

The Critical Voice;

A Heuristic Enquiry into the
experience of hearing a Critical
Inner Voice to deepen our
understanding of its meaning and
purpose.

Georgina Dyson-Horton, 2020

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Declaration

This is an original piece of work conducted by Georgina Dyson-Horton as part of a Doctorate in Counselling Psychology through the University of Middlesex and the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling.

Research supervisors have been Dr. Charlotte Harkness, Dr. Simon Cassar and Professor Digby Tantum.

Ethical Approval was gained on the 12th May 2017. The Chair of the Ethics Board was Professor Digby Tantam.

I would like to thank my family for their ever loving support during times that must have seemed like their mum wasn't available. Love is always there even when it doesn't show.

Abstract

The purpose of this thesis is to discover new ways of thinking about and understanding one's critical inner voice. The critical voice is defined as words that are heard internally, are typically negative towards the self and others and not Auditory Verbal Hallucinations.

The research question asks if there is a meaning or purpose to the critical voice as this has often been overlooked in previous research and literature. Theories on the aetiology of the critical voice come from a Psychodynamic perspective, however by applying an Existential Philosophical perspective it is possible to widen the lens in order to discover more about it.

The chosen methodology is Heuristic which elucidates participant's lived experience and personal meanings. Heuristics provides a richness of data by using verbatim extracts and this showcases the texture and grain of participant's thought processes.

Seven adult women participated in this study aged between 30 and 56. The interviews were semi-structured with emphasis on talking about what was important to them. The criteria for participation were for adults over eighteen and therefore the participant's gender and age range proved interesting.

The results yielded exciting and novel findings, which are grouped into thirteen Gathered Themes, each of which have sub themes. For example, the critical voice is 'Not All Bad'; it can be a 'Little Friend'; it 'Changes Throughout Life' and the Menopause can effect it. It was found that the Critical Voice is connected to one's whole being and also to our external world. Of particular interest are the findings entitled 'Safe Criticism' where participants found ways to be critical without harm to the other.

The implications for Counselling Psychology are that the critical voice can be both a blessing and a curse; it is interconnected within oneself and to our outer world. The findings suggest that it is important to look to our own beliefs and values so that when working with clients we do not inadvertently overlook a necessary function of the client's inner world.

Introduction

Definition of The Critical Voice

For the purposes of this research the definition of critical means negative, disapproving, fault-finding or judgemental. Critical relates to being and experiencing criticism which can be towards oneself, to others or both. Criticism is experienced in a way personal to the individual, that may have come from experience or have developed over time. Whatever the aetiology of the criticism, the meaning will be unique to the individual experiencing it.

With regard to the terminology of voice in this research, this relates to where a thought or thoughts, images, feelings, sensations or bodily responses are translated by the person experiencing them into words that one hears or are formed internally, but not necessarily spoken out aloud.

‘Critical Voice’ in this research, then, is collectively defined as words heard internally by oneself, that are typically negative and derisory towards the self, others or things. This research does not refer to, nor include to audible hallucinations but to one’s own critical thoughts and feelings heard as words. This research intends to keep an open mind with regards to the aetiology of one’s critical inner voice but rather explores its meaning, purpose and function as identified by the individual experiencing it.

Firestone’s (1986) definition of ‘the voice’ aligns closely to the researcher’s concept of a critical voice:

“The “voice” refers to an internal system of hostile thoughts and attitudes, antithetical to the self and cynical toward others.”

(Firestone, 1986, p.439)

Whilst a definition of the critical voice is provided, the author was mindful that this may not be how others understand or define it. Care was needed in explaining the critical voice to potential research participants so as not to lead them down a route that was not theirs.

For this reason the advertising material identified a range of expressions, thoughts and feelings one's critical voice may have, and the information given to participants gave the research project definition and possible other descriptions that may be experienced. An extract of the Participant Information Sheet is provided for clarification:

"My research focuses on what I call the critical voice. I take this to mean "your own voice in your head that critically comments on things". To you this may be recognised as your thoughts or feelings about something to which there could be a range of expressions. For you there may be a number of voices that provide a running commentary, there may be derisory sounds such as an audible sigh, or "grrrr", or a "tut", or an image. This may be one of many interacting sounds, thoughts or voices, amongst a range of internal dialogue.

The 'critical voice' may sound like someone familiar, or it may not, it may elicit a range of emotions, or may change your behaviour, affect your thinking, limit your way of living or take you away from something you were doing whilst you are hearing it."

Firestone (1986) excludes thought processes that are concerned with constructive planning, creative thinking, self-appraisal and moral considerations, however this research takes account of a broader range of internal ruminations, as identified in the theoretical framework and literature review. Firestone's (1986) definition of the 'Voice' also excludes hallucinations as does this research, however, Firestone regards the voice as directly analogous to a verbal hallucination. A brief appraisal of research into audible verbal hallucinations will be considered for referential purposes in the literature review section.

Research Framework

There is a paucity of qualitative research and literature into the lived experience of critical inner speech. Quantitative research, however, exists on changing or eradicating self-criticism. Research into inner speech can aid insight into the critical voice as it gives a wider

perspective but there are limitations to the methodologies used, particularly with regard to the meanings the person attributes to their inner speech.

The theoretical framework and review of literature in this thesis purposely takes a broad lens so that an understanding of the context of the critical voice can be gleaned. Firestone's (1986) theory of the voice is limited as is quantitative research, for example Gilbert et al (2004) because criticism is not an isolated phenomenon. How can we know what criticism is without knowing non-criticism? Dark would be the norm if we didn't have light to show the difference. One cannot exist without the other and it is this researcher's assertion that a holistic approach be adopted in its analysis.

Human beings cannot separate themselves from the world around them; we are inextricably linked and therefore in studying a phenomenon that human beings experience researchers must understand the context in which they live (Waddell, 2007). The experiences that shape our understanding of the world will be meaningful in individual ways, thus as much of an individual's explanation of their critical voice should be shown in research so that a deeper, more insightful appreciation can be sought. Qualitative research methods and analysis provide this insight.

[Why Research Into The Critical Voice Was Conducted](#)

Research into the critical voice came about because of the researcher's client work and personal self-enquiry. Clients had reported being self-critical, for example constantly berating themselves such as 'you can't do this', 'they are going to find you out', or 'I'm just no good'. This was a familiar phenomenon that seemed to be shared by others, including the researcher. This set off a period of reflection and exploration into whether there could be a purpose or function to it, what meaning it may have, and why it existed.

A review of the literature led the researcher to think that there was something missing from how authors had written about the critical voice, assumptions were being made that it was something to be eradicated and managed, and although there were theoretical

assumptions as to its function, little was known about the wider perspective and context in which it occurred. A deeper exploration and analysis could reveal people's personal meanings, and a research question began to develop to facilitate this discovery. Questions such as 'What is the lived experience of hearing a critical inner voice', 'Does the critical voice have a meaning, a function or a purpose', and 'Is there a dialogue that goes on, i.e. a counter-balancing voice' emerged which formulated the three enquiries of the research question.

The Researcher's Personal Motivation

The researcher's personal motivation to undertake this research was a felt-sense that important information was missing from the understanding of the critical voice. It is the researcher's belief that these unspoken voices were not being heard because the methodology used in other studies did not allow for their expression.

The methodology needed to be qualitative to add depth and texture, one that encompassed the researchers own enquiry, one that allowed participants to explore their experience with few boundaries or limitations.

The best research methodology for this study became apparent during the period of reflection, and Heuristics was chosen for its rich descriptive qualities, its search for personal meanings, and the personal commitment on the part of the researcher to use themselves in the process. A key feature in qualitative research methodology is reflexivity, which is a skill that involves transparency and explication of processes. Similarly, it is a useful skill for counsellors to be able to notice their responses to the world around them and then to be able to communicate that knowledge (Etherington, 2004). It was hoped that by researching in this way it would be possible to see into the cracks of previously held assumptions and deepen the knowledge and understanding of therapists working with people who experience critical inner voices.

The Layout of This Research

Following the introduction will be a review of the literature and a theoretical framework which provides a backdrop to the critical voice from a psychological and academic perspective. The backdrop includes a broad contextual framework including inner speech, traditional psychological theories and frames the critical voice within existential philosophy.

The research question follows which provides the rationale for the research and the foundations for enquiry. The methodology section sets out the researcher's epistemological and ontological position, why alternative methodologies were rejected and the process of conducting the research.

The recruitment section shows how participants were recruited and the information they received about the research. The research interview section outlines the interview questions, the format of the interviews, the risk assessment, participant consent and demographics. This is followed by risk and ethical considerations and finally how the interviews were transcribed and the process of analysing the data.

The findings are shown in 'Gathered Themes', which are presented alphabetically so as to remove the temptation of the reader to attach importance or assume hierarchy. The findings show exciting qualities to the critical voice that have not previously been found in a review of the literature or in psychological theory.

The discussion section reflects upon the research process and considers the findings in relation to the theoretical framework and literature review. Implications for psychotherapeutic therapy are considered and also proposals for future study. Finally a conclusion draws together the salient points of the research.

Literature Review & Theoretical Framework

The review of literature and the theoretical framework developed and refined as the research progressed. Initially reading was wide with literature from the modules in the Doctorate in Counselling Psychology informing possible areas for further exploration and previous reading in the study of counselling and psychology.

From the perspective of psychopathology, for example, it is possible to view the critical voice as the hearing of voices and therefore reading was conducted in this area. Research papers that were found to be relevant are noted in the section entitled Research in Relation to Auditory Verbal Hallucinations and Inner Speech.

Psychoanalytical theory directed reading towards Sigmund Freud and this is noted in the section entitled A Psychodynamic Theory. Existential literature does not specifically reference the critical voice, however when the critical voice is viewed through the lens of one's being-in-the-world and one's relationship to others this adds a perspective that is somewhat obscured in psychoanalytic theory.

Literature that provides the majority of the theory of the critical voice is that of Robert Firestone (1987). Literature reviewed included his books, papers, and a telephone interview with him personally. Firestone's perspective of the critical voice is psychodynamic; however this perspective is limited and static which is why a broader range of literature and ideas are presented in this research paper.

The researcher used open date electronic literature searches using the search words "Critical Inner Voice", "Critical Inner Speech", "Critical Inner Thoughts", "negative inner speech", "critical speech", "inner critic dialogue", "critical inner dialogue", "self-punitive talk", "critical self-talk" and "Inner Critic" using the search engines Google Scholar, Mendeley, and Library Search (previously Summon) on Middlesex UniHub.

The findings of this electronic literature search produced a vast number of results. For example, on the 5th February 2014 using the search engine Mendeley and the search words

“critical inner thoughts”, 100,839 results were produced. Of these 100,839 results the researcher reviewed 1,500. Of these 1,500 items, 37 were saved. On the 12th February 2014 using the search engine Summon and the search words “critical inner speech”, 5 items proved pertinent and were saved. The results of these searches included books, articles and citations within books.

Due to the numerous results from the electronic literature search, many of the findings are not included in this paper, however the Bibliography section shows some of the items that were reviewed but not deemed relevant due to a number of factors. For example, articles relating to inner speech, the superego, hallucinations, self-criticism that were not referenced were either repetitive or similar to other articles, fell out of the scope of the research question, or were not specific to the findings in this thesis.

The Aetiology of The Critical Voice

Robert Firestone developed the concept of the critical voice, which he called the “Voice” (Firestone, 1987) from his work as a Clinical Psychologist. Firestone stated that the critical voice relates directly to the rejecting thoughts and attitudes of one’s parents; *“children repress their anger toward their parents for their (the parent’s) rejection and turn it on themselves. [...] It is this process of introjection that is responsible for the evolution of the pattern of negative, self-critical thoughts known as the ‘voice’”* (Firestone, 1987, p.219).

The theory purports that parent’s rejecting covert and overt thoughts and attitudes are a direct replication of actual criticism or an unspoken hostile attitude, so for example parents may or may not be directly critical to the child but their non-verbal expressions will be experienced by the child and internalised. Later in his life Robert Firestone acknowledged that the voice is not limited to parental criticism but can be introjected from society at large; *“it’s affected by the experience and the negative experiences that people go through and it could be in relation to society, it could be anything that impacts and has that effect, that emotional effect is to create these primal feelings which are then translated into words”* (Firestone, 2018a).

The critical voice develops from guilt and self-hatred from the child's wants and needs for affectionate contact and love being refused or prohibited because the child feels that they are bad or wrong for wanting or attempting to fulfil them. Guilt also emerges due to the wish of the child to be independent and separate to the parent, thus separating the fantasy bond (Firestone, 1985). The Voice can be critical of oneself or others and is at the core of paranoid suspicion where *"suicide is the ultimate conclusion of acting upon this negative thought process"*, (Firestone, 1986, p.439).

According to Firestone, the purpose of internalising the critical voice is to attempt to protect the individual from feeling anxious and vulnerable by rehearsing and predicting negative outcomes. Their feelings of rejection then become self-fulfilling prophecies, which isolates them further.

Firestone developed Voice Therapy which aims to bring the negative thoughts and attitudes into the person's awareness. The purpose is to evoke feelings of compassion and support for themselves and to encourage them to develop their own point of view rather than the introjected viewpoint. Firestone believes that the Voice is maladaptive and inappropriate, and therefore Voice Therapy is seen as a way of eradicating the critical inner voice. Along with his daughter, Lisa Firestone, he has continued to write and has developed scales on the critical voice (see Firestone, 1984; 1987; 1988; 1990; 1991; 2009; 2010; 2011; 2018a; Firestone, Firestone & Catlett 2002).

A Psychodynamic Theory

Robert Firestone is a psychodynamic psychologist and therefore his ideas can be traced back to Sigmund Freud's *"cruel self-depreciation of the ego combined with a relentless self-criticism and bitter reproaches"* (Freud, 1921/1952, p.680-681). Freud proposed the personality concepts id, ego and super-ego, with the super-ego being referred interchangeably as the ego-ideal. The id is a person's unconscious instincts which seek immediate gratification. The ego is partly conscious and mediates the id's desires with the outside world. The super-ego is the introjection of a child's parents on whose conduct the child models him or herself; the child wants to be like his or her parents and therefore identifies with them.

The super-ego can be described as what is expected of a one's higher nature, it exercises the censorship of morals. It judges, using the language of 'you must not ...', 'you ought', and this is reinforced over time by influential others such as teachers, society, public opinion, ethics and culture. Ridgway (2009) asserts that one's inner voice is "often the voice of our integrity that reminds us of our principles" (Ridgway, 2009, p.46) so by using the super-ego and the inner voice as reference points, the critical voice can be seen from this perspective.

Freud referred to a special institution called the conscience whose task it is to secure narcissistic gratification from the super-ego by keeping guard and watching over it (Freud, 1914/1952). Freud uses the term Narcissism here to mean the libidinal instinct for self-love and self-preservation that is enjoyed in early childhood. This narcissism is projected onto the super-ego which deems itself to be the "possessor of all perfections" (Freud, 1914/1952, p.407). If narcissistic perfection is not relinquished in childhood, and the child cannot tolerate the critical judgement of others as he develops, then:

"His own critical judgement is awakened, he seeks to recover the early perfection, thus wrested from him, in the new form of an ego-ideal. That which he projects ahead of him as his ideal is merely his substitute for the lost narcissism of his childhood – the time when he was his own ideal".

(Freud, 1914/1952, p.407)

The conscience has the characteristics of a voice which comments on what we do, from the mundane to the critical, and speaks in the third person. Freud believed that the conscience exists in everyone and enables an understanding of delusions of observations such as paranoia. The conscience is explored in Sartre's (1989) play 'No Exit', which is explored later in this paper.

The question remains as to how the child's critical judgement is awakened unless the aggressive instinct is explored, which arguably is Freud's aggressive component of the super-ego. The child projects his own aggression onto his parent/s which is then

introjected back into the child along with the image of the parent. The child has imagined that the parent shares the same aggressive impulses as himself and in this way, the super-ego is felt to be severe as well as kind in its judgements. The severity of the criticism is responsible for the child's feelings of guilt and worthlessness. Therefore, two co-existing instincts of self-love and aggression combine to form both the nurturing and critical super-ego, which along with the conscience's continual watching accounts for the concept of the critical voice.

Freud's theory of the super-ego is wider than Firestone's 'voice'; Firestone states that the critical voice "excludes those thought processes that are concerned with constructive planning, creative thinking, self-appraisal, fantasy, value judgements, and moral considerations" (Firestone, 1986, p.439), whereas Freud's super-ego includes parental kindness and the seeking of the satisfaction of self-love.

The psychodynamic perspective contains many assumptions about the internal interpretation and understanding by the child, as well as the environment the child grows up in. What is missing is the wider picture; how might a loving voice interplay with a critical voice, how might feelings of dignity interplay with feelings of shame? What a psychodynamic aetiology of the critical voice does not show is how the critical voice might be tempered at different points in time, or in what circumstances it comes out.

A Transactional Analytic Perspective

Eric Berne provides similar but further theoretical perspective on the development of the critical voice. Berne (1964) describes Parent, Adult and Child ego states, which are a coherent system of feelings and behavioural patterns. The parent ego state influences a person both directly (i.e. "do as I do") and indirectly (i.e. "do as I say"). As with Freud's super-ego, Berne's Parent ego state is based on the child's perception of the parent. The theory is based upon the precept that everyone has had parents or substitute parents that they carry around inside them, which forms into the Parent ego state. According to Berne, the function of the Parent is twofold;

“To act effectively as the parent of actual children, thus promoting the survival of the human race [...] secondly, it makes many responses automatic, which conserves a great deal of time and energy. Many things are done because ‘That’s the way it’s done’. This frees the Adult from the innumerable trivial decisions so that it can devote itself to more important issues, leaving routine matters to the Parent.”

(Berne, 1964, p.27)

Thomas Harris developed Berne’s theory of Parent, Adult and Child ego states by purporting that they are collections of recordings in the brain of imposed external events (Harris, 1967). This is in contrast to Berne and Freud’s assertions that they are the child’s perceptions of their parents. Harris believed that the data is recorded straight, without editing by the child so that actual verbatim and behaviour are recorded. Harris (1967) constructed four possible life positions from the Transactional Analysis perspective; I’m not ok – you’re ok, I’m not ok – you’re not ok, I’m ok – you’re not ok, and I’m ok – you’re ok. Harris purported that these life positions are decided by the child at age two to three and these positions do not change over time, unless the fourth position is consciously chosen later in life. The decision as to which position to take is a conclusion based upon the child’s experience and environment.

As with the psychodynamic perspective, the transactional analytic perspective appears static and fixed in the way introjection is processed. Both theories do not account for any analysis or affect that the child may have in relation to the perceived criticism such as confusion, disbelief, or incomprehensibility. This may be due of course to the fact that it is impossible to see inside another’s head to ascertain their thinking or feeling, one can only interpret from the lens of one’s own experience, beliefs and cultural heritage.

A Cognitive Behavioural Perspective

From a Cognitive Behavioural theoretical perspective, thoughts, moods, behaviours, physical reactions and one’s environment all interact with each other (Greenberger and Padesky, 1995). One’s perception of a situation influences how one responds to it (Beck, 1964; 1995; Ellis, 1962), so different people will react differently to the same situation

according to what they believe and how they think about it, which then affects how they feel and behave. During childhood core beliefs are developed, beliefs about oneself that are strengthened over time by attention to information that confirms such beliefs and discounts other contrary information. Aaron Beck identified automatic thoughts through his client work (Beck, 1976), who defined automatic thoughts as those that constantly go on in the background of a person's inner world; interpretations or misinterpretations about events, self-evaluations, self-monitoring, making predictions about oneself or others and making generalisations.

Beliefs that are critical towards the self are called Negative Automatic Thoughts (NATs). NATs are purported to arise when a person is suffering from a psychological disorder (Bennet-Levy et al, 2004) and can comprise of 'What an idiot!', 'I'm useless', 'You can't trust anyone' to generalisations of underlying assumptions such as 'If I take a challenge of any sort, I'll be bound to fail' or 'That was lucky, they didn't find me out'. Underlying assumptions and core beliefs form part of a schema system, which are deeper enduring cognitive structures, for example a 'perfectionist' schema or a 'world-as-dangerous-place' schema. These schemas bias information that people attend to, so only information that relates to the schema will be stored and will contribute to the persistence of the schema.

Dysfunctional schemas can develop at any point in life, however they are most often derived from childhood. It is the meaning that a person attributes to an event that causes problems; "problems arise from the meanings individuals give to events, filtered through the framework of core beliefs and assumptions which they have already developed through life experience" (Bennet-Levy et al, 2004, p.4).

Traditional Cognitive Therapy attempts to challenge and change NATs whereas Third Wave Cognitive Behavioural Therapy takes a different approach by helping clients develop a different relationship to their NATs. Techniques such as Mindfulness are used where clients are helped to notice and accept thoughts rather than judge them (Hickes & Mirea, 2012). A cognitive behavioural perspective introduces the concept that criticism can be learnt or unlearnt. The aetiology still derives from childhood however learning can be at any point in one's life. In addition, meaning is introduced into how one assimilates the critical voice.

Cognitive theory identifies NATs as part of a psychological disorder, yet without critical appraisal how would evolution continue to develop? Defining terminology such as NATs can be useful in order to identify and treat a debilitating condition yet it can also be punitive and counterproductive by perpetuating the unobtainable state of perfection.

Opening up the theoretical framework further, it would seem wise to explore the literature and research on inner speech so that a fuller description of the phenomena of critical inner speech can be achieved. The researcher's view is that whilst it can be useful to separate out the elements of a phenomenon for descriptive or educational purposes, there cannot be one element on its own without reference to the whole, i.e. how one is interconnected to one's internal and external world. In order to describe something as fully as possible we need to know what the phenomena is not in order to elucidate what it is, therefore, some form of comparison and context is needed. Previous authors on the critical voice or critical inner speech have primarily focussed on the negative or critical elements of the self, and as such have limited the potentiality of understanding of the phenomenon. In order to understand critical inner speech the theories and study of inner speech would provide some context and reference points.

Inner Speech

Lev Vygotsky was among the first to empirically study inner speech (Sokolov, 1972). Inner speech, according to Vygotsky, is a blend of language and thought, which develops from the internalisation of dialogue and external influences. Thought and speech have different developmental roots; thought development has a pre-linguistic stage, and speech development has a pre-intellectual stage.

"Inner speech develops through a slow accumulation of functional and structural changes, that it branches off from the child's external speech simultaneously with the differentiation of the social and the egocentric functions of speech, and finally that the speech structures mastered by the child become the basic structures of his thinking."

(Vygotsky, 1962, p.50-51)

For a very young child the function of speech is an attempt to remain in contact with others and participate in the social world. With regard to why speech turns inward, this according to Vygotsky is because its function changes, such as in preparation for external speech and a way of rehearsing what will be spoken out loud. As speech is internalised it is condensed and simplified, and as a result only the inherent meanings remain; *“in inner speech ... a single word is so saturated with sense that many words would be required to explain it in external speech”* (Vygotsky, 1962, p.148). Verbal thought is not innate but formed through a historical and cultural process. A person’s sociological and cultural experience and their time in history will influence the character of their inner speech as it develops.

According to Emmerson (1983) “words in discourse always recall earlier contexts of usage, otherwise they could not mean at all ... A person’s experiences exist encoded in his inner speech” (Emmerson, 1983, p.248-250). Of patients during psychoanalysis, Emmerson continues, the repressed inner realities that are believed to be the id and ego by the psychoanalyst are reflections of social dynamics. Research, Emmerson purports, should not study inner speech in isolation in traditional controlled experiments and therefore it would be wise to research the critical voice outside of the psychoanalytical framework.

Words have a purpose and a function (Emmerson, 1983), they have meanings that are unique to the individual, and it follows that the meaning intended by the speaker may not be the meaning that is interpreted by the hearer. Jackl (2018) states, it is difficult to observe or measure the inner voice, it can only be studied by contemplation or introspection. This is challenging when attempting to research inner speech requiring skills to help the participant elucidate their inner speech and, when spoken out loud, bracketing any assumptions about what the research participant is meaning with the words they use.

Internalised speech becomes part of one’s inner life, becomes the voice of our integrity, reminding us of our principles and rarely goes away completely, remaining with us for the rest of our lives (Ridgway, 2009). Inner speech “is crucial in the learning of a second language” (Tomlinson, 2001), it helps to reduce anxiety and gain confidence and control and can contribute to competence in communication. If inner speech increases one’s emotional affect and confidence, such as when learning a second language, then does it

have the converse effect when it is negative or as Firestone purports, does critical inner speech exponentially lead to increased anger, guilt and ultimately suicide? Furthermore, what is the interplay between the increase in confidence and control and the negative effects of the critical voice such as shame or worthlessness?

Research in Relation to Inner Speech

Most of the research conducted on inner speech has used quantitative analytical methods, however some researchers have used qualitative interviews as a starting point, for example Puchalska-Wasyl (2015) who used statistical analysis to identify an internal dialogue where two different viewpoints were adopted alternately.

Hurlburt et al (2013) state that inner speech has the same tone, pitch, pacing and emotional qualities as external speech, inner speech can be whispered or shouted. Inner speech does not need to comprise of full sentences, it can be condensed and single words can convey a greater meaning, for example “mmm” may mean “I am thinking of some delicious food that I would like to eat”. Inner speech may be directed at oneself or to another person, irrespective of whether that person is present. This is significant when applying this to critical inner speech, which substantiates the argument for broadening the lens of understanding the critical voice.

With regard to rehearsal, Hurlburt et al (2013) found that what is rehearsed internally may not be what is said eventually spoken externally. Similarly, words may be spoken internally by the hearer that do not exactly match the speaker’s words. What is happening is that the hearer is interpreting the spoken work according to their own frame of reference, or what makes sense to them.

Morin and Everett assert that “inner speech parallels the state of self-awareness, is more frequently used among highly self-conscious persons, and represents an effective, if not indispensable, tool involved in the formation of the self-concept” (Morin & Everett, 1990, p.337). They continue “if a person’s surroundings make it problematic for him or her to discriminate himself or herself from his or her immediate environment, it then becomes difficult for him or her to focus on himself or herself as an object” (Morin & Everett, 1990,

p.339). In a later paper, Morin (2004) develops a model of self-awareness that proposes the existence of three sources of self-information; 1) a social setting which includes early face-to-face interactions, self-relevant feedback, a social comparison mechanism leading to perspective taking, and audiences; 2) contact with objects in the physical environment, self-focusing and reflective stimuli, e.g. mirrors; and 3) bodily awareness of oneself, self-reflection using imagery and inner speech. Therefore, inner speech is contextual dependant on one's environment and interconnected to the world around us.

For Morin, self-awareness and inner speech are connected. Self-awareness embodies the ability to become the object of one's own attention (Morin, 2011a). Self-awareness does not occur in isolation, it is connected to the environment and one's social setting. It involves identifying, processing and storing information about the self. Loss of inner speech following damage to the brain produces deficits in self-awareness (Morin, 2011b).

Morin and Everett purport that people who are self-aware will respond more accurately to assessments on aspects of themselves (Morin & Everett, 1990) because they are more self-focussed. If this is true then it is hoped that the participants in this research project will be able to accurately describe their critical inner voice, dependant of course on the researcher capturing the participant's meaning accurately.

Inner speech can create a psychological distance between the self and mental events it experiences, and in doing so can evoke a problem solving strategy (Morin, 2005). This distance can facilitate self-observation which help to see the problem objectively. Seen through the lens of inner speech, the critical voice's function or purpose could be to rehearse external speech, is connected to self-awareness, is a reflection of one's culture, one's internal and external world, is imbued with idiosyncratic meanings, provides principles for living, and has a problem solving element.

Research and Literature in Relation to Critical Inner Speech

As stated previously, there is a paucity of research into the lived experience of critical inner speech, but there is however a vast amount written on eradicating, managing and dealing with the inner critic. One only has to type in the term "inner critic" to any search engine to

be bombarded with articles, books and video clips ranging from silencing the inner critic (Cox, 2013), to the inner critic and compassionate mind training (Gilbert and Proctor, 2006) to the inner critic and acupuncture (Konefal, 2014), to analysing the inner critic during the process of therapy (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2002a) to identifying neuronal correlates of self-criticism and self-reassurance (Longe et al, 2009).

Kainer (1979) used clinical vignettes with regard to the critical voice as a factor in patients with obsessions. Kainer stated that “each patient had at least one harshly critical parent” (Kainer, 1979, p.277). Furthermore, as children, the patients were made to feel that they were somehow doing something wrong without knowing what the ‘right’ thing to do was. Perfectionism was also identified as a factor, with one patient unable to choose between ideas because she wanted to make ‘the perfect choice’ in order to silence the critical voice.

Robert Firestone developed his concept of the critical voice and Voice Therapy as a result of his clinical observations and psychological discussion groups rather than by conducting research (Firestone, 2018a). Robert and Lisa Firestone developed the Firestone Assessment of Self-Destructive Thoughts (FAST) which is an assessment tool for use in clinical settings. FAST assesses self-destructive thoughts, self-harm and suicide risk on a continuum of negative thought patterns.

Research into critical inner speech has lacked human experiential depth, it lacks what it feels like to live with criticism on a daily basis. What is missing is an understanding of non-clinical research participants. Assessment tools provide a guide but do not enable a bigger picture that is unique to the individual’s world.

Self-Criticism

Paul Gilbert, along with colleagues, has produced a number of research papers on self-criticism over the past two decades. Gilbert describes self-criticism as self-devaluation, self-condemnation and self-attacking. He developed self-report scales out of his clinical work which were “typical reasons and functions that depressed patients have offered about their own self-criticisms” (Gilbert et al, 2004, p.36), for example, The Functions of

the Self-Criticising/Attacking Scale, and The Forms Of Self-Criticism/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale.

The Functions of the Self-Criticising/Attacking Scale begins with a probe statement such as 'I get critical and angry with myself' and this is followed by 21 possible reasons for self-attacking, for example 'to remind me of my responsibilities'. Participants have to rate the items on a five-point scale. The Forms Of Self-Criticism/Attacking and Self-Reassuring Scale is a 22-item scale that measures the forms and styles of participant's critical and reassuring self-evaluative responses to a setback or disappointment. As per the Functions scale, a probe statement is provided such as 'when things go wrong for me...' and this is followed by statements that participants have to rate on a five-point Likert scale, for example 'I am easily disappointed with myself', 'I have become so angry with myself that I want to hurt myself'.

For Gilbert, self-criticism is a complex process with different forms and functions which are mainly evolutionary in nature. For example, a defensive submissive response to threats from others (Gilbert, 1992; Gilbert & Irons, 2005); to try to improve oneself and to prevent errors, or out of frustration by lashing out at oneself, or self-hatred (Gilbert, 1997); coercion from dominant animals is used towards subordinates in order to elicit compliance (Gilbert, 2000); linked to shame-proneness (Gilbert & Miles, 2000); to prevent the self from taking risks, thereby retaining a subordinate position (Gilbert, 2002); and self-correction and persecution (Gilbert et al, 2004).

High levels of self-criticism have been found to be linked to social anxiety disorder (Iancu, Bodner & Ben-Zion, 2015), psychopathology (Castilho, Pinto-Gouveia, & Duarte, 2015), and eating disorder pathology through feelings of shame (Carter, 2018).

Self-criticism seems to be something that is learnt; "we are not born useless, unworthy, disgusting, etc. Rather in early life we are made to feel that way by the treatment of others because we may not have any other experiences or resources by which to refute their condemnations" (Lee, 2005, p.348). Both Lee and Gilbert's views correlate to Firestone's

belief that criticism is not inherent in human nature, rather it develops through our interaction with, and interpretation of, our environment.

Over the past two decades Nele Stinckens and colleagues have produced a number of research papers on the inner critic. The concept of the inner critic was introduced by Eugene Gendlin and it can be described as a strong normative voice which blocks people (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2002b) and interferes with one's organismic experiencing process (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2013a). The inner critic is rigid, critical, judges negatively, chatters, nags and repeats itself relentlessly. It can be characterised by the words 'must' and 'ought'. It represents the norms and expectations in society which dominate one's own intuitive experience.

This societal approach firmly connects the individual with their social environment and moves away from the developmental stance of the individual perceiving the world in relation to their parents or caregivers to acknowledging a person's need for both autonomy and connectedness. There are similarities however to the Psychodynamic concept of the superego in terms of the judgments of the caregiver, which could be expanded out to society at large 'you must not do ...'. Similarly, this conceptualisation of the inner critic can be likened to one's negative automatic thoughts from Cognitive Theory whereby the interpretation of external information becomes one's own inner belief system.

Both Gilbert, Stinckens and their respective colleagues' studies attempt to change criticism through therapy, Gilbert by the use of compassion and acceptance (Gilbert et al, 2004; Gilbert et al 2006; Gilbert & Proctor, 2006), and Stinckens by internalising the therapist's accepting and understanding attitude (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2002a; Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2002b; Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2013a; Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2013b). Due to the individualistic nature and meanings a person attributes to their self-criticism a flexible approach offers the best chance of change according to Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, (2013b). By tailoring the approach, the function of the inner critic can be considered and the person helped to achieve what they need. This approach to therapy takes account of the function of the criticism, addressing what the criticism is trying to achieve rather than trying to eradicate it because it is deemed unproductive.

Indeed, as Dennis Palumbo states *“the problem with silencing or banishing the inner critic is that it confirms the idea that there’s something wrong with you that needs to be fixed. It suggests a perfectible “you” in the future who’s unencumbered by such conflicts”*, he continues that the inner critic is a necessary part of who you are and *“provides us with the ability to discern our likes and dislikes, to form opinions, to make decisions. It reinforces the faith in our subjective experience that allows us to choose this rather than that. We need a sense of judgement to navigate the world”* (Palumbo, 2012). This opinion aligns with the researcher’s whereby one needs to be able to judge in order to make decisions, however the researcher accepts that when the critical voice becomes so loud and overwhelming some form of other voice needs to activate in order to take a balanced view.

More systematic research is called for rather than attempting to characterise the inner critic based on clinical impressions (Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen, 2002a), furthermore, Gilbert et al (2004) say that therapists should explore the functions of self-criticism in detail with clients, elucidating the possible aggressive/disgust feelings and emotions that accompany self-criticism. It is the researcher’s view that research should be conducted on the individual’s own experience of their criticism rather than the therapist’s interpretation of a client’s criticism. Moreover, regarding the development of self-criticism scales for mass use does not adequately illuminate the texture of an individual’s experience. Clearly there are similarities across people in terms of functionality and form of critical inner speech but if the ultimate aim is to help the individual come to terms with their own critical voice then it is at the individual level that research needs to focus its attention.

The research into self-criticism does not take account of criticism towards others; the process is purported to be only directed towards the self. Surely if one develops self-criticism from one’s environment there must be a two way process; an externalisation of criticism as well as internal. It is the externalisation process that is missing from such research and requires consideration.

Research in Relation to Auditory Verbal Hallucinations and Inner Speech

Robert Firestone links the inner voice to suicide and Auditory Verbal Hallucinations (AVHs) (Firestone, 1986), stating that AVHs are an extreme manifestation of the critical voice. McCarthy-Jones & Fernyhough (2007) agree citing neural correlate evidence; AVHs result from abnormalities in the transition between condensed and expanded dialogic inner speech and are mis-attributed as coming from an external source. McGuire et al (1996a; 1996b; 1996c) provide further evidence for neural correlates of AVHs and inner speech with findings indicating a failure of AVH hearers to activate the normal monitoring of inner speech.

Similarly, Langdon et al (2009) questioned patients with both Schizophrenia and AVHs and non-voice-hearing participants on their experiences of hearing voices, if present, and their inner speech. They found no discernible differences in the hearing of voices and inner speech between the two groups. Although Langdon et al's (2009) research asks participants about their experience of inner speech, it provides a quantitative methodological analysis. The researcher authoring this paper feels that a greater depth of understanding could have been highlighted by using qualitative methodology in order to showcase participants' lived experience of inner speech and voice hearing.

Legg and Gilbert (2006) found that the degree of hostility of the AVH changed with the degree of stress in other aspects of participant's lives. This is particularly interesting because if AVHs are an extreme manifestation of the critical voice as Firestone (1986) suggests then there may be a correlation in the non-voice hearing population whereby the greater the degree of stress correlates to the greater degree of hostility of the critical voice.

Research Methodologies for Inner Experience and Inner Speech

A theme that runs through the inner speech literature is "*we also need to understand what the experience is like*" (Moseley, 2014) and to this end research methods such as Descriptive Experience Sampling (Hurlburt & Heavey, 2001; Heavey & Hurlburt, 2008; Hurlburt et al, 2013), and the Varieties of Inner Speech Questionnaire (McCarthy-Jones & Fernyhough, 2011; Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2014) have been designed. These

approaches aim to explore the phenomena of inner experience and the phenomenological properties of inner speech respectively.

Descriptive Experience Sampling (DES) records inner speech at random moments of time using a beep method. Research participants are asked to record their inner speech at the time a beep on their mobile phone sounds throughout the day. Research participants are then interviewed in detail about their experiences and the results identify the actual inner speech and experience of the participant during those moments.

The limitation of this method of data collection is that DES does not take account of the idiosyncratic personal meanings behind a person's inner speech despite being designed "*to produce high fidelity descriptions of randomly selected pristine inner experience*" (Hurlburt et al, 2013, p.1477). The iterative nature of using DES as a research tool enables participants to distinguish what the actual inner speech meant to the participant by expanding on condensed speech, for example "milk" meant "I must remember to buy milk at the shop". However, the method does not go beyond this expansion to fully explore the meanings that are "saturated with sense" (Vygotsky, 1962, p.148) with the participants. It may be that the inner speech that was recorded was not particularly meaningful and that focusing research on the critical element of inner speech may in itself contain more meaning to the individual.

The Varieties of Inner Speech Questionnaire (VISQ) is a self-report questionnaire which aims to assesses the quality of the participant's inner speech in terms of four characteristics; dialogicality, evaluative/motivational content, condensation and the presence of other voices. Data is statistically analysed. The VISQ also identifies psychopathological variables across clinical and nonclinical populations, assessing for anxiety, depression and AVHs.

Alderson-Day and Fernyhough (2014) accept the limitations of VISQ and suggest using qualitative methodology as a supplement to assessing subjective experience due to the trade-off when attempting to gather statistically meaningful data. Similarly, the researchers who used DES fail to go on to elicit a deeper understanding of the research

participant's inner speech, what it meant to them, or how the speech affected them. Arguably, DES elicits marginally more meaningful data than a self-report questionnaire, however, both of these research tools fail to yield a rich and accurate description which shows the texture and grain of the research participant's experience and verbatim.

Heavy and Hurlburt (2008) in their findings using DES found that higher frequencies of inner speech were associated with lower levels of psychological distress. This is contrary to Fernyhough's (2004) findings with regard to AVHs which result from stressful conditions or cognitive challenge. Legg and Gilbert (2006) similarly found that the degree of hostility of AVH's changed with regard to the levels of stress in the participant's lives. If increased inner speech reduces psychological distress, then why do AVH's become more hostile when an individual is stressed? From this research one might wonder if the answer lies in the meaning of the individual's inner speech, what is going on in the individual's inner world and what is the nature and purpose of their inner speech?

An Existential Perspective

Research closest to this researcher's methodology investigated the lived experience of inner speech using phenomenology. Vivian Waddell (2007) followed Van Manen's (1990) approach to phenomenology in order to explore the lived experience of hearing an inner voice and inner voice experience (IVE). Waddell's definition of inner voice experience encompasses a voice with no identifiable external referent and could be a voice construed by the hearer to originate inside or outside the head. This definition is slightly different to the definition of the inner voice in this research; that the critical inner voice is your own and recognised as your own thoughts and feelings. A similarity of definition, however, is the exclusion of auditory hallucinations with regard to the voice hearing.

Waddell reports on how the participant felt about their voice, how it affected them and what it meant to them; *"Hearing a voice speak to her had the effect of cutting through her concerns, taking her to the very core of her own being [...] the voice seemed to remind her of her deeper self and her relation with existence"* (Waddell, 2007, p.41). Waddell's research is not motivated towards eradicating or changing the experience but shines a light on it, as a natural phenomenon that contains meaning to the individual experiencing it.

Waddell cites Martin Heidegger's (1927/1962) concept of being-in-the-world (*Da-Sein*) in order to explain the hearing of voices as a natural human phenomenon; *"a person is always a 'being-in-the-world' and cannot be separated from the world. Thus to understand people, one must understand their context, that is, the worlds or situations in which they live"* (Waddell, 2007, p.37). Waddell's aim was to describe the essential nature of the phenomena of the inner voice experience 'as it is', rather than as a pathological aberration. Waddell's reference to Heidegger's *Da-Sein*, or the 'being there' of existence looks at IVE in a different way to previous researchers such as Firestone (1986), Siegrist (1995), McCarthy-Jones & Fernyhough (2007), Morin & Uttl (2011), and Perrone-Bertolotti et al (2014); Waddell provides an existential perspective by her choice of methodology and by not pathologizing the hearing of voices, rather studying people's lived-in-the-world experience.

Being-in-the-world

Martin Heidegger was fascinated by the poetic word and language (Farrell Krell, 1977). He thought theory to be limited, favouring ontology; studying the nature of being human (Dreyfus, 1991). In *Being and Time*, Heidegger explored the concept of *Da-Sein*, which refers to Being-In-The-World (Heidegger, 1927/1962), suggesting an interconnectedness and care for others and the world around us. We are both similar and different to others, we notice the differences in the other and may criticise them for it if they don't fit with our notions of how things should be or how we wish ourselves to be. We reject that difference but without a difference we would not be able to appreciate ourselves as separate beings. In the same way, we cannot fully separate ourselves from others and thus we find ourselves in a constant state of flux between intimacy and separation.

Our perception of other people's thoughts and feelings, our relationship to them is part of our experience in the world. Heidegger's ontology provides an adjunct to the developmental theories of Freud and Firestone, which focus the attention on the development of the individual. Heidegger suggests an uncertainty to being, a constant process of change to the world into which we are thrown. Human beings are always being-with-others, inextricably linked with them whether they are physically near or apart due to

our memories and perceptions of others as we carry them around with us. Therefore, in order to study one's critical voice we must consider the context in which we exist.

Existential Guilt

Firestone (1987) identified the phenomenon of existential guilt within his patients who experienced critical voices. Existential guilt relates to the feelings a person has when they are guilty of transgressions against themselves (Yalom, 1980). Firestone's definition includes the guilt of hurting others; *"people feel strong guilt feelings when they act in a manner that goes against their stated goals and real preferences. They are basically depriving of themselves when they are opposed to their own point of view, but in addition, they feel bad about hurting others who depend upon their love."* (Firestone, 1987, p.223).

Heidegger's view of guilt encompasses a sense of morality, having responsibility for oneself and others; it is a fundamental part of Dasein (Heidegger, 1927/1962). Both Firestone and Heidegger's definition takes account of one's interconnectedness to others, in particular those who are important to us and our sense of responsibility to them. It denotes a care for others, and when our care falls short of how we would like to treat ourselves or those close to us we feel guilty and indebted. There is also the sense of how things 'ought' to be within this lack of achievement, that somehow we should fulfil our goals or behave in the best way possible towards others. The difference between Firestone and Heidegger's ideas about existential guilt is that Firestone describes a 'one-way' route; from external to internal, whereas Heidegger's description references a constant process of change. This distinction is important when considering how as individuals we view ourselves and our critical voice because relationships are back and forth, reactionary in the moment.

I and Thou

When looking at the nature of relationship and ourselves in relation to others, the work of Martin Buber requires consideration. Buber's I and Thou was a mystical and philosophical poem (Smith, 1937). Buber elucidated the nature of relationships between people and things from the viewpoint of the individual. The I-Thou relationship is primary; it is characterised by a full, open, non-exploitative, non-stereotyping meeting, and relates to communion with God. Despite the direct translation of the German word 'Du' meaning

'you' in English, the term 'Thou' is used to reflect the reverential nature intended (Kaufman, 1970). The I-It relationship, by contrast is one that is casual, exploitative, objectifying and demeaning (Feltham & Dryden, 2004).

Buber wrote *"The attitude of man is twofold, in accordance with the twofold nature of the primary words which he speaks. The primary words are not isolated words, but combined words"* (Buber, 1923/2010, p.3). Buber purports that the primary words of I-Thou can only be spoken with the whole being where nothing of oneself can be withheld. He cites a baby's instinct to make contact with another human being, and the sense of interconnectedness between two humans. Furthermore, the longing for the Thou is bound up with one's soul and contact with the Thou is contact with eternal life.

The 'It' is experienced by the 'I' as separate; there is no relation or mutuality with the 'it', the connection is one way from the 'I' to the 'It'. The concept of I-Thou and I-It in terms of the critical voice can be viewed from Robert Firestone's developmental perspective that parent and child are one and the same (I-Thou) until separation is realised and there is a push away from the parent's perceived criticism (I-It). The objectifying of the 'it' distances the other, perhaps because the pain is too much for the 'I' to experience. The pain would be the perceived external criticism that becomes self-criticism where the 'I' feels they have done wrong (Kainer, 1979), exacerbates feelings of self-disgust (Gilbert et al, 2004), is relentless and bitter (Freud, 1921/1952).

Hell is Other People

Criticism can be found in fictional literature and Jean-Paul Sartre's statement "Hell is Other People" (Sartre, 1989, p.45) provides another aspect to the study of the critical voice and of relationships. Sartre's statement is taken from his play 'No Exit', which highlights the inescapable prison of our own assumptions and constructs about how we see the world, and how we think other people see us. The play is comprised of three characters; Garcin, Inez and Estelle, who are trapped in a room together which they understand to be Hell in the afterlife. There is a bell to call the valet but the bell does not always work and the door remains locked.

The characters struggle with their own beingness; trying to explicate who they are to the other characters or wish to be seen as, whilst trapped in their own personal worlds. Inez reflects early on that due to the nature of their imprisonment *“each of us will act as torturer of the two others”* (Sartre, 1989, p.17), believing that in Hell there must be a torturer. Garcin, on the other hand chooses to believe that it would be easy to live together without ever taking notice of the others *“I think I could stay ten thousand years with only my thoughts for company”* (ibid, p.17).

In a poignant passage of dialogue, Estelle and Inez question their existence and sense of themselves:

Estelle: *When I can't see myself I begin to wonder if I really truly exist. I pat myself just to be sure, but it doesn't help much.*

Inez: *You're lucky. I'm always conscious of myself – in my mind. Painfully conscious.*

Estelle: *Ah yes, in your mind. But everything that goes on in one's head is so vague, isn't it? It makes one want to sleep. [She is silent for a while.] I've six big mirrors in my bedroom. There they are. I can see them. But they don't see me. They're reflecting the carpet, the settee, the window – but how empty it is, a glass in which I'm absent! When I talked to people I always made sure there was one nearby in which I could see myself. I watched myself talking. And somehow it kept me alert, seeing myself as the others saw me.”*

(Sartre, 1989, p.19)

The passage speaks of authenticity and transparency; Estelle is constantly aware of how others might see her, ever vigilant to the presence of others and their perceptions. Without her reflection she simply does not exist. Sartre may have been thinking of Freud's (1921/1952) concept of the super-ego in his depiction of Estelle; stuck in the position of seeing herself from the outside (or believing she can see herself as she thinks others see her). Similarly Berne's (1964) Parent ego state bears a similar resemblance to Estelle's

position by maintaining a constant vigilance and directing her to behave in certain ways for the benefit of others.

This researcher's reflection of the message of the play is to take Sartre's 'Hell is Other People' and expand on it; it is not that other people are 'Hell', it is our own internal dialogue, our own beliefs about ourselves that is the inescapable Hell that we imprison ourselves in. We cannot escape our Da-Sein or conscience, it is part of us as we are part of our world. This raises the question of why we imprison ourselves in our own internal world, the internal world comprising of our external world as we perceive it and our internal world as we experience it.

Meaning

"Meaning [...] is implicit in our experience of reality. We cannot tolerate meaninglessness" (Spinelli, 1989, p.7); human beings are meaning makers, in order to understand our world we need it to make sense otherwise we feel anxious and disturbed. For Sartre, life is absurd, there is no inherent meaning, humans are thrown into this world and *"condemned to be free"* (Sartre, 1948, p.34). Humans are free to choose how to live and what meanings to attribute to one's experience of the world; *"I emerge alone and in anguish confronting the unique and original project which constitutes my being; all the barriers, all the guard rails collapse, nihilated by the consciousness of my freedom"* (Sartre, 1943, p.63).

This idea places responsibility on us as individuals to determine ourselves, to determine our thoughts and actions. If, as Sartre purports there is no God with a higher purpose for us then we must choose that purpose for ourselves. The Danish Philosopher Soren Kierkegaard struggled throughout his life to identify his purpose; *"the thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wished me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die"* (Kierkegaard, 1835/1958, p.44).

It is interesting to note that Kierkegaard talks of faith and God's purpose for him, yet at the same time searching for his own truth, his own unique idea to live by, one which he would die for.

Sartre's idea of 'emerg(ing) alone and in anguish' in search of a purpose appears to echo Kierkegaard but Kierkegaard, unlike Sartre, believed that one's purpose was sent from God out there waiting to be found. For Kierkegaard the looking was a key aspect to his way of being, finding it impossible to understand his life; *"life can never really be understood in time simply because at no particular moment can I find the necessary resting place from which to understand it backwards"* (Kierkegaard, 1843/1985, p.89).

Albert Camus also references the search for meaning in his work 'The Myth of Sisyphus'; *"the meaning of life is the most urgent of questions"* (Camus, 1942/2005, p.2). It is urgent because if there is no meaning to life then there is no point to life and therefore one might as well not live. Yet, Camus continues *"the wild longing for clarity whose call echoes in the human heart"* (Camus, 1942/2005, p.20) cannot be unheard, it requires attention. For Sisyphus, life seems absurd endlessly rolling the rock up the hill only to have it roll back down again. What is the point in that, and why does he continue with this pointless endeavour? Sisyphus's purpose must lie in the meaning he attributes to the task, which lies in his back story, his memories and the reason he came to be in the position he is in.

Victor Frankl offers another aspect to meaning, which is that through struggle itself can meaning be found (Frankl, 1959/2004). Frustration is a part of life, *"an indispensable prerequisite of mental health"* (Frankl, 1959/2004, p.109), and a change of attitude towards the frustration can bring about a different sense of purpose. Frankl provides a potential rationale to Sisyphus's struggle; that once the search for meaning is successful then not only can happiness ensue but also the capability to cope with the suffering.

How individuals interpret what is meaningful to them will be unique to their particular set of circumstances, their past, their life experience, their context in the world. People perceive things in context (Spinelli, 1989), we interpret and construct things through selective attention and we hold on to those constructs because they are meaningful, for us they have a purpose.

Critique of Literature and Previous Research

"If language is always a means of interaction with the world, it is perilous to study it in isolated environments or in traditional controlled experiments."

(Emerson, 1983, p.252)

Quantitative methodologies limit our understanding of a psychological phenomena due to the difficulty of reducing a complex issue into statistical data. Thoughts, feelings and behaviour are contextual and subject to individual perception and can lose their individual meaning when presented in research papers. The critical voice contains personal meanings and idiosyncrasies which dedicated enquiry and immersive research can help to explicate so that a greater understanding can be gained.

Firestone's (1984; 1987) theory of the 'Voice' offers a limited perspective on the internal critical voice. Looking at the critical voice only through the lens of the critical element loses the humanness of the phenomena. People are affected by their surroundings *"for it affects me as I affect it"* (Buber, 1923/2010, p.10). Therefore studies and literature must include the broader perspective of inner speech and personal meaning in order to provide the framework in which the critical voice operates. Primarily the research question in this study focuses on the meaning and purpose of the critical voice, but it also includes the surrounding internal voices that may or may not be present.

The review of the psychological literature on critical inner speech and self-criticism has mainly produced psychodynamic theories authored by men, such as Robert Firestone, Sigmund Freud and Paul Gilbert. Whilst this paper is not intended to take a political stance on gender and the lack of writing by female psychologists, the question of how critical inner speech and self-criticism theories would look if produced by women from a different psychological perspective requires some consideration and will be explored in the discussion section. This issue is of particular significance because out of all of the people that came forward for this research, only one person was male.

The review of literature on self-criticism with regard to participants also highlighted the widespread use of undergraduate students, some of whom were studying psychology. The methodology section of this paper identifies the criteria for participation in this research and it is noteworthy to mention that psychology students were excluded for this reason.

Whilst the theoretical framework provides a grounding for the critical voice, the methodology and findings provide the structure and colour. By using a qualitative methodology it is possible to dig a little deeper into a phenomenon, explore meanings and feel what it is like to experience a human phenomenon through the eyes of another person.

The methodology section follows which explains how this study was realised, why such a methodology was chosen, and provides a detailed description of the steps taken.

The Research Question

The research question was identified following discussions with a range of people, primarily tutors and fellow students, and then honed with the research supervisors during the research proposal planning stage. Questions that focussed the researcher's thinking included 'what is the purpose of the research?', 'why research this topic?', 'is the critical voice the same for everyone and if not, how might it differ?', 'how can these differences, if any be captured by the research questions'?

Explorations into this topic needed to be open ended and the researcher should adopt a 'blue sky thinking' approach in order not to limit participant's meanings or responses. The research question emerged into three enquiries:

1. What is the lived experience of hearing a critical inner voice?
2. Does the critical voice have a meaning, a function or a purpose?
3. Is there a dialogue that goes on, i.e. a counter-balancing voice?

Having formulated the research question the research methodology was selected from a range of possible methodologies.

Research Methodology

The Researcher's Epistemology

A qualitative research methodology was chosen as this reflected the researcher's epistemological and ontological position; knowledge is gained through lived experience and the study of other's experience. Reality is understood in context. Qualitative methodologies allow for a greater depth of understanding of a research phenomenon, use reflexivity, and are oriented towards discovery rather than verification (McLeod, 2003). Qualitative methodologies also seek to redress the balance of power between researcher and research participant (Etherington, 2004).

Reflexivity involves transparency, being open about what and how decisions are made. Etherington explains *"Reflexivity is a skill that we develop as counsellors: an ability to notice our responses to the world around us, other people and events, and to use that knowledge to inform our actions, communications and understandings"* (Etherington, 2004, p.19).

The researcher also feels that qualitative research methodology is a joint endeavour between the research participant and the researcher, but more than this, there may be a process of change as a result of the research. Whilst this research is not measuring change and the research question does not focus on a process of change, by allowing ourselves to be known and seen by others in the endeavour to discover more about the phenomenon there is the possibility of finding new perspectives and meanings in our lives (Etherington, 2004).

By talking about something personal to us we transform our lived experience into language which becomes a narrative. Narratives are stories containing meanings and are audience driven (Kohler Riessman, 2008). Interview participants tell stories about themselves and researchers construct stories, or themes from the data. There is a socio-cultural and historical aspect to a narrative; *"Narratives are composed for particular audiences at moments in history, and they draw on taken-for-granted discourses and values circulating in a particular culture"* (Kohler Riessman, 2008, p.3).

Choosing the Research Methodology

The above perspectives led the researcher to a narrowing of the choices for obtaining the best fitting research method. Quantitative methods were ruled out due to the depersonalisation of the individual experience in favour of statistical data. The research method needs to best fit the research question, which is a search for the lived experience in order to more fully discover critical inner speech, and in doing so must also acknowledge the researcher as an integral part of the research.

Whilst the telling of one's story is a narrative, the researcher felt that using Narrative Analysis was moving too far away from the individual's lived experience to a broader viewpoint of the phenomenon. Discourse Analysis was considered as this could be argued to fit with the linguistic nature of speech and inner speech, however Discourse Analysis aims to *"gain a better understanding of social life and social interaction"* (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), and the focus of this research is not about social life but about personal meanings.

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was considered as it is *"concerned with trying to understand lived experience and with how participants themselves make sense of their experiences"* (Smith, 2018). Equally, Hermeneutic research such as Van Manen's (1990) approach explores personal meanings and lived experience and was used by Vivien Waddell (2007) in her exploration of the inner voice experience of ordinary people. However, these approaches do not completely meet all the requirements of the research question as they do not take account of the researcher's intrinsic involvement in the research. Therefore, it seemed that only one research method was suitable to approach the research question; Heuristic.

Heuristic Research

Heuristic research seeks to discover more fully the essence or meaning of a phenomenon by *"obtaining qualitative depictions that are at the heart and depths of a person's experience"* (Moustakas, 1990, p.38). It involves an internal search to find meanings and realisations relevant to a person's experiences; it is autobiographic. Douglas and Moustakas explain: *"it requires a subjective process of reflecting, exploring, sifting, and*

elucidating the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. Its ultimate purpose is to cast light on a focussed problem, question, or theme." (Douglas and Moustakas, 1985, p.40). The researcher is inextricably involved in the research process, indeed, their passion and engagement drives the research.

As stated in the introduction, this research came about because of the researcher's work with clients who recognised an inner critical voice, and the researcher's own critical inner voice. To conduct research without declaring a personal interest would be inauthentic as it does not take account of any potential influence the researcher may have on the research participant. *"People modify their behaviour, including their talk, in accordance with different social contexts"* (Potter & Wetherell, 1987, p.37), therefore transparency, reflexivity and self-inquiry are essential requirements of Heuristic research. Reflexivity enables transparency of the researcher's values and belief, furthermore *"reflexivity adds validity in research by providing information about contexts in which data are located"* (Etherington, 2004, p.37).

Heuristic Methodology

Heuristic methodology, as described by Clark Moustakas, best fits the research criteria for this research study due to its use of rich description, texture and grain of the participant's verbatim, the search for personal meanings and self-inquiry. The following is a précised account of Moustakas's (1990) stages of research:

Initial Engagement - This is the passion that holds a researcher's interest in the research, the question that gets followed through to the end. Here the researcher will deepen their enquiry, with a view to the implications for their field of work. The initial engagement involves a dialogue with oneself, and a commitment to be receptive to the underlying meanings of the question. There is an inward looking to one's tacit knowledge (a knowing without being able to formulate this into words) and allowing one's intuition to flow without obstruction (the bridge between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge). The research question will develop from this initial engagement.

Immersion - Once the research question has been formed, the researcher will immerse him or herself in it, it will become part of their world and life for a period. This helps to fully become aware of all that relates to the question, and to discover as wide a variety of settings and contexts as possible.

Incubation - Incubation is the stepping back from concentrated focus in order to allow all the aspects to settle and arrange themselves tacitly. It is the 'sleep on it' phase of silent creative integration.

Illumination - Illumination is akin to the 'eureka' moment. The researcher is open and receptive to answers; qualities, clusters of qualities, themes, meanings and understanding become synthesised or integrated into new awareness.

Explication - This is where the themes and elements that have been illuminated are described and explained in detail. Researchers will do this by being as aware as possible of themselves, attending to their beliefs, judgements and thoughts through focusing, indwelling, self-searching, and self-disclosure and noting these as separate to the data from the research participants. The researcher will need to be careful not to distort or miss what is there but bring out the richness in as much detail as possible.

Creative Synthesis - This is the final phase of the research where everything is brought together. The researcher will be thoroughly familiar with the data, meanings and themes. These will then be arranged into core themes, whilst still keeping the detail of the verbatim transcription. Moustakas (1990) states that for creative synthesis to occur the tacit dimension, intuition, and self-searching need to be present.

Recruitment

Recruitment Criteria

The criteria for participation in the research interview was:

1. Adults who were over the age of 18. Children were not considered suitable due to ethical reasons of informed consent.
2. The participant must recognise that the critical voice is their own and not an audible verbal hallucination (AVH). The rationale for this was that prior research and discussion papers had been conducted on the critical voice and AVH (see Langdon et al, 2009 & Firestone, 1986).
3. The participant should not have a prior relationship with the researcher. The rationale for this is that a prior relationship may alter the interview process or prejudice the researcher's view of the transcript by making assumptions about the participant's meaning.
4. Psychotherapy students were excluded as they are not sufficiently representative of the general population and generally are over researched, in addition prior research had focused on undergraduates (see Hurlburt et al, 2013 & Morin & Uttl, 2011).

In order to ensure that the participant recognised that the critical voice was their own and not an AVH, as per criteria number two, the researcher asked participants to confirm the absence of a current or previous diagnosis of auditory hallucinations or psychosis. This was done verbally when arranging the interview on the telephone, set out in the flyer, and at the start of the interview, the details of which will be stated later on.

Advertising

Participants were recruited using a range of formats; by putting flyers up locally (see appendix i); by presenting the results of the pilot study at a British Psychological Society

(BPS) talk; via a dedicated Facebook page (see appendix ii); by direct mail attaching a flyer to doctor's surgeries in Jersey, and by word of mouth.

In addition flyers were sent or posted on the following websites; via direct mail to contacts on LinkedIn; on the researcher's Facebook page requesting it be re-posted by the researcher's 'friends'; on the BPS South West Facebook page; on the Society for Existential Analysis Facebook page; on the World Congress of Existential Therapy Facebook page; on the Jersey Counselling and Psychotherapy Facebook page; on the Counselling Psychologists UK Facebook page; on The Tara Centre's Facebook page; on the Networking Jersey Facebook page; and on the researcher's ResearchGate page.

The flyers were printed in two sizes; A4 and A5 and contain a brief overview of the research, the criteria for participation, some brief information about what to expect, the purpose of the research and the researcher's contact details. The A4 flyer, in addition to this, gave a definition of the critical voice and prompted questions to consider about the critical voice.

The flyers were put up in the following locations and permission was sought and obtained prior to display:

- local supermarket community notice boards
- coffee shops
- sports centres
- churches
- pet shop
- community centres
- dentist waiting room
- school staff room
- hairdresser's staff room
- libraries
- tax office staff room.

Some unsuccessful requests to put up flyers were in a Yoga studio, and large supermarkets. Similarly, no response was received from the doctor's surgeries, the government organisation, or an educational establishment.

Participant Contact

With the exception of two participants who expressed interest by word of mouth, participants primarily expressed their interest by email to the dedicated research email address. An email reply was sent thanking participants for their interest and attached to this email was the Participant Information Sheet (see appendix iii) and the Consent Form (see appendix iv). The email asked them to read the information and to reply with their availability for interview.

Upon receipt of confirmation of interest in being interviewed further email correspondence took place to arrange the interview day and time. Two participants used the dedicated mobile telephone number to confirm interview arrangements. For face-to-face interviews directions to the site were sent once the interview was confirmed. For Skype interviews, details of the researcher's Skype address were sent by email and the participant was asked for their Skype address (see section entitled Skype Interviews).

The participants that were interviewed were not chosen but were the first to confirm acceptance to be interviewed. Seventeen people expressed an interest in the research in total, seven of which were interviewed and ten who either did not respond following receipt of the Participant Information Sheet or did not confirm an interview time.

The Research Interview

The chosen format of the interview was a semi-structured phenomenological interview. The rationale for this format was so that participants could answer as openly as possible, and it was made clear to the participant at the start of the interview that they should say what was important to them rather than feel they had to answer the questions, which were guideline interview questions. Speedy (2001) advises against orchestrating the interview as far as possible. The researcher discovered in the research question stage that different people held different conceptions of what constituted the critical voice, and therefore the researcher did not want to limit the participant's responses but to encourage discussion.

Interview Questions

The interview questions were developed and honed from the research question and the chosen methodology. The guideline questions, with possible prompts, were as follows:

- Are you aware of a critical element to your thoughts and inner speech?
 - a) Can you describe what it is like? e.g. is the critical voice directed towards yourself, others, or a combination?
- Do you have an example of a situation or situations when you experience your critical voice?
- How do you feel when you experience your critical voice?
 - a) Are there any feelings associated with it?
- Are there particular times that the critical element of your inner speech is more dominant or noticeable?
 - a) Can you tell me about that?
- What happens in those moments that you are describing?
 - a) Is there some kind of dialogue that goes on for you?

- Do you think the critical voice serves a function or a purpose?
 - a) i.e. does it help, hinder, are you indifferent or something else?
- What do you make of your critical voice?
 - a) Do your feelings towards it change over time, or in different situations?

The researcher used an interview checklist (see appendix v) by way of a prompt at each interview, which included the criteria for participation, the interview questions, a list of the participant sheets to be given to the participant and demographics. Demographics collected included Age, Gender, Ethnicity, Profession, and Geographical location (see below).

The Interview Location and Format

Five face-to-face interviews were conducted at the researcher's private counselling practice in Jersey, and two were conducted over Skype. The location of the Skype interviews for the researcher was the researcher's home office. The researcher ensured privacy at each location and suggested that the Skype participants ensured they were in a private setting as well.

Face-to-face interviews were considered preferable for the interview format, however not enough participants from Jersey came forward, so Skype interviews were considered. The rationale for the preference of face-to-face interviews was threefold; the personal nature of the phenomena and the potential for distress; some of the nuances of interaction can be lost due to poor connectivity with Skype; and also the privacy at the participant's end could not be controlled by the researcher.

The rationale for considering Skype as an interview format was due to three reasons: three individuals from the United Kingdom expressing an interest in participating following the Facebook posts; by that point the researcher had gained experience at conducting the research interviews; and the researcher was familiar with using Skype having used it as a medium for counselling.

Chair's Action was sought to conduct the final interviews over Skype and this was granted. The three individuals who had expressed an interest in taking part in the research were contacted and two of the three individuals took up the offer of a Skype interview.

Skype Interviews

A dedicated Skype address was set up entitled "CriticalVoice Research" using Microsoft. The Skype profile showed the dedicated Middlesex University email address and mobile telephone number, and a picture of the researcher. The participant's Skype address was added as a contact by the researcher prior to the day of the interview. On the day of the Skype interview the researcher checked that Skype was working and there were no problems with connectivity. At the appointed time of the interview the researcher sent a message to the participant asking if they were ready and asked them to start the Skype call.

Risk Assessment

A risk assessment of the interview location was conducted during the research proposal stage (see appendix vi) and briefly again prior to the start of each interview in case of any change. The potential hazards were noted and mitigated and there were no other potential hazards or risks that required further attention. The risk assessment was approved by the Ethical Committee.

Consent and Participant Information

At the start of each interview the participants were asked if they had read the information sent to them and asked to confirm that they met the participant criteria. Both written and verbal consent to conduct the interview was obtained with one copy of the consent form being retained by the participant and one copy being retained by the researcher and stored in a locked filing cabinet. For participants who were interviewed over Skype the consent form was obtained prior to the day of the interview via email. The participant was asked to print off and sign the form and to scan it back. Once printed off by the researcher and filed, the consent form was deleted from the researcher's computer.

Verbal and written permission was sought to record the interview, which was done using a small digital recorder. The researcher explained that at any time the interview could be

halted, and permission to use the data withheld by the participant. Each participant acknowledged an understanding of this and agreed to proceed. There were no issues regarding the giving or obtaining of consent from participants.

Demographics

All of the participants identified as female and Caucasian. Their age range was between 30 and 56 years of age, specifically 30, 41, 43, 51, 54, 54, & 56. Their professions included self-employed (2) student (2), social worker (1), teaching assistant (1) and midwife (1). Five of the participants were located in Jersey and two were located in England. Demographics will be explored further in the discussion section.

Explanation of the Critical Voice to Participants

The researcher explained the definition of the critical voice that was being used in this research study and asked the participant to explain their understanding of it. The interview then proceeded and the research questions were asked where appropriate within the participant's dialogue.

Monitoring

Throughout the interview the researcher monitored the participants for signs of distress by listening to the participant's tone of voice, speech patterns, observing non-verbal communication and general demeanour. As an experienced counsellor, the researcher felt she had the skills appropriate to identifying client's emotions and therefore it would be possible to transfer these skills to the research interview. As the focus of the interview was on recreating the lived experience (Moustakas, 1990), the interview could have been very challenging for the participant (McLeod, 2003). If the participant had felt distressed but after a period of discussion felt able to continue, the researcher would have ensured that express permission to continue with the interview was given by the participant.

In addition, any signs of hallucinations or hearing voices was monitored. The researcher's previous experience was a manager and trainer for mental health charities and as such has knowledge and skill in working with people who hear voices. Typical signs of audible verbal hallucinations (AVHs) include the voice hearer being distracted, looking at a certain place

other than what is expected, pausing between speech, being visibly distressed or showing inappropriate emotions to the situation. Had the researcher noticed any of these signs the interview would have been halted, the criteria for participation would have been discussed and the interview gently brought to an end. The researcher would have contacted the research supervisor as soon as possible following the end of the interview. None of the participants interviewed showed signs of AVHs.

Debriefing

At the end of each of the interviews the researcher conducted a verbal debriefing with the participant asking them what it was like to be interviewed, and if at any time after the interview they had any questions about the research they were invited to use the contact details on the Debriefing Sheet. The participants who were interviewed face-to-face were then handed the Debriefing Sheet, with the exception of the first interview where the researcher emailed the Debriefing Sheet. For participants who were interviewed over Skype the Debriefing Sheet was emailed at the end of the interview. The Debriefing Sheet for Jersey participants contained local organisations that provided sources of support, and the Debriefing Sheet for Skype participants contained both local and UK organisations that provided sources of support.

The Debriefing Sheet thanked the participant for their participation and identified the name and contact details of the researcher, the name and contact details of the researcher's supervisor, the title of the research, the name and address of NSPC Ltd and Middlesex University (see appendix vii).

Ethical Considerations

The nature of the critical voice brings in itself ethical issues when asking participants to talk about their critical inner speech and how it impacts them. Indeed, as Firestone (1986) discovered in his research into the critical voice *“people became angry and defensive when they receive certain types of feedback about their behaviour”* (Firestone, 1986, p.441). Whilst the purpose of the research was not to give feedback to the participant about their critical voice or behaviour, the researcher considered the possibility of the participants becoming distressed, tearful or emotional during the course of the interview. Talking about one’s criticism towards oneself could have raised a number of feelings, and therefore the researcher needed to be particularly sensitive to the questions asked and the emotional state of the participant.

Risk assessment

A risk assessment of the location of the interview was conducted to minimise any risks and ensure any potential health hazards had been accounted for and considered (see above section entitled Risk Assessment).

Clear Participant Information

The material that was to be seen by potential participants had to be clear and contain information about the nature and purpose of the research, what could be expected, the researcher’s contact details and in some cases the research supervisor and the college’s contact details (see Flyers, Participant Information Sheet and Debriefing Sheet). The research criteria were identified on the advertising material, and either confirmed verbally or over email prior to the interview, as well as at the start of the interview. Transparency is a key aspect of Heuristic research. The researcher felt that transparency should not be limited to the researcher’s reflexivity but should extend to the research as a whole.

Dedicated Contact Details

The researcher dedicated contact details purely for the purposes of research, which comprised of a UK mobile number and the researcher’s Middlesex University email address. This ensured a separation of roles to other aspects of the researcher’s life, such

as personal life or counselling profession, and the potential of confusion on the part of the participant.

Clear & Freely Given Consent

At the start of the interview the participants were informed that at any point they could halt the interview and withdraw their consent for their data to be included in the research (see above section on Consent). Consent was requested both verbally and in written format, and a copy of the written consent was given to the participant as well as kept securely by the researcher. Ensuring participants are given comprehensive information in order that they can make an informed choice to participate is an important ethical consideration due to extracts of their verbatim being used (Kohler Riessman, 2008).

Participant Distress & Hallucinations

The researcher considered the appropriate steps to take should the participants become distressed, and these are identified in the above section entitled Monitoring. The researcher also considered the possibility of people with critical verbal hallucinations coming forward for interview, perhaps mis-interpreting or mis-reading the advertising material. The procedures that would have been put in place to deal with this situation are identified in the above section under Monitoring.

To mitigate the risk of distress, anguish, or questions about the research after the interview a Debriefing Sheet was developed (see above section on Debriefing). Organisations were identified for sources of support, such as counselling agencies and mental health charities.

Confidentiality

The researcher held confidentiality and anonymity to be a key factor in participation, particularly because some of the sample base were located in Jersey, which is a small 9 x 5 mile island with a population of around 100,000 people. Any identifying features or information needed to be changed so that the participants could remain hidden behind the data. For example, the term 'spiritual experiences' was chosen by the researcher as the original term used by the participant could potentially be identifiable within a sector of the local population. Care was taken to find suitable alternative words so that the verbatim

was not watered down in substance. Trust needed to be established in order for the participants to speak openly, and assurance as to anonymity played an important role in this. A final check of the transcript and verbatim extracts was undertaken prior to submission and inclusion in the thesis in order to ensure that identities had been adequately disguised.

University Guidelines

Middlesex University guidelines were considered and adhered to, as well as research and ethical guidelines provided by the New School of Psychotherapy and Counselling.

Researcher Wellbeing

In terms of support for the researcher, it was agreed that the researcher be in private Psychotherapy throughout the course of the research due to the nature of the research topic and the Heuristic methodological process. The Doctoral program requires continued research supervision with two research supervisors, and these supervisors were chosen for their skill and expertise in the methodology and subject matter.

Transcribing the Interview

The digital file recorded on the digital recorder was copied onto the researcher's personal desktop computer and once transcribed was deleted from the digital recorder. The interview was transcribed by the researcher in a Microsoft Word document using a foot pedal to operate the speed of play whilst typing. Each transcript was headed with the number of the interview and the date of the interview.

The researcher's personal desktop computer is password protected and solely used by the researcher. The password is known only to the researcher.

With regard to transcribing the interview, all of the words were transcribed, including "err's" and "um's" as they add to a fuller description of the dialogue. Also included were any pauses in speech and any significantly noticeable extraneous noises or non-verbal communication.

Each interview was transcribed using a three-column format; in the first column a letter was assigned for the speaker, i.e. "P" for the participant's verbatim and "R" for the researcher's verbatim; the second column contained automatic numbering for each section of the speaker's verbatim; and the third column contained the verbatim. By way of example the formatting looked like this:

P 66. *Yeah, I suppose it does expand to other programmes, my husband and I wouldn't, don't tend to watch a lot of reality TV, and I wouldn't necessarily criticise a drama, cause you're watching a drama*

R 67. *Mhm*

Each section of speech was allocated a number so that meaning units could be referenced and easily located within the transcript. The rationale for assigning a number per section of speech rather than per line on the page was because numbering each line interrupted the natural flow of speech. Unlike Discourse Analysis where specific points in the verbatim

are analysed, Heuristic Analysis identifies meaning units which may run over more than one line.

During the transcription process comments were inserted using the 'New Comment' function in Microsoft Word. The comments contained reflections on the researcher's responses to the participant, how the researcher's questions or introjections may have affected the participant's responses, and any other elements that were not captured within the verbatim itself. At the end of each transcription a 'Self-Reflection' section was added which included the researcher's reflections and thoughts about the interview and the research participant.

The transcript was then revisited and checked for accurateness by listening back to the interview whilst reading the transcript. All of the participant's "err's, um's, intakes of breath, and audible exhales were captured and punctuation was inserted as appropriate to the emphasis, pauses, and speech as it was spoken.

The transcript was then saved and allocated a number; #1 for the first participant, #2 for the second and so forth. Each transcript was password protected in Microsoft Word, which encrypts password protected files. In addition the 'Read Only Recommended' was selected to ensure the document could not be accidentally altered when being accessed at a later date. Each transcript was given the filename of the number of the interview and the date of the interview, so for example "Interview One 20.09.17".

A copy of this document was made for the purposes of anonymising the transcript so that it could be attached to the appendices of this thesis (see appendix viii). In this transcript all of the comments and personal reflections were deleted and any identifying data such as names or locations were changed in order to ensure anonymity. The filename of this document was the number of the interview and the word 'Transcript', e.g. "Interview One Transcript". By using "Save As", the document maintained the same password protection and read only recommendations. The clean transcript was printed and filed under 'Transcripts' in a lockable filing cabinet.

Data Analysis

Methodology of Analysing the Data

In order to analyse the data, the researcher chose Moustakas's (1994) modification of Stevick (1971), Colaizzi (1978) and Keen's (1975) methods of analysis. Moustakas's (1990) original work on Heuristic research provided an informative framework yet failed to offer a structured comprehensive method of analysis with which to follow. An alternative could have been to use Colaizzi (1978) as it is structured and specific, however this method of analysis involves modifying the words of the research participant, and the researcher wished to stay true to the actual verbatim in order to elucidate texture, grain and authenticity.

A description of the steps Moustakas (1994) identified in his modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen method of analysis are as follows:

1. Obtain a full description of your own experience of the phenomena, using a phenomenological approach.
2. From your verbatim transcript:
 - a. Consider each statement with respect to significance for description of the experience.
 - b. Record all relevant statements.
 - c. List each non-repetitive, non-overlapping statements, which become the 'meaning units' of the experience.
 - d. Relate and cluster the meaning units into themes.
 - e. Synthesise the meaning units and themes into a description of the textures of the experience, including actual verbatim.
 - f. Reflect on your own textural description and create a description of the structures.
 - g. Construct a textural-structural description of the meanings and essences.
3. Repeat steps 2a. – 2g. above for each of the research participants.

4. Finally, construct “a composite textural-structural description of the meanings and essences of the experience, integrating all individual textural-structural descriptions into a universal description”.

(Moustakas, 1994; p.122)

The steps suggest that the researcher becomes a research participant by going through the interview process themselves (step 1). The researcher did not follow this step due to the nature of the phenomenon and its impact on the researcher. This was discussed with the researcher’s supervisor and in psychotherapy and it was agreed that the researcher’s experience of the phenomena would be elucidated through an integrative approach to the work itself by reflecting on the phenomena and the research questions from several different perspectives; by considering the relevance for eliciting a description of the phenomena, by reflecting on any answers and how the questions felt, and finally, the researcher’s reflections on the participant’s responses. By using this approach the researcher’s own experience of the phenomena should shine through the steps as they proceeded, a process that required reflexivity and transparency. Further rationale can be found in the discussion section.

The researcher at times immersed herself in the data, took time out to pull back and consider connections, jumped back in and then an explication of the findings. This is indicative of the Immersion, Incubation and Explication stages of Heuristic methodology. Due to the nature of the research topic this proved a difficult process. The immersion into the data was at times hard work and the negative emotions weighed heavily. The data had to be read and re-read from several different aspects to ensure that the themes went together coherently.

Reflexivity and Use of the First Person

The following section is written in the first person to reflect the researcher’s connection to the data and the personal struggle with the Heuristic process. The section also includes the researcher’s critical voice in action and reflexivity.

Once I had read through the transcript and saved an anonymised copy for the appendices, I took a break to allow the contents of the interview to settle (Incubation). I then came back to the transcript and began to try and identify meaning units.

The Struggle to Identify Meaning Units

Firstly, I created a copy of the “Transcript” document using the “Save As” function, which would be used to highlight the meaning units. I did this by using Text Highlighter Colour in Microsoft Word. The filename of this document was the number of the interview and then ‘Highlighted Statements’ (e.g. “Interview One Highlighted Statements”).

I started out feeling overwhelmed at how to analyse the data, and so I left it for a while. As Moustakas does not provide a definition of a meaning unit per se, I initially struggled to begin the process of identifying what constituted a meaning unit. I went back to Moustakas’s 1990 and 1994 texts and re-read the process of data analysis. Unfortunately this did not help much as it was somewhat theoretical rather than practical. I began to feel that the method of analysis I had chosen was in fact far too complicated and that I should change my methodology and so I contacted both research supervisors outlining my proposal to change the method of analysis to Moustakas’s original, and far simpler, method of analysis.

Whilst waiting for their responses, I decided to re-read the transcript a couple of times and try and see what I could find (step 2a). I began pasting some of the significant phrases on a separate page (step 2b) with little cohesion or understanding of what I was trying to identify. I was identifying what seemed significant to me but it felt rather random due to the fact that I wasn’t sure exactly how I was supposed to know what bits were significant.

Both research supervisors replied saying that it could be possible to change the method of data analysis at this point, however my primary supervisor suggested we talk it through. When we spoke on the telephone, I couldn’t find the words to argue my case, and I realised that I had wanted to change the method because of my own lack of confidence and feelings of not being good enough. It all seemed a little too academic for ‘a bear of very little brain’ (A.A. Milne, 1926) . My supervisor and I discussed the methodology, and she suggested

that I try tackling just one page and send it to her. This felt possible, and I laughed when I realised that my self-doubt had been behind my proposal. Following the telephone call I found that I could in fact do what I set out to do and I had completed a page of analysis before the end of the day.

During my struggle some of the questions I was asking myself were “*what if what I think is a meaning unit is not a meaning unit?*” (This question suggested that I thought there was a ‘right’ or commonly identifiable meaning unit that I wasn’t capable of finding.) Another question was “What if I think something is significant and other people don’t?” (This suggested that I thought my work was not as good those in a ‘higher authority’ and I wouldn’t be able to hold my own ground when questioned.) My critical voice was insidiously at play, making me doubt my ability.

Reflexivity and A Learning Process in Identify Meaning Units

In order to break through the struggle to identify meaning units I chose to initially analyse one question from the interview questions from the pilot study transcript. I chose to colour code the meaning units based on a perceived category; Critical, which I highlighted in red; Compassionate, which I highlighted in blue; and Neutral / Learning, which I highlighted in pink. I found this quite difficult to adequately categorise each unit as some of the units could fit into either category, and I began changing some of the colours, which then became confusing trying to track the changes. I transferred the meaning units onto a separate page (step 2c), and then transferred them again into a table keeping all the coloured units together. These meaning units in the table then developed into themes (step 2d).

I then synthesised the meaning units into a description of the textures of the experience (step 2e), essentially pulling the statements together in a cohesive way but using the language of the research participant. I struggled to identify a structure of the experience as different from the texture, but through imagination and wondering (which Moustakas (1994) refers to as imaginative variation), I re-worded the research participant’s narrative into my own sense of their narrative (step 2f). I then sent this off to my supervisor questioning whether this was the right way to do it, but also feeling a little bold by wanting to carve out my own way of doing it.

Whilst waiting for a response I pondered whether this way of colour coding was a good way of analysing the whole of the transcript, not just for the one question. As I read from the beginning of the transcript I noticed other meaning units and assigned a colour to these. Continuing in this way I began to question whether this was too random, so I went back to my research question and the purpose of my research. I re-grouped my thoughts and focused my attention on the three principle questions:

- What is the lived experience of hearing a critical inner voice?
- Does the critical voice have a meaning, a function or serve a purpose?
- Is there a dialogue that goes on, i.e. a counter-balancing voice?

I then went back to the transcript and looked at it in terms of significance of the description of the research participant's lived experience of hearing a critical inner voice (step 2a), and I colour coded these statements into grey. I then highlighted statements relating to meaning, function or purpose into blue, and statements relating to dialogue into green.

From there I continued with each step as before; listing each statement (step 2b) onto a separate page under its heading, one for each question as above. Then clustering the meaning units into themes (step 2d), and then synthesizing them into a description of the textures of the experience (step 2e). I then took a break to reflect on this description in order to construct a description of the structure of the experience (step 2f). I also had questions and self-doubt which halted further analysis so I took another break to let things settle, which Moustakas (1990) refers to as incubation.

One of the questions I had was "am I looking at the data clearly, as it is, am I applying epoché as I should do". The honest answer I came back with is no, I am not. The reason I am not is that I am conducting research for a specific purpose, so per se, I cannot horizontalize each and every section of verbatim because otherwise the research would have no focus, there would be no point to asking a research question or conducting research at all. However, am I applying epoché to de-mist my own assumptions and thoughts from what the research participant is saying, and what I think they are saying. So

then yes, to the best of my ability I am being clear about what are the participant's words and what my reflections are.

The process was confusing and at times I was full of self-doubt, as can be seen in the above description of the analysis process. My critical voice was in the background saying "*you can't do this*", "*you must do this properly, you're not doing it right*" and I believed this voice, I fell for it every time. What kept me going was the realisation that behind this critical voice is the yearning to do a good job; I wanted to do the best I could to showcase the research participant and this under researched phenomenon. It seems my critical voice drives and halts me in equal measure.

Immersing oneself in the data, looking again and again at what is there is part of the methodology (Moustakas, 1990), furthermore "*skills required are developed as one tries to make sense of (the) transcript*" (Potter & Wetherell, 1987). Rather than thinking that I am not doing the analysis properly, I realise that my self-doubt, my earnestness and my struggle is in fact part of the research process.

Further reflection on my methodology during a discussion with my research supervisor brought about a realisation that even looking at the data through the lenses of the three research questions was still filtering the data, and that horizontalizing each meaning unit, irrespective of a theme would elucidate the phenomena in a clearer way. So again, my justification outlined above for using the three questions is also an example of the dialogue of my critical voice and impatience. Indeed, there is some truth in my argument, but no argument is necessary when the transcript is viewed without filters or intentions.

I returned to the transcript once again and highlighted the meaning units in one colour; yellow (step 2a). I then transferred them to another document to list all the meaning units (step 2b). Then I checked that I had captured all the relevant meaning units from my previous lists highlighted in different colours ensuring they were not overlapping (step 2c). This was a difficult task as some of the meaning units could be broken down into key phrases but by doing this lost some of the context of the meaning and so I listed both of these units despite their duplication. At this point of the analysis I felt it was better to

record more than I might use so as not to lose the nuance. I would then make the decision at a later time whether to use the fuller description or the shortened phrases. I then removed the highlight colour from all of the text for ease of reading.

Identifying Meaning Units

Identifying what constituted a meaning unit as I have stated above was a difficult process. By returning to the three principle questions within my research question and the purpose of my research I was able to focus my attention on the participant's verbatim. Much of verbatim contains phrases that are filler words, for example "kind of" and "you know" and where these appeared within a meaning unit, I abridged the text to remove them (see section entitled 'Approach to Removing Filler Words and Abridging Text').

The following extract shows an example of how I identified a meaning unit using the Text Highlighter Colour in Microsoft Word, the text that is highlighted in yellow is the meaning unit and the text that is not highlighted was omitted:

"I can't remember what it was this morning, you know I was stood at the window of my room and the voice came along and said "you know this is never going to stop hurting" and erm, literally just, well actually I can look at it like that or I can look out this window and see what a lovely day it is out there and I can move through the day feeling positive"
(T.1.P.104)

The first phrase *"I can't remember what it was this morning, you know"* (T.1.P.104) did not strike me as a meaning unit because it appeared to be reflective rather than about the participant's critical voice. The first meaning unit *"I was stood at the window of my room and the voice came along and said "you know this is never going to stop hurting" (T.1.P.104)* is a description of an instance that the critical voice occurred, and also an example of the participant's critical voice. The next few words *"and erm, literally just"* I deemed filler words between two separate meaning units with the second meaning unit speaking about how the participant was trying to dialogue with the critical voice *"well actually I can look at it like that or I can look out this window and see what a lovely day it is out there and I can move through the day feeling positive"* (T.1.P.104). Arguably the two meaning units could go together to form

a larger meaning unit about reflection on the critical voice but at the point of analysing the transcript I decided to separate them to distinguish the example from the dialogue.

Once I had highlighted all the meaning units in the transcript, I copied and pasted them into a new document in a list format, which I saved using the same filename formula as before, e.g. “Interview One Meaning Units”. Alongside each meaning unit I referenced the location of the meaning unit using the number of the transcript (T), whether it was the participant (P) or the researcher (R) speaking, and then the line number, e.g. “T.1.P.100”.

The rationale for referencing whether it was the participant or the researcher speaking was originally because I noticed that in the interview, I used different words in summarising what the participant was saying, and on occasion would leap ahead of the participant and they might reply with simply a “yes”, and so I wanted to capture this theme. As I went through the process of analysing the Themes and Textures, I eventually removed the researcher’s narrative as these meaning units did not seem necessary as they were captured elsewhere in the participant’s narrative, and this is why all the references use the term ‘P’ rather than ‘R’.

During the transfer stage of copying the meaning units from the “Highlighted Statements” document into the “Meaning Units” document I transferred all of the meaning units rather than remove any repetitive units as indicated in Step 2.c of the Heuristic analysis process. The rationale for this was to capture as much of the meaning and data as possible and then at a later stage I could filter out any repetition.

Clustering Meaning Units into Themes

The next step involved clustering the invariant meaning units into themes (step 2d). To do this I used the Save As function to create a copy of the document entitled “Stuff I haven’t used yet” and prefixed this document with the number of the transcript. I then created another new document entitled ‘Themes’ using the same filename formula as before, e.g. “Interview One Themes” and cut and pasted meaning units from the document entitled “Stuff I haven’t used yet” into the ‘Themes’ document. This was to ensure that I did not

inadvertently miss out any meaning units, to keep track of which meaning units I had used so far, and to enable work to be carried out in stages.

I listed each meaning unit underneath a proposed theme heading. The themes seemed to emerge from one or two meaning units, some themes became clustered and others were broken down further into separate meaning units. An example of a proposed theme that emerged from clustered meaning units is shown as follows:

Incapacitating / It halts me

I know it's a personality trait, definitely but it's something that has become erm, incapacitating (T.2.P.44)

it will stop me from erm, from going forward from erm, completing tasks (T.2.P.44)

from succeeding, from feeling satisfaction in what I've done (T.2.P.46)

but I went through so much trauma in my younger years that I, I'm now kind of like held back by all these traumas (T.2.P.283)

Some of the themes linked and flowed together from one to another and others were in opposition. Where the meaning units could have fitted into different themes, I shaded the duplicate meaning units or text so as to identify the duplication. This was so that I did not end up using the same meaning units across different themes. For themes that were similar I used a larger bold heading to identify the overarching theme, and a smaller font in bold for the under-arching theme headings.

Meaning Units That Were Not Used

There were some meaning units that I did not use as they didn't fit anywhere or add to anything. For example in response to my question "*so there's no particular points where it comes out more, or less, or anything like that?*" (T.2.R.27) the participant replied, "*professionally definitely, erm and in my relationships*" (T.2.P.28). This meaning unit didn't seem to add anything further to other themes that had been identified, however in order not to lose the meaning unit I wanted to keep it in the document entitled "Stuff I haven't used yet" in case a theme emerged from the other transcripts when constructing the universal description.

Textures

The next step for each transcript was to identify a short description of the texture of the experience (step 2e). In order to do this I created a copy of the “Themes” document and renamed it “Textures”, again with the prefix of the interview number; e.g. ““Interview One Textures”. In this document I further clarified and condensed the theme headings and inserted a sub-heading narrative which summarised the meaning of the theme, often using the same words that the participant had used. I then condensed the participant’s actual verbatim underneath. To clearly identify the texture from the verbatim I used a black font colour for my textural description and a blue font colour in italics for the participant’s verbatim, using speech marks to signify the start and finish. An example of a texture is as follows:

It’s Ever-Present

The participant is aware of her critical voice all the time, it is ever-present.

“I’m aware of it all the time, (T.4.P.44) it’s still there the next day and the next day (T.4.P.382), but more so recently I think” (T.4.P.80)

Repetitive Statements

Any repetitive statements that I removed during this final process I pasted into the document entitled “Stuff I haven’t used yet” pertaining to the relevant interview participant’s transcript. However, I kept some repetition in where it emphasised the quality of the way the participant was speaking, for example in Transcript Four the participant spoke about her spiralling thoughts:

“just focus on that, just focus on something, stop all, stop the spiral [...] thoughts like that, and then that will help, (T.4.P.528-532) it breaks the thoughts, the cycle [...] but then they still come back again” (T.4.P.536-538)

Had I removed the overlapping speech it would have read:

“just focus on something, stop the spiral [...] thoughts like that, and then that will help, (T.4.P.528-532) it breaks the thoughts, the cycle [...] but then they still come back again” (T.4.P.536-538)

The second statement does not have the same phonetic quality or pace and reads very differently. By keeping in the overlapping repetitive speech it shows more of the participant’s thought process and natural speech.

Approach to Removing Filler Words and Abridging Text

Some of the participants used a lot of filler words, such as “err”, “um”, “kind of” and “like”. As noted previously, I transcribed all of the spoken utterances that the participant made and these appear in each participant’s transcript. I considered whether to keep these filler words in the participant’s verbatim in the final analysis as they could contain meaning in themselves, however I felt I did not want to interpret what the meaning of an “err” or “um” meant to the participant as it could have been any number of things from a struggle to find the right words, to being distracted by other thoughts etc. Therefore, on balance I felt that ease of reading my analysis of the participant’s verbatim was my preference rather than disruption to the flow. By way of example the following extract shows the actual verbatim: *“it will stop me from erm, from going forward from erm, completing tasks”*, which when the filler words were removed became *“it will stop me from, from going forward, from completing tasks” (T.2.P.44)*.

Other examples of filler words the participants used were “kind of” and “like”, which I removed; for example *“it made me kind of want to withdraw a bit and feel very kind of to, to be very self-attacking and to feel very kind of anxious” (T.6.P.60)*. Once the filler words were removed the verbatim read *“it made me want to withdraw a bit and feel very, to be very self-attacking and to feel very anxious” (T.6.P.60)*. I felt this helped the reader to understand the meaning more clearly without being distracted from the filler words.

I also some abridged of the verbatim as it was repetitive and distracted from the essence of the meaning; for example *“it feeds, or has been part of, or is a symptom of my anxiety, I have an anxiety erm, disorder, erm that was only diagnosed a year ago, erm, and I know*

*that that is part of what fuels that anxiety” (T.2.P.30) was abridged to “it feeds, or is a **symptom** of my anxiety, that is part of what fuels that anxiety” (T.2.P.30). Where only a few of the words were omitted due to abridging a comma seemed to suffice rather than the standard “[...]”. The rationale for this was that in the above example the flow of the verbatim would have been disrupted considerably and would have looked like: “it feeds [...] or is a **symptom** of my anxiety [...] that is part of what fuels that anxiety” (T.2.P.30).*

Where the participants verbatim went over two or more numbered sections, for example where I spoke in between the flow of the participant’s speech, I used the standardised “[...]” to show a break in verbatim and the referencing will show the line numbers from start to finish (i.e. (T.5.P.200-202)).

One of the participant’s verbatim appeared to flow rapidly, and the meaning unit centred around being taken advantage of. I removed a middle section of the verbatim to condense it making it more comprehensive but felt the meaning unit should stay as long as it is to show the intensity of the participant’s feeling. The whole section of verbatim is shown here and the section in grey was the section I removed;

*“I have to cook, the dishes, the mess you know so, it really, really, **really** annoys me if somebody says, ‘I’ve loaded the dishwasher for you’ FOR ME! FOR ME! And sometimes I will actually say this ‘ok so, which of those dishes were mine?’ and sometimes I will just in my head start having a little rant like ‘why would I, why would you think I’d’ you know, this is all in my own head ‘why would you think I’d want to do this, why would you think this would be a choice in life’, and I’ll go on and on like that ‘I’m sure if you were doing it you’d **love** this for a life’, I’ve actually said to my daughter ‘when you grow up don’t have a family, don’t get married and don’t buy a house until you’ve done **everything** else you want to do’ and I know that the first time she meets a bloke that she likes that will be it, end of, but I admit I’m at that stage where I’m like you know ‘why would you think this is ok that I have to do, why would you think I want to do it, why would you” (T.7.P.292)*

Gathering Themes; the Textural-Structural Description

A construction of the structures of the experience then began to emerge (step 2f) which developed into textural-structural description of the meaning units and essences (step 2g). I called this 'Gathered Themes' as this title made more sense to me as a 'textural-structural description of the meaning units and essences' seemed to be somewhat elusive.

To identify the Gathered Themes I used my knowledge and understanding of all of the themes across all the transcripts (i.e. using imaginative variation and creative synthesis). This process also involved printing out the documents that contained the 'Textures' and the 'Stuff I haven't used yet' for each participant, which I stapled together. I then annotated them by hand in pencil with additional possible themes to the themes identified in the sub-headings.

In order to gain some sort of organisation as there was a lot of data to handle I developed a matrix using an Excel spreadsheet (see appendix x). The matrix was somewhat similar to analysing data numerically as each theme was marked where it appeared in each of the transcripts. I felt that I needed to have a system that was easy to identify which theme appeared in which transcript so that it made the handling of the data more systematic and less overwhelming.

Themes were listed horizontally and transcript numbers were listed vertically across the columns, i.e. T1 through to T7. The appearance of a theme was recorded in the corresponding cell of the theme and the transcript number using a tick "✓". Where the opposite of the theme appeared in the transcript, this was marked with a "И" symbol, for example in the theme 'Ever Present' *"I'm aware of it all the time"* (T.4.P.44) would be marked with a tick and *"it's not there every day"* (T.4.P.384) would be marked with opposite symbol.

Additional columns were entitled 'Score', 'Opposite' and 'Related Themes'. These columns were for the total number of times that the theme appeared (Score), and the total number of times the opposite theme appeared (Opposite). Where the theme appeared in all of the transcripts "All" was entered into the Score column rather than the total number.

Where a theme appeared in the transcript that was similar to the theme listed, for example the participant had not used the same words but the sense was the same, a tick was put into the box but marked in grey font. For example, a similar theme to 'Redressing a Balance' was 'Reconnecting with Me' which appeared in transcript number two, and therefore under the theme 'Redressing a Balance' a tick marked in grey font was identified under the column for transcript number two (T2). In the final stages the theme 'Reconnecting with Me' became a sub-theme of 'Redressing a Balance'.

Further columns were added entitled "Related Themes", which identified any themes that were related to the listed theme, so for example 'Not All Bad' could also be related to 'My Little Friend', 'Coping Mechanism', 'Break', 'Strive to be Better', 'Safe Criticism' or 'Rehearsal'. Some of these related themes were included in the gathered theme, whereas some of them fell under different gathered themes. The 'Break' later became 'Externalising the Voice' as this fitted the theme better.

To start the process of gathering the themes I filtered the Score column using the filter function in Excel. I firstly filtered for "All", so as to identify the theme that appeared in all of the transcripts. I then continued this process identifying the highest numerical score down to the lowest. I created new Word documents giving each a possible title of the gathered theme which comprised of a global title and various sub-themes, i.e. 'Harsh Judgement' was the global Gathered Theme, with 'Meltdown', 'Self-Blame' and 'Fuelling the Fire' being sub-themes. I then saved these documents under a folder entitled "Gathered Themes".

In order to create the gathered themes I used both the Excel matrix and the printed document comprising the Textures and Stuff I hadn't used for each participant, which contained my handwritten annotations. Starting from the beginning of the document of the first transcript I copied the theme from the digital document into the new gathered theme document. Once copied and pasted I then shaded the text I had copied into grey font in the original document in order to keep track of which text I had used so that I was not duplicating verbatim. I continued this process for each of the transcripts.

Once all of the extracts for that theme were copied over I then read through the document and wrote a short opening paragraph about the gathered theme and used sub-headings where variances occurred. Under each sub-heading I wrote a brief statement about the verbatim. Each piece of participant's verbatim was grouped into separate paragraphs so that participant's words were not mixed with those of other participants.

As I worked through the gathered themes documents some of the themes did not seem to fit and therefore I moved them back into the original document. For example I originally put the following extract into the 'Harsh Judgement' gathered theme, because "*verbalising, being horrible and aggressive to other people outwardly that's destructing you*" (T.7.P.532) could be seen as harsh and judgemental, but it didn't seem to fit in with the other extracts which contained sub-headings of 'Self-Blame' and 'Fuelling the Fire'. Therefore it was cut and pasted back into the participant's Textures document. I later used the extract in the 'Safe Criticism' gathered theme because 'I'd rather destroy me than destroy you' fitted better with sentiment of not wishing to hurt another:

"making excuses not to run, being an addictive personality, that's self-destruction (T.7.P.530), verbalising, being horrible and aggressive to other people outwardly that's destructing you and I don't do that [...] so I internalise, so I'll destruct, I'll destroy me [...] and I'll, I'll have internal conflicts for me [...] so I don't want to upset you, offend you [...] I don't want to engage with you" (T.7.P.532-540)

The process of identifying the gathered themes was initially straightforward, however as the process continued this became harder as some of the themes overlapped either in their meaning or the context the participant was describing. Consequently having initially located some of the extracts into one gathered theme I then moved them into another because they fitted better there. For example, the following extract was originally in 'Harsh Judgement' but when looking at when the critical voice was present, it felt more at home under the heading of the gathered theme entitled 'Alone'. Although the sentiment includes anger and harsh judgement, it speaks more of feeling isolated and alone, which seemed to be behind the harsh judgement:

*“a lot of my close friends they still have children so they’re really busy [...] and it was the same when I had my daughter [...] all my friends are younger than me, so I again felt isolated then because I had post-natal depression, I felt isolated (T.4.P.190-194), I can be at ***** for dinner [...] and I can feel isolated in that situation as well (T.4.P.576-578), my daughter was like a month old, ***** served me dinner at eleven o’clock at night, I was breastfeeding! She serves me fucking dinner at eleven o’clock at night, so you know they’re in a different zone to me totally (T.4.P.590), I can feel excluded there as well yeah, yeah, yeah (T.4.P.584), and I’ll just sit there going ‘oh for fuck’s sake’” (T.4.P.582)*

In order to not duplicate any verbatim text across the gathered themed documents I used the search function in Microsoft File Explorer in the Gathered Themes folder to search for words in the file contents. This enabled me to locate which themed document the word existed in so that a detailed search could be carried out in the document itself. This method was also a good cross-check that all of the extracts had been used and to then identify by annotation on the paper document where the extract was located.

As this process progressed I was then able to solidify the title of the gathered theme and write a short description of the findings in each of the documents. Time was needed for this final piece of work in order for me to feel that the data was presented as best as it could be, and in a way that showcased what each participant had to say. The discussion section will explore which clustered meaning unit went into which gathered theme and why.

This final piece of work took some time because I wanted to feel that the data was presented as best as it could be, and in a way that showcased what each participant had to say. This was partly my critical voice coming into play; the internal fight between perfectionism, being beyond criticism and the frustration of the existence of the conflict battling with impatience.

Findings

This section details the findings of the study which elucidates extracts of verbatim from participants and synthesises the themes into a coherent form. The following key shows the formatting and meaning of the characters used in participant's verbatim:

- Participant's verbatim is in "speech marks," *italicised* and in **blue** font.
- Worlds shown in **bold** are where the participant used emphasis.
- "[...]" denotes abridged verbatim where there is a break in speech, i.e. where speech occurred over more than one line (e.g. (T.5.P.200-202)).
- A comma "," shows where there was a natural pause in the speech or where filler words were removed (i.e. "err/like/kind of").
- (Bracketed) words denote nonverbal communication or add information about what was happening.

The findings are presented in Gathered Themes, which are listed in alphabetical order with a summary and Creative Synthesis at the end. Each Gathered Theme has a global title with sub-titles that reflect aspects of the global title. The thirteen global titles are:

- ❖ Caring for Oneself
- ❖ Changes Throughout Life & Menopause
- ❖ Childhood & Parenting
- ❖ Halts Me
- ❖ Harsh Judgement
- ❖ Impact of Being Interviewed
- ❖ Interconnection
- ❖ Internal Dialogue
- ❖ Isolated & Alone
- ❖ Not All Bad
- ❖ Perfectionism & Not Good Enough
- ❖ Redressing A Balance
- ❖ When It Occurs

Caring for Oneself; Learning About Oneself, It's Hard to Hear Positive Things, Being Positive Is Not Enough

Caring for oneself is not easy when you are self-critical and is often overridden by taking care of others; the focus is outside of oneself rather than towards or for the self. One participant said that she had no idea how to care for herself, only how to self-soothe. She felt she knew what she ought to do but in practice this did not happen:

*"I always come back to reading that you need to learn to self-care and be gentle with yourself, look after yourself. I have no idea how to do that. Apart from self-soothing as in overeating, you know, things like that or, locking myself away just to be alone at home and quiet and not answering the phone, apart from that kind of self-soothing, I don't know what it is to be **gentle** with myself, (T.2.P.52) I have no idea how to self-care, I have no idea, I've got the theory" (T.2.P.407)*

Another participant spoke about coming to the realisation that her work was affecting her health, and indeed exacerbating her critical voice. She was able to recognise that this was not good for her and to take action to care for herself by changing jobs.

"And that's one of the reasons why I'm going to give up [the job] this summer because I just feel I need to do something that's less life and death [...] and less critical, (T.5.P.330-332) I think doing a more gentler job might just be the right thing for my health really [...] mental and physical health" (T.5.P.362-364)

A third participant spoke about being fed up with caring for everyone else and stepping back to re-focus her care on herself, as she had reached a point of saturation:

*"If this is the rest of my life it's not going to be caring for everyone else' that seems to be the common thread [...] of that role that you have as a mum, of everyone expecting you to nurture and be there and you're the, you're the backstop all the time [...] you're the wicket keeper and then you reach an age where you go 'mhm ok then so for **me** that's stopping now' and everyone else is*

going ‘no, no please don’t stop that, please don’t stop that’, you know, so I think that’s my overriding narrative at the moment” (T.7.P.78-82)

Learning About Oneself

Learning about oneself can be harsh but it can also be transformative if you are prepared to be courageous. Participants spoke about situations where confronting your critical voice can change the way you see it, which then enables you to re-frame your perception about yourself and your life. This can, however, cause you to be more critical about being self-critical in an effort not to be so self-critical:

“Well I remembered it from then onwards thinking I mustn’t be so hard on myself [...] what it changed was that I must be careful not to say that to myself, (T.5.P.114-116) so it just made me reflect, self-reflect and, and sort of be critical about being so critical about myself” (T.5.P.126)

Learning can be healing; once you recognise your critical voice and you are brave enough to engage with what it is trying to say to you, it is possible to see it for what it is. For this participant, this began during spiritual healing experiences where she engaged with her shadow side which revealed her motives, why she reacts the way she does and not to take the critical voice at face value:

“Once you’ve seen and recognised something then you can really start working on how to fix it, (T.1.P.192) you know you just need to gather the tools” (T.1.P.194)

“Plant medicines that are taken in ceremonial circumstances that can teach us huge amounts about ourselves, and give us the possibility to see that actually that’s, its, it’s just wrong [...] we have to go very deeply into our own shadow side, into our own darkness to do that, then the experiences will show us how we’re thinking, what we’re thinking, and allow us to see that those thought processes are extremely disruptive for us, for our wellbeing and for our daily lives, and eventually for people surrounding us” (T.1.P.16)

Other forms of learning, such as education can help you to understand yourself better. For this participant, having counselling and taking a degree in psychology and sociology helped her to learn about herself, reframe things and like herself more:

“In my mid-twenties I did about eighteen months of counselling, (T.3.P.118) it was only afterwards I was able to reframe things and think about things in a different way, (T.3.P.296) so I like myself more, I think also doing a degree in my early thirties and thinking learning more about you know, psychology, sociology, all those kind of issues, and being able to do something so I not only was I liking myself more but I was then able to do something that was more productive, (T.3.P.118) some of the stuff I learnt in my degree I actually watch myself play out, so I’ve watched myself kind of going back” (T.3.P.122)

Knowing oneself and what it means when you behave in certain ways helps with understanding oneself and others around you. This participant spoke about how her emotional intelligence aided her to manage her emotions:

“There’s always been an underlying emotional intelligence, I think I’ve always been quite emotionally aware of my own emotions, how to manage them, and not to let them get the better of me so I’ve always been aware that when I’m feeling low or when I’m feeling angry, the best thing to do about that is work that energy out, do something with that energy, (T.3.P.187) have an awareness of how I was feeling and why, how other people were feeling and why they might be feeling that way” (T.3.P.192)

It’s Hard to Hear Positive Things About Myself

If you are self-critical it can be hard to hear people say positive things about you when you feel that what is underneath the façade people seem to see in you is not how you feel about yourself. What they are thinking is not correct and therefore you want to make them aware of this difference in order to correct their misperception, be more truthful and authentic.

"I find it really difficult to hear positive praise, (T.6.P.166) people are so like 'oh yeah you use silence and then when you do say something it's really well worded', (T.6.P.160) people were saying you seem so calm I wish I could be like that, and me feeling incredibly uncomfortable with that [...] especially in a group setting where you've got 8 people saying really nice things about you" (T.6.P.174-176)

*"Somehow I seem to have developed an ability to not **look** anxious [...] I look very **calm** apparently, (T.6.P.150-152) I don't think people would know that I'm self-critical and that calmness is a façade, (T.6.P.164) 'you're wrong, you think I'm calm but actually I'm not' [...] I need to tell you that actually you're wrong because of the nice things that you think, are wrong.' [...] they're saying things that aren't true and that's, that's not ok, they can't think that I'm calm if I'm not" (T.6.P.180-188)*

Being Positive is Not Enough

Trying to be positive instead of being critical is just not enough. According to one participant there needs to be more interconnection between the heart and the head for you to really feel that you have value and worth. Simply telling ourselves that we are good enough needs to engage the emotions because the critical voice is so powerful:

*"I had all the things up on the mirror that I could see; 'you are, I am a wonderful person blah blah blah' and that **can** work, and it **can** help, but it's not enough [...] it's nowhere near enough [...] because you know by that time, that critical voice is so **powerful** that a few positive words, they kind of help, we take it in intellectually, there's a great deal that we take in intellectually that doesn't actually hit home in our emotions, in our hearts" (T.1.P.204-208)*

*"We don't **know** it until we feel it [...] so sitting and intellectually saying 'yeah well I understand this and I know I'm a really good person and blah blah blah' while you're actually cut off from your heart to your head, that's not going to work, (T.1.P.212-214) and I might have just kind of gone 'that is not true! I am worth, I have worth' but I didn't actually truly believe it" (T.1.P.202)*

[It] Changes Throughout Life & Menopause

Participants spoke about their critical voices changing throughout their lives. Change had occurred for a number of reasons; for some it was a catalyst, for others a response to significant events or personal circumstances. Depending on the experiences you are going through the critical voice will be more prevalent if the experiences are perceived as negative or outside of your control, or less prevalent if you feel comfortable.

For one participant, the critical voice *“got worse and worse with age”* (T.2.P.275) whereas another participant reflected on times in her life where things were difficult, she felt out of control and the critical voice was really bad. Now her circumstances have changed she feels loved, is financially sound and consequently the critical voice is different:

“I’m no longer a single mum on the dole, with no money, living in a house full of damp and no food. Now I’ve got a great job, a great house, plenty of money, I’m not in that situation, (T.3.P.238) It wasn’t down to me, it was down to other people or down to other things but I had no control over that (T.3.P.226) I just thought here I am stuck with no money and how I don’t know what to do about this and all these things are happening and I’ve got no control over it” (T.3.P.232)

“I think your critical voice really depends on where you are in your life, I mean I think if you are in a fairly negative place then your critical voice is going to have a much bigger impact or if you’re able to, if you’re in a positive place I think and even in, in different times in your life it will play a very different role” (T.3.P.370)

*“I also think meeting my husband, I think just the acceptance from my husband and having that mutual love and respect which I’d never really had before has also impacted on the way I feel about myself, he **really** does contain me, being nurtured by him. When we first met I spent all my time sitting on his knee (laughs) just being loved, I think that has had a huge impact being in that relationship” (T.3.P.122)*

The critical voice can lessen over time as you mature. Being able to reflect back on your life allows for a greater distancing of past memories where you remember the critical voice being a horrible experience:

"I think although its maybe not so much now at the moment but certainly in the past when it's been more difficult, it's been a horrible experience" (T.6.P.212) it's in a place where, although it will continue for a little while, I am able at the moment more to put it aside and to really join the discussion and look at the positives [...] I'm not spending the whole day in my head listening to this voice, (T.6.P.60-62) it's at a distance [...] I'm looking back as an observer on it" (T.6.P.68-70)

Being older and more mature can bring about a different perspective of the critical voice; that of find it amusing. This seems to be coupled with finding stupid things you do amusing rather than berating yourself for your stupidity, and also being able to verbalise this. This participant reflects upon how she handled things she thought were stupid in the past, and how she handles them now. The difference is that she now no longer pushes them under the carpet as they occur but laughs and talks about them:

"It amuses me I think now, I think now I'm older and more mature it, it's more of a, although it's critical, it's more of an amused (exhales) just kind of eye rolling, whereas in the past it may have been more, much more critical and much more, putting myself down, (T.3.P.100) now, it's not so much, I'm just amused by the stupid things that I do" (T.3.P.102)

"In the past I would have just pushed it under the carpet, not told anyone, (T.3.P.132) now I'm much more likely to say some things to my husband whereas you know, 'today I left the car at home and then I walked to work and then when I needed to go to a meeting and I walked out the office and thought oh where have I left the car?, I've left the car at home' (laughs)" (T.3.P.132)

Catalysts can provoke a dramatic change in how you feel and behave. Previously mild mannered and considerate people can suddenly become curt and direct if the

circumstances demand immediate action. In this extract the participant experienced the abrupt transition from being a child to parenting her parents, which thereafter affected how she behaved towards others and felt in herself:

*“I think there was the catalyst for me [...] I **know** the time that happened was when my mum was diagnosed as being terminally ill [...] and I suppose up until then I had been more inclined to pretty things up and put too many words in and make it palatable to people if it was unpleasant news and, and then I thought ‘well we just need to cut through that now and just get on with it’, and I said to my dad ‘she’s out in the kitchen and she’s worrying about blah de blah, and she thinks you’re not going to be able to cope because you can’t use the dishwasher, the washing machine blah de blah’, ‘Come in tell her that you can cope’ and he went ‘no cause I can’t’ and I went ‘wrong answer! **You** get your backside out there and tell her you can cope [...] because that’s what she needs to hear and it ain’t about you now’ [...] my mum had always been the matriarch, at that time she was showing vulnerability that I’d not seen” (T.7.P.346-354)*

“And I felt fiercely protective of her then [...] and from that point on I think I’ve taken that approach both in my own head and outwardly [...] to say to people, you know, in the most pleasant way possible, (T.7.P.358-362) I am quite direct with people, not rude or unpleasant but I will tell them if there’s a problem because I don’t see the point in skirting around it [...] I’ve not always been like that” (T.7.P.342-44)

Menopause

The menopause was reported as having had a significant impact on four of the seven participant’s critical voices. The menopause was cited as changing how the participants felt about themselves, their lives and those around them. The menopause had affected them in different ways and their acceptance or non-acceptance of how they were feeling varied accordingly.

The Menopause caused feelings of confusion and forgetfulness, which led to increased worry for the participants. There were feelings of loss; the loss of perceived efficiency,

professionalism, confidence, or concentration. Participants spoke about a part of themselves dying and this brought about a difficulty in coping with this loss. A part of their personality as well as the physical change to their body seemed to be inescapably irredeemable.

“It does worry me about becoming more confused, it does worry me about becoming more forgetful, more anxious, more angry because they’re all the emotions that I don’t want to have and I’ve worked really hard [...] to get away from them, (T.3.P.282-284)

“The menopause doesn’t help of course [...] that’s kicked in as well and that’s robbed quite a bit of my confidence, (T.5.P.416-418) I think the confidence, it’s all wrapped up so it’s just that I can’t cope with the changes in my career [...] as well as I did, (T.5.P.424-426) my concentration is less and my memory is less so I just think well, you know it’s not so easy to cope here, (T.5.P.428) a bit, bit worried cause I think is this the slippery slope now to older age [...] and this is just hormone changes and that’s, that’s not the critical voice bit of it, it’s just [...] an anxiety there [...] it feeds in” (T.5.P.442-446)

As well as the loss of parts of themselves that they did not want to lose, there was also the reduction of feelings of anger which brought about a sense of calmness. For this participant this is one of the benefits to the menopause because it brought a happiness that wasn’t always there before:

“Going through an early menopause as well, I think a lot of my anger was linked to my hormones so when those stopped and now I don’t have hormones I’m much calmer and much more, my mood is more flat, that constant up and down, I’m just generally content, (T.3.P.120) I’m no longer angry, I’m just generally fairly happy” (T.3.P.124)

Losing one’s purpose in life coupled with going through the menopause brought on feelings of sadness and loss. Some of the participants shed tears at various points throughout the

research interview, and as noted in this extract were conscious of being on the verge of tears. Here the participant talks about how she feels in relation to her friends and her husband:

"I might start crying but I do cry a lot so don't take any notice of me, (T.4.P.178) I suppose because I am 54, I think it's menopause, I've got other friends the same age as me and they do the same thing, they just start crying and they don't feel like they're good enough and they feel like their kids have left home, their kids don't want them anymore, the husband's sailing or doing whatever he's doing and then they just feel like 'well what have I got now?'" (T.4.P.182)

Menopause was spoken about as the death of one stage and the birth of another. This transition period brought on internal conflict where stark feelings arose such as not wanting to be here anymore, lacking in tolerance where previously there was forgiveness, and an increase in arguments both internally with oneself and externally with others. The menopausal change was in turn bringing about change in the participant's relationships:

"Menopause to a degree is you know, it's an ending of the productive period of your life, (T.7.P.366) it's a death of one period but is the birth of another period [...] that's why there's a lot of internal conflict. Personally, I think that's why a lot of women around my age get that conflict of 'why do you think it's ok that you come in and sit on the sofa all afternoon and don't cook your own food and wait for me to come in three hours later and stand cooking for everyone, why is that ok for you?' Well from their point of view its ok cause that's always been how it's been" (T.7.P. 368-370)

"More since I've become pre-menopausal and menopausal, I've had quite stark feelings of 'I don't want to be here anymore, I don't want to look after people anymore, I don't want to, if this is my life I, I need to change it.'" (T.7.P.48) I'm unforgiving of other people's mistakes, I'm not tolerant if I feel people aren't treating me [...] or, being respectful. Previously, I'd want to make the peace, and now I'm 'd'you know if that's us, that's fine for me' [...] I don't need anyone', (T.7.P.58-62)

Childhood & Parenting

Most participants spoke about their critical voice as having developed from childhood and have quite distinct memories of its aetiology; *“it comes from childhood, I remember it, as long as I can remember I can remember telling myself off”* (T.5.P.86).

The critical voices of parents still echo years through to the present, affecting thinking, feelings, and behaviour. Memories such as hearing parents argue, of being told how to behave, what to do, what not to do and how to do better has shaped participant’s lives.

A child doesn’t yet have the worldly understanding that adults have, and consequently can blame themselves for their parents arguing. If there are no safe and trustable people to talk to, the child is unable to make sense of events or consider events as normal; *“As a child you know, you, you very much take it all in”* (T.1.P.76).

In the following extracts participants describe the very first memory they had when they experienced that first moment of being criticised and how they tried to make sense it:

“Certainly for me it began when I was a child, in fact I have a very distinct memory of being, I don’t know maybe seven or eight and that critical voice was always there from a very young age, (T.1.P.38) my family life was incredibly dysfunctional, my parents were arguing and I was lying in bed and very clearly the thought came to me ‘this is my fault, if I wasn’t here they wouldn’t be arguing’” (T.1.P.34)

“It’s actually linked to when my parents split up, (T.2.P.269) that’s when the fear started, when the anxiety started, when the perfectionism started, when the need to please started, because you’re torn between two parents, both of them trying to brainwash you, so it, it was really a mind constricting time and so that’s why it’s so clear, that’s why I know how and when it started, I know the situations, I was very carefree before that, I started living in a paradise lost environment” (T.2.P.273)

The rules we learn in childhood echo throughout our lives. These rules not only come from our parents but the socio-cultural environment we grow up in. Participants spoke about how as a child they accepted the rules and were expected to comply with them. These extracts show how as a child you were expected to be invisible, not talk about your feelings but deal with them on your own:

“Drawing back on this inner voice I think as the guide to what behaviour was expected of me [...] and how I was supposed to live I suppose, (T.5.P.190-192) you had to be presentable, you had to look pretty, or look decent, or behave yourself well, and so drawing your attention to me was not something that was encouraged, in fact it was frowned on” (T.5.P.154)

“I tie that back to the way I was brought up in a very sort of Victorian you know, you don’t express, ‘boys don’t cry’” (T.7.P.254)

*“I think some of it comes down to the time and the social status of how you’re brought up, my mum and dad were both from quite big working-class families, of the ‘children seen and not heard generation’ [...] I was expected to behave in a very adult way, I was never encouraged to talk about my feelings [...] so I think that’s where that need to have a little bit of a tantrum on my own in my bedroom when I was growing up because that was **not** something that would have been tolerated (T.7.P.116-122), girls don’t talk about their feelings, you don’t talk about your periods, none of that, ‘No. No, let’s not talk about that’” (T.7.P.256)*

“there was a very strong, you know, this is the way you do things (T.7.P.138), if you can convince a doctor you’re ill, you can stay home [...] other than that ‘taraa, you’re off to school’ (T.7.P.134-136), there was no blurred line between them being parents or mentors or friends, they were parents” (T.7.P.256)

“‘Smile and the whole world smiles with you, cry and you cry alone’ and that’s very much what they used to say [...] mum and dad” (T.5.P.168-170)

Rules learnt in childhood can be hard to unlearn, they become rules for life. Even though you may be an adult with many years of experience of being a parent yourself, the echoes of your upbringing remain;

“I think what other people think of me is important and I try not to let it rule me, but it was very much how I was brought up” (T.5.P.152)

A strict upbringing, such as the Victorian upbringing referenced by another participant, shapes the critical voice’s love for rules. Being the oldest child, this participant keenly felt the difference between how she was parented and how her younger siblings were parented. Here she describes how she can still hear her mother’s harsh voice today:

“I’m very close to my mother and I feel that the way that I was brought up was quite, quite strict. I was the first child and the strictness was not there so much for the other children and I was the only daughter so we were always together and I’m very close to my mum but I hear her strictness come through, (T.5.P.160) it’s sort of her voice, it’s not her but it’s her, it’s, it’s the way I’ve been brought up, (T.5.P.166) she was very harsh” (T.5.P.256)

The participant also spoke about how her mother was fierce about her own weight and critical about the participant’s grandmother’s weight. The participant was unable to emulate this harsh dietary regime and as a consequence felt her mother’s displeasure:

“She was fierce about weight, she’s fierce about her own weight [...] her mother was very obese and she said ‘I’m never going to be like that’ and she never has, very strict with herself but of course I couldn’t keep up with that, (T.5.P.264-266) I have a sweet tooth and she was very cross with me for becoming tubby, I suppose when I was nine, ten I felt her displeasure, well no, no, her embarrassment for me being slightly overweight I mean now it’s laughable because I wasn’t wildly overweight but then it was an issue” (T.5.P.268)

Parental aspirations and expectations affect participant's critical voices. Pressure can be felt by a child whose parents see potential in them and want the best for them, however the perceived pressure can be a burden to the child. The child comes to believe that there is no room for slowly learning something and learning from their mistakes, instead the sense is that they have to perform straight away. The second extract reveals this fast track expectation as a teenager:

*"I was born with that potential [...] that intellectual potential, or creative potential, my parents saw that in me [...] and that's why they put that pressure on me, (T.2.P.303-307) knowing I had that potential has always been more of a burden [...] I was the seventh wonder in my parent's eyes, I was destined for great things in a way, I was always given the **best gear**, straight away all the whole gear for oil painting when I barely did water colours, and that kind of made it harder [...] You've gotta perform straight away, you've gotta perform rather than building those blocks, those stages of, of, I was going to say mediocrity, of building your skills, of building your abilities, your knowledge and all that and getting to that point where your potential can actually express itself, (T.2.P.297) it was more of a trip up, more of a hindrance" (T.2.P.293-299)*

"Never done the whole learning stages and mistakes you do when you're a teenager, when you're looking for yourself and all that and then all of a sudden I had to be an adult and pay my bills and look after myself, (T.2.P.317) and you're expected to act like an adult and know what to do, have that maturity, I was always a very mature child but not for these things, not for relationships and things like that [...] knowing that potential so 'why am I not there?'" (T.2.P.333-335)

Being a parent oneself can make you reflect on your own experience of being parented and how you don't want that same experience for your own children. Effort is made to be a different kind of parent to your children than the type of parenting you received. In the following two extracts participants talk about how they have reflected on the best way to be a parent in terms of the development of the critical voice by comparing their approach to that of their parents, and also what their parents might think of their own parenting:

“She’s a very interesting person because she’s very hard on herself, very hard on herself and I think that’s where I get it from. I’ve listened to how she’s responded to herself much like my son did with me, and that’s quite an interesting link really, and so I’ve learnt the mechanism that she has for herself (T.5.P.252) she just thinks of other people before herself, she’s quite sacrificial in the way she lives, she would do loads for other people and loads for the family, you know, she’s not harsh with other people, it’s with herself” (T.5.P.260)

*“My daughter and I have a different relationship and I’ve not yet decided which strategy is best from a parenting perspective, (T.7.P.258) my daughter’s a lot more open with me than I was ever able to be with my mum, (T.7.P.126) I don’t know if my dad would see my upbringing the same as I do (T.7.P.266) I think him and my husband’s dad were both quietly critical of us not forcing her into school when she was having her panic attacks, I suppose if my mum had been alive I may have pushed further, pushed **her** more, pushed [my daughter] more, but that wouldn’t have been a good thing” (T.7.P.264)*

Participants spoke about how the words and tone of voice their parents used affected them, creating beliefs such as not being clever or good enough which continue throughout their lives. The occurrences do not need to be frequent, as this participant explains:

“My father had a lot to do with stuff as well, I remember once he was always questioning me, like doing the maths and he was going ‘come on add this up, add this up’ and I couldn’t add it up quickly in my head so that made, I think that is one little thing that went back to, you know ‘I’m not clever enough’, (T.4.P.242) he didn’t do it a lot but there was a time when he did do it, it might have just even been one day but it was enough to shatter me” (T.4.P.248)

“my father would always be with one of the paintings, it was always never ‘ooh that’s very nice’ it was always ‘ooh well you should have made your sun a bit more yellow’” (T.2.P.38)

[It] Halts Me; Restraint & Futility

An aspect of the critical voice is where it halts or limits you from doing or saying something, it can stop you in your tracks completely or just limit you for a short while. Stopping and thinking about what you are doing or about to say can serve a useful function depending on how you perceive the process, what you say to yourself or how much you want to do the thing you were about to do.

The critical voice can be harsh and incapacitating; , it halts action with statements such as *“no, you can’t!”* (T.6.P.20) or *“you look ridiculous in that”* (T.5.P.142). It stops you from living the life you would like to live or from being the person you would like to be. It can also halt your thinking, stop you from exploring ideas and possibilities in your mind. The results of this harsh stopper can be incapacitating, leave you feeling unsatisfied or that you will never achieve your dreams:

*“Then there’s thoughts that make me stop doing something, or thinking I can do something and the voice says ‘don’t even **think** you can do that, don’t even **think** you can say that,’ (T.5.P.134) ‘don’t even **think** you should go there, you could go there,’ (T.5.P.136) or ‘don’t even **think** you should think that’, (T.5.P.138) it’s like a full stop for me, it means I can’t, I can’t take something further”* (T.5.P.138)

“That’s the ‘come on’, it jolts me and makes me think I’ve got to do better [...] ‘what are you thinking of’ it’s a very much another jolt, it’s ‘what are you thinking of, what are you’ you know, ‘you can’t, you can’t be serious” (T.5.P.92-94)

“I’d love to dress in a bohemian style, I’d love to dance madly, I’d love to let my hair down, and I just can’t do that, (T.5.P.206)

“It’s something that has become incapacitating, it will stop me from going forward, from completing tasks [...] from succeeding, from feeling satisfaction in what I’ve done” (T.2.P.44-46)

The critical voice can make you more cautious to engage with others which leads to a withdrawal from interaction. The anxiety of wanting to speak but not being sure how you will sound creates an internal dialogue between your critical voice and your wants and desires. If the critical voice is successful in talking you out of doing the thing you wanted to do, not only do you reproach yourself for spending too much time dialoguing, but the critical voice then reproaches you for not doing what you wanted to do after all:

“Wanting to get in before the critical voice starts again cause I [...] had that awareness that if this continues too long I’m just going to get kind of caught up in the dialoguing with this voice, and the moment passes [...] then I don’t do it, and then ended up doing that awkward thing where two people start speaking at the same time [...] so then I was ‘no, no, no, you say, you say it’ and then the voice is just back going ‘oh look you’ve interrupted somebody, you can’t contribute in a group discussion’” (T.6.P.38-44)

“At the start feeling more positive, so feeling energised and curious [...] a little bit confident like ‘ooh I’ve got something that I think will be helpful to the discussion’ [...] that dips a little bit when the critical voice comes in and a little bit of anxiety creeps in linked to those thoughts ‘what if this isn’t relevant’ etcetera, and it’s an immediate spike in feeling very anxious, (T.6.P.86-90) it added fuel to the critical voice so it made me kind of want to withdraw a bit and feel very, to be very self-attacking” (T.6.P.60)

This participant recognised that by taking immediate action when she wanted to do something like running she could bypass the internal dialogue which would inevitably lead to not going for a run:

“Another time where I have lots of conversations in my head are if I decide to go running and I used to have to run first thing in the morning, because otherwise it just don’t happen, because there are far too many things in my head tells me are much more important [...] like painting the ceiling or cutting

the grass, things that I would not normally want to engage in [...] and I can come up with lots of very creative excuses to not do things” (T.7.P.518-522)

Restraint

The halting aspect of the critical voice can also serve as a restraint. Being able to restrain yourself from immediately speaking saves face, saves embarrassment and shows consideration to others. It can show you your values as in this extract where the participant likes the way she is considerate, means what she says and says what she means:

“The critical voice has served a function, I very much value wording things in a way that feels, feels ok, I like that I don’t jump in with stuff generally, I like that the voice has made me develop an ability to phrase things in a way that seems to really convey what I mean [...] the critical voice limiting my spontaneity and forcing me to really consider how I use words and language” (T.6.P.214-216)

The critical voice can stop you from doing something stupid, or forcing you to consider how you speak to someone rather than be impulsive or saying something that you later regret.

“At some point it does serve a purpose in as much as, if you can learn to work with it, it can actually stop you doing some really stupid things” (T.1.P.130)

Another function of restraining yourself from immediately speaking your criticism can be that it is a crisis management tool, a way of filtering what you want to say before you say it. One participant likened her feelings to that of a coke bottle that had been shaken up. By restraining herself from expressing her anger she could have the internal dialogue with the critical voice which meant that the anger would subside and not spill out in an explosion:

“You’ve got a Coke bottle that you’ve shook up [...] you can take the lid off and the contents will explode or you can keep the lid on and you know at some point that will subside to the point that you can take the lid off and it will be ok, (T.7.P.166-

168) I'm going 'ok so what are my options here', (T.7.P.172) I'm going to keep a lid on this until I decide what's the best move [...] crisis management" (T.7.P.176-178)

Restraining oneself from criticising others in the moment also serves the purpose of maximising the effect of what you want to say to someone. Rather than be seen as 'nagging' or constantly critical, choosing your moment to speak helps the message to be heard by the listener. This is not always possible of course, however this participant explained how this was important for her:

"It depends on I suppose how relaxed I feel, so if I'm trying to get an assignment ready to submit and everyone's expecting me to still do the housework and do the cooking and everything and I'm trying to meet a deadline [...] so then I might verbalise that and say 'that's not reasonable' but I'm a firm believer that if you moan too much people shut their ears so I pick my moments, (T.7.P.380-386) I can't maximise the effect of what I'm saying if I say it now [...] I want to achieve a certain outcome [...] I'm going to do it at the time when I think people are most receptive to what I'm going to say" (T.7.P.390-394)

Futility

The critical voice can also lead you to feel that something is futile or pointless, which leads to gradual inaction or a full stop. One participant explained that the result of being openly criticised in a group situation caused her to feel small and humiliated. She felt it was pointless to speak up and defend herself because it would be a waste of time and energy, furthermore the others would remember her defence more than her humiliation. By saying nothing she could protect herself by suffering in silence rather than cause a scene where she would be embarrassed even further.

"I felt smaller than the others, (T.2.P.206) rational mind thinking 'they won't even think about it in 10 minutes' whereas if I pipe up and try and defend myself and look good and explain why [...] that they'll remember (T.2.P.212-214) if I had said 'yes but I used the one you sent me!, I only did what I was told' basically I would have embarrassed myself all the more, (T.2.P.210)

Futility and despondency can be the result of the dialoguing of the critical voice. Looking back over your life and the choices you made, the dreams you had but did not pursue, or the advice you took but wish you hadn't. The critical voice repeats itself until you feel that there is just no point in doing anything.

One participant spoke about regretting not going to art college at a young age, which was what she wanted to do but was advised not to. Now, she feels unable to pursue her dreams, because she is stuck with what the critical voice repeats to her:

“When I was fifteen, sixteen I wanted to go to art school [...] and the career guidance teacher at school said ‘you don’t want to do that, you don’t get a job out of that’ [...] so I never did, (T.4.P.132-136) I was the eldest of eight kids and I needed to go to work cause you know there’s not much money at home and all that kind of thing, (T.4.P.240) I think ‘well if I did an art degree and go back to what that woman said, well what am I going to do with it?’ (T.4.P.146) but I can’t afford to do that [...] I can’t afford to just take a year off work” (T.4.P.124-126)

Harsh Judgement; Meltdown, Self-Blame & Fuelling the Fire

The critical voice can be harshly judgmental both of oneself and others. Harsh judgement of oneself can be quite violent, the voice can be destructive where you tell yourself off for something or put yourself down; *“oh this isn’t going to work, you’re wasting your time blah blah blah”* (T.1.P.94).

Self-judgement can be *“a reprimand”* (T.5.P.86), where the critical voice tells you off for something you have done that contravenes perceived cultural courtesies or how you think you should behave. Interrupting someone was spoken about by one participant as something you should not do, so when she did this she berated herself. The critical voice does not take account of an inadvertent mishap, nor any other mediating factors (such as in this example the group facilitator later invited her to say her point), but recollected previous times where she interrupted, and this exacerbated her anxiety:

“oh look you’ve interrupted somebody, you’ve spoken over somebody, (T.6.P.44) oh nobody wanted to listen to this, they’ve only come back to you because they were being kind, really your point doesn’t add anything to the discussion’, (T.6.P.50) and then the voice is going ‘yeah you did that last time where you accidentally spoke at the same time as somebody’ then it’s that continuing anxiety of ‘what is everyone thinking about me’” (T.6.P.60)

Similar to self-judgement, judging others by your own standards, your cultural and moral expectations can eat away at you if others don’t comply with them. However, this externally directed criticism can soon turn inwards when you feel you should be more compassionate towards others, leaving you feel conflicted:

“I think that where the critical voice really comes in is of course comparing myself to others, to society, to what would be expected, (T.2.P.333) I can be very judgemental towards other people if they do a what’s called a half arsed job, I look down on that and I know it’s not a good human value, we all have our strengths, our different values, and that does eat away at me, every day it does

*eat away because I know that I need to be more compassionate, more understanding of people who are maybe **different** from me” (T.2.P.126)*

Some judgements of others can be quite stark or shocking and at times the internal narrative can be unknowingly externalised:

“I probably have said to myself ‘I wish people were dead’ [...] that’s probably the common thread, (T.7.P.322-324) I have a lot of moments in the car when I’m driving, a lot of moments where sometimes I talk out loud as my daughter tells me where I’m criticising other people’s driving or being very annoyed at them (T.7.P.242), but a lot of the time it’s just going on in my head” (T.7.P.244)

The narrative of the critical voice contains words like ‘should’; I should be doing this, I should not be doing that. The critical voice can remind you of how you should behave but your desires conflict with the voice, and if the desires win the critical voice then reprimands you. The judgement does not necessarily need to be harsh and can be conversational:

“I have a voice in my head that if I’m doing things wrong I sort of tell myself off (T.7.P.40), I have those conversations where ‘well I should eat more healthily cause I could do with losing a bit of weight and I am 50’ and then I have ‘but I really like a bag of crisps’ and I have a chat with the bag of crisps, that sort of thing where I know if I didn’t buy it, it wouldn’t be there but they call me and I go running, so those sorts of light hearted conversations where you know you shouldn’t but you do and I’m reprimanding myself” (T.7.P.298)

However the critical voice can be very harsh, harsher towards yourself than you would ever want to speak to someone else and this raises the question ‘why is it ok to speak like that to yourself?’ The critical voice can be demeaning and constant which leads to further judgements of yourself and what you do:

*“It’s the old exercise of ‘well if you were to hear someone else say that to someone [...] would you find that normal? And **no** definitely not, it would be*

*quite violent at times, it would be totally unacceptable to see that happening to someone else, but to **myself** it's not something that I even know how to change, (T.2.P.56-58) very self-critical, very, very negative, very demeaning, (T.2.P.20) it's a **very harsh voice**, (T.2.P.52) it leads you to always, judge your output, whatever that output is."* (T.2.P.88)

Meltdown

Destructive narratives can lead to meltdown or tantrums out of sheer frustration. The meltdowns can escalate and de-escalate quickly, and are usually in response to an external event. The event triggers a value or belief such as *"nobody gives a shit about me"* (T.7.P.296) or where you feel you have been overlooked:

"I can get very 'I wanna die, I don't want to be here, I can't do this', I'm having some sort of meltdown. Once the moment's past I think what a ridiculous thing to think and say [...] but I can really lose the plot really quickly sometimes, like if I can't find a parking space [...] and I need to get to an appointment (T.7.P.68-72)

*"My son the other week made himself and his girlfriend a cup of tea and was going to walk up the stairs and I said 'oh! no cup of tea for me then' and he went 'no' and I was expecting him to go and make one and he didn't and I **absolutely** had a meltdown [...] because it's not the cup of tea [...] it's the principle of the cup of tea and what that says to **me** [...] it's almost like I'm going 'right now I think I'm worth this and if you don't agree then we have some conversations to have'" (T.7.P.334-340)*

"it was all sort of going on and I just flipped and I went in the lounge and I went 'everybody's got their own problems, everybody blah, blah, blah but I'm going through the bloody menopause, nobody gives a shit about me" (T.7.P.296)

"I suppose really the word I've not used yet that at its worst is a tantrum [...] I can stamp my feet, I can feel like pulling my hair out, I grit my teeth, I'm just out of control physically as well as mentally" (T.7.P.592-598)

Self-Blame

Telling oneself off and blaming oneself appeared as a theme for three participants, and this links in with judging oneself harshly. The blame can be automatic, the narrative usually contains 'should' and can leave you feeling belittled.

Blame comes automatically and quickly. It is only upon reflection that consideration can come as to whether it really was your fault but by then the damage is done. The critical 'shoulds' appear, *"I felt that I should have done it, I should, and I felt an idiot"* (T.5.P.466). Mistakes can be blown out of proportion, particularly those that are picked up by someone else and these usually result in apportioning huge blame onto oneself:

*"I do tend to blame myself first [...] and then **much** later on I think actually that it might not be my fault but like **always** you know, it's very quick 'huh, that's my fault, I should have done that better' or 'oh gosh that was forgotten, that was, that was me'"* (T.5.P.458-460)

*"If someone picks up a mistake I have made I take it really badly [...] it's a proper let down **to** myself, (T.2.P.168-170) it's that voice always saying 'of course they're looking down on you now because you made a mistake' (T.2.P.190) I take it as a massive blame, a massive telling off"* (T.2.P.194))

The shame and self-blame from long ago in one's life can still be keenly felt. In the following extract the participant recalls an event in her early career when she felt belittled and this led to her blaming herself for failing to perform the job that was expected of her:

"When I was nursing, this was way back in the eighties, I was doing night duty relief which meant I was on a different ward each night and the nursing officer used to do a ward round at one o'clock, two o'clock in the morning and she would expect me as the nurse in charge to remember thirty five patients and all their diseases and why they were there, and she would shine a torch at each bedside and I would have to say the name and the diagnosis of the person and

she was furious if we forgot or just didn't know and it never, ever crossed my mind that this was an unreasonable expectation that somebody who walked in at that ward at nine o'clock and by one o'clock needed to know everything. But it didn't cross my mind for years [...] and feeling absolutely gutted if I got it wrong and feeling that I was a hopeless nurse and all of that and I just think now how unreasonable and I'm really quite cross about it that I was made to feel so belittled [...] it did such damage to my confidence as a nurse, (T.5.P. 462-466)

Adding Fuel to the Fire

Having others criticise you can lead to a fuelling of the fire of your own self-criticism. Mistakes made public can be crippling, the humiliation and criticism that you are already giving yourself is brought into the open and you feel exposed. External criticism is like to *"a tonne of bricks"* (T.5.P.374) raining down on you, *"it's like getting a beating, you remember it"* (T.2.P.257):

*"I was so embarrassed, I took it like a **failure**, (T.2.P.200) I know that I will remember that event, next time [...] in a much harsher way, (T.2.P.251-253) I lived it in such a, with such a feeling of embarrassment that that's going to stay with me, not the positive of learning from your mistakes but more the 'I don't ever want to feel that again'" (T.2.P.257-259)*

"I'm already deeply self-critical so then if I'm criticised at work it's just like raining down on my head a tonne of bricks [...] because I already know that I could have worked better, or I could have done something different, I don't need other people to tell me [...] so when they do tell me it's, it's, it's so hard to take" (T.5.P.374-378)

The type of job you do can exacerbate your critical voice. If the job requires constant evaluation and accountability, this can ramp up the internal criticism:

"I think the job means that that's always there and it has to be there to some extent, you have to self-analyse, you have to critique your actions, you're always thinking 'can I learn from this experience?' [...] and it feeds into that, (T.5.P.326-328)

*I did an MSc and I felt that it **taught** me how to be even **more** critical, (T.5.P.338) I remember doing the critical evaluation module and then about a year afterwards thinking ‘wow it’s just upped me even more, upped my critical abilities even more’ [...] you can’t unlearn it, (T.5.P.340-342) you could say it’s tailor made for somebody like me, somebody that’s self-analysing and self-critical” (T.5.P.324)*

[The] Impact of Being Interviewed

Every participant spoke about the impact to them from taking part in this research and a theme emerged that participants had either never spoken about their critical voice before or had not reflected on its nature before; *“I haven’t actually thought of it as the critical voice but when you’d put that on the title, suddenly I thought that’s what it is [...] That’s it! That’s it! That’s it!”* (T.5.P.26-28)

By taking part in the research participants focussed their thinking on their critical voice and as a consequence felt that taking part had been a good thing for them. They also felt that it would be a beneficial subject to research. They had not until this time actually looked into what having a critical voice was like, had not considered it before, and thought they were alone in experiencing it. Some participants said that they simply had no awareness they were being critical all the time.

Knowing that the critical voice was experienced by other people and the subject of research was important to participants; they wanted to be involved so that it might help others in the future but also to understand and help themselves. Having someone bear witness to their critical voice was very important:

“It’s really good that you get, that you understand, (T.5.P.308) it’s been really good to do this, I thought it would, I thought it would be good, just to know that it’s not just me, I think that’s really important to know [...] that other people have this critical voice, (T.5.P.549-551) I think it’s important for me to know that you’ve heard it and you’ve acknowledged it and you know that it happens enough times to people that you actually want to study it [...] more and that it’s a, a recognised issue that people have” (T.5.P.555-557)

For one participant it was hard to describe her critical voice as she felt she wasn’t very good at explaining her feelings or verbalising what was happening in general. She struggled to find the words, preferring to provide examples of her critical voice in action.

Becoming aware of one's criticism can lead to taking responsibility for it, the responsibility we have towards others on how we are being and the responsibility we have towards ourselves for how we are being:

"We don't accept responsibility for what we're actually creating ourselves, (T.1.P.44) it's a very easy trap to fall into, very fine line, I think attentiveness (inhales) is very necessary" (T.1.P.132)

One participant relished the time and space to be able to explore her critical voice without boundaries, being able to talk about it felt freeing. Talking about oneself in such an open way also felt a little indulgent but also enriching:

"It doesn't always make sense but that's a lot of the nature of what goes on in my mind, there's a lot of pulling both ways, so I've just tried to just react basically, not overthink, that is really quite freeing, it's really quite, for me quite therapeutic, (T.2.P.423) to not worry if it doesn't make sense, but to let the thought follow its, its trail and see where that leads, I was interested in taking part because I think it's (pause) enriching, I suppose it was also maybe a bit selfish as well, because in a way it was an opportunity for me to explore, explore without the boundaries, I think it was a good wander in the woods in a way" (T.2.P.427)

Interconnection; Safe Criticism, Social Media & TV, Care for Others

The theme 'Interconnection, Social Media & TV, and Care for Others' speaks of the interconnectedness of ourselves to our world and our physical, mental and emotional wellbeing. The critical voice is not an isolated phenomenon within each individual, it exists as part of ourselves and in our relationships to others and the world around us.

Your critical voice has an impact on your health and wellbeing, the thoughts, feelings and emotions are seen to be interconnected. Three participants spoke about how they believed that their current health conditions are a result of years of negativity resulting in a physical manifestation:

*"I have an auto-immune condition right now which I **believe** which is directly linked to that, those thoughts, those feelings that I had for **many**, many years and so finally it does manifest physically because you know, your thoughts and your feelings are part of your whole, (T.1.P.66) it's a feeling that comes with it [...] it's connected to a feeling, to an emotion (T.1.P.56-58)"*

"I've developed hypertension and I wonder if that's an element of it, always on the [...] state of alert (T.5.P.358-360), damages my mental health actually" (T.5.P.380)

"I went through so much trauma in my younger years that I'm now held back by all these traumas, through life's experiences I have been knocked down quite a lot" (T.2.P.283)

Participants spoke about a sensitivity towards others which they found to be hard work and unsettling but it also served the function of judging situations or being able to manipulate people. This was reported as a blurring of the boundaries between oneself and others or being able to pick up on atmospheres in a room:

"Half the time you're not sure whether it's your feeling or someone else's, (T.1.P.254) It (said hesitantly) begs the question 'is it your own critical voice or is it

a shared critical voice?’, (T.1.P.256) maybe it’s our own critical voice that is responding to what we’ve picked up from others” (T.1.P.268)

“I am someone who is very emotional, very sensitive, I can pick up the atmosphere in a room as soon as I walk in, I feel people, by small tiny body language things, it makes for a very wobbly base [...] the emotions will always take over in me” (T.2.P.409-413)

*“I’m quite good at reading people [...] in reading other people’s body language, that have proven to be right [...] I’ll know **most** of the time what buttons to press and when to press them” (T.7.P.398-406)*

Safe Criticism through Social Media & TV

Being able to be critical towards posts on social media without actually posting a reply, or being critical towards people on television means you can express your criticism without the other knowing you are doing so. This provides a ‘safe’ way of being critical as there are no direct repercussions from the object concerned. It also shows a care for others, you do not want them to hear your criticism or offend them. Finding a way to be safe with your criticism shows your awareness of the other’s feelings, that we are not islands but interconnected to the world around us.

Being critical to others who are on social media or the television provides a way to vent anger and frustration without directly affecting the other. People on television or social media cannot hear you criticising them, you can do this without fear of reprimand, unless of course you post a reply. Typical ways participants were able to do this was when watching programs like Gogglebox, the news, or when viewing social media posts about someone’s wonderful house, or holiday, or family. Being directly critical to another person was not something the participants would normally do, or could do in their work environment so this safe outlet was useful to them:

*“Watching Gogglebox, I often think disparaging comments about people, (T.3.P.58)
I wouldn’t necessarily criticise others in my day to day life even when I’m just out*

and about in public, (T.3.P.58) I think the people on the telly are there to be criticised [...] ‘what is she wearing, what does she think’ all those kind of things, (T.3.P.62-64) they’re not going to hear me, not going take offence, it doesn’t really matter” (T.3.P.324)

“You see people like ‘look at these wonderful holidays’ and ‘oh my wonderful family’ and ‘my wonderful hou’ and you’re like ‘I don’t have that, you know, am I a failure, why, should I have that? I’m supposed to have that, everyone’s got that, everyone wants that’, but it’s difficult to distance yourself” (T.2.P.343)

*“Very hard on myself but also very hard on other people so if I’m watching the news I’m very cynical and sarcastic, you know my asides are very cynical and sarcastic about politics and I feel very **despairing** about the world, and so I’m critical about them” (T.5.P.238)*

As well as serving the function of being able to safely criticise others, watching people on social media can also serve the function of learning about yourself. It can help you to see that you are falling into the trap of comparing yourself with others and finding yourself wanting. The learning point comes when you realise that it is not good for you to do this. This extract shows the participant’s emerging awareness of this and the steps she took:

*“I started realising that I was really falling into this whole feeling bad about myself comparing to others, and saying to myself ‘you should, you should be this and you should be that’ and, and it was affecting my, my, my morale definitely, and since I’ve cut off, I’ve seen the difference, **very** quickly, in a matter of, of a couple days” (T.2.P.345)*

Another form of safe criticism towards others is where the criticism is performed through the medium of a cartoon character. In the following extract the participant spoke of her ‘Mutley Moments’ where the cartoon dog Mutley from the television series Penelope Pitstop expresses unintelligible words such as *“mrah, mrah, mucking mucker” (T.7.P.44)*. This enabled her to be composed on the outside in relation to the object of annoyance but to express her annoyance internally:

"I have a Mutley in my head so when other people annoy me I have an internal thing that I'm composed outside but inside I'm 'meshing, mhah, mhah', (T.7.P.46) say I'm having an argument, either I try to verbalise how I'm feeling and the other person's not getting it [...] or, it's a situation where I can't because they're in a car and I'm in a car, (T.7.P.200-202) or perhaps I'm going round the supermarket and there's little old lady in front of me and every time I try to overtake her she gets back in my way, (T.7.P.204) when probably most people would use expletives I just 'mucking shucking'" (T.7.P.206)

The final theme of safe criticism is where the criticism is turned inward towards the self rather than being directed towards others. The sentiment is 'I'd rather destroy me than destroy you' and this reveals a desire to not harm or offend the other:

*"Making excuses not to run, being an addictive personality, that's self-destruction, (T.7.P.530) verbalising, being horrible and aggressive to other people outwardly that's destructing **you** and I don't do that [...] so I internalise, so I'll destroy me [...] I don't want to upset you, offend you [...] I don't want to engage with you" (T.7.P.532-540)*

Care for Others

Caring for others is a narrative that participants spoke about, particularly in being able to express their critical voice without harming the other. In addition to this care was the kind of care for others to not be so critical towards themselves. It is a recognition in the other of the other's self-criticism, the recognition of the pain that brings, and not wanting that for them:

"I've since recently heard one of my colleagues say it when she's forgotten something at work, or done something that she thought, and she, she says to herself 'oh I'm such an idiot' and I instantly put my hand on her arm, I've done it a few times now, and said 'don't say that to yourself, just don't say that to yourself, that's not right'" (T.5.P.118)

Wanting to a good role model to others was spoken by one participant who recounted a time when she called herself an idiot in front of her son. She realised that the way she spoke to herself was recognised by her son who tried to comfort her, and this made her realise that he, in turn, could copy her self-criticism which she didn't want him to do:

*“When I was collecting my sons from school in the car, I meant to collect another child at the same time, but I completely forgot about him and I got half-way home, and then suddenly I realised! Gosh I’ve forgotten Josh!’ and so I said to myself ‘you **are** an idiot, you **are** an idiot, idiot, idiot, idiot’, and then from the back after a long pause, my son suddenly said ‘I love you mummy’. He was trying to reach out to me to comfort me, but it made me think I don’t want him to learn that way of thinking [...] I don’t want him to learn that thought sequence from me,” (T.5.P.110-112) he could recognise something very hard about the way I was talking to myself [...] that he didn’t like and that he wanted to somehow comfort me” (T.5.P.122-124)*

Being aware of the effects of your own self-criticism can help you to help others cope with theirs. One participant spoke about strategies she has learnt that she imparts on to her daughter such as *“I tell her to just tell herself ‘its fine’ you know, tell herself she’s doing really well, and I think that’s the little head inside that you say to yourself ‘yeah I’m doing really well actually’” (T.7.P.474).*

Strategies that she imparts, as well as being comforting, can also be a rebuttal to be used in a future scenario:

“My daughter said to me ‘you have so many put downs’ and I go ‘yeah I know but I’ve had a lot of years to develop them, I have a little stash in my head of things that I will say to unpleasant people if they’re being rude to me and I give them to her so in this scenario, next time that happens, say this’” (T.7.P.552)

Internal Dialogue

Dialoguing with the critical voice featured in every transcript in different forms. This ranged from trying to normalise or reason with the critical voice, to having an internal narrative discussing the pros and cons of a situation, to trying to refute what the critical voice was saying, or to making a conscious choice to see different options. For some participants the dialogue only comes with reflection or a while after the critical voice.

Normalising It

Experiencing a critical voice can become your normal way of being, it is part of who you are and what you do. There can be a rationalisation that everyone has conversations in their head, and that it is normal to feel up and down:

“Part of me just thinks ‘well this is just normal, lots of people think, analyses stuff and they have down days and they have up days and all that as well’ [...] and then I’ve talked to other people and they feel the same [...] so then I think ‘oh well it’s no big deal, you’ve just got to kind of go through those days and then you have your good days’” (T.4.P.212-218)

Shutting It Up

One participant spoke about deciding to shut the critical voice up by bringing in another voice which resulted in a dialogue. She noticed things changing from that point onwards where she started to feel better within herself, more positive:

“I think the dialogue possibly began when I started changing that [...] that thought pattern, that that thought feeling self-criticism. What started happening was that I had just started feeling better, I just started feeling better about myself and feeling more positive. (T.1.P.110-112) I think, you know, you have to bring in the other voice as if to shut that one up [...] or to at least start going ‘well actually you might be wrong’” (T.1.P.120-122)

Arguing With It

Similar to bringing in another voice to shut the critical voice up is arguing with it. The dialogue can be a rebuttal or a way of mediating and reasoning with it. This is a technique that participants spoke about that they had learnt in order to manage their critical voice. The dialogue can be feisty, placatory or reasoned:

“I’ve learnt to mediate or mitigate against it so I’ll listen to the critical voice and then another part of me will say ‘oh come on, come on that’s, that’s too much’ [...] and sometimes I’ll actually swear (laughs) and say ‘fuck it I’m going to do it anyway.’ (T.5.P.388-390) So there’s a sort of reasoning voice through it, through the middle of it [...] that’s saying ‘you don’t have to, you don’t have to accept that criticism, that’s too much’” (T.5.P.392-394)

*“The voice saying ‘you don’t need to be perfect’ is me trying to get better, trying to let go a bit of that perfectionism, trying to heal myself, (T.2.P.110) nobody’s perfect, I **know** it, (T.2.P.124) you don’t need to be 100% perfect every time [...] on everything, sometimes 80% is enough” (T.2.P.104-106)*

Fighting Back

The dialogue can take the form of two different personas: the child and the adult. The child plays the role of the critical voice that is emotional and demanding whereas the adult plays the role of the rational, confident, ameliorating parent. This can be felt as a constant fight with the outcome dependant on how the participant is feeling at that point in time:

“The emotional child in me was like ‘huuuh! I’ve done wrong, I need to defend myself. And then straight away the adult in me, the intellect came in and said ‘whoa! Hey it’s not all that bad, don’t make it any worse’, and so there’s always, there is always that fighting inside, (T.2.P.231) the adult with the rational mind saying ‘listen to me, I’ve got this. I’ve got this, I can sort this out’ [...] but the child has got so much power” (T.2.P. 407-409)

I Wish I Could But I Can't

Another example of the internal dialogue is the rebuttal of the critical voice to things you would like to do. The 'I wish I could but I can't'. This dialogue will continue to deflate any ideas for action and always has a ready response:

"I got up this morning and I do all my jobs that I kind of do, and then I go 'right, I've got time now, what am I going to do' and then I'll think, or there'll be a WhatsApp from the family and I'll think 'oh, that'd be nice if I could go and see them.' Can't do that, and I'll think 'right what'll I do' and then I just think 'well, what' yeah so it'll be dialogue like that going on in my head" (T.4.P.336)

Spurring You On

The internal dialogue can also be a useful way of spurring you on, enabling you to take action when you feel anxious or angry. Instead of the rebuttal of the critical voice wearing you down, feeling angry with it motivates you to defy what it is saying:

*"I'd thought 'oh yeah I want to say something about this' [...] So I thought 'yeah I think this is kind of relevant and it will be helpful for the rest of the group', and then (exhales) there was that pause where I hesitated, and then had a critical voice saying 'no you can't say this, people don't want to hear this, they don't want to hear about your experience, you're just gonna interrupt the session, don't be so stupid,' which I guess made me more anxious [...] about wanting to share, so made me continue to hesitate. But I was kind of like 'No actually I think this *is* relevant and I think it's ok to share, and this is a group I know' (T.6.P.18-24), 'stop telling me I can't do this', and a little bit angry at myself for having this voice, (T.6.P.30) that spark of anger made me think 'no I want to say this, I'm in a point where I actually want to contribute to the group discussion'" (T.6.P.36)*

Little conversations with myself

Having little conversations with oneself can provide useful information and advice. The dialogue can be seen as a way of talking things through with yourself where you are able to take stock, give yourself the advice you would give to someone else, or reassure yourself:

“All through my life had little conversations with myself, (T.7.P.84) talking myself into doing these things that I may be finding completely out of my comfort zone, (T.7.P.140) telling myself things, the sort of advice I would give to other people, I’ll give to myself (T.7.P.144) it’s more like there’s two sides to my conversation in my head” (T.7.P.174)

Stopping it in its tracks

The internal dialogue can be a way of stopping the critical voice in its tracks. Similar to ‘Shutting it Up’, the function is to cease its relentless diatribe but in a much kinder way. It is not always easy to do this and it is not always an effective way of quieting the voice:

*“There was a brief moment of ‘you’re never going to get better’, but now as I said previously, I’m pretty much able to, to change that, just stop it in its tracks and go ‘actually, you know, I can look at the day through **your** eyes’ or I can actually look at the day and go ‘Wow! Anything’s possible today’ or ‘today could be full of **love**’, or ‘I’ve got another day to do this in’ [...] switching that thought off before it can really do too much damage, (T.1.P.96-98) I don’t necessarily always give myself those possibilities but I do make a conscious decision to decide to focus on at least one of those possibilities” (T.1.P.102)*

Talk myself out of it

The internal dialogue can be a way of talking oneself out of being critical. In variance to ‘Stopping it in its tracks’, what happens is that the dialogue with the critical voice gradually peters out naturally by talking about the positive things the participant has in her life and then by taking action:

“Sometimes then I don’t give a fuck about any of it and I just think ‘well, you know, my life’s fine’ cause I don’t have any pressure, I don’t have this, or that, (T.4.P.402) then I suppose, I suppose I talk myself out of it, (T.4.P.646) so I say ‘right well if we get up and we go and do something’ or I do this or do that” (T.4.P.650)

Dialoguing Whilst Dreaming

An unusual finding was spoken about by one participant who is aware of dialoguing whilst dreaming. When she was having a bad dream she would reassure herself that it was just a dream and that she could wake up at any time:

*“I also find I can be quite logical even when I’m asleep so if I had nightmares or bad dreams I would tell myself when I’m asleep that it is a dream [...] it’s nothing to worry about, it’s a dream [...] and if I chose to wake up it will end so, I’d, I’ll do that and I **know** I do that when I’m asleep” (T.7.P.148-152)*

Working Out The Next Steps

Dialoguing can help to work out what the next steps are. One participant spoke about this type of dialoguing as a dialogue between herself and the critical voice where she answers it back out aloud. The act of externally verbalising her discussion with the critical voice helps her to work out a better way of doing something, which in turn builds resilience in her:

*“There is a bit of a dialogue that goes on so I would ‘oh ***** what have you done that for, oh da da da’ and then I may, I may answer that ‘oh well never mind because now we can do this, or [...] ‘don’t write that in the email’, ‘yes but if I write this then I’m not sure how to word that’” (T.3.P.150-152)*

“It can help me, have a thought process so it sometimes actually verbalising your thinking helps you see the next steps and think what to do now ‘ok well that’s not worked, what, what, what can we do more’ [...] it helps build resilience particularly in me” (T.3.P.266-268)

Isolated & Alone

Having a critical voice can be very isolating, and lead to questions such as *"why am I the only one who does this?"* (T.6.P.124) It can make you wonder if there is anything wrong with you when you don't see others being so critical, or hesitant or unsure of themselves. These feelings can lead you further down the road of loneliness and isolation.

Being alone or having nothing to do can exacerbate the critical voice because there is more space for it to run free. Participants cited that being able to distract themselves seemed to help, for example meeting up with friends, having things to do, or going out for a walk.

"I know it's worse if I feel lonely and I do feel lonely quite a bit, when I feel I'm at my lowest ebb, (T.5.P.412) I think my mood affects the voice, so the voice is more prevalent when I'm alone and I've got less to do, (T.5.P.284) I don't like being alone, I find it's where the voice is free to talk" (T.5.P.290)

Wintertime

Wintertime was cited as exacerbating the critical voice for two participants because they loved to go out walking, however the weather is unpredictable in winter so this was not always possible. Their critical voice is not so noticeable during the summer months:

"I think also wintertime is a time when I get lower emotionally and I think there's more time in the winter to think about things cause you're not out and doing stuff and [...] you're not in the sunshine" (T.5.P.282-284)

"Some days you can't go walking, and I do get seasonal affective disorder [...] desperately, I know I get that, I don't have this so much in the summer" (T.4.P.342-344)

Time On My Hands

Having time on your hands with nothing to do exacerbates the critical voice. One participant struggled to come to terms with the life she was now living, her daughter had gone to university and she had lost her purpose, lost something that would keep her busy:

“I’ve got all this time, cause my daughter’s gone and left to university and the job that I have I quite like it but it’s probably not enough, (T.4.P.84) I’ve got so much time on my hands and it’s just I want to fill that time, I’d like to have more, much more going on [...] if I had more kids I’d still have more things to do because, maybe I regret not having another one, so if I had another one I’d still have another one at home” (T.4.P.390-394)

“I don’t want to be on my own, (T.4.P.298) sitting at home with a sketch book on your own, well I’m still lonely then [...] and the loneliness is part of it” (T.4.P.320-322)

Normal Family Life

Different life circumstances can affect the critical voice. One participant recalled how her life growing up was full of hustle and bustle, there was always someone popping in, phone calls happening, or something going on and this was a normal part of her life when she was young. Now her life is considerably different, she is largely on her own in a big house and far away from her birth family feeling isolated and alone:

“I feel very lonely over here because it’s only me and then all my friends are busy, it’s just, I think it’s that family thing I think, you know where you can just go around and have a cup of tea with your mum or something, (T.4.P.194) I grew up in a large family and I’m used to all this around me all the time [...] and now I don’t, and I always assumed that would be there” (T.4.P.438-440)

*“With my husband, it’s us two now my daughter’s gone so we’ve got to kind of rebuild. He’s going to buy a big boat and he wants to sail it all round the Caribbean [...] but he hasn’t said to me you know, it would take him five weeks, he was going to leave me **on my own** (said in a high pitched voice) so not only*

*has my daughter left me but my bloody husband's going to go and leave me.
I'm living in this great big fucking house all on my own" (T.4.P.414-416)*

Different Interests

Having friends with different interests can feel isolating. For example if most of your friends drink alcohol and you don't then the prospect of going to the pub is not very attractive. If your friends have children but yours have grown up and moved away, the similarities between you seem a distant memory. There may also be differences in hobbies, which further isolates and leave you wondering if you have anything in common left:

"A lot of my close friends they still have children so they're really busy [...] and it was the same when I had my daughter [...] all my friends are younger than me, so I again felt isolated then because I had post-natal depression" (T.4.P.190-194)

*"I can be at *****'s for dinner [...] and I can feel isolated in that situation as well, (T.4.P.576-578) my daughter was like a month old, ***** served me dinner at eleven o'clock at night, I was breastfeeding! She serves me fucking dinner at eleven o'clock at night, so you know they're in a different zone to me totally, (T.4.P.590) I just fake it don't I, and just stay there" (T.4.P.598)*

However, being on your own does not always exacerbate the critical voice, it can be something to be treasured, for example when you can take possession of the sofa all to yourself:

"I actually like being on my own sometimes, my husband says 'oh you know, I've got to go away for a night' I think 'great, I've the sofa to myself' and I don't mind that, I'm actually kind of alright being on my own" (T.4.P.300)

Not all Bad; Valuing It, My Little Friend, Options, Coping Mechanism, Rehearsal, Strive to be Better, It Motivated Me, I Would Like [it] To Be

A theme that emerged from most of the participants was that their critical voice was 'Not All Bad'. There were aspects that they rather liked about it or found some benefit to it in some way. This may be an alien concept, and indeed to one participant it was, however two participants called it their 'Little Friend'. One participant said it gave her the ability to consider her options, and that it was a coping mechanism.

Other participants said that the critical voice provided a rehearsal function and motivated them to strive to be a better person. Finally, the critical voice can also provide the function of problem solving.

Valuing the Critical Voice

Seeing the critical voice as serving a useful function rather than being detrimental is an alternative way of looking at it. One participant spoke about how, in a group they had been discussing their critical voices and was surprised to hear that members of the group valued it, it served a useful purpose. As she began to think about it she was able to reflect on the things she valued, such as taking the time to word things well, and the internal dialogue helped her to do this:

"There were a couple of people who really embraced their critical voice, saw that the function their critical voice was to support them to keep striving, to keep being ambitious and trying to achieve things, they really didn't want to get rid of their critical voice (T.6.P.208-210), it was really kind of interesting to hear that some members of my cohort really, really valued the function of having a critical inner voice [...] that's quite a weird thing to think about" (T.6.P.226-228)

"I very much value wording things in a way that feels ok, I don't jump in with stuff generally, I like that the voice has made me develop an ability to some of the time phrase things in a way that seems to really convey what I mean" (T.6.P.214)

My Little Friend

Two participants spoke about their critical voice as a little friend. The critical voice has grown with them as they mature, keeps them company and has the comfort of a long term friendship or marriage. You know where you are with your little friend:

“I suppose I’d liken it to friendship so when you’re young you have quite intense friendships but not for very long periods so you don’t really get to know little friends at infant and junior school very well, (T.7.P.562) it’s a bit like a long-term relationship like a long-term marriage or friendship that you feel comfortable with someone, you can finish their sentences, I sort of know with my internal voice where things are going” (T.7.P.588)

“I quite like it [...] it’s like a little friend” (T.3.P.304-308)

Considering Options and Accepting the Situation

Having a discussion with your critical voice can help solve a problem, help you to look at all the options. Internal discussions can bring about a resolution or, if action is not possible, find a way of accepting the situation:

“If I get a problem I sit there and I analyse the problem and then in order to be able to put it in a box in my head somewhere I have to have some options, if there aren’t any options then I need to accept that and just keep the lid on (T.7.P.252) talk about ways of doing things better [...] thinking things through, planning things out (T.7.P.40-42) and discuss in my head my options and then become accepting of whatever is the only option, or act upon one” (T.7.P.162)

Coping Mechanism

The critical voice can also serve the function of being a coping mechanism. It helps you to cope with a situation, which was considered a good thing:

“And so I would have those conversations about that as ways to develop coping mechanisms and I think I still do it now, (T.7.P.252) in some ways I think that’s a good thing because I think that developed in me coping mechanisms” (T.7.P.132)

Rehearsing Different Scenarios

The critical voice can help you to rehearse different scenarios so that you can be prepared in the future. In the following extract the participant relates how unpicking an unpleasant situation that occurred in order to work out how she could have dealt with it differently is helpful. Once understood, her responses can then be rehearsed for future use:

“I don’t like confrontation, say you’d had an argument with somebody or something had happened in a shop, then I’d go home and I would rehearse numbers of different scenarios on how I would have liked to have behaved but couldn’t [...] for whatever reason [...] in some ways that’s helped me going forward because then as I’ve got older and sometimes those situations or kinds of situations re-occur [...] I’ve rehearsed [...] what I’m going to say so then I’ll just come back at people like that” (T.7.P. 542-550)

It Makes Me Strive To Be A Better Person

The critical voice can help you strive to do better, to be a better person. This can be through pushing yourself to connect with your full abilities, by believing that you are better than this, by doing the right thing, by being the best you can be, or by motivating you:

“I’d like to think that it makes me better, (T.2.P.278) that it makes me strive to give better, or more, but more in the good sense, to, that it pushes me to connect with what I, with my full abilities rather than maybe be a bit lenient or, or, or lazy with, my, my, my daily way of being [...] I believe that I, again maybe it’s, it’s, it’s my, my self-doubt, but I believe that I have a great potential, and that through life’s experiences I have been knocked down quite a lot, and that with that critical voice it’s maybe somewhere that little potential inside me saying ‘you’re worth better than this, you know you can do much more’” (T.2.P.281-283)

"It helps me develop skills, my skills so whatever I chose to do I'll try and do it to the best of my ability and I'll critique myself along that path [...] until I've got somewhere with the skill, whatever it can be, sewing, playing an instrument, learning a language, you know, whatever it is, (T.5.P.482-484) I suppose there's an invisible expectation on myself to, to, to achieve things, to demonstrate that I'm not an idiot" (T.5.P.490)

The punishing, critical voice's purpose here is to push you to be better, akin to the purpose of a cheerleader but sounding like a Sergeant Major. It knows you can do more, it speaks of your values that you should do more and it is impatient with you for not doing so.

It Motivated Me

The critical voice can ignite your rebelliousness to prove something or someone wrong. A casual put down from someone can be enough to motivate you to prove to them that you are capable, that you can in fact do the thing they imply you can't do. One participant related an incident from twenty years ago by a respected male consultant who belittled her dreams of one day doing a Masters / PhD. Years later she achieved this ambition, and believes that the retort from the consultant had motivate her by tapping into anti-feminist narrative:

*"He turned to me and he said 'now my dear what do you think you're going to do for a career' and I said I'd just started nursing, and I said 'I'd like to do an MSc and a PhD' and his retort was 'ohaw my dear!' and to me it just made me turn round and think 'damn you, right I'm going to do it' so the MSc was for no other reason twenty years later than to prove this blooming man wrong, (T.5.P.500) He probably has **never** remembered that himself but gosh it was a big moment, (T.5.P.536) It feeds into feminism, you know, women aren't as key as men, and my career was never sort of important in terms of where I was going [...] compared to my brothers and so I'm living up to that or trying to disprove that expectation" (T.5.P.492-494)*

I would like [it] to be

Participants spoke about how they would like their critical voice to be a little different. They recognised that it was a part of themselves and that there was nothing wrong with being critical in itself, as without the ability to judge something, to critique, it would mean that they would end up being too trusting, to accepting of the world around them.

Living without a critical voice would mean losing something important and necessary, however dampening the critical voice down was a work in progress and not something that was easily achieved:

“There’s nothing wrong with being critical. It’s not a bad thing, I mean that’s how people grow and change and develop isn’t it? It’s about analysing what you’re doing, why you are doing it, and what you can do better next time, (T.3.P.308) most people would think of a critical voice as something that is negative but the word critical or to, to critique [...] if you critique something, that’s not necessarily negative, you’re looking at the positives, you’re looking at the what went well, the what didn’t go so well and the what we’re going to do about that” (T.3.P.312-314)

“I should be living how I want to live, (T.5.P.212) and she [mother] has a really interesting life, and I suppose I’d like a part of that really [...] I’d like to live the sort of life that she leads, she’s much more gregarious and sociable and yeah, just she’s a better person I suppose, and I don’t feel that” (T.5.P.222-224)

“Perhaps not just to get rid of it fully but to dampen it down, (T.5.P.573) because you want some critical voice, you want some critique of the world, otherwise you would be just the most gullible person in the world [...] accepting everything” (T.5.P.581-583)

“I would like mine to be a little bit quieter [...] or to be, maybe to serve the same function but to be more compassionate in the way that it does that” (T.6.P.210-212)

Perfectionism & Not Good Enough

Perfectionism was cited by three out of the seven participants as relating to their critical voice in a direct way. Perfectionism feeds into the critical voice but also the critical voice adds pressure to continue to be perfect, thereby feeding back into perfectionism. The critical voice can make you cautious, not wanting to make mistakes or to not wanting to continue making the same mistake again leading to anxiety and guilt. Wanting everything to be perfect can be an asset, particularly in the workplace, but it comes at a cost.

Not feeling good enough, clever enough, feeling inadequate, that you are a fraud or that you could do better are refrains of the perfectionist narrative. The critical voice that tells you that you are not good enough and so you strive to be better, but often this can lead to a circular feedback loop where one feeds into the other in a perpetual vicious circle:

“I’m a perfectionist in everything I do, in the quality of my work, in my expectations from other people and from myself, and I don’t know if it’s the perfectionism that came first or if it’s that critical voice that came first [...] it’s definitely linked [...] it’s a bit the chicken and the egg” (T.2.P.82-86)

*“I think it comes from, from, from, from being cautious and not wanting to make mistakes, (T.5.P.204) I’m quite a perfectionist, so if I feel that something hasn’t gone as well as I think I **could** do then that’s when the, the voice starts, (T.5.P.282) it feeds into my perfectionism [...] maybe my perfectionism has come as a result of the inner critical voice, I don’t know which came first actually” (T.5.P.478-480)*

In describing the critical voice’s perfectionist quality one participant described the ideal of having things run smoothly like a *“well-oiled machine” (T.2.P.136)*, not too fast and not too slow. The critical voice says that anything other than perfection is mediocrity, it insidiously whispers that if you achieve perfection then everyone will be happy. However, this perfectionist ideal can be boring, there are no challenges, now new inspirations, spontaneity or great discoveries:

“It’s reliability, it’s constance, it’s quality that doesn’t let down, (T.2.P.126) comfortably, (T.2.P.140) mistakes create delays, (T.2.P.136) haste can create problems [...] if you do your job properly I’ll be able to do my job properly, everyone is happy with the situation, with how things are working [...] there’d be no grief, there’d be no tensions, there’d be no difficulties” (T.2.P.142-146) I suppose it would get pretty boring, because there’d be no challenges. Out of chaos there’s a, a lot of things can be born, a lot of new discoveries, new interests, (T.2.P.146) great discoveries in science have been found through mistakes” (T.2.P.162)

Being a perfectionist in the workplace can be an asset. You become very good at your job, you strive to do well and bosses like this attention to detail. However this perfectionism comes at a cost to you, if you don’t maintain the perfection you feel you are letting yourself down, not living up to the expectations you have set yourself and that others have come to expect. Unchecked, this can begin to affect your physical and mental health:

*“The perfectionism in a way for me has been very good because it’s made me very good at my job, I very often became the go-to person because of my level of quality work, my level of adherence to procedures, to expectations, my striving for the best output, fastest, best quality, it’s really a value and so, that perfectionism has helped me to give the best that I **can**, and to often be better than other people” (T.2.P.92)*

“It’s also very difficult to live with, (T.2.P.86) that does come at a price, (T.2.P.92) that comes at a moral and nervous cost as well physically, (T.2.P.102) I will find myself checking something three times, although I know perfectly well I have done it well the first time, (T.2.P.166) I will sometimes make a mistake, or forget something [...] and that will set me back [...] it’s in a way being caught up in the system of if I don’t continue to be a perfectionist I’m letting myself down, it’s reflecting badly on who I am” (T.2.P.172-176)

Letting go of one’s perfectionist tendencies is hard, it is not easy to accept less than perfection and it may even be an example of perfectionism in action; telling yourself

that you don't need to be perfect is a way of trying to improve yourself, to be better, to be more perfect:

*"Well the voice saying 'you don't need to be perfect' is me trying to get better (laughs) trying to let go a bit of that perfectionism, trying to heal myself, (T.2.P.110) it's very much theory as opposed to being able to put it into practice [...] I **know** it would be better to be just ok with 80% [...] doesn't mean I manage to (T.2.P.114-118) I'm an overthinker as you can imagine as a perfectionist" (T.2.P.423)*

Not Good Enough

When the critical voice tells you that you are not good enough, not clever enough or inadequate in some way you feel like a failure, you have been judged and found wanting. You have let yourself down, you have let others down. The critical voice is replete with 'ifs'; if only I had tried harder, if only I had done things differently, etcetera. The result of this narrative can be to feel small:

*"It's never good enough, what you've done [...] you can always do more, (T.2.P.96-98) I'm not as good as I thought I was, it's very much slapping myself back down really like 'oh you've **failed**'" (T.2.P.204)*

*"My biggest critic, that I'm not good enough, that I never went to university, or I never studied anything, (T.4.P.70) that's the way **my head thinks**, it makes me feel small" (T.4.P.164)*

Not feeling good enough can be embarrassing, for example when you don't know what someone is talking about and feel you ought to know and feel inadequate. One participant spoke about how she puts on a persona, pretends that she knows rather than show her ignorance to the other person:

"Socially it's not easy, I think I do a big act actually but somebody's only got to mention something, like I might say 'what do you do' and then, if they give an answer of a job and I have no idea what that is suddenly I'm completely flawed

and I feel (sharp intake of breath) 'I don't know what that is at all, I'm going to have to crawl under a stone now' [...] it makes me feel really inadequate that I've failed, (T.5.P.296-298) so you put on this face, you put on that persona" (T.5.P.172)

Shame is a feature of not feeling good enough and the critical voice tells you things like 'you should be ...' or 'you'll get found out', or 'you're going to screw this up'. It makes you lose confidence in yourself by putting you down and making you doubt your abilities:

*"I remember being deeply ashamed, and I do feel very **ashamed** of myself, this critical voice makes me very ashamed of myself, ashamed of my figure, (T.5.P.270) ashamed of my thought processes, ashamed of not being the person that I think I should be [...] or could be" (T.5.P.270-272)*

*"I've done my job for 33 years but I would say in the first 15, 20 years I used to think 'it's only a matter of time before I'll be found out' that's probably quite a common thought that's 'it's only a matter of time before they'll realise I don't know something, I don't know this job, I don't know how to [...] how to be' and that, that critical voice comes in, no I haven't done that right or I could do that better, the voice would say 'you see, it's only a matter of time', after about 15, 20 years I thought 'come on *****, really you do know your job'" (T.5.P.316-318)*

"In my head I'm going 'what are you gonna ask next', your mind's gone blank, 'you're about to screw this up and everybody's about to realise that you're a fraud and you're not supposed to be here'" (T.6.P.154)

Redressing A Balance; Reconnecting, Releasing Pressure & Externalising the Voice

Redressing a balance in oneself was identified by five participants in relation to the critical voice. Redressing a balance can help you see different parts of yourself, see how wrong the critical voice can be, be able to reconnect with who you feel you are, and find a juxtaposition to the critical voice. The critical voice can be a way of releasing pressure, letting off steam. By externalising the critical voice it can stop it festering inside which gives you a break from its relentlessness.

Redressing A Balance

One participant spoke about how confronting her critical voice had the effect of redressing the balance within herself, back to a non-critical, more pleasant way of being. Glimpsing that different side to herself felt refreshing and once felt, she wanted to experience that more often. By continuing on this path of redressing the balance she began to see her capabilities and strengths rather than just the deficits:

“Reinventing yourself is not quite the right thing but it’s redressing a balance [...] another opportunity, (T.1.P.161-163) being able to see the other side [...] and go “Oh! It’s rather pleasant over there! [...] and then of course wanting it [...] and that spurs you on! (T.1.P.166-174) over time it gets stronger and, you can concentrate more on that [...] I started feeling better about myself and learning more about my own strengths and just how capable I am” (T.1.P. 118-120)

Confronting your critical voice is not easy, it can be a terrifying experience. It takes courage to really listen to what it is saying to you but doing so can bring about gradual relief:

*“The hardest thing to do in the world is confront ourselves [...] because it’s terrifying to have to see what’s really, really truly going on, it can be very frightening, but the next day or the day after you’re going ‘Wow! Ha! I’m smiling, I feel **good**, I feel lighter, I feel’ [...] I mean initially it was a more sporadic relief, and then it just becomes more constant [...] and of course the more you do this then the more your thoughts and emotions have an opportunity to not*

necessarily reinvent themselves but to go back to source, going back to, that possibility that you had when you were first born, or when you were first conceived, (T.1.P.152-160) it's constant work, it's daily attention to your thoughts, and your feelings" (T.1.P.252)

Another participant spoke about how hard it is to control the critical voice, and likened it to controlling an Arab racehorse. She reflected on the benefits of doubting what the critical voice tells you, of seeing through the erroneous voice and how the voice can drown out your achievements:

"It's just one point of view, it's just skewed, it's not reality it's a voice that makes you forget your achievements [...] you realise that you were wrong to listen to that voice, like thoroughbreds, a proper Arab horse they're very hard to control, but if you can you'll get the best racehorse you can dream of" (T.2.P. 371-373)

Having a faith can provide a juxtaposition to the critical voice. For one participant faith is everything contrary to the critical voice, it helps her to feel strengthened and peaceful:

"My faith is very important to me and that's full of goodness, full of love and patience, kindness, mercy, forgiveness, acceptance, that sort of experience, and so you feel emboldened and you feel relaxed and you feel at peace with yourself, (T.5.P.226) this inner voice is everything again contrary to that" (T.5.P.228)

Reconnecting with me

One participant described becoming aware of the need to reconnect with herself. She began to feel that watching social media was not doing her any good and that it would be beneficial for her to pull away in order to find herself again, to connect back into what makes her feel happy. Once she had done this she remembered aspects of herself that she had forgotten such as creativity and spontaneity:

"I had this very strong feeling that this is not doing me any good, Facebook and all that, whereas before it was, it was fun, it was good to stay in contact. (T.2.P.347)

and very quickly I thought to myself 'this is not right, this is not ok, I don't want this, this is completely sterile' (T.2.P.353), I pulled away, I got rid of the app on my phone and all that and I felt practically immediately much better, (T.2.P.357) I was looking to find myself again, I had lost myself in work, I'd lost myself, it was a point where I needed to connect back to, to, to me, what is it I need? [...] What makes me happy, what makes me feel good about myself? (T.2.P.359-361) I'd forgotten how much of a creative person I am, (T.2.P.363), reconnect with that spontaneity" (T.2.P.367)

Releasing The Pressure

The critical voice serves a purpose of releasing one's internal pressure. One participant described it as letting off steam, it was a way of managing her feelings so that she doesn't hurt anyone, it stops her *"doing something that might not be socially or criminally acceptable"* (T.7.P.486). Dialoguing with the critical voice meant that she could conduct a cost benefit analysis or a risk assessment which releases the immediate pressure:

"It's my pressure cooker valve [...] at times when I think I could lose the plot (T.7.P.458-460) it allows me to debate the situation and come up with the pro's and con's or do a cost benefit analysis of what's the risk, I do a little risk assessment in my head" (T.7.P.466)

Being able to be really nasty provides a way of releasing the pressure in a job where you have to be nice all the time. For one participant, being a good manager and being approachable means that you cannot afford to be nasty, so having an outlet where you can open that valve brings balance back into her life:

"The ability just to get it out because I think particularly in the, in the job that I do, I spend my whole time being nice to people, sometimes you just need to be mean (laughs) sometimes you just really need to be really nasty and horrible about something and just get it out because being lovely and nice and nurturing all day is hard work, (T.3.P.320) open the valve, just open the valve" (T.3.P.328)

A release of pressure can show you what is behind the pressure. For one participant it is a sadness, a sadness that is kept at bay by laughter or expressions of frustration, and once the pressure is released then the sadness comes through. The sadness itself can be released through crying and then after crying, she feels fine again:

“The laughing a lot of the time keeps it at bay, (crying) sorry, [...] I feel very much like this is always very near to the surface [...] and a lot of being jovial and a lot of the aggression I think is managing feeling sad, (T.7.P.608-612) when I’ve done that ‘RRRRR’ sort of feeling I can just sink onto the floor and cry, (T.7.P.600) it hijacks me [...] like I couldn’t stop it if I wanted to, I can’t choke it back [...] and can come from nowhere, (T.7.P.620-624) I get these little, little bursts of that and then it goes and then I’m fine [...] and it’s another pressure valve release” (T.7.P.662-664)

Externalising the Critical Voice Helps

Another way of releasing one’s feelings is to externalise the critical voice. Laughing at oneself helps to externalise the critical voice rather than internalise it, and this makes it feel less frightening and stop it from festering:

“I also think it serves a purpose particularly when I’m just laughing at myself to help not internalise this and, they don’t then fester ‘yeah that’s happened, oh well, move on’, (T.3.P.266) you’re not overthinking things [...] it’s sometimes as if how you’ve got another person stood next to you and you’re able to laugh and have a joke about it and it doesn’t become a big issue (T.3.P.270-272) it’s about talking and just getting it out there, (T.3.P.278) ‘oh here we go again’ it, it just makes it less frightening [...] being able to laugh at things that are actually not very pleasant is a way of emotionally working through them so they don’t become traumatic” (T.3.P.286-288)

The listener doesn’t need to be human either, she continues, talking to the dog works too:

“I notice it more at work, in the home you can talk to the dog, it doesn’t matter what you say to the dog does it (laughs) the dog doesn’t care” (T.3.P.280)

Another way of externalising the critical voice is to direct it outwards and blame other people. One participant spoke about how criticising other people served the function of giving herself a break, by criticising others she was giving herself a break from criticising herself, however the consequence of this was that she then felt worse towards herself:

“While we’re paying attention to other people and their, you know, shortcomings, then giving ourselves a break, (T.1.P.234) we project it outwards and blame other people, (T.1.P.44) ‘Oh look at the state of them! Least that is not me!’ you know you’re kind of being a bit self-righteous almost in that, (T.1.P.250) ‘Blame them!’ (T.1.P.246) it’s easier to hear ourselves judging others and criticising others than doing that for ourselves, then it’s possibly more work to be able to stop that in its tracks immediately whenever it happens, (T.1.P.232) you feel far worse about yourself, for sure, for sure” (T.1.P.252)

Resilience

One participant spoke about how the critical voice can make you forget what you have survived, and how resilient you are. The harshness of the critical voice drowns out all other voices such as the self-care voice, which can help you to remain balanced:

“There is that harshness inside me that tends to forget what I’ve survived, (T.2.P.319) that could self-care in telling myself ‘well actually you’ve done a pretty good job seeing what you set out with’, (T.2.P.323) I know I am someone who’s extremely resilient, I have survived a few things, emotionally I have been through a lot of trauma, I’ve struggled through [...] I’m resilient in the sense that I’ve always picked myself up, only it’s like burning the candle at two ends” (T.2.P.421)

When it Occurs

The critical voice is a fundamental part of oneself, it may not be noticeable all of the time and can come to light in certain situations or at certain times. Most of the participants spoke about their critical voice being ever present, they were aware of it but were able to carry on with their day. One participant, however said *“it’s not there every day”* (T.4.P.384). The critical voice had become something the participants had come to accept.

The context played an important part of when participants noticed their critical voice, for example it could come out during periods of distress, when doing something wrong, having nothing to do, or depending on how one is feeling *“I manage to calm it down at times when I’m feeling stronger”* (T.2.P.24).

Ever Present

For most participants, the critical voice is an ever present part one’s life. There is an internal dialogue or a narrative that goes on where the critical voice plays a part but it is not the whole:

“I do have a narrative to my life, (T.7.P.246) I think there’s a lot of internal chat going on all the time with myself [...] particularly when I’m doing things like driving that require concentration, (T.7.P.248-250) I can go for months with no ill feelings towards myself or anyone else [...] and then I could have a couple of little things” (T.7.P.332-334)

“I’ve always ever known that judging voice inside me, (T.2.P.38) it’s a fundamental part of me, (T.2.P.60) reviewing everything I’ve said after a conversation, answering differently to situations than I did on the moment, second judging, all that doubting, ‘ooh I could have done that better, I could have negotiated that better’, I’ve never known peace basically” (T.2.P.263)

A Relentless Critic

The critical voice can be relentless, constantly reinforcing a feeling of worthlessness which in time you come to believe. Its presence is still felt even if you are able to set it aside:

“Constantly second guessing my decisions and constantly being criticising, and being convinced that nothing would work out as it should, (T.1.P.10) I just accepted it, I really, really did think I was completely worthless, for a very, very, very long time, (T.1.P.108-110) I believed every word it told me” (T.1.P.200)

A Parasitic Worm

One participant described her critical voice as a parasitic worm that eats away at her. It is part of her but not who she feels she naturally is, and the voice always creeps back:

*“It’s something **inside me** that’s like a parasitic worm, (T.2.P.64) it will eat away at my daily life, (T.2.P.48) like a burning feeling, (T.2.P.24) I’m someone who’s naturally at the base someone who’s very bubbly, happy, but that force is always there inside me, (T.2.P.68) it will come in all of a sudden, hit me even though something is going great. It will always creep back, although even all the signs are really positive that voice will always come back” (T.2.P.50)*

I Just Live With It

Participants spoke about accepting that the critical voice is there, accepting its presence and accepting what it says. Despite its existence, they continue with their day, finding a way to live with it:

“I just live with it, and I accept it kind of thing [...] cause that’s just the way it is, (T.4.P.372-374) it’s still there the next day and the next day, (T.4.P.382) I just carry on, (T.4.P.388) there is an acceptance of it” (T.4.P.628)

Context

The context in which you find yourself affects the nature and prevalence of the critical voice. During an experience of burnout from work, one participant noticed her critical

voice as being very loud. She felt too weak and exhausted to quieten it, had no resources to draw upon, which in turn affected her self-confidence and self-worth:

“I was in a fragile state, I was nervously exhausted so I didn’t have the strength to laugh it off basically, or to change it into ‘right, note to self for next time’ kind of thing, no, I just started hitting myself, (T.2.P.391) rational mind was sitting in the corner saying ‘I can’t do anything here sorry’. So I know I need to build that strength, I need to get proper sleep because I had developed insomnia, all these things that build your self-worth, your self-confidence because then that impacts your way of thinking” (T.2.P.393)

Being Occupied

Being occupied helps to not notice the critical voice or engage with it. Having something to do or having a purpose stops the spiralling thoughts and breaks the cycle. One participant said that her critical voice was more noticeable at the weekend when there was not so much to do:

*“It’ll change in different situations because I won’t have it if I’m doing something, (T.4.P.554) Yeah **definitely** like weekends, (T.4.P.254) because I’m off on Friday I arrange to meet a friend, or I go to a Pilates class, or I go for a walk with someone, or I go for lunch with someone, so I do all that then and so then I have my weekend free, (T.4.P.260) if I did really have something to focus on it would be great, even if it was my mother over here who was ill, and I had to take her to the doctor, what purpose do I have now?” (T.4.P.226)*

Environment

Your environment, who and what you have around you can affect the critical voice. Participants spoke about how feeling in a safe and familiar setting can help with not listening to what the critical voice is saying or be affected by it. Environment was a distraction that could counteract it but could also cause it to flourish depending on your experience:

“It depends on what other networks and voices you’ve got around you to counteract anything that it is saying to you” (T.3.P.372)

“Generally when we have a big lecture I don’t very often ask questions or volunteer information [...] that used to stress me out, when I thought there was an expectation on that [...] the smaller sessions that we have are less didactic teaching and, and much more interactive, (T.6.P.12-16) it’s a fairly safe environment, that group, (T.6.P.184) towards the start of training when it was all a bit newer I might have listened to the voice and stepped back, (T.6.P.22) that would have continued and really affected me for the rest of the day” (T.6.P.60)

How I Feel

The critical voice can fluctuate depending on how you are feeling on any particular day. Participants explained what affects their ability to stand up against the critical voice, which included being in physical pain, believing you are worthless, or not feeling confident:

*“If I wake up in the morning and I’m in a particular amount of **pain**, or, there are times when I get frustrated with **healing**, then it can come out, (T.1.P.92) when you don’t feel good about yourself [...] if you feel worthless then, you know you’ve got no positive to fall back on and so of course, everything about you is just going to scream ‘I’m worthless’” (T.1.P.136)*

“My courage to, to stand up against the critical voice fluctuates according to how my mood is on that day so [...] sometimes I’m just overwhelmed by the negativity and I can’t do anything but accept it and then other days I can rise up against it, (T.5.P.402-406) some days I’m ready to take on the world and other days I want to crawl under a duvet” (T.5.P.410)

Trapped

Feeling trapped was spoken about by one participant as a trigger for her critical voice. When she can’t verbally express her feelings of anger or frustration because the situation does not allow it, her critical voice is heightened:

“At times where I feel either through anger or through that sort of scenario where I was feeling claustrophobic, times when I feel like I’m going to lose control [...] or times where I feel out my depth, (T.7.P.170-172) you have this narrative going on when [...] you can’t actually express how you feel, (T.7.P.128-130) I want to get away from me [...] I get that sometimes where I feel trapped or cornered in either physically but mostly mentally, if I feel trapped I feel like ‘mmmm’ I wanna escape, I want an ejector seat” (T.7.P.494)

Fear of Being Unloved

One participant reflected on her present circumstances and how different they are to her past experiences. She now feels loved and therefore not so plagued by her critical voice but is very aware that should this change she could well be back in that place of loneliness and despair where the critical voice reigned free:

“If I was in that situation now, I would hope that I would have the skills and the knowledge to not revert back into that type of thinking [...] that is a, is a fear, [...] if something was to happen to my husband, you know, would I then cycle back down, (T.3.P.240-244) I think it would probably be worse actually, I think that is my biggest fear, I don’t believe that it is better to have loved and lost than not loved at all, I think having had my husband who meets all my emotional needs and cares for me and loves me, to not have that, to lose that I think will drive me into despair [...] and I will not be able to see the light at the end, there is no end of the tunnel, I’m just alone” (T.3.P.252-254)

Summary of Findings and Creative Synthesis

The Gathered Themes bring together the essential components of the critical voice, they show the colour and threads that are interwoven into its fabric. The researcher's personal and professional engagement with the research has opened up an emotional outpouring of deep respect for the participants. The vulnerabilities of participants are elucidated, such as uncertainty, self-doubt, internal dialogue showing justifications and fights for rights. There is a tension where battles are being fought with oneself, where aspects of oneself are separated out into different voices, lines are drawn and walls are torn down by humour. There is a fluid and ethereal quality to the critical voice, not only does it change according to one's environment but it changes throughout one's lifetime. Things impact it, as it in turn impacts other things; it is interconnected within oneself throughout the body, mind and emotions, and between oneself and the world around us.

How one engages with their critical voice depends on how it is viewed and what meanings are made of it; it can stop you doing something you want to do or it can stop you doing something you might later regret. You can beat yourself up for not being good enough, you can enjoy the comforts of a long-term friendship, or find ways of criticising others without fear of reprimand. Naming one's critical voice and bringing it into one's awareness seems to have a beneficial outcome; from a profound revelation of giving it a name, to enjoying a wander in the woods where you are free to move in any direction to be able to release the pressure. Remaining silent and not exploring one's critical voice seems to inhibit one's awareness of it whereas allowing it to manifest in a safe way so that others are unharmed by it shows a level of care.

In each of the findings it is possible to see both good and bad elements, things that can harm or heal depending on one's perspective. This perspective will inevitably depend on one's interpretations of life experiences and beliefs. The extracts in the findings allow us to see the participant's journey through their explorations and to understand their personal lived experience. The following section discusses various elements of the research and relates the findings to relevant literature and theory.

Discussion

Pertinent questions for this discussion section from an academic perspective include; are the findings plausible and convincing, and are the findings supported by evidence (Kohler Riessman, 2008). In answering these two questions, the researcher points to Moustakas's (1994) method of analysis and reflexivity used in this research which shows an audit trail, explicates decisions and processes and presents participant's verbatim extracts. This approach should lead the reader to understand the findings (finding them plausible and convincing) and appreciate the conclusions made (as they are supported by evidence).

Participant's verbatim transcripts have been included at the end of this paper so that the reader may go back to the source if further clarification is sought, however as much as possible of the relevant sections are included in the findings to present the texture and structure of the themes. It is possible that alternative perspectives could have been concluded if another researcher had conducted the study assuming the research question was the same and the processes remained as per this research due to individual differences and life experiences, however because of the explication of each part of the research process and the researcher's reflexivity it is hoped that the reader can follow the progression and handling of the data.

Participants & Recruitment

The initial sample size was proposed to be between eight and ten participants, however during the recruitment process it became apparent that this sample size may not be possible, and therefore Chair's Action was sought and granted to reduce the sample size down to seven. Similarly, face to face research interviews were conducted in Jersey, but due to the low number of people coming forward for interview Chair's Action was again sought and granted to conduct interviews over Skype.

With regard to why only seven participants out of the seventeen interested parties were interviewed is a difficult question to answer. One reason may have been due to the deeply personal and potentially difficult nature of the subject matter, however this cannot have been the only reason. Any number of reasons for people not either agreeing to be

interviewed or identifying themselves as interested could have been possible as it takes dedication and commitment to be part of the research process.

Participation is not simply a 'spur of the moment' decision, thought and action are involved, often over a period of time. It takes the person to become aware of the research, read the advert, contact the researcher, wish to be identified as interested, the researcher to respond to the interested party with detailed information, the person to read this information (a three page document) and contact the researcher again to state commitment to be interviewed, then further contact to agree a suitable time and date for interview, and then to attend the interview! Of the ten who were not interviewed, two were located outside of Jersey and did not wish to use Skype, and the remaining eight did not respond to the researcher's reply.

Demographics

The age and gender of the participants was interesting because it was unexpected. The advertising material and recruitment criteria did not stipulate specific age ranges or was gender specific. The researcher's name was not on the advert so potential participants could not ascertain whether the researcher was female or male, or indeed the researcher's age. For adverts that were distributed via LinkedIn or Facebook it may be possible that the researcher's social media connections may have discussed the personal qualities of the researcher with their connections who were interested in participating.

It is possible that the tone of the advert may have been construed by a potential participant in a certain manner. The advert was written in the first person, using "I" and "We", and reference was made to the researcher being a student of Middlesex University so assumptions could have been made about the researcher from this information. However, the researcher has no awareness of any assumptions being made.

Had the age and gender of the participants been different then certain themes would definitely not have arisen, for example if all the participants were male then the theme of Menopause would not have been in the findings, and participants who were in their twenties may not have talked about their critical voice changing over time.

One of the individuals who expressed an interest in the research but did not commit to being interviewed had a name typically used by males. Similarly another individual had a name that could be used by either a male or a female. If both of these individuals were male it would have been interesting to interview these individuals to see how this would have changed or added to the data.

The researcher also collected demographics on participant's professions as it was wondered whether this would be relevant. Three participants spoke about their how their job affected their critical voice yet they each worked in different professions. Upon reflection the collection of professional status was purposeless in this study but may be a point of interest for future research, particularly with respect to organisations where a blame culture has developed.

Limitations of This Research

This research is intended to provide a deeper dive into the phenomenon of experiencing a critical inner voice, and as such does not intent to be seen as the same experience for all adults. The sample of participants was unexpectedly women, again this should not be taken to be the lived experience of all adult women.

The research is limited to the women who bravely came forward to talk about their lived experience of a critical inner voice. Their contribution should not be extrapolated to the wider community but it is hoped that their contribution can add gravitas and depth to our understanding of it. Similarly, this research does not include the experiences of younger people, indeed students have been representative in samples used in other research.

One of the unanswered questions that this research does not address is how men experience their own critical voice. It would be useful to find out why men did not come forward for interview and share their experiences. Perhaps this is something for further research.

Gathered Themes

The Gathered Themes are listed in alphabetical order, so that the reader does not infer any form or hierarchy to them. Had the themes not been listed alphabetically then one theme might have been viewed by the reader as more important than another because of the number of participants who spoke about that theme. The premise of this study is not to organise the findings according to numerical prevalence, rather it is to take a deeper and more considered exploration into critical inner speech at the individual level, for it is at the individual level that a depth of meaning and personal understanding can be gleaned.

Gathered Themes are entitled using a larger blue font size and any sub-headings will be in a smaller blue font size. Where a gathered theme has a link to another it is shown with an initial capital letter and placed in a single quote marks, e.g. 'Interconnection'. The Gathered Themes will be discussed according to the findings in this study and any relevant literature or theory.

Caring for Oneself, Being Positive Is Not Enough

The findings in this study show that caring for oneself is not easy when you are self-critical. Simply being positive in order to banish the inner critic is just not enough. Negative self-talk has a significantly more debilitating impact than positive ones (Morin, 2009). Gilbert & Proctor (2006) state that *"self-reassurance, warmth and self-soothing can act as an antidote to the sense of threat"* (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006, p.355), furthermore they state that their research did not produce a significant change in self-correcting self-attacking.

Indeed participants within this study struggled with finding ways of caring for themselves or combatting their critical voices, therefore disproving the theory that compassion is an antidote to threat. What these findings indicate is that your heart and your head are connected, you need to feel that you are a good person rather than be told it, or tell it to yourself. Gilbert & Proctor (2006) state that people with high shame and self-criticism do not know how to be gentle with themselves, however one participant cited a growing awareness that she needed to leave her job as it was not doing her any good.

How one cares for oneself can take different forms, is overeating a form of self-soothing as one participant cited? According to Firestone (2018b) this would be where a seemingly friendly voice compensates for painful feelings of low self-esteem.

One participant stated that she was through with caring for everyone else and was turning her care upon herself. Gilbert et al (2004; 2006) and Gilbert & Proctor's (2006) assertions may or may not be confirmed in this case as the context is missing from their studies, due to the lack the depth of self-report questionnaires.

Learning About Oneself

Learning about oneself was not an expected finding because the focus of this study was not to find ways of changing the critical voice, however this theme could relate to Firestone's (1988; 2009) Voice Therapy where patients were encouraged to voice their self-criticism in a therapeutic group. Facing the critical voice head on can lead to new knowledge about oneself, self-reflection and the potentiality of liking oneself more. *"Preparedness to turn towards difficulty and the commitment to try to work it out by taking action"* (Gilbert, 2018, p.38) links to the participant who spoke about going deeply into her shadow side, however there is little else in the way of self-learning in relation to the critical voice in the literature.

This may be due to fear, both on the part of the researchers to tackle a potentially emotive and ethically challenging subject but it may also be due to reluctance on the part of the participant who may be fearful about facing their own self-criticism. Facing one's demons in order to learn more about oneself takes courage, *"one could say that the courage to be is the courage to accept oneself as accepted in spite of being unacceptable"* (Tillich, 1952, p.160). Tillich, in this statement is referring to taking a leap of faith to truly become oneself, to live a more authentic life by accepting the whole of oneself. Furthermore, *"courage, in this view, is the readiness to take upon oneself negatives, anticipated by fear, for the sake of a fuller positivity"* (Tillich, 1952, p.82) and this seems to be borne out in these findings.

It's Hard to Hear Positive Things

The finding of 'it's hard to hear positive things' about oneself was to be expected in the data; Gilbert and Proctor (2006) purport that for high self-critics *"feelings of warmth or*

gentle reassurance were often frightening for them” (ibid, p.355). However as none of the other participants talked about this aspect it highlights the individuality of one’s experience of a critical voice. There are other factors to consider in this participant’s statements, such as her wish to correct others, her wish to ensure that they do not misunderstand her but see the whole of her rather than just their perception. This may have links to ‘Perfection’, i.e. wishing to ensure nothing is hidden, and also through a ‘Care for Others’, a sub-heading of ‘Interconnection’ when she states *“wanting to be normalising and [...] supportive”* (T.6.P.184-186).

Changes Throughout Life

The research findings from this study indicate that for most of the participants their critical voice changed over time. For one, this meant changing according to the life situation they were in and the circumstances they were living in, and another spoke about a catalyst in her life that changed her criticism. ‘Changes Throughout Life’ was an unforeseen, and therefore unexpected theme that emerged from the data. None of the literature on the critical voice or self-criticism contained any link to it changing over time. Reflecting on why this may be would necessitate consideration of what has been written, by whom, and who the study sample were.

With regard to the critical voice, the author of the theoretical perspective was Robert Firestone, a male psychiatrist working in America. Firestone, by his own admission did not carry out research into the critical voice other than to observe his patients and the therapy group, and these observations became the basis for his theory, largely drawn from Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalytic tenets. His daughter continues his work to this day, however there has been little deviation from the theoretical basis.

Paul Gilbert, a male psychologist working in England, has carried out research on self-criticism using self-report questionnaires which were developed from his observations during his work with clients. The demographics of Gilbert’s research subjects included female psychology students (Gilbert et al, 2004) and two male and four female patients with psychological difficulties (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006).

The demographics of the participants in the present research study, were all female and aged between 30 to 54 years of age, with six being between 41 & 56 old. Therefore it does not seem so surprising that Gilbert et al's (2004) research did not highlight any changes over time or indeed menopause being a factor as their research sample constituted undergraduate students (assuming that the majority of undergraduate students were aged 20 and under as per the HESA Student record in 2004 (Universities UK, 2015)).

Menopause

Menopause was cited by four participants as having a significant impact on their critical voice, which was a completely unexpected finding and provides a brand new aspect that warrants further investigation. A subsequent review of the literature via the Middlesex University library search, adding results beyond the library's collection, found no results using the search terms "menopause and self-criticism" or "menopause and criticism". Therefore a wider search was conducted using search terms "menopause and critical voice", "menopause and critic", "menopause and critical", "menopause and worry", "menopause and anxiety", "menopause and self-doubt", "menopause and inner speech" and "menopause and critical inner speech", which produced variable results but nothing connecting the two factors (for example, results that were discounted included "Self-Care and Menopause: Critical Review of Research" (McElmurry & Huddleston, 1991), and a study which used a similar research methodology looking at the lived experience of perimenopause and menopause (Marnocha et al, 2011)).

Considering that menopause appears to be widely studied around the world, which was evident from the search results, it is surprising that self-criticism did not appear to be a topic for research bearing in mind over half of the participants in this research cited menopause as a factor in their critical voice. Perhaps these findings may encourage others to look deeper into this phenomenon (for example expanding on Mauas et al's (2012) study of the role of irritability, personal vulnerability and self-regulation in menopause).

It is interesting to note that bearing in mind that the two main protagonists of critical inner speech literature are male, one may assume that menopause was not 'on their radar',

particularly in view of Gilbert et al's (2004) methodology and demographics of research participants.

Childhood & Parenting

According to the literature, children have a more enduring memory for negative events than for positive ones (Firestone et al, 2002). Indeed the traditional theories of Psychodynamic, Cognitive and Transactional Analysis state that the critical voice comes from childhood and therefore it was unsurprising that participants in this study spoke about their early childhood memories.

The aetiology of the critical voice was not part of the research question and participants were not asked where it came from, yet with the exception of one, all of the participants spoke about childhood being a factor in the development of their critical voice.

As the aetiology of the critical voice was not part of the research question it is not possible to confirm the theory that participant's critical voices developed exactly as Firestone purported, i.e. *"children repress their anger toward their parents for their (the parent's) rejection and turn it on themselves. [...] It is this process of introjection that is responsible for the evolution of the pattern of negative, self-critical thoughts known as the "voice"*" (Firestone, 1987, p.219).

What can be demonstrated in these findings is that participant's critical voices varied according to their perception of their unique childhood experiences, from blaming themselves for their parents arguing, to the onset of fear and anxiety, or the development of sets of rules to live by. These individual and unique experiences show that it is not possible to definitively construct a theory for the development of a critical voice.

Looking at the critical voice through the wider lens of inner speech and its function, it is possible to understand that the purpose of a critical voice is partly as a guide to life, and provides a way of regulating oneself (Morin & Uttl, 2011).

Similarly, *“the inner voice is often the voice of our integrity that reminds us of our principles”* (Ridgway, 2009, p.46) which is in stark contrast to Firestone et al’s (2002) belief that the critical voice is *“NOT a conscience or a moral guide [...] it is irrational, illogical, and contradictory [...] If the voice were a true conscience, it would not have the tone of sarcasm or ridicule, nor would it possess a harsh, punishing quality”* (Firestone et al, 2002, p.42).

The aetiology of the critical voice as theorised by Berne (1964), Harris (1967), Firestone (1984; 1987) and Freud (1923) is for the purposes of this study, a moot point. What is more pertinent is what participants made of their critical voice, how they felt about it and the meaning it holds for them.

It Halts Me

The critical voice stopping or halting oneself from doing or saying, or even thinking something can be found in the literature. It is therefore unsurprising that participants in this study spoke about how their critical voice stopped them from doing things, stopped them thinking in certain ways, and by engaging in protracted internal dialogue had the effect of halting or talking themselves away from something.

Butler (2008) identifies ‘stoppers’ which curtail spontaneous self-expression, exaggerate risk, set rigid requirements (i.e. ‘If ... then’), narrow one’s choices and block feelings and actions. Firestone et al (2002) states that the critical voice limits us, it sabotages our success and that the purpose of the critical voice is to stop movement towards the unknown out of fear in order to stay safe. Butler’s (2008) conclusions are reflected in the findings of the two participants who said *“don’t even think you can do that”* (T.5.P.134) and *“it’s something that has become incapacitating”* (T.2.P.44).

Gilbert (2000) purports self-attacking to have evolved as a result of compliance; dominant animals attack and threaten subordinates so they behave in certain ways. Gilbert’s (2000) animalistic assumptions were not borne out in the findings of this study and therefore remain a theoretical supposition.

Restraint

Restraint is new concept in relation to the critical voice. Being able to hold oneself back from being critical does not appear in the literature at all. It raises the question of how does one hold oneself back, and what factors are at play in order for this to happen. The participant spoke about recognising that restraint served the purpose of finding the right time to criticise so that the criticism was taken on board.

Another participant recognised that listening to her critical voice enabled her to stop doing something stupid. Both of these aspects are novel findings in relation to the critical voice.

Futility

With regards to futility arising in the findings, Driscoll (1989) in his paper on self-condemnation alluded to low expectation and the possibility of failure, citing "*Blessed are they who expect nothing of themselves, for they shall not be disappointed*" (Driscoll, 1989, p.105). Therefore it was not so unexpected to find participants talking about a sense of futility. Similarly, Iancu & Ben-Zion (2015) claim that low self-esteem is linked to higher levels of self-criticism.

The findings in this study reveal noteworthy features about futility, such as protecting oneself from further embarrassment and feelings of stuckness.

Harsh Judgement & Self-Blame

Harsh judgement and self-blame were to be expected in the findings, which can be seen in Freud's (1921) narrative of one's personality, that of cruel self-depreciation and relentless self-criticism and bitter reproaches. Similarly, Firestone (1986) and Firestone et al (2002) refer to hostile thoughts and attitudes and a harsh punishing quality, and Gilbert & Miles (2000) refer to blame and shame with regard to the critical voice and criticism.

Psychodynamic theories talk about the critical voice in terms of the direction being towards the self, however Firestone (1987) also refers to criticism towards others, which he believes to be the basis for paranoid beliefs.

The findings in this study reveal participant's values, their moral judgements of themselves and others. The harsh judgements participant's cited related to people doing "*a half arsed job*" (T.2.P.126), and occurred when comparing themselves to others. When directed internally, there was self-blame and telling oneself off.

Moral judgements are not explored in the theoretical underpinnings of the critical voice however if we look to Ridgway's (2009) assertion that the inner voice is the voice of our integrity and principles then this seems to be borne out in how participants described their harsh judgements.

According to Palumbo (2012), judgement is a necessary part of life. Furthermore, "*judgement worth having needs to be fraught with the possibility of painful failure if it is to matter*" (Marar, 2018, p.3). Judgement has a function which can help us and hinder us. The findings in this study indicate that this natural ability to judge, despite being harsh serves a useful function.

Meltdown

Having a meltdown was not specifically found in the literature and describes the explosive potential of the critical voice. For one participant, the experience is very harsh to the point of her feeling "*I wanna die, I don't want to be here*" (T.7.P.68). Firestone (1986) and Firestone (2010) state that suicide is the ultimate conclusion of the critical voice, however the participant later concludes that this expression is a way of saying she has had enough rather than an actual desire to commit suicide. Therefore, the Firestone's theory is questionable as it is not supported by these findings.

Fuelling the Fire

Participants did express the idea that external criticism fuels the already smouldering fire of internal criticism, supporting Firestone's (2002) assertion that "*we often overreact to outside criticism, no matter how harsh or mild, realistic or unrealistic*" (Firestone et al, 2002, p.22). The rationale Firestone gives as to why this happens is because we think the external criticiser is as hostile towards us as we are towards ourselves however, this rationale cannot be supported from the participant's verbatim.

Impact of Being Interviewed

Etherington (2004) posits that by allowing ourselves to be known and seen by others in the endeavour to discover more about the research phenomenon there is the possibility of finding new meanings and perspectives in our lives. It is therefore unsurprising that participants were impacted by being interviewed and taking part in this research even though this was not the research intention. Research had previously been carried out tracking the process of change of the inner critic by Kugel (2010), and Stinckens, Lietaer & Leijssen (2002a; 2013a; 2013b), however this was through therapy rather than research.

Interconnection

Being interconnected within one's world is a central tenet in existential literature, for example 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1927), 'Hell is other people' (Sartre, 1989), embodiment (Merleau-Ponty, 1968), and 'I and Thou' (Buber, 1923). The findings in this study confirm that participants felt closely connected to their environment, to others around them and within their bodies, minds, and emotions.

This wider existential lens is not so visible within the psychodynamic literature of the critical voice, but is stated by Stinckens, Lietaer, & Leijssen (2002b) who note that a person is inextricably connected to their social environment. What has not been found in the literature and would be an interesting topic of further investigation is where participants spoke about how their critical voice affected their physical health, for example manifesting as hypertension and trauma.

With regard to where participants spoke about being sensitive to the feelings of others, and sensing atmospheres around them, this reflects Morin & Everett's (1990) assertions in their paper on inner speech and self-awareness; *"if a person's surroundings make it problematic for him or her to discriminate himself or herself from his or her immediate environment, it then becomes difficult for him or her to focus on himself or herself as an object"* (Morin & Everett, 1990, p.339).

Safe Criticism, Social Media / Television and Care for Others

This theme was completely unexpected from a review of the literature on the critical voice or self-criticism. Through the lens of existential literature can care and responsibility for others be found, such as in Heidegger's (1927) description of Dasein's being as care; care for others is linked with care for oneself, which is part of one's connectedness to the world. This was not specifically within the research question, nor did it feature in the interview questions, however participants spoke about being able to be critical to someone or something where there was no risk of the other taking offence. This theme is not so different to being critical to others, but the distinguishing feature is that it is 'safe' to be critical in these circumstances, and this denotes a care for other people.

The findings may link to making (Harsh) Judgements about other people and measuring them up to one's own morality or integrity, which is what Ridgway (2009) stated in relation to one's inner speech. The findings also link to the theme of 'Restraint', where rather than holding oneself back from being critical towards someone, when the other person cannot hear then no restraint is needed. As stated in the theme 'Restraint', further research is needed into this area to discover what processes are involved and why.

The findings also highlighted how participants wanted to teach others or help others to not be so critical towards themselves, and this may be a topic for further research in terms of the processes involved in criticism and care for other people.

Internal Dialogue

Puchalska-Wasyl (2015) identify Interlocutors, which are internal dialogues where "*a person alternately adopts two different viewpoints and that utterances formulated from these perspectives refer to one another*" (Puchalska-Wasyl, 2015, p.444). This study confirms the existence of interlocutors which, in these findings, are depicted as 'normalising it', 'shutting it up', 'arguing with it', 'fighting back', 'I wish I could but I can't', 'spurring you on', 'little conversations with myself', 'stopping it in its tracks', 'talking myself out of it', and 'working out the next steps'.

The purpose of this study was not to identify emotional types of interlocutors as Puchalska-Wasyl (2015) does, but simply to describe the function of the dialogue. Interestingly, one of the participants described being aware of dialoguing whilst dreaming, which was not expected and was not found in a subsequent literature search.

Other researchers that have considered the interplay between the critical voice and another voice are Gilbert et al (2004; 2006) with regard to self-attacking and self-reassurance, and Kalsched & Sieff (2015) with regard to the inner protector and inner persecutor in relation to trauma. Related research can also be found in studies on inner speech and audio visual hallucinations, such as Fernyhough (2004), McCarthy-Jones & Fernyhough (2007; 2011) and Alderson-Day & Fernyhough (2014).

Isolated and Alone

Participants talked about feeling isolated and alone, which exacerbated their critical voice and this can be found in Firestone's writing; *"blocks of time alone, [...] extended periods of isolation inevitably give rise to the critical inner voice"* (Firestone et al, 2002, p.68). The findings in this study show more specifically how at certain periods of time these feelings are more prevalent, such as during wintertime, when life circumstances change or having different interests to those of your friends and family.

Firestone also stated that *"attacks alienate the person from others and foster an isolated, inward life style [...] these negative thoughts are at the core of paranoid suspicion, distrust, and self-fulfilling prophecies of rejection"* (Firestone, 1987, p.222), however this cannot be confirmed in the findings of this study.

Not All Bad; Valuing It

It is interesting to note that a review of the literature on the critical voice or self-criticism does not reveal any benefits to the critical voice, and indeed primarily focus on eradicating it. The findings in this study did however yield useful and helpful qualities that participants were aware of. Looking to literature on inner speech it is possible to see that a critical voice is 'Not All Bad'; archetypes, such as the benevolent angel, the wise old man, the befriending fairy or great good mother exist alongside malevolent characters (Kalsched & Sieff, 2015).

My Little Friend

This theme was completely unexpected from reviewing the critical voice literature. What is noteworthy here is that the participants who spoke about seeing their critical voice as a little friend also spoke about it in terms of a long term relationship or marriage, which suggests that their relationship with it had developed over time. Longitudinal studies would thus chart the change of a way of relating to it. Puchalska-Wasyl (2015) identified a 'Faithful Friend' as one of the emotional types in her study on self-talk, and this can be likened to the finding of 'My Little Friend' in this study.

Coping Mechanism and Options

Contrary to Firestone's (1986) assertion that *"even in its milder forms, the voice creates stress and interferes with a person's ability to cope with stressful situations"* (Firestone, 1986, p.440), one participant felt that her internal dialogue helped her to develop coping mechanisms, which she valued. Furthermore, the dialogue gave her options in which she could step back and evaluate the situation. Therefore, the findings in this case did not confirm Firestone's (1986) assertion.

Rehearsal

One of the functions of inner speech is in preparation for external speech (Vygotsky, 1962), or in order to rehearse for anxious situations (Firestone et al, 2002). It was therefore unsurprising that one participant talked about rehearsing what she would say if a confrontational situation was to re-occur.

Strive to be Better and It Motivated Me

Three participants spoke about how their critical voice helped them to strive to be better and that it also motivated them. Gilbert (1997) and Gilbert et al (2004) propose that a function of self-criticism could be an effort to improve oneself and Gilbert & Proctor (2006) propose that it drives you on, however there is no explanation of how this occurs. The findings in this study show the individual reactions participants had to their critical voices, and the circumstances that spurred them on, such as a critical retort experienced some twenty years ago.

Struggle and frustration are a part of life; *“an indispensable prerequisite of mental health”* (Frankl, 1959, p.109). Meaning can be found through struggle, particularly if it hits a nerve of something important to you. Striving to be better was appreciated by participants as it tapped into their values. *“Once an individual’s search for a meaning is successful, it not only renders him happy but also gives him the capability to cope with suffering”* (Frankl, 1959, p.141); suffering their critical voice was meaningful because they were moving towards their ideals.

I Would Like [it] To Be

Critical voice literature is rife with assumptions that it should be eradicated, changed or not be so harsh and it was therefore an unsurprising finding in this study. Interestingly, participants also said that they did not want to get rid of it completely, merely dampen it down as it had value to them. Counselling Psychologists and talking therapists alike should therefore heed the findings that the critical voice serves a useful purpose and is something to be valued.

Perfectionism

The link of perfectionism and the critical voice can be found in the literature, for example Horney (1939) with regards to maintaining a façade of perfection, Kainer (1979) in the impossibility of perfection and the critical voice, Driscoll (1989) regarding perfectionism as part of self-condemnation, and Claes et al (2012) with regard to perfectionism and parental criticism. It was therefore expected that participants would speak about perfectionism in relation to their critical voice. Ironically, efforts to silence the inner critic assume that there is a ‘perfectable’ you (Palumbo, 2012) by striving towards an idealistic way of being. Perhaps then *“the challenge is not to perfect ourselves, but to get better at living with our imperfections”* (Van Deurzen, 1997, p.289).

Not Good Enough

Not feeling good enough was unsurprisingly a theme in participant’s critical voices as the literature on the critical voice claims. Gilbert & Miles (2000) link self-criticism with shame-proneness and included the item of ‘not good enough’ in their Sensitivity to Put-Down Scale. The concept of not being good enough can also be inferred in Freud’s (1914; 1921;

1923) description of personality development with regards to the interplay between the Id, Ego and Super-Ego, Freud (1914) stated that it is because of the inability to achieve the perfection of our childhood that critical judgement develops. However, not feeling good enough can obscure the wider picture of how it helps you to strive to be better, thereby having both a negative and a positive role.

Redressing A Balance & Reconnecting

The theme of redressing a balance and reconnecting with oneself does not appear in the literature, yet it has an intuitive quality; how can we appreciate what 'good' is if there is no comparable 'bad'. Participants spoke about confronting their critical voice and having another side to them that counteracted the negative effects. One participant had a sense of what she needed to do to re-connect with herself. The literature on self-criticism offers tools and techniques, such as Voice Therapy (Firestone, 1987), Compassionate Mind Training (Gilbert & Proctor, 2006), or Cognitive Therapy (Beck, 1995) but the findings in this study show that participants through their own explorations have developed their own way of living with their critical voice.

Releasing Pressure & Externalising the Voice

Releasing pressure and externalising the voice could be seen through the context of Firestone's (1987) Voice Therapy, however participants were not in group therapy and only one participant stated that she had experienced therapy. Releasing the pressure for these participants related to managing their critical voice in a way that did not harm the other, which would be linked to 'Safe Criticism' and 'Restraint'. One participant felt that it was important to externalise the voice so that it did not fester internally, and had found that humour was effective in doing this. As inner speech contains one's experiences, being able to define and express them allows for freedom and release (Emerson, 1983).

Resilience

Resilience in relation to the critical voice does not appear in the literature, and this warrants further exploration. This is a new finding which raises interesting questions such as does the critical voice diminish one's sense of resilience or does having resilience enable one to

pick yourself back up from the slings and arrows of the harsh critical voice? Further research into this theme is recommended.

When it Occurs

According to the literature and research studies, the critical voice would seem to be ever present. Indeed, the findings in this study show that participants do think it is there all the time, however there were some interesting variations to this. Participants noted that it was more prevalent in certain situations or contexts, for example during periods of stress, at the computer, when there is nothing to do, the networks and people you have around you, and how you are feeling.

This contextual information is lost within quantitative research because data is usually sought at one point in a participant's life showing only their understanding of it at that point in time (typically research participants are undergraduates). Also, research questionnaires contain design flaws in that answers to questions are required in general terms, such as 'most likely / often / not often', and this does not allow for the variation of context, situation or environment.

My Critical Voice & Why I Didn't Use Myself as a Research Participant

"The heuristic research process is not one that can be hurried or timed by the clock or calendar. It demands the total presence, honesty, maturity, and integrity of a researcher who not only strongly desires to know and understand but is willing to commit endless hours of sustained immersion and focused concentration on one central question, to risk the opening of wounds and passionate concerns, and to undergo the personal transformation that exists as a possibility in every heuristic journey"

(Moustakas, 1990; p.14)

The following section is written in the first person because the researcher felt this was the most appropriate way of conveying the personal struggle that is inextricably linked to the research topic and the process of research.

My struggle with this thesis and research topic has been at times too much to bear. My critical voice has halted my work often, it has insidiously crept around my mind like a shadow, barely visible at times whispering its taunts and accusations; *"you can't do this, this is too much for you, you are not capable"*. Because of its stealth and wispy like quality it has been hard to pin down and confront but it is always there. When it appears in concrete form and I can hear it loud and clearly, and it is at this point that my stubbornness kicks in and I want to prove to it that I **can** in fact do this, I **am** clever (well, clever enough anyway), I **don't** need to be an expert academic to be able to do this, and I am (good/clever/able [insert any adjective]) **enough** (bold used for emphasis).

For these reasons I did not include my own verbatim transcript as suggested by Moustakas (1994), my own understanding of the phenomena can be found throughout the theoretical framework and literature review. My experience of my own critical voice is explicated in the methodology and in this section. If I were to have arranged to have myself interviewed using my interview questions and then transcribed the interview I do not think I would have been able to stand back from the data in order to analyse it in the same way I have done for the other transcripts. It would have been too difficult to bracket my own critical voice

and refrain from selecting only certain data that I didn't mind being known to the readers, and especially to the people judging my work.

I appreciate that all of the research participants have to some degree only told me what they wanted me to hear, but I am sure that they have also divulged previously unspoken personal aspects of themselves. I believe this to be due to the promise of anonymity and, without wishing to be accused of hubris, I believe that it is also because of my skill as a counsellor who has honed good listening skills, is able to connect with people, and utilises tools to elicit further disclosure, for example using minimal prompts such as "*mhm*", non-verbal communication, and seeking further clarification.

With regard to the analysis of data had I used my own interview, I would always know which bit of data was mine, which words I used, and in the presentation of the whole would be unable to restrain my feelings or reactions to potential threats or attacks at the point of final judgement in the VIVA. Therefore, for me it was safer to entwine my experience of the phenomena throughout the work as a whole, and attempt to explicate my methodology, my thinking and my assumptions as clearly as possible.

The work has at times been overwhelming, due in part to life's trials and tribulations and at times I felt that I couldn't complete the project. Time and financial restrictions meant that it took longer than expected but each time I set it aside I felt a pull to return to it. The thesis has kept me going throughout my personal challenges by giving my life a meaning and purpose, what has sustained me is a sense that career wise, this is my 'magnum opus'.

Self-Reflection & Reflexivity of the Transcripts

This section briefly conveys the reflections of the researcher whilst transcribing and analysing the interviews. As above, the reflections are written in the first person to denote their personal nature. The researcher's speech is shown in *italics* and black font and the participant's speech is shown in *italics* and blue font.

Reflections on Transcript One

At the beginning of the transcript I wondered if I may have led the participant down the road of focussing on her critical voice as a past occurrence too soon, as in my question "*I don't know if this is going off topic but I'm intrigued also to find out if there is any reason that might have tailed off, or any awareness you have got around that?*" (T1.R.11). The participant may have talked more initially about her current feelings and experiences, but these came up later when she spoke about waking up in the morning and dialoguing with her critical voice.

What was surprising to me was when the participant said "*this is really interesting because I have never considered any of this*" (T.1.P.128) in relation to my question as to whether there might be a function or a purpose to the critical voice. I had presumed that by participating she had reflected, or at least considered the nature of the critical voice, particularly as I had sent the Participant Information Sheet out prior to the interview which set out the purpose of the research.

Reflections on Transcript Two

I remember feeling as if I needed to be perfect in the interview otherwise I would be judged by the participant. I noticed my comments were quite critical, often using "*so when you said...*" and I wonder if I came across as critical or challenging. In the transcription I was conscious of ensuring I had accurately captured what the participant was saying, making sure I had transcribed exactly what she had said and not made any typographical errors. Perhaps my perfectionism was mirroring hers and I wonder how open she was able to be with me.

Reflections on Transcript Three

I felt an instant liking to this participant, I found her funny, open and honest (she admitted that she had missed the previously booked interview because she had had a few drinks and had forgotten). In contrast to the previous participant, laughter can mask going deeply into pain so perhaps some of the difficult experiences she described lacked the emotional attachment.

Reflections on Transcript Four

I had a prior distant relationship to this participant and so I contacted my supervisor and talked through whether it would be ok to interview her. During the interview I tried to be careful not to assume that I knew what she meant and asked for clarification several times as the problem with interviewing someone you know is that you think you know what they mean. I wonder if I went overboard on this, as I was worried that I might be judged for interviewing someone I knew, albeit not very well.

Reflections on Transcript Five

I felt that this participant was particularly earnest to help with my research, and as a consequence I felt a slight pressure to make something of the end result for fear of letting her contribution down. Also her sudden revelation of *“That’s it! That’s it!”* (T.5.P.28) when she saw my flyer naming the critical voice added to my viewpoint that the critical voice was a much un-reflected subject, which in itself spurred me on.

Reflections on Transcript Six

This interview was the first of the Skype interviews, and whilst I was comfortable with Skype, I was somewhat nervous of being able to gather good data due to occasional connectivity problems over the internet. As it happened, when the Skype call began the participant couldn’t see me but I could see her. We tried to fix the problem but couldn’t and after a period of discussion the participant chose to continue none-the-less. I felt uncomfortable about this and kept checking in on her as to whether she was ok and each time she confirmed she was fine and happy to continue. My discomfort was because I felt foolish and unprofessional, the interview should have gone ‘properly’.

Halfway through the interview I checked my Dictaphone and to my horror it wasn't switched on! I didn't want to appear completely inept so I switched it on to record and muttered something about it being turned off, which is why the transcript starts with *"Right I'm going to start it again, and we'll just start from there"* (T.6.R.1). In my mind I regretted the loss of the data and wondered how I could re-capture what she had said without annoying her or have her think I was even more stupid. I didn't want to take up more of her time as she was kind enough to come forward for interview. I thought that the best thing to do would be to ask her for some examples of when her critical voice is present and then go deeper into them.

So the result of this debacle was that I ended up with some good data, however brief. I felt proud of myself for dealing with the situation, but I did feel really stupid and even though she couldn't see me, I know that a lot can be picked up by voice alone. I wonder what she thought but she said *"it's absolutely ok"* (T.6.P.4) in answer to my question of *"how are you doing, are you ok"* (T.6.R.1), and at the end of the interview she added *"I'd be really interested to see it kind of when you've written it up, I'd like to see what you've found"* (T.6.P.236).

Reflections on Transcript Seven

This was a Skype interview and unlike interview six, everything went well technologically. There was a lot of laughter during the interview, mostly by the participant and towards the end of the interview she explained that the laughter masked her sadness. She spoke about things that I could relate to, for example complaints about the housework and the feeling of being on a hamster wheel in life. Because of these assumed connections and her humour it is possible that I missed going deeper with her in terms of getting her to describe her critical voice, but overall I think there are a lot of examples there and her explanation at the end seems to explain her process.

Contributions for Counselling Psychology

The findings in this study raise a number of issues that are pertinent to Counselling Psychologists or indeed anyone who works in the field of therapy, be they psychotherapists, psychologists, counsellors, volunteer support workers, doctors, anyone who, in the course of their role offers a listening ear to another person. There is a depth and breadth to the critical voice that should be explored with a client as it connects to other beliefs and experiences that provide structure to a person's world.

The findings that therapists should take note of include caring for oneself, being positive is not enough, learning about oneself, the impact of being interviewed, interconnection, perfectionism, redressing a balance, when it occurs and that the critical voice is not all bad. These themes will be dealt with in turn.

Caring for Oneself

Caring for oneself appeared in the findings and as such requires consideration when working therapeutically with a client. How does a client care for themselves, how do they care for others, what halts them in their caring and what is behind this? Are there any ways in which care can be brought into a client's awareness in conjunction with criticism, the purpose of this is not to have one overshadow the other but to raise its presence as an equal.

Being Positive is Not Enough

An important finding in this study notes that positivity alone is not enough to combat criticism and this suggests that other factors are involved in self-criticism. The implication for therapy is to caution therapists who take a targeted approach to reducing self-criticism rather than a holistic enquiry into its function and contextual structuration.

Learning About Oneself and The Impact of Being Interviewed

It was interesting to note that simply being interviewed altered the way the participants thought about their critical voice, and this has an implication for therapy. By shining a light on a phenomenon without the purpose of changing it enables a person to explore without

boundaries, and this in itself can bring about new ways of self-understanding. Being able to face one's demons takes courage and can reduce the fear we have that paralyses us and so it is important that the therapist does not lead the client but simply walks quietly beside them in their exploration and asks questions to facilitate their self-awareness. This approach also requires courage on the part of the therapist so that the space is held for the client to be able to fully explore their critical voices without fear.

Interconnection

Recognising the context in which the critical voice operates has a key implication for therapy. Viewing the critical voice through the Existential lens of interconnection shows how a person has many interconnecting features to their world which affect the nature and functionality of one's critical voice. For example, how does someone restrain themselves from criticising others, why do they hold themselves back, and under what circumstances do they 'let rip'? This theme may also connect to how someone cares for others and themselves.

Perfectionism

Caution should be taken when aiming to eradicate the critical voice where elements of perfectionism exist as this may feed into the idea that there is a 'perfectable' way of being. The therapist should examine their own beliefs around what is the 'right' way of being as well as those of the client. Of course, there is no right or wrong way, but it is important to explore the purpose of therapy and what might be either party's motivation.

Redressing a Balance

Redressing a balance is something that requires the therapist's attention because it highlights the function that the critical voice can play. Therapists should explore the purpose that the critical voice serves to the client; does it provide a release of pressure, does it clear things for the client so that they can re-connect with themselves, or restore a sense of equilibrium?

When It Occurs

The findings highlight that the critical voice can come and go, it can be present at certain times, and change over the course of one's life. The critical voice is not static but will develop and change. The context of the client's present life situation is important because of the interconnection to their experiences and belief system.

Not All Bad

The critical voice, as well as being a foe can also be a friend. The findings highlight that it can serve a number of useful purposes such as being a coping mechanism, it motivates and helps people strive to be better. Of course, this can also be detrimental but if we only look at the critical voice from an either / or perspective then we miss the myriad of possibilities in between. If therapists can view the critical voice as a 'necessary evil', i.e. that judgement is an inescapable part of being human, then it is possible to value its presence.

Some of the functions and beliefs behind the criticism may also be critical but they will be purposeful. Caution should be taken by the therapist not to assign their own idea about what is positive, negative, useful or not useful onto the client's world. The critical voice contains idiosyncratic meanings that are personal to the individual and therapists need to take account of what other connections they are severing if their purpose is to remove or reduce the criticism. Perhaps it is better to investigate what function the critical voice performs and similarly the function that the structures behind the critical voice perform using the technique of horizontalization.

Implications for Further Research

The findings in this study reveal a number of new and previously unexplored features to the critical voice, which may warrant further investigation.

Changes Throughout Life

Studies into self-criticism, an aspect of the critical voice, do not take a longitudinal perspective whereas the findings in this study indicate that self-criticism does change over time. Researchers may also wish to look at the impact the menopause has on one's critical voice in greater depth as there does not appear to be much research into this area.

Job Type

How one's profession may exacerbate the critical voice was identified by a participant, this is a particularly topical issue within certain industry sectors with the trend towards the naming and shaming of individuals.

Restraint & Safe Criticism

Of particular interest is the interplay between restraint and criticism towards others, what stops someone from being openly critical? When is it 'safe' to criticise others, what does 'safe' mean, and what is the bigger picture of safe criticism in terms of personal meaning?

Interconnection & When it Occurs

The interconnection of one's physical body and the critical voice was cited by a participant and may be an interesting study for exploration. How does criticism affects one's body, is there an interplay between mental health, physical health or indeed dental health? The connection to one's environment was highlighted in this study, what environmental factors exacerbate the critical voice and what is the role of society in the critical voice?

Perfectionism

What aspects of having a perfectionist tendency aids or hinders one's critical voice? Up to what point does perfectionism motivate one to do a good job, is this a linear path or other factors present that mitigate the critical voice if perfectionism is not achieved? These

questions will help people who identify as perfectionists to gain a broader perspective of themselves and where their limits to effectiveness lie.

Not All Bad

The critical voice's more positive and helpful aspects have been identified in this research. This study shows that depending on one's perspective, the critical voice can be friendly, amusing and serve a useful purpose. Qualities such as it being a coping mechanism or pressure release may provide useful further analysis of the critical voice. Similarly, does creating archetypes aid one's understanding and acceptance of it?

Talking About The Critical Voice

Participants spoke about the impact of being researched and talking about their critical voices, which begs the question does simply taking part in research enable someone to look at their critical voice in a different way? Further research into this area would provide an adjunct to studies that have tracked the movement of criticism through therapy.

Through the use of qualitative research methodologies can a depth of understanding be gained; data becomes more meaningful and this enhances the field of psychological therapy. Research aids therapeutic work and as such further exploration into the above listed areas is to be encouraged.

Conclusion

*“When it comes to judgement, criticism weighs much more heavily than
praise”*

(Marar, 2018, p.1)

It is no wonder that there is a tendency of humans to want to get rid of the bad things in one's life. Criticism can feel justified when denigrating others, it can make us feel good about ourselves but it can also have repercussions. When criticism is directed towards us it can rain down like a tonne of bricks. When we criticise ourselves we accept it, often without noticing the harm we are doing to ourselves.

The findings in this innovative study show that there is so much more to criticism than previous studies have shown. Innovative findings show that one's critical voice can be a little friend, it is not 'all bad', it can redress a balance, it can spur you on, it can give you time to consider the best thing to say or do and that it changes over time, particularly in women going through Menopause. These aspects to criticism have not been revealed from previous studies or literature.

Additional nuances to criticism have come to light and require consideration, such as the impact of the 'name and shame' culture on individuals, how having a 'safe' outlet to criticise can be helpful and how one's ability to restrain oneself interplays with the critical voice.

This study highlights the importance of conducting qualitative research methodologies when studying human phenomena because of its ability to show depth and to go beyond the surface where individual meanings and context can be discovered.

By only looking at the critical element of self-criticism and attempting to eradicate or manage it we also affect the other aspects of oneself that are connected, the meanings they hold for us and the purposes they serve us.

For therapists working with psychological problems our practice can be informed by qualitative data, it is possible to gain a better understanding of a person's world when they explain it themselves rather than reading through statistical data gathered from multiple participants (usually undergraduate students). By working only on the critical element with clients we may miss the opportunity to reflect on the bigger picture and as participants in this study said, they had previously not considered or reflected on their critical voice despite its presence.

The critical voice is not something to define or measure in a static way as it lives in the context of one's ideas, beliefs, emotions and experiences. One's critical voice is a part of us, a necessary part that is bound up with a myriad of other voices and experiences which need consideration and attention in a holistic way. Humans do not live in isolation, just as one's beliefs and experiences do not operate in isolation within one's psyche.

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