Journal of Youth Studies

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: https://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cjys20

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**To cite this article:** Raquel Matos, Luísa Campos, Filipe Martins, Jo Deakin, Alexandra Carneiro, Claire Fox & Anna Markina (2023) At the 'risky' end of things: labelling, self-concept and the role of supportive relationships in young lives, Journal of Youth Studies, 26:3, 313-330, DOI: 10.1080/13676261.2023.2174007

**To link to this article:** https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2174007



Published online: 20 Feb 2023.

JOURNAL OF YOUTH STUDIES
2023, VOL. 26, NO. 3, 313–330
https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2023.2174007

Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group



# At the 'risky' end of things: labelling, self-concept and the role of supportive relationships in young lives

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**ABSTRACT**

The 'risky' label attached to certain groups of young people has disproportionately made them the target of 'interventions' designed to monitor, rehabilitate or punish. This article explores how young people experience and respond to that label across many aspects of their lives from school to leisure and from justice to welfare. We employ the notion of self-concept to understand the negative impact of labelling on young people and by contrast, the enabling influence of supportive relationships. Our analysis points to a relevant link between labelling and conflict and young people's self-concept, as well as to the relationship between self-concept and demonstrations of different forms of agency. Drawing on key findings from a meta-ethnographic synthesis of case studies from three countries (Estonia, Portugal and UK), we find that, regardless of the country where young people live, the significant relationships in their lives are essential for breaking the 'risk-labelled' cycle and to promote a more positive path. The case studies were developed with 71 participants (49 male), mostly aged between 15 and 24 years old, who presented long paths of conflict with major normative social institutions like the family, school, or the law, frequently leading to school exclusion and, sometimes, anti-social or criminal behaviour.

**ARTICLE HISTORY**
Received 28 April 2021
Accepted 22 January 2023

**KEYWORDS**
Labelling; risk; self-concept; youth justice interventions; significant relationships

## Introduction

Dominant constructions of young people as 'troubled' or 'at risk' of offending are driven by public and media discourses about 'antisocial' young people (Goldson and Muncie 2015). The 'risky' label produced in such discourses has made some groups of young people (particularly those facing a range of disadvantages and inequalities) the target of increasingly punitive and controlling policies and practices, from school discipline to policing, which, in turn, has led to further interventions (Goldson 2010). This feeds into a cycle of criminalisation and intervention which has 'profound and enduring'

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consequences (Tyler and Slater 2018) fuelling stigmatisation and increasing social exclusion and marginalisation from the mainstream (see Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022).

Elsewhere we discuss the cycle of labelling through intervention demonstrating how existing social inequalities and stigmatisation interact to produce a cycle of labelling with harmful consequences to young people's opportunities and life chances (Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022). In the current article, we explore the psychological process at work as young people engage (or not) with interventions and demonstrate agency in different forms. Our research presents the voices of young people, from Estonia, Portugal and the UK, who experience difficulties in their everyday lives across multiple sites and with multiple agents, often in relation to social norms of behaviour. Throughout the article, we use the word 'conflict' to describe these difficulties.

The first part of our analysis explores the experiences and responses of young people who have been labelled as 'risky', including intersectional disadvantage and demonstrations of agency. The analysis draws on the psychological notion of self-concept, a critical component of the individual's affective and cognitive system (Markus and Wurf 1987). Self-concept is a complex, dynamic and multifaceted phenomenon (Markus and Wurf 1987) that broadly refers to a 'person's perception of him or herself' (Shavelson and Bolus 1982, 3). Over time, the study of self-concept has focused on different aspects: types (e.g. professional or physical); mechanisms underlying its change and stability; its relationship with different types of variables (e.g. psychological, social); and the development of assessment measures. Contemporary theory and research on self-concept draws a distinction between its contents, i.e. one's self-beliefs and self-evaluations ('Who am I?' and 'How do I feel about myself?'), and its structure, that is, how the contents of the self-concept are organised (e.g. Campbell, Assanand, and Di Paula 2003). Research on self-concept also explores how this construct impacts on attitudes and behaviours to become a mediating factor between certain life experiences and ways of acting (e.g. Al-Talib and Griffin 1994). Through the notion of self-concept, we seek to understand how a young person's perception of self is influenced and altered by a negative label. Labelling theorists (e.g. Becker 1963; Lemert 1951) have, for a long time, argued that young people exhibiting 'delinquent' behaviours tend to be labelled as 'delinquents', and progressively integrate this label into their self-concept. From this perspective, 'the more a young person is 'told' he or she is 'a delinquent', the more he or she will think and act like one' (Chassin, Eason, and Young 1981, 31). For those who are the target of formal state intervention, the impact of such a label has been shown to be particularly negative (Al-Talib and Griffin 1994). In this paper, we use the psychological notion of self-concept to explore how young people with experiences of conflict, formally and informally labelled as 'delinquents', develop different modes of action.

In the second part of the analysis, we focus on a consistent feature of young people's narratives: the role of relationships developed with adults working in institutions and interventions. Research highlights the central role that relationships can play in positively shaping the pathways of vulnerable young people facing everyday conflict (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and McNeely 2008; Case and Haines 2015; Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022; Johns, Williams, and Haines 2017; Johnstonbaugh 2018; McNeill et al. 2012). Contributing to this area of literature, our findings support the crucial role of supportive relationships in young people's lives. We develop this area further to explore how affective relationships positively influence young people's self-concept and impact their ability to act. This

stands in contrast to the damaging effect labelling (by institutions and individuals) can have on a young person's self-concept.

## *Labelling young people as 'risky': from the neighbourhood to the criminal justice system*

Dominant discourses about young people tend to link them to risky and deviant behaviours, such as violence, drug use, and confrontation with older figures and authorities. These discourses are deeply rooted in society and are disseminated by diverse social practices, including media descriptions of 'out-of-control' young people (Goldson and Muncie 2015). This negative representation of young people is influenced by a set of intersecting factors, such as gender (Matos 2018), ethnicity (Sanderson and Thomas 2014; Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff 2003) or area of residence (Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001). By taking an intersectional approach to our analysis, focusing on the connection between multiple social identities (Garnett et al. 2014), we are able to better understand the unique patterns of oppression that stem from the relationship between claimed and perceived identities (Bowleg 2012; Reyes 2017). The interplay between these factors contributes to our understanding of the ways some groups of young people become the target of the 'risky label' and, consequently, face stigmatisation and discrimination.

Young people most likely to experience the 'risky' label include those who live in certain urban areas or belong to specific ethnic or gender groups. Belonging to a family with a history of contact with the justice system can also heighten negative labels and enhance the beginning of a conflict cycle (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022). Young people with this background can be labelled from the moment they enter school, facing expectations that do not allow them to adapt and succeed. This negativity from teachers and staff can be a factor in future disengagement from school and eventually, to prematurely leaving education (Meo and Parker 2004; Van Houtte 2011; Tarabini et al. 2018; Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022). Moreover, interventions within schools can quickly escalate into suspension and permanent exclusion from mainstream education into alternative statutory provision (Deakin and Kupchik 2016), adding to further reinforcement of labelling and stigmatisation (Cunha et al. 2015; McAra and McVie 2005). Those young people who have had contact with the criminal justice system have an increased chance of being treated more harshly by social services, probation officers and court judges (Smith 2012). This punitive attitude creates structural obstacles for young people as it reduces their chances to access new opportunities (Healy 2010; Weaver 2013; Nugent and Schinkel 2016). It also has an effect on the way young people see themselves, on their self-concept (Hattie 1992; Shavelson and Bolus 1982).

## *Labelling, self-concept and agency*

Self-concept is central to understanding how young people perceive themselves based on the reaction of others towards them: a person's self-perceptions are formed through experience with, and interpretations of, their environment (Shavelson and Bolus 1982). It is a dynamic and complex construct that consists of a set, or collection, of images, schemas, conceptions, prototypes, theories, goals or tasks (Markus and Wurf 1987). Self-concept is understood as a multifaceted phenomenon, as particular facets

reflect the category system adopted by a particular individual and/or shared by a group, and it becomes increasingly multifaceted as the individual develops from infancy to adulthood (Shavelson and Bolus 1982).

There are various types and sources of self-representations that differ in their relevance – the 'core' and the 'peripheral' conceptions. The core or central conceptions of the self (generally the most well-elaborated) are presumed to most powerfully affect information processing and behaviour; the more peripheral (less well-elaborated) conceptions may still wield behavioural influence. Regarding the sources, some self-representations result from inferences that people make about their attitudes and dispositions, their internal physiological reactions, their cognitions, emotions, and motivations. It results from direct attempts at self-assessment, from social comparisons and direct interactions whereby 'the most powerful determinant of currently available self-conceptions is the configuration of the immediate social environment' (McGuire 1984, McGuire & McGuire 1982, cited in. Markus and Wurf 1987, p. 305). Indeed, self-perceptions are especially influenced by the evaluations of significant others, reinforcements, and attributions for one's own behaviour (Shavelson and Bolus 1982). Therefore, deviant or 'risky' labels can impact on young people's self-perceptions, including self-beliefs ('Who am I?'), self-evaluations ('How do I feel about myself?') and self-efficacy ('Am I capable?').

A vicious circle is thus identified: adopting criminal or anti-social behaviours, or having other characteristics perceived by society as negative, leads to the labelling of young people; in turn, when young people are labelled, their self-concept is negatively impacted (e.g. Al-Talib and Griffin 1994). With a negative self-perception (and consequently, negative self-esteem and negative self-efficacy), young people may act in order to improve it, sometimes adopting criminal or anti-social behaviours (Al-Talib and Griffin 1994; Carroll et al. 2007).

We can therefore say that the labelling of young people produces various forms of agency, and this process is mediated by their self-concept. In its broadest sense, we conceptualise agency as young people's capacity to act in a way that would alter their (or other's) situation(s) within a wider context of obstacles and unequal structures that constrain and/or support it (Evans 2007). By analysing young people's individual experiences of, and responses to the labels they experience, we are able to indicate the connection between labels, self-concept and agency.

Significant relationships established with young people also have a crucial impact on their self-concept. Perceiving that others believe in their abilities and have affection for them, young people are able to build a more positive self-perception. Research has demonstrated that affective dyadic relationships can support turning points in young people's lives (Nolas 2014; Wood 2016; Mason 2015; Munford and Sanders 2015; Bryant and Ellard 2015; Lister 2007; Ekman and Amnå 2012), encouraging them to develop resilience (Motz et al. 2019; Robertson et al. 2016) and enhance agency (Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022). Within the institutional context, the relationships young people establish are crucial to their development (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and McNeely 2008; Case and Haines 2015; Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022; Johns, Williams, and Haines 2017; Johnstonbaugh 2018; McNeill et al. 2012). Meaningful, supportive and respectful relationships that vulnerable young people develop with authority figures can play an important role in identity and emotional development, and in transforming their lives towards more adaptative pathways (cf, Case and Haines 2015; Johns, Williams, and Haines 2017;

McNeill et al. 2012). Relationships that are affective and 'promotive' (Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022) will have a positive effect on a young person's self-concept and, therefore, their ability to act. Our research demonstrates how external confidence is gained from relationships, enhancing a young person's agency and enabling them to seize opportunities and make changes in their lives.

## Method

This article is based on a meta-ethnographic synthesis (Noblit and Hare 1988; Pilkington 2018) of data from three case studies carried out in three different European countries: the United Kingdom (UK), Portugal (PT), and Estonia (EE). It is part of the European project PROMISE[1], which explored young people's social involvement employing a mixed-method approach.

Overall, there was a wide range in terms of age (UK: 13–30; EE: 15-27; PT: 15–24), but most of the 71 young people interviewed were aged between 15 and 24 years old. We included a small number of older participants who were able to reflect on their past experiences and two younger participants. All the young people had been labelled as 'risky' or experienced conflict with major normative social institutions like the family, school, employment, or the law, frequently leading to stigmatisation, academic failure and/or school dropout, difficulties in finding a job, or to delinquent and criminal behaviour. As such, all participants were, or had been, involved in some kind of state or third-sector intervention aimed at rehabilitation or improving life chances. In the UK, 21 (11 male) participants were recruited through five youth clubs and support groups run by third-sector organisations, one of which was a provider of creative activities as part of the statutory youth justice provision. In Portugal, 26 (17 male) participants were recruited both through youth justice services of the Ministry of Justice, and through two second chance education projects. In the Estonian case study, 24 (21 male) young people serving sentences were recruited initially via the statutory probation service, and later through a snowball process involving peer-interviewing (see Table 1).

The researchers had training and experience in ethnographic research, creative methods and in-depth interviewing. In most cases, researchers had established relationships with the

**Table 1.** Overview of data by case study.

| Country | Case study | Participants (males) | Age range | Data collection period | Data collection strategies and settings |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Estonia (EE) | Young ex-offenders and recidivism | 24 (21) | 15–27 | December 2017 to January 2018 | Semi-structured interviews, photo elicitation and peer-interviewing with young ex-offenders in probation |
| United Kingdom (UK) | Criminalised youth | 21 (11) | 13–30 | April 2017 to April 2018 | Participant observation including art and drama workshops, semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation with criminalised young people enrolled in youth clubs and support groups |
| Portugal (PT) | Young people with risk and deviant paths | 26 (17) | 15–24 | April to November 2017 | Participant observation, semi-structured interviews and photo elicitation with young people enrolled in two second chance education projects and with young people serving non-custodial youth justice measures |

young people prior to the start of interviews. Participant observation and photo-elicitation were used in all case studies to both gain familiarity and trust with the participants and collect data. In Estonia, peer researchers were trained to conduct interviews.

Participants were contacted and selected using techniques appropriate to each setting. In the UK, contact with the young participants was made primarily through links with four youth clubs and support groups run by third-sector organisations already known to the researchers. An additional group, run by a third sector organisation providing creative activities as part of the statutory youth justice provision was also accessed. In Estonia, participants were recruited via probation services and organised as a group. In Portugal, participants were recruited through a Youth Justice Team of the Ministry of Justice and two different second chance education projects in the north of the country. Both education projects were private civil society initiatives that offered a lower secondary education qualification to young people who have had problematic and/or unsuccessful school paths and have dropped out of regular school or vocational training.

Data were collected using a common semi-structured interview protocol designed for use in all case studies but with specific adaptations according to the participants' characteristics and contexts. The interviews were designed to draw out young people's stories, prioritising the everyday reality of the young people, as they themselves understood it, exploring perspectives of conflict in young people's lives, their responses to it, and social changes brought about by these responses to conflict. All interviews were conducted in the places where the groups were based, or in other places selected by the participants, and lasted up to 90 min. The interviews were recorded and *verbatim* transcribed, alongside field notes written after the interview. A variety of creative and dialogic activities were used together with participant-directed interviews and participant observation, such as photo elicitation (photo voice), and in the UK, arts-based activities, including drama, visual and musical arts.

Data from each case study were analysed through a common general coding framework with twenty pre-defined Level 1 nodes using NVivo 11 software. This first analysis was performed by the research team, which collected data in each case study. Extensive node memos and a final report were produced for each case study, which, in turn, were subject to a new overall coding process. The meta-ethnographic analysis was performed by a team of five researchers from two different countries, and it was organised to shed light on the conflicts and discrimination young people face in their everyday lives, their responses to those conflicts and the factors that enable or inhibit their personal development and future actions.

A range of ethical issues were considered prior to the start of the project and monitored throughout its duration via an in-house, responsive 'Research Ethics Committee' made up of 4 researchers from the project and an external ethics advisor. The usual issues associated with empirical data collection of this nature were addressed, including gaining informed consent from young people, parents and carers, potential harm to participants or researchers, ensuring confidentiality and anonymity. Despite the project's rigorous processes and procedures, conducting research with young people on a sensitive topic poses additional challenges. Research addressing stigma and labels has the potential to reinforce the label and perpetuate the stigma (O'Connor and Earnest 2011), particularly where researchers do not belong to stigmatised groups themselves; they may be accused of approaching the research 'from the vantage point of theories that are

uninformed by the lived experience of the people they study' (Link and Phelan 2001, 365). In order to avoid further stigmatisation of young people, we approached fieldwork and dissemination with an awareness of our positions as privileged researchers sharing in the experiences of young people.[2] While our status as 'outsiders' to the groups was unavoidable, we sought to use methods that value and respect the participants' attitudes, views and interpretations of their experience. As much as possible, we used research techniques that would engage our participants to promote a collaborative, participatory approach to data collection, analysis and dissemination. These activities were designed to provide a space for young people to have a voice, share their experiences explore their own interpretations and retain ownership of their narratives. We hoped that our approach would go some way to breaking down power structures.

In addition, the more sensitive topic of stigma was not directly approached in the interviews by the researchers; instead, discussions were directed by young people with a loose focus on identity and everyday experiences. While this complicated the analysis, it allowed the young people to introduce and present their own examples of everyday stigma, labelling and marginalisation through negative representations.

## Findings

The findings discussed here present the experiences and responses of young people 'at the risky end of things', exploring, firstly, how a young person's perception of self-concept is affected by a negative label, and secondly, the impact of supportive relationships on young people's self-concept and ability to act.

### *Portraying young people: the 'risky' label and self-concept*

Throughout each of the ethnographic case studies, certain characteristics were mentioned by our participants as being significant contributors to discrimination, which in turn influences a young person's self-concept. Examples of these characteristics, identified as being linked to negative labels and having a negative impact on self-concept, included being part of a minority group and living in a 'deprived' neighbourhood. Some of the UK participants revealed the difficulties brought about by the layers of discrimination associated with intersectional identity features, like being a young black man or woman. For instance, Becki (age 18) discussed the negative feedback she receives from others in relation to her 'colour', age and the area in which she lives. Across the case studies, young people tended to perceive life as harder for those managing multiple types of discrimination related to various aspects of social identity.

Living in a 'deprived' neighbourhood is another major factor that participants, especially from Portugal and the UK, referred to as an amplifier of their discrimination. In fact, many of those who lived in these neighbourhoods stressed how they often felt stigmatised as a consequence of the place where they lived or had lived in the past. In their perspectives, life is made unjustly harder because of the social stereotypes about those who live there:

> Many people discriminate against us because we are from the neighbourhood. What's the problem of being from the neighbourhood? We are like other people; many people discriminate against this … (Manuel, PT, age 18)

> Getting out of neighbourhood life and becoming a normal person, the neighbourhood problems follow behind. A person can never be 'normal'. (Lourenço, PT, age 24)

These accounts are in line with the academic literature on socially disadvantaged neighbourhoods and deviance, namely, that structural poverty and social stigma favour social (dis)organisation patterns defined by low collective efficacy (low social trust and low shared willingness of residents to intervene in social control) (Morenoff, Sampson, and Raudenbush 2001).

Gender also emerged as a relevant identity feature of discrimination towards young people. Overall, the participants agreed that girls tended to face more obstacles, and consequently increased difficulties, than boys. In the Portuguese case study, however, a few opposing opinions emerged. Some participants mentioned that boys could have more difficulties, since they take longer to mature and, for that reason, tend to face more difficulties in concentrating at school. Others said boys are more likely to be viewed negatively by society:

> Ahh, for example, as I shall explain, in the boys' part, they probably think they only want nights, they do not listen to anyone, or they do not want to listen to advice. […] It is harder, of course, because they are viewed negatively, not positively. (Rita, PT, age 20)

From the Estonian participants, there was a shared view that girls are punished more severely than boys when they do not comply with the social norms and that this extended to views held within wider society. For instance, when girls are engaged in crime or suspicious behaviours they are seen as bad mothers and as 'more promiscuous'. This links with literature on gender and crime from Portugal, which has evidenced how women who commit crimes tend to be judged, first of all, by whether or not they conform to conventional gender roles (Matos 2018).

In the UK, several participants discussed their views on the treatment of girls and young women by the police. In one example, Jo described her distressing experience of witnessing the arrest of her friend:

> I don't think they should manhandle you like they do … especially girls. Because I've seen a police officer manhandle … a girl, like push her down on the floor like a man. I'm like, 'That's gonna hurt her boobs. You've got to be careful.' Like he pushed her down on the floor and held her there. She wasn't even, she wasn't even struggling. He was just panicking … He didn't know what he was doing. (Jo, UK, age 19)

Our data points to gender as one of several interconnected identity features that is misunderstood or misrepresented within criminal justice practice, feeding into discrimination and disadvantage.

Focusing on anti-social or criminal behaviour, participants suggested that having a history of involvement with the criminal justice system makes it harder for young people to gain legitimate work regardless of gender. If they do find employment they are usually seen as untrustworthy, and they are the first ones to be blamed when trouble occurs:

> Let's say that you've committed theft. People don't employ you … Let's say you get a job in the construction industry. And when something's missing, [you] are the first to be blamed and to be questioned and bothered. Well, it's a rather unpleasant experience. (Indrek, EE, age 28)

These sorts of examples of labelling and discrimination impact upon a young person's self-concept. In the various contexts of their lives, from the neighbourhood to school

or work, and especially when they accumulate layers of discrimination, young people's 'conflict-based encounters' combine to reduce their perceived self-efficacy. In fact, in many everyday situations in their lives, they do not feel able to reverse the situation of vulnerability and conflict in which they find themselves.

### *The cycle of conflict – conflict generates conflict*

For many participants of the three case studies, experiences of conflict tend to reinforce or facilitate the development of future conflict-heavy behaviours or pathways. This can include engagement, past or present, in non-normative, anti-social, or conflict-heavy behaviours or ways of living.

School failure and problematic behaviour at school are among the most frequent conflict experiences shared by our participants, particularly in the Portuguese and British case studies. These often include trouble learning, engaging in disruptive behaviour in the classroom, school absence, or episodes of violence with teachers, school staff or among school peers:

> At my old school, I beat the record of disciplinary offences, … there wasn't a single class where I wasn't sent to the student's office with a disciplinary offence, because I was always getting into trouble. (Andreia, PT, age 18)

Most participants from the Portuguese case study pointed to school as the site where they experienced the most conflicts, such as school failure, undisciplined behaviour, drug use, and interpersonal violence between peers and with teachers. For many, these conflict-based episodes led to a progressive path of disengagement from school and education:

> I didn't want to go inside the school, I didn't like school. (Óscar, PT, age 18)

> I went back to study in a course, I went through the same problems in school and I gave up again, I went back to work. (Lourenço, PT, age 24)

These experiences of conflict at school, however, tended not to be isolated episodes. Most participants referred to them as a behavioural pattern that repeats or escalates over time, as they feel that teachers have a stronger focus on their past misbehaviour than on their future possibilities. As such, school teachers were seen as expecting them to fail, to be irresponsible and to misbehave continuously. These negative expectations were seen to impact upon young people's sense of self and their educational paths. Many of the young people in our studies entered a process of progressive disengagement from school which can eventually lead to early dropout (Meo and Parker 2004; Van Houtte 2011; Tarabini et al. 2018). Becki described the negative spiral of labelling and low expectations that influenced how she viewed her own abilities:

> Felt so degraded that I just felt useless and it was like, it's not even the way like, it was the way he was saying it as well, very direct like, 'You're gonna fail,' like. There wasn't like, 'If you don't do this [Becki (pseudonym)], you're gonna fail.' It was, 'You're gonna fail,' like and after that he didn't even seem like he cared. He was like, he made his judgement, 'You're gonna fail,' is there even a point in teaching her anymore? […] After that, my grades were a lot worse than they were before. I was skipping maths, wasn't coming in and I had to think to myself, 'Is it all because that teacher told me I was gonna fail?' I really thought I was gonna fail and really got my mind to the point where I was gonna fail. (Becki, UK, age 18)

For many of the young people across the three case studies, the experience of being labelled as 'bad' or a 'failure' began in school and became their first experience of state-led punishment. Our case studies demonstrate that interventions within schools can quickly escalate into suspension and permanent exclusion from mainstream education into alternative statutory provision (Deakin and Kupchik 2016).

In other cases, experiences of conflict related to aspects not directly dependent on young people's individual behaviour, such as their family background or their formal status. Family history of harmful behaviours such as alcohol or drug addiction, criminal offenses, child abuse or neglect, or domestic violence, were frequently referred to by participants as sources of stigma and moral judgement, and of social services intervention, sometimes leading to placements in foster care or residential care facilities (Fitzpatrick et al. 2022). Being placed in care, in turn, becomes a new conflict-laden experience that could generate new vulnerabilities, including transgressive behaviours, and restrict young people's personal development and positive futures:

> People were just taking the mick out of me, 'cause you don't have a mum, you don't have a dad who look after you. And so got really angry. And I will hit the teachers, and the police will come and talk to me and stuff … . 'Cause people just taking the mick out of me for being in care, so thought, 'Fuck it.' I just left' (Samantha, UK, age 24)

Taken together, the data from our case studies shows that engaging with conflict-laden or non-normative behaviours or trajectories tends to reinforce negative representations and low expectations about young people, which, in turn, fosters the establishment of non-supportive, stigmatising, or even punitive relationships with authority figures and institutions (Deakin and Kupchik 2018; Goldson and Muncie 2015):

> I mean, if I'm already convicted once, they're trying to make me really, like, doing something wrong. And then they're watching me twice as much as [they usually do], actually. (Ken, EE, age 19)

> The police, I could never … if I, say for example, if I was arguing with Scott [boyfriend] and there was a big domestic or whatever like, I would not ring the police, like no matter how frightened I was. Because I feel like they are definitely against me, definitely like. (Amelia, UK, age 21)

> School thinks we are not capable, doesn't insist [on working with us]. You don't come, you don't get. It's finished. Give up, go away. You're expelled' (Elsa, PT, age 20)

These reactions end up strengthening young people's personal and social vulnerability and limiting their life choices and their opportunities to move forward (Nugent and Schinkel 2016). They also contribute to a reduction in self-confidence and perceived self-efficacy (Carroll et al. 2007). Therefore, it may be easier to continue non-normative paths, and sometimes even to strengthen their marginal or criminal identities. The result is a vicious circle of 'risky' behaviour and conflict, that inhibits young people's ability to seize opportunities or to act to improve their lives. Our analysis, here, focuses on labelling, relationships and self-concept, however for a more detailed discussion of the various ways young people in our case studies responded to conflict (such as remaining in conflict, actively seeking ways to escape the conflict, and employing strategies to navigate through conflict), see Matos et al. (2019).

### *Breaking the cycle of conflict: the role of 'promotive' relationships in supporting young people*

The analysis of the three case studies captures the vital role of relationships between young people and significant others (or with others that become significant) in the development of their personal identities and self-concept, whether as inhibitors or as enablers of positive futures.

The relevance of social relationships to emotional and behavioural development, to identity development and to well-being (Halle and Darling-Churchill 2016; Johns, Williams, and Haines 2017), and to social reproduction and social mobility (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) is widely accepted within psychological and sociological literature. The three cases in this paper evidence how 'promotive relationships' (Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022) – those that promote and support positive futures – can be crucial in improving self-concept and shaping the life paths of vulnerable and marginalised young people.

Across the case studies young people discussed the transformative potential of promotive relationships with adults running interventions (schools, youth support organisations or activities, foster care families, residential care facilities, youth justice teams). These adults, often teachers, youth workers, psychologists and other professionals, can be seen by vulnerable and marginalised young people as important sources of support. Young people repeatedly referred to them as being 'like family':

> They [referring to second chance education teachers] help us a lot. If I have to talk, if I have to vent, you can go to them. They give advice; it's like a second mother and a second father, basically. I feel good, it's different. The warmth, the cosiness, the trust, is completely different. (Júlia, PT, age 18)

Others talked about the motivation to make a change that they had gained from taking part in an intervention and seeking advice. Jacob discussed the advice he had received from a youth worker that had motivated him to apply for an apprenticeship:

> I wanted to get a job, but it's like I wasn't motivated to get a job. And it's like coming here and (Youth worker) started speaking to me about jobs, and he made me like get off my … he made me get up and think about it, and it's like, 'I want to do that.' So, then it's like then I started looking for jobs and I found one I liked, an apprenticeship, and just give it and […] like the respect that they gave me and I'm giving other people now, it's like that. And then it's like I wouldn't have got a job, I wouldn't have got nothing like. Thanks to [local youth organisation 1] (Jacob, UK, age 17)

However, for these relationships to offer effective support and foster positive changes in young people's lives, they must have some specific qualities. Positive relationships are welcoming and respectful, providing a space where young people can share their thoughts, and adults can listen and hear them without judgement and respond in an accessible way. The young people in each of our case studies described their relationships with the adults supporting them:

> [It's] Basically good [referring to the relationship with the probation officer]. Very good, actually … She was supportive. She talked, advised. (Aare, EE, age 26)

> Everyone that works here [referring to youth organisation], I love them. Because they like show me the respect that … like I don't usually get treated with respect, so like it's a new thing (Jacob, UK, age 17)

In all the case studies, the most impactful relationships with adults running interventions were pictured as 'human-like', caring, warm, equal, and trustful. Young people particularly valued being accepted and respected 'for who they are', discussing occasions when adults suggested solutions to their problems without imposing them, offered support and encouraged them to achieve new goals.

> So, I consider the [second chance education project] a good place to be. Teachers strive to help us, in whatever they can. They do not just teach us stuff here, do they? They help us with many other problems. Personal problems, just like anyone has. (Santiago, PT, age 24)

They also looked for a sense of security and trust within these relationships, valuing those relationships where they felt adults were committed and would not give up on them. This highlights the crucial role relationships with adults of reference can play in shaping the future pathways of vulnerable young people facing conflict (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and McNeely 2008; Case and Haines 2015; Johns, Williams, and Haines 2017; Johnstonbaugh 2018; McNeill et al. 2012). If adapted to young people's needs and traits, these relationships can be experienced as sources of structure, boundaries, routines, and 'safe authority', and not limitation (Mottern 2012).

Many of the young people across the cases discussed positive relationships with staff in interventions as a blueprint for functional relationships with authority figures, peers and family. While this was not evident in young people's relationships with all staff working in all institutions (and less so in statutory justice provision and social work), it is something that most young people hoped for.

An interesting feature of positive relationships with authority figures is their potential for transformation from conflict-based and problematic, to supportive and enabling (Giordano, Cernkovich, and Rudolph 2002). We have termed this process 'recasting authority'. This occurs where young people have formed respectful and trusting relationships with authority figures, having previously been 'in conflict' with the same, or similarly placed, adults. In Portugal, for example, at the second chance education project, young people talked about their changing attitudes towards teachers and their acceptance of norms of behaviour that they had previously rejected. The most common narrative included a recasting of teachers' authority from mainstream to an alternative school. The problematic relationships with teachers in mainstream schools that prompted negative responses by young people and a cycle of conflict and punishment became positive and supportive relationships with teachers in the 'second chance' school. The mutually respectful nature of their relationships with teachers in the alternative provision school enabled a recasting of the teacher role:

> Because I think here teachers are different from regular school. Regular school teachers don't want to know about students, basically. But not here, here you notice the affection that the teachers feel for us. They make us feel good, like we are at home. (Telma, PT, age 19)

### *Building confidence and emotional resilience: the mediating role of self-concept*

The power of the promotive relationships, described above, lie in their ability to influence a young person's self-concept, providing a site within which confidence and emotional resilience can grow. Across the three case studies, young people discussed the impact of the relationships they have formed within organisations. Some of those attending

voluntary interventions in the UK, and second chance education projects and statutory youth justice interventions in Portugal talked about the ways close relationships with authority figures helped to build confidence and emotional resilience.

> Like, they brought me out of my shell and made me, like, feel a lot happier. So I love it here. They really are supportive. (Princess, UK, age 20)

In many cases, these relationships provided them with the confidence to engage in social interaction and enabled them to take up further opportunities. Sophie, discussing the care-leavers support group in the UK (a voluntary sector intervention) said:

> It's made me more confident with people. Like I speak to people now, like, yeah. It's made me a bit more open-minded and stuff. Like, as in like meeting new people and that. (Sophie, UK, age 23)

Self-concept is a key dimension to understanding how confidence is gained from relationships developed within interventions. Young people's self-perceptions are influenced by those around them through reinforcements, and attributions for their behaviour (Shavelson, Hubner and Stanton 1976; Shavelson and Bolus 1982). If their experiences are positive and meaningful, young people's self-concept, which at this developmental stage is more malleable, will be positively shaped and consequently will impact on their interpersonal relationships, decision-making and behaviour.

On the one hand, when young people develop a lower self-esteem, self-efficacy, or self-confidence, their ability to make better choices, establish positive relationships and be socially involved is compromised. Whereas, on the other hand, when young people develop a positive sense of self, they tend to adopt more positive views about life and about others, are more open to new opportunities and more likely to demonstrate prosocial attitudes, behaviours, and choices. The words of Susanna sum up this argument:

> One thing is that nobody wants to fail. This will affect many of the new things to try … A lot of people see they're not worth anything. Second, you're afraid what [will happen] if you can't do it. … [When] people learn to see their worth, then this is what makes them want to contribute and give back. For people who don't feel their own value, they have a very hard time seeing that it matters. (Susanna, EE, age 25)

Finally, some young people described the positive change in their self-concept and how that translates into action. In Portugal, for example, young people who had experienced promotive relationships with second chance education teachers or other institutional staff associated them with the adoption of new self-reliant ways of coping with problems, based on their own behavioural and attitudinal changes. They described strategies such as, for instance, individual perseverance and responsibility, being proud of oneself or focusing on the future rather than the past:

> I am the first to say: I want to change. It's not because of others wanting me to change that I'm going to change, it's me who wants to change. It's one thing to have your own attitude and another thing to follow others' attitudes. Because if it was like that, I would already be stealing everything, I would be beating everyone, but I'm not. When a person wants to change, it must be ones' attitude, not of others. (Nelson, PT, age 18)

In line with the notion of self-concept, young people across the case studies demonstrated that self-worth and pride in oneself, obtained through social validation by significant others, is a strong enabler of positive action towards change.

## Conclusion

This article encompasses the experiences and perspectives of young people from three different European countries, who are labelled by the authorities and through public and media discourses, as 'troubled youth' 'at risk' of offending.

Negative representations, labelling and discrimination towards young people, whether by the media, older generations or institutions, are key aspects in reinforcing responses that perpetuate conflict. Indeed, when young people are portrayed as troublemakers, disruptive, and disrespectful of others, this favours the internalisation of a negative group identity that naturalises inequality and conflict and reduces more adaptive expectations and behaviours (from oneself and from others). Besides the label of 'troubled youth', the labelling process may be further enhanced by the co-presence of other specific identity features, such as ethnicity, social class, area of residence, and gender. This can amplify young people's feeling of being socially judged, given that combinations of identity features tend to generate specific social expectations and limitations towards young people, regardless of who they 'really are' or who they can become. Likewise, negative labels and discrimination towards young people often inform mandatory interventions directed towards 'at risk' young people, which tend to be mostly control-focused and punitive. These interventions end up solidifying young people's personal and social vulnerability and limiting their self-confidence, their life choices, and their opportunities to move forward in life (Nugent and Schinkel 2016).

However, the supportive relationships established with adults, namely the staff involved in interventions, can play a crucial role in positively shaping the pathways of vulnerable young people facing conflict (Bradshaw, O'Brennan, and McNeely 2008; Case and Haines 2015; Johns, Williams, and Haines 2017; Johnstonbaugh 2018; McNeill et al. 2012; Deakin, Fox, and Matos 2022). If based on empathy, trust and positive expectations, and if adapted to young people's needs and traits, these relationships can be experienced as sources of structure, safety, and empowerment, and can be felt as actual turning points in young people's lives. They are, indeed, a critical determinant of successful development and should form part of discussions about service delivery in relation to young people facing adversity.

Overall, the findings seem to point to self-concept as a key dimension in promoting change or maintaining conflict. The opportunities that young people have, the labels they face and the relationships they experience contribute to a more or less empowered self-image, self-esteem, and self-efficacy. Socially reinforced young people tend to see themselves as more effective and competent and this can lead to increased social involvement, not only because they feel accepted but also because they feel they contribute. Thus, self-concept is essential in interventions with vulnerable and stigmatised young people, whereby positive relationships and validation by significant others become a trigger to change their pathways affording them equal participation in social life.

Our research reflects the experiences of young people 'at the risky end of things'. It raises questions about the value and nature of affective relationships with adults of reference in different types of interventions, and the role of those relationships in promoting

young people's positive self-concept as they navigate negative everyday representations of themselves. We suggest that there is a need for further research with groups of disadvantaged or marginalised young people, focusing on self-concept and the factors that impact it, whether positively or negatively.

## Notes

1. PROMISE is an EU-funded research project, which ran from May 2016 to April 2019. The project brought together 12 collaborating centres in Croatia, Estonia, Finland, Germany, Italy, Portugal, Slovakia, Spain, the Russian Federation, and the UK. See Promoting Youth Involvement and Social Engagement – Opportunities and challenges for 'conflicted' young people across Europe (http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/home-page/).
2. For a statement on positionality of the researchers in each of the case studies see the individual case study reports available here: http://www.promise.manchester.ac.uk/en/ethnographic-case-studies/.

## Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank all the young people who participated in this project for sharing their stories. Thanks also to Maria João Leote de Carvalho, Luísa Mota Ribeiro and Mariana Negrão, from the Portuguese team, for the insights for the cluster analysis report, and to Aimee Harragan and Rebecca Kaur for their work on the UK case study.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

## Funding

The research leading to these results has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme, under Grant Agreement no. 6932. This publication reflects only the views of the authors; the European Commission and Research Executive Agency are not responsible for any information it contains.

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