

**A SOCIOLOGICAL IMAGINATION IN PUBLIC HEALTH:  
SYSTEMATIC REVIEW, QUALITATIVE STUDIES AND  
YOUNG PEOPLE'S HEALTH IN SCHOOLS**

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## Abstract

Since the 1970s, public health research has shown a renewed focus on the social determinants of health. A focus on the social or 'upstream' determinants of health suggests the value of developing sociological analyses. My research applies a *sociological imagination* to public health science to develop an understanding of the interrelationship between, on the one hand, individual experiences and, on the other, societal arrangements and social position. This research is critical because a public health science oriented towards equitable improvement of people's lives will require attending to the connections between health and their social contexts.

In this critical overview I re-assess the publications I have submitted for the degree of PhD by publication, which includes six peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2013-2015 in top ranking journals in sociology and public health. I highlight the original empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions the publications have made to two domains of public health research and practice: a) school health and b) systematic review methods. The common thread underpinning my research across these domains is situating an understanding of health within a framework of larger social processes. A key aim of this overview is therefore to elaborate and extend my thinking from individual publications to bring this to fruition. I do so by using Anthony Giddens' notion of *structuration* as an over-arching theoretical lens to interpret my qualitative research (including interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis and qualitative systematic reviews including meta-ethnography and meta-narrative synthesis) and to illustrate that attending to the duality of *structure* and *agency* is useful for providing a framework through which to assess research and practice, and for developing theories which could inform the design and evaluation of complex health interventions.

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# 1 Introduction: the 'sociological imagination' in public health science

Since the 1970s, public health research has shown a renewed focus on the social determinants of health (Dew, 2012). This has been fuelled in part by increased recognition of the limitations of a narrowly 'individualist' approach and the importance of addressing social ills such as poverty, discrimination and inequality as contributors to health problems. A focus on the social or 'upstream' determinants of public health suggests the value of developing sociological analyses of the determinants of health. While traditionally public health researchers have been content to draw on sociology to develop measures, for example, of socioeconomic status (Green, 2006), they have been slower to draw on what C. Wright Mills (2000) referred to as a 'sociological imagination' – that is, to develop an understanding of the interrelationships between individual experiences and societal arrangements and social position. The slow adoption of a sociological sensibility may be in part explained by tensions between, on the one hand, sociology in Britain in the 1960s and 1970s, which was preoccupied with a critique of positivism and with arguably an excessive focus on discourse and criticism (Alexander, 2003; Calhoun, 1987); and, on the other, public health science, which was synonymous with epidemiology and was regarded by many social scientists as a *method* of positivist enquiry (i.e. adopting methods and approaches employed in natural sciences). There is now increased recognition of the value of sociological theories and qualitative methodological approaches that allow us to explain the complex social processes through which health is reproduced. This is critical in informing complex health interventions that address multiple determinants of risk at the individual and wider socio-ecological levels (Craig *et al.*, 2008).

Qualitative research is useful for opening up the 'black box' in health research as it allows us to unpack causal processes too complex and extended to be examined with quantitative analysis, as well as to capture unintended consequences of social action. It allows us to gain insight into the lived experiences of people in their social settings to understand how these may influence their health. Importantly, it helps us to understand social action as interplay between *structure* and *agency*: social structures influence people's actions, but actions also reconstitute social structures. This is integral to an understanding of the social determinants of health, which are not merely monolithic independent variables, but are themselves shaped by agency/actions. Qualitative research that attends to the duality of structure and agency is useful for developing mid-range theories of social change (i.e. theories about empirical phenomena that can be

verified with data – see for example, Merton *et al.* 1936) which could inform the development and evaluation of complex public health interventions (Craig *et al.*, 2008; Moore *et al.*, 2014).

In this critical overview<sup>1</sup> I re-assess the publications I have submitted for the degree of PhD by publication, which includes six peer-reviewed journal articles published between 2013-2015 in top ranking journals in sociology and public health. The collection of research represents my most recent and impactful contributions during my time at the Institute for Health & Human Development, University of East London (UEL) and sits within a larger body of published work spanning my whole research career. Typical of public health research, the studies are co-authored with other researchers including my PhD supervisors and/or are outputs from large collaborative grants funded by the National Institute for Health Research (NIHR) and the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC). However, all the research described in the publications has either been led by me or has involved a significant contribution by me as reflected in the order of authorship. Taken together, the collection of six publications offers original and significant contributions to two domains of research and practice in public health science: a) school health and b) systematic review methods. The common thread underpinning my research across these domains is applying a ‘sociological imagination’ to public health science. That is, to situating an understanding of health within a framework of larger social processes. Some of the publications do this explicitly (section 5 school health); while others have hinted at this possibility (section 6: systematic review methods). Writing this overview has given me the space to elaborate and extend my thinking from individual publications to bring this to fruition. I do so by drawing on the extensive qualitative research I conducted to produce these publications including interviews, focus groups, documentary analysis and qualitative systematic reviews including meta-ethnography and meta-narrative synthesis.

In this critical overview I highlight the original empirical, theoretical and methodological contributions this research has made to the two research domains mentioned above. In addition, I draw on sociological concepts of *structure* and *agency* provided in the works of Anthony Giddens (1984, 1991) to re-assess and configure my research as a coherent whole, illustrating that grounding public health research within an ‘ontology of the social’ is critical to developing an understanding of the social context of health. Details of the six studies that comprise this overview are reported in the following:

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<sup>1</sup> The University of East London (UEL) refers to this submission as a ‘critical appraisal’. I have used the term ‘critical overview’ instead because the UEL term might be confused with the procedure of checking the validity of studies in systematic reviews.

1. Bonell C, Jamal F, Harden A, Wells H, Parry W, Fletcher A, *et al.* (2013) Systematic review of the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health: evidence mapping and synthesis. *Public Health Research* 1(1).
2. Jamal F, Fletcher A, Harden A, Wells H, Thomas J, Bonell C (2013) The school environment and student health: a meta-ethnography of qualitative research. *BMC Public Health* 13: 798.
3. Fletcher A, Jamal F, Fitzgerald-Yau, N, Bonell C (2013) "We've got some underground business selling junk food": qualitative evidence of the unintended effects of English school food policies. *Sociology* 48(3): 500-517.
4. Jamal F, Bonell C, Harden A, Lorenc T (2015) The social ecology of girls' bullying practices: exploratory research in two London schools. *Sociology of Health & Illness* DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.12231.
5. Jamal F, Bertotti M, Lorenc T, Harden A (2013) Reviewing conceptualisations of community: reflections on a meta narrative approach. *Qualitative Research* 15(3): 314-333.
6. Jamal F, Langford B, Daniels P, Thomas J, Harden A, Bonell C (2014) Consulting with young people to inform systematic reviews: an example from a review on the effects of schools on health. *Health Expectations* DOI: 10.1111/hex.12312.

## **2 Structure of the overview**

In the next section I provide critical summaries of the publications submitted for the PhD degree including a description of my role in producing the research and the standing/impact of the publication in the field. In section 4 I describe structuration theory, as proposed by Anthony Giddens (1984), which is the sociological framework I have used throughout my research and which frames this overview. The main body of the overview follows this and is divided into two sections, representing the areas of research which I have contributed to: the first relates to school health research (section 5), in which I explore the social processes through which schools influence young people's health; and the second relates to systematic review methods (section 6), in which I explore the social processes of knowledge production in conducting reviews. Section 7 provides a critical commentary on key strengths and limitations of the published papers; and a reflection on theory and approaches for future research. I conclude by summarising the original contributions the sum of these publications have made to public health science in general, and the more specific contributions individual papers have made to the fields of school health and systematic review methods in particular. The full text publications submitted for the PhD by publication are provided in Appendix 1 in chronological order. As the publications submitted for this degree sit within a wider portfolio of work I have produced in my career so far, I provide a complete list of all my research outputs to date in Appendix 2.



### 3 Critical summary of publications submitted

- 1) Bonell C, Jamal F, Harden A, Wells H, Parry W, Fletcher A, et al. (2013) Systematic review of the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health: evidence mapping and synthesis. *Public Health Res* 1(1).

This publication describes the first ever empirical synthesis of evidence on the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health. The research was funded by the NIHR Public Health Research Programme and used an innovative mixed-methods synthesis approach including evidence from outcome evaluations, process evaluations, multi-level modelling studies, qualitative studies and theories. The review concluded that ‘school environment’ approaches involving community/ relationship building and empowering student participation in modifying schools’ food/ physical environments are promising. The review also found that schools that add value educationally may promote student health and elucidated the pathways underlying these effects. The rationale for this project was that despite considerable policy interest in ‘whole-school’ interventions to improve student health, the evidence regarding ‘school environment’ influences had not been systematically reviewed across diverse research types and health topics. This research has been critical in informing the development of new ‘whole-school’ interventions for health improvement.

This project was seminal in my career trajectory. Through in-depth analysis of the literature via systematic review, I developed expertise in school health research – an area which my subsequent research has focused.

The paper is published in *Public Health Research*, which is the flagship journal for the NIHR Public Health Research Programme. The paper is the most viewed publication in the journals library and has been cited 23 times since its recent publication in June 2013. It is also cited in the World Health Organisation’s ‘Health for the world’s adolescents’ report ([www.who.int/adolescent/second-decade](http://www.who.int/adolescent/second-decade)).

Contribution: My PhD supervisors, Prof Angela Harden (AH) and Prof Chris Bonell (CB) co-led the research. I contributed to all stages of the systematic review process from screening studies, producing the evidence map, conducting consultations with stakeholders and drafting the report. I was specifically responsible for conducting the review of qualitative research and played a key role in developing the overall synthesis across the various domains of research in

the review. The significance of my contribution is evidenced in the order of authorship. Other co-authors were involved in the management of the project (HW), provided quantitative expertise (WP), or were involved in the design of the overall project and funding applications.

- 2) Jamal F, Fletcher A, Harden A, Wells H, Thomas J, Bonell C (2013) The school environment and student health: a meta-ethnography of qualitative research. *BMC Public Health* 13: 798.

This paper reports the first meta-ethnography to address the question: through what processes might school environment influences on student health outcomes occur? The research was conducted as part of a larger project mapping and synthesising the research on the effects of schools on health (see publication 1). The rationale for this piece of work was that existing research had offered little guidance on how the school context enables or constrains students' sense of identity, friendships, health behaviours, or how students' backgrounds relate to these processes. Nineteen qualitative studies were included in the final synthesis which outlined key pathways of school influences. These pathways resonated with Markham and Aveyard's theory of human functioning and school organisation, and this paper uses the synthesis results to refine and extend this theory, in particular conceptualising more fully the role of young people's agency in constituting school environments and generating health risks.

The paper is published *BMC Public Health* and is selected by the journal as 'highly accessed' as it is among the top ten most viewed papers over 30 days since its publication in September 2013. It has been accessed more than 6141 times as of 17 July 2015. According to the article's Almetric score (measure of the quality and quantity of online attention that this article has received) it scores higher than 99% of all articles in *BMC Public Health* and is in the top 5% of all articles ever tracked by Almetric. It has been cited 12 times (as of July 2015). I have presented this paper at a number of scholarly and policy conferences on young people's health in the UK.

Contribution: I co-designed the study with my PhD supervisors, conducted the meta-ethnography, solely originated and completed the extended mid-range theory, and drafted the manuscript. AF provided qualitative expertise in synthesising and interpreting the studies. HW was involved in project management. AH and CB led the funding application and were involved in designing the study. JT provided comments on the final manuscript.

- 3) Fletcher A, Jamal F, Fitzgerald-Yau, N, Bonell C (2013) “We’ve got some underground business selling junk food”: qualitative evidence of the unintended effects of English school food policies. *Sociology* DOI: 10.1177/0038038513500102.

This study brought together qualitative field work carried out for two separate research projects – one led by one of my PhD supervisors Prof Chris Bonell and Dr Adam Fletcher, and the other by me, independently. While informally discussing emerging findings from our respective research, to our surprise we found common evidence of pervasive black markets in confectionary, ‘junk’ food and energy drinks at our separate case study schools, which appeared to be direct responses to new food regulation introduced in state maintained secondary schools in England. In this paper we interpret how these new ‘junk food markets’ represent a new form of student counter-school resistance to institutional constraints within the context of enduring class-based stratification. The publication has been critical in highlighting the unintended consequences of new school food ‘bans’ which appear to ignore the complex, ecological drivers of poor diet in youth and the potential iatrogenic effects of policies which exacerbate health inequalities.

The research was published in *Sociology* which is the flagship journal of the British Sociological Association. The paper has been cited six times (as of July 2015) since its recent publication date (May 2014). The paper has been reported in a number of health related blogs (<http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/socsi/newsandevents/news/black-markets-in-school-food.html>; <http://www.cost-of-living.net/>) and featured on BBC Thinking Allowed as a critical contribution to knowledge.

Contribution: As stated above, this publication combines the findings from two separate research studies, one of which I led. My field work for this study was funded by UEL’s Early Career Researcher Accelerator Grant. I independently applied for ethics approval, recruited schools, and conducted all data collection and analysis. AF and CB led the second study, and NFY conducted data collection on the second study. AF and I drafted the manuscript. The publication is considered an ‘equal contribution’ by me and the lead author.

- 4) Jamal F, Bonell C, Harden A, Lorenc T (2015) The social ecology of girls' bullying practices: exploratory research in two London schools. *Sociology of Health & Illness* DOI: 10.1111/1467-9566.12231

This paper reports on the processes through which the school environment influences girls' bullying practices and considers how gender is implicated in this. It was the second paper produced from my UEL Early Career Researcher Accelerator Grant for which I designed and conducted an exploratory project aimed at identifying health issues that were important to girls and how these are shaped in school contexts. The rationale for the project was to consider explicitly the views of girls, as most qualitative research (which I previously systematically reviewed in submitted publication 2) had privileged the voice of boys in the study of risk behaviours and had not adequately investigated how gender might be implicated in the processes by which schools influence risk behaviours. In this paper, I use Giddens' theory of structuration to theorise practices around bullying and aggression. I found that bullying practices were spatially patterned in the school environment and were most often characterised by the policing of girls' sexuality and sexual harassment. Repeated acts of aggression were fluid with regard to the bully and victim role, challenging the dominant view of bullying as characterised by consistent disparities in power between individuals. The school environment also structured bullying practices via policies and practices that ignored these forms of peer abuse and which may have been complicit in perpetuating these behaviours. I suggest that Giddens may not adequately recognise the continuing role that traditional gendered and sexual discourses play in structuring identities of the schools and girls in this study. This study renewed my interest in investigating the role of gender in social processes of health behaviours and I'm currently pursuing research exploring this in the context of sexual health in schools.

The paper is published in *Sociology of Health & Illness*, a leading journal in the social sciences. This paper has been published very recently (January 2015) and therefore does not have a record of citations.

Contribution: As noted above, I conducted the research independently including applying for ethics approval, recruiting schools, and conducting all data collection and analysis. I independently drafted the manuscript. The co-authors (CB, AH and TL) are my PhD supervisors and provided comment and edits on the manuscript.

- 5) Jamal F, Bertotti M, Lorenc T, Harden A (2013a) Reviewing conceptualisations of community: reflections on a meta-narrative approach. *Qualitative Research* DOI: 10.1177/1468794113509262.

This paper emerged from a critical reflection of conducting a meta-narrative review on the changing and contested nature of 'community' as understood across the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, political theory and health. It identifies the challenges that arose in the review, and the strengths and limitations of the approach. The paper concludes that the meta-narrative approach provides a useful framework for making sense of the multiple, changing and contested conceptualisations of community. However, in contrast to previous meta-narrative reviews, the approach used in this research is original in re-situating theoretical meta-narratives within their historical context, thus providing a more sociologically grounded description of the evolution of research.

The project was funded by AHRC under the 'Connected Communities' programme. The manuscript is published in, *Qualitative Research*, which publishes methodological manuscripts and is rated 9/92 in Social Sciences. As the methods for conducting meta-narrative reviews are still in their infancy, this paper forms an important contribution to the development and use of the approach.

Contribution: I independently conceived and drafted this manuscript. I developed the approach to meta-narrative reviewing used in this paper and was involved in all stages of the research process and conducted the synthesis of studies. AH and MB led the funding application, were involved in data collection and synthesis and commented on the manuscript. TL provided comments on the manuscript.

- 6) Jamal F, Langford B, Daniels P, Thomas J, Harden A, Bonell C (2014) Consulting with young people to inform systematic reviews: an example from a review on the effects of schools on health. *Health Expectations* DOI: 10.1111/hex.12312.

This publication presents a critical reflection on the process of consulting with young people to inform a systematic review on the effects of schools on young people's health (see publication 1). The idea originated in informal conversations between my PhD supervisor, Prof Angela Harden and I on our experience of involving young people in the review and the current lack of research on participatory reviews despite increasing interest in involving the public in systematic reviews. The paper reports the process and impact of consulting with young people in the review and suggests new avenues for investigation.

This paper is published in the journal *Health Expectations* (December 2014) which is dedicated to a critical assessment of public and patient involvement in research and policy. In the context of growing recognition by research councils and other public funders that stakeholders should be involved in research that affects their lives – this paper provides a rare and valuable contribution. According to its Almetric score the article is the 6<sup>th</sup> highest scoring article in the journal so far, scoring higher than 94% of articles of a similar age.

Contribution: The manuscript was entirely conceived and drafted by me. I designed and conducted the web-based and face-to-face consultation on which this study is based. BL and AH conducted another face-to-face consultation on which this study is also based. I analysed all the consultation data to produce the manuscript. PD provided comments on the manuscript. AH and CB led the funding application. JT, AH and CB provided comments on the manuscript.

## 4 Theoretical framework: understanding social context through the duality of structure and agency

I draw on Giddens' (1984) notion of *structuration* as an over-arching theoretical framework to explore the dynamics of how *agency* and *structure* are mutually constitutive and underlie social processes. Other social theorists (see for example, Pierre Bourdieu, 1977; Norbert Elias, 1982; Michel Foucault, 1977) have similarly highlighted the interdependence of human action and social structure; however, I chose to use Giddens' (1984) approach because it is considered a 'grand social ontology': it explains what exists in the world, rather than setting out a clear hypothesis about particular human action. Thus, it is more suitable as a general framework in which I'm able to position various strands of my research and bring them together as a coherent whole for the purposes of this overview. Also, Giddens' (1984) approach is unique in insisting researchers focus on *mechanisms* of social change, which is important because much of my research seeks to inform the development of social-behavioural interventions.

Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration proposes that social systems are constituted by the activities of human agents. Agency is the capacity of individuals to act and make choices, whether these are intentional or unintentional, and is both enabled and constrained by social structures (Giddens, 1984). These structures define the *rules* (procedures or norms) and *resources* (material and non-material), through which agents act and make choices (Giddens, 1984). However, while structural properties make action and choices possible, agents always produce, reproduce and transform these structures, suggesting a dialectic of control:

"According to the notion of the duality of structure, the structural properties of social systems are both medium and outcome of the practices they recursively organise" (Giddens, 1984: 25). Giddens (1984) suggests that for people to apply their agency in society they must have a sense of *ontological security*, which is a person's sense of safety and trust in others, as well as *ontological competence*, which is a person's capacity to participate within a social sphere. With these capacities, human agents can choose actions deliberately and carry them through effectively: "To be an agent is to be able to deploy (chronically in the flow of daily life) a range of causal powers" (Giddens, 1984: 14). Indeed, Giddens (1984) suggests that for individuals in modern society, "a fundamental component of day-to-day activity is simply that of *choice*" (Giddens, 1991: 80). The waning of collective identities and traditions and the enhanced capacity for self-awareness is what characterises the era of high modernity and ostensibly provides the potential for choosing individual 'life-styles' and identities (Giddens, 1991).

Empirical studies of youth culture and schools, while not explicitly informed by the concept of structuration and reflexive identity construction, have illustrated how behaviours are influenced by social circumstances and vice versa. Indeed, Giddens (1984, 1991) has, in part, drawn on such sociological studies of secondary schools to develop his theoretical concepts. This further highlights the usefulness of Giddens for this overview because schools are a great example of how structuration works. In England, scholars at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies were steeped in qualitative research investigating the ways in which individuals, particularly young people, resisted identities traditionally ascribed to them by dominant social institutions (Clarke *et al.*, 1976; Hall and Jefferson, 1993) and found new spaces and styles through which to disrupt 'orderly sequences' of political systems (Hebidge, 1976). Willis' (1977) ethnographic study of working-class 'lads' at a secondary school in the West Midlands was part of this body of work and has had a major influence in my research (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013; Jamal *et al.*, 2015) as it is particularly illustrative of Giddens' (1984, 1991) structuration theory (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013). In this study, students' identities were developed in opposition to their secondary school institution, and this counter-school resistance both reflected and reinforced existing structures of inequality (Willis, 1977). Although criticised for under-estimating the diversity of cultural responses among students (Brown, 1987), this concept of counter-school cultural resistance illustrates the dialectic of *agency* and *structure* in shaping students' behaviour and how institutional *rules* and students' *resources* enable and constrain young people in this process (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013; Giddens, 1984). Nonetheless, students' agency and rebellion were directed towards anti-school actions and risk behaviours and thus, according to Willis (1977), paradoxically prepared them for working-class life and constrained their life chances towards becoming industrial workers, thus ensuring the reproduction of existing structures of inequality rather than transforming social structures itself.

Re-visiting youth culture years later, Willis (2003) described the breakdown of traditional class-based collective identities as a result of modernisation and changes to capitalist modes of production: "if the 'lads' were *proto-workers* who identified with the common culture of their local factory and working-class 'estates', then young people are now connected via *proto-communities* based on their shared styles and interests (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013)." This interpretation reflects Giddens' (1991) characterisation of identity construction in an era of high modernity whereby reflexive self-awareness provides individuals with opportunities to construct identities that are not necessarily reflective of collective social structures (e.g. class or gender), which have become less visible (but no less determinative) (Furlong and Cartmel 2006;



Giddens 1991). Scholars have stressed that such 'reflexive' identities are still powerfully shaped by wider social structures, only with the *appearance* of greater choice and control (Furlong and Cartmel, 2006; Henderson *et al.*, 2006). It is argued that the greater invisibility of collective social structures such as class or gender only serves to mask increasing social inequalities in Britain (Reay, 2006).

I use Giddens' (1984, 1991) concepts of the duality of structure and agency in shaping social contexts as an overarching theoretical framework to consider: in section 5, whether young people's health-related behaviours can be seen as 'identity work' in action and how this understanding might shape our view of their relationship to the school setting; and in section 6, the ways in which an emphasis on agency and structure can be used to extend existing methodological frameworks in systematic review research. The benefit of using a structuration approach is that it connects micro-social practices and macro-structural considerations and thus allows us to situate our understanding of health within wider social processes.

## 5 The social processes through which schools influence student health

### *Background*

The physical and social environment of schools in which staff and students spend every weekday may have profound effects on their health (Bonell *et al.*, 2011). Originating with the work of Rutter *et al.*, (1979), educational researchers have found that a school's environment, in terms of its ethos and organisation, can explain differences in attainment and behaviour between schools (Arnot *et al.*, 1998; Bonell *et al.*, 2011; Gaine and George 1999; MacBeath and Mortimore, 2001). This research has shown that factors such as strong leadership, student involvement, high expectations and frequent evaluation and praise appeared to explain some of the differences in attainment across schools. As well as their social environment, schools differ in their physical environment, such as cleanliness, lighting, ventilation and aesthetics, which may have important consequences for student health (Bonell *et al.*, 2013). The emphasis on the 'school environment' in explaining young people's health is largely driven by a socio-ecological model of health promotion which has gained traction in the last decade and has helped shift attention to the contextual factors involved in health behaviours (Whitehead 1995; Whitehead and Dahlgren 1991).

The systematic review on the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health included a review of theories (Bonell *et al.* 2013). A number of psycho-social theories which suggest the various influences of schools on young people's health were identified (e.g. social learning theory, contagion theory, theories of reasoned action and theory of planned behaviour) (Bonell *et al.*, 2013). However, we found that these theories neglect any examination of the interplay between behaviours and social structures and instead concentrate on how individuals come to behave in healthy or unhealthy ways influenced by social norms. In the systematic review of theories (Bonell *et al.* 2013), the most notable theory that addressed the pathway 'upstream' from schools' organisation, teaching, and discipline to student health outcomes was Markham and Aveyard's (2003) theory of human functioning and school organisation. Integrating theoretical conceptions of parenting and cultural transmission in education, these authors suggest that to enable young people to choose health-promoting behaviours, schools ought to develop students' capacities for 'practical reasoning' – which is the ability to understand your own and others' perspectives and emotions; and sense of 'affiliation' – which is the ability to form relationships (Bernstein, 1975). According to the theory, schools enable students to fulfil these capacities through its 'instructional' and 'regulatory'

orders. The former is meant to promote learning and the latter is meant to promote behavioural norms. Students committed to these orders are theorised to choose healthy behaviours, whereas students disconnected from these orders are more likely to engage in risky health behaviours (Markham and Aveyard, 2003). Schools' ability to build commitment to these orders is theorised as depending on how flexibly 'boundaries' are maintained, for example between staff and students, and the extent to which the organisation and delivery (termed 'framing') of schooling is student-centred (Markham and Aveyard, 2003). It is this focus on how institutions promote commitment which makes this theory stand out from other theories of school health effects.

The systematic review on the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health identified quantitative research aimed at testing this theory (Bonell *et al.*, 2013). Evidence from cross-sectional (Aveyard *et al.*, 2004; Bisset *et al.*, 2007) and longitudinal studies (Markham *et al.*, 2008; Tobler *et al.*, 2011) included in this systematic review showed that in schools where attainment was higher than would be expected given the social profile of students, and truancy was lower, lower rates of substance use were observed, suggesting that what contributes to better student health is the added value that schools as institutions provide (Bonell *et al.* 2013). Thus, developers of the theory of human functioning and school organisation suggest that 'value-added' education *might* be an indicator of the extent to which a school promotes student commitment to school's 'instructional' and 'regulatory' orders (Markham and Aveyard, 2003). However, we still do not know how 'instructional' and 'regulatory' orders function or how 'boundaries' work to promote health. The theory is not properly substantiated by this quantitative evidence because value-added education is simply a proxy measure for these processes representing unexplained variance, and thus more large-scale research which examines school level determinants is required. However, in order to do this the theory of human functioning and school organisation may need refinement to ensure it is conceptually coherent and informed by health and educational research.

The quantitative studies outlined above were crucial in the systematic review in understanding relationships between school level exposures and health outcomes (Bonell *et al.* 2013). However, as explained above, they only offer very limited insight on how the school context enables or constrains students' health behaviours, or how students' gender or socio-economic status are implicated in these processes (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b). In other words, they offer no insight into the 'upstream' part of the causal chain, which Markham and Aveyard's (2003) theory focuses on. Such an understanding of social process is crucial for developing and

evaluating school environment interventions that are grounded in sufficiently complex theoretical frameworks.

Qualitative research is critical to the development of these frameworks as they allow us to unpack causal processes too complex and extended to be examined with quantitative analysis by engaging with the lived experience of schools by the people within them. Furthermore, qualitative analysis can examine how students interpret their own actions and context, and can explore the impact of student agency on maintaining or transforming institutions. The qualitative research I've conducted via meta-ethnography and primary research (interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis) in two London secondary schools seeks to do just this: develop an understanding of the processes through which schools influence young people's health and *vice versa*. Taken together, my qualitative research illuminates how schools are experienced and how actions are enabled and constrained by the immediate school environment, as well as wider structural forces such as education policies, gender norms and socio-economic status. The findings are already described in my individual publications (Fletcher *et al.*, 2014; Jamal *et al.*, 2013b; Jamal *et al.*, 2015). I focus the remaining part of this section on interpreting findings across my qualitative research to develop an 'extended theory' of human functioning and school organisation which accounts for the duality of *structure* and *agency* in the constitution of the school environment.

### *An extended theory of human functioning and school organisation*

Informed by the qualitative research I've conducted, as well as other existing research, and using Giddens' (1984) notion of 'structuration', I argue that while Markham and Aveyard's (2003) theory is instructive for understanding the processes through which schools influence student health-related behaviours, it denies sufficient autonomy to young people's agency and ascribes causal efficacy too strictly to institutional structures. I suggest that there are two distinct but overlapping 'systems' that constitute the school environment: (1) the student peer system (comprising student-led structures and processes); and (2) the school institutional system (comprising structures and processes involving school management, policies, and teacher and staff practices) (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b). Both systems are recognised in Markham and Aveyard's (2003) theory of health-promoting schools but the former, student-led system is not elaborated on by them.

Informed by my qualitative research, I theorise that the student peer system, like the school institutional system, is guided by a set of social norms, relationships, rituals and symbolic practices, and also influenced by broader social factors such as poverty, insecurity and gender inequalities. In line with Bernstein (1975) and Markham and Aveyard (2003), I sub-divide the institutional features of schools according to their 'instructional' and 'regulatory' orders. However, as my qualitative research highlights (Bonell *et al.*, 2013; Fletcher *et al.*, 2013; Jamal *et al.*, 2013b; Jamal *et al.*, 2015), students not only react to institutional policies and practices, but also promote their own (often competing) versions of these orders (Jamal *et al.* 2013b). I suggest that the importance of the student peer system is only partially theorised and that these orders should be re-conceptualised to acknowledge more explicitly the student-led as well as institutionally driven nature of the instructional and regulatory orders (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b).

The instructional order of the student peer system is apparent, for example, in the process through which young people learn and adopt acceptable roles, such as dominant femininities and masculinities (Jamal *et al.*, 2015), and related practices such as 'acting tough' (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b). These actions are socially determined. They are rational and orderly, bound by rules of social interaction. In some cases, they are critical in ensuring young people's safety and social status, particularly in schools which fail to secure students' engagement or safety (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b; Jamal *et al.*, 2015;). Thus, social control, mediated through rules and norms, seems to be operating among the student body, but on the terms of young people themselves. Take for example the rigid rules students follow when confronted with a violent incident such as the practice of linking arms to block adult intrusion (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b); or the rigid gender rules which govern girls' interactions and the social repercussions girls face in breaking these conventions (Jamal *et al.*, 2015).

These processes can also be situated within wider social contexts. They maintain and reproduce hegemonic ideals of masculinity and femininity within schools, which contrary to Giddens' (1991) view of the waning of collective identities in a time of high modernity, appear to continue to have salience in structuring young people's identities (Jamal *et al.*, 2015). The importance of maintaining respect via substance use, bullying or violence (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b), or engaging in other forms of resistance such as buying and selling junk foods where these foods are banned in schools (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013), is intensified in contexts of poverty and disadvantage. This highlights the centrality of violence, consumption practices and other risk behaviors for identity construction, security and peer bonding in the context of enduring class-based and gender-based stratification. These interpretations resonate with Bourgois' (1995)

notion of 'street culture', Dance's (2002) concept of 'tough fronts', and Paule's (2013) explanations of 'toxic schools' which conceptualise young people not as victims of structural poverty but as agents struggling for meaning and survival (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b).

Young people's connection to the peer system's instructional and regulatory order, as with that of the school's institutional system, enables them to develop a capacity for, what Bernstein (1975) termed 'practical reasoning' and 'affiliation'. Thus, rather than risk merely stemming from an absence of practical reasoning and affiliation, risk actually arises from students developing these capacities to engage in behaviour which is often regarded as 'anti-social' but which is thoroughly social (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b). The strategies they adopt, however, create a vicious circle whereby the means through which students gain support, solidarity and respect conflict with relationships with teachers and lead to further disengagement from school and lower expectations, which in turn inhibits the realisation of 'pro-school' reasoning and affiliation and ultimately reproduces behaviours detrimental to health (Jamal *et al.*, 2013b). This suggests that all explanatory power of school-level effects cannot be placed on the oppressive or emancipatory 'orders' of the institution alone. Students themselves construct their own instructional and regulatory orders, which together with the school institutional orders determine school environments and student outcomes.

The qualitative research I conducted (including meta-ethnographic synthesis, interviews, focus groups and documentary analysis) allowed me generate a detailed understanding of the more 'upstream' social determinants of student health in schools. The inductive and interpretive approach helped illuminate meaning that can be valuable to policymakers looking to better understand behaviours in context, perceptions and unintended consequences. The result of the qualitative interpretive process was a compelling analysis that identified and described key constructs, explained the relationships among them, and contextualised the findings in a way that then allowed me to further develop existing mid-range theory on the drivers of young people's health risk behaviours in schools. The emerging theory is sufficiently complex as it recognises how individual and collective action occurs locally and creatively via the interplay of structure and agency, which together influence health. The development of genuinely social and complex theory is a key aspect of scientific inquiry and a major contribution to public health science as it can inform the development of public health interventions which go on to test theories of social behavioural change. My current research (at the UCL Institute of Education) seeks to do just this: evaluate the effectiveness and processes of a whole-school intervention to reduce bullying and violence among secondary school students in London and south-east England (funded by the NIHR Public Health Research Programme), which is based

on the theory of human functioning and school organisation presented here. Partly informed by my research, the intervention provides a more sociologically grounded approach to health promotion which addresses multiple levels of influence to improve risk behaviors at school, for example via students' social and emotional skills and learning, peer group norms, discipline and pastoral care practices and 'attachment' to schools.

## 6 Foregrounding social context within systematic review methodologies

### *Background*

Systematic reviews are a scientific approach to collecting, organising and appraising research to arrive at a more comprehensive picture of a topic than is possible from examining individual studies (Gough *et al.*, 2012; Jamal *et al.* 2013a). Systematic review methods have been successfully developed for quantitative studies which synthesise findings using statistical meta-analysis (Thomas *et al.*, 2004). In recent years there has been growing interest in developing methods for reviewing qualitative research and theories in a systematic way (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009; Hannes and Macaitis, 2012; Harden and Thomas, 2010). There is now wide recognition of the benefits of utilising diverse research types in systematic reviews as a means to enhance the richness of contributions to knowledge and practice (Harden and Thomas 2010; Thomas *et al.*, 2004). However, as systematic reviews are applied to other forms of data, it becomes more obvious that a 'sociological imagination' or in other words, reflexive and critical attention is needed towards the inter-relationships between existing social arrangements and the processes by which knowledge is produced and understood. It is from this perspective that I have re-assessed two of my publications in the area of systematic review methods. One is related to patient and public involvement in systematic reviews (which was born out of a project consulting young people to inform decision-making in a systematic review of school health) (Jamal *et al.* 2014); and the other is related to approaches to conducting 'meta-narrative reviews', a new interpretive synthesis approach aimed at understanding research literature across multiple research traditions (which was born out of a project conducting a systematic review on the different conceptualisations of the term 'community') (Jamal *et al.* 2013a). While these two areas of research were conceived and carried out separately and are not obviously linked, a critical reflection through a sociological lens highlights the concern of both projects with the social contexts in which knowledge is produced, including the power relations involved, and how these influence methods and interpretations. In the sections to follow, I critically reflect on the need to recognise more fully the social context of knowledge production within the two areas of my systematic review research. This is important because without the contextualisation of knowledge production, there will be no critical understanding of how knowledge is generated about health problems, how this changes over time, and how it is influenced by social and political processes (Inhorn and Whittle 2001; Krieger *et al.*, 1993).



## *Public involvement in the scientific process*

Public involvement in the scientific process has been described by some sociologists as “citizen science” (Brown, 1997). Lay persons are considered *agents* in the research process and involved as experts and in turn, scientists “experience the citizenry” (Brown, 19992) and how the problem being studied is experienced (Inhorn and Whittle 2001). Public involvement can thus be considered a key ‘site’ in which knowledge is produced through social process. However, public involvement in systematic review research, beyond the ethical and political imperatives, has not been adequately theorised. There is a tendency in policy and research to view public involvement as unproblematically good and desirable (Gallagher and Gallagher 2008). The literature on public involvement in systematic reviews is mainly concerned with elaborating the structures by which public members can participate in research decision spaces (for example via consultation, collaboration or leading) (Oliver *et al.*, 2008) and with how these participatory structures are applied by specialists (see for example Carr and Coren, 2007). The original contribution of my research in this area was to move beyond descriptions of processes of involvement and specify how this involvement directly impacted on systematic review outputs. In this overview I extend this contribution by beginning to theorise how public participants’ and researchers’ *agency* is enabled or constrained in participatory review spaces. In contrast to the emphasis on participatory *structures* in the systematic review literature, the concept of *agency* (which is central to wider discourses of ‘patient centred care’ and ‘public engagement’) has been inadequately theorised or explained among systematic reviewers. The resulting gap means that we are unsure whether the value of public involvement in systematic reviews is attributed to scholarly and policy supposition or a productive and meaningful activity for all stakeholders.

Giddens’ (1991) theorisation of agency as a coupling of *ontological security* and *ontological competence* (described in section 4) may be useful for understanding the social context of participatory spaces in systematic reviews. Ontological competence suggests that public participants must know enough about a topic to meaningfully contribute (Giddens, 1991). Systematic reviews can be complex, involving different types of research and various stakeholders, and are often structured by *a priori* procedures originally designed to reduce subjectivity in the research process. The competence of public participants also varies and may be in part determined by their ‘social location’ (for example, socio-economic status, language ability, and ethnicity). Thus, engaging diverse participants, particularly vulnerable or traditionally marginalised groups, in this type of research presents challenges. Ontological

competence also applies to researchers undertaking the systematic review. Their capacities to facilitate meetings and dialogue, and relay research concepts and procedures accessibly are skills in which researchers are not traditionally trained. There is currently little research examining the competence of researchers in participatory research spaces, focusing instead on the competence of public participants. With regards to ontological security, there is a challenge in establishing and maintaining a sense of security and trust among various stakeholders within participatory research spaces. The concept of ontological security suggests trust is a necessary precursor to public involvement in research. Trust can be challenged, for example, by the historical lack of collaboration between 'lay people', 'researchers', 'funders' and other stakeholders, and the different levels of social power these groups may possess. Ontological security also applies to the researcher whereby the need to deliver participatory aims as set out in research protocols and grant applications may lead them to maintain patterns of behaviour that unintentionally reproduce power hierarchies (between researchers and the public) within participatory decision spaces. There is a growing body of research critically exploring the ways in which power dynamics shape research relationships (see for example, Gallagher and Gallagher 2008; Holland *et al.* 2010; Prout, 2005; Thomas 2007), but these studies are focused on public participation in primary studies. For example, Gallagher and Gallagher (2008) suggest that research with young people may be labelled as 'empowering' but much of it is managed and instructed by researchers and relies on young people's 'schooled docility' for their participation. For example via teaching technical/research terms and requiring participants to use them; or expecting completion of tasks and assessing them. The term 'empowerment', cited above, is commonly used in participatory research and can often be conceptualised as something that is 'given' or can be 'known' by the researcher (Holland *et al.* 2010). Some primary researchers prefer the perspective that power in researcher-participant relationships changes according to context and particular moments in the research process (Holland *et al.* 2010; Christensen and Prout 2002) and thus, researchers need to be aware of the nature of these dynamics, rather than assuming who has power (Edwards and Mathuner 2002).

In my own research consulting young people to inform decision making in a systematic review (Jamal *et al.*, 2014), I did not explicitly aim to critically examine the processes of involving public participants and thus can say little about how meaningful it was for participants. This is a shortcoming across the existing evidence base (for participatory systematic reviews and primary research) which should be addressed in future research. Indeed, from a researcher perspective, my primary focus was on delivering participatory objectives, as set out in our

study protocol. To some extent, I depended on young people's 'schooling docility' to facilitate the meeting to ensure I delivered the outputs required (e.g. I led, instructed and required the completion of tasks). On the other hand, since I had experience conducting focus groups in primary research with young people and other marginalised groups, I felt able to facilitate communication whereby everyone had a say. For example, by using open forum discussions as well as individual writing exercises. The presence of a youth worker which the young people trusted and worked with regularly helped to create a space of security for both the participants and myself. It also helped that the group of young people consulted were members of a pre-existing youth panel that had previously been trained in health and social research, thus ensuring a good level of competence. Overall, the consultations conducted with young people were most useful for: flagging 'early signals' of key themes in the evidence synthesis, which was an unanticipated outcome of the consultations; and for providing me with additional confidence in my decision-making at key stages in the review (Jamal *et al.* 2015). I do not think young people's involvement led to necessarily 'better' research outputs. At best, it led to us to emphasise different areas of research than we might have otherwise done, and therefore the systematic review output is likely better sensitised to young people's concerns. It should be noted that while we consulted with a range of stakeholders, including young people, the systematic review was intentionally researcher-led, which I think was suitable given the limited resource and limited evidence of the value of more participatory systematic reviews.

In this section, I've gone beyond my original paper to stress the need for more reflexive awareness of the social context of participatory spaces including how we might begin to assess what enables or constrains the *agency* of both researchers and public participants. Without greater reflexivity we risk: assuming that all public participation is unquestionably good; engaging in tokenistic participatory research, which fails to create productive and meaningful spaces for participation; and compromising the quality of research outputs.

### *A sociological grounding of texts in meta-narrative reviews*

There has been extensive methodological debate around assessing the quality of individual studies so that the evidence in a systematic review can be presented in a way that accounts for biases and limitations. However, with few exceptions (e.g. Popay *et al.*, 1998, Greenhalgh *et al.*, 2010, Sandelowski and Barroso 2002) this is as far as systematic reviewers have gone in terms of *critical engagement* with texts. Sociologists and anthropologists concerned with

problems of 'reflexivity' have questioned this kind of 'neutral' orientation towards texts and emphasised the need to understand the social context in which texts are both written and read so as to problematise the status, validity and authority of knowledge claims (Weber, 1947; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992, Geertz, 1988). In what follows I draw on and extend the arguments presented in a meta-narrative review I conducted on how the term 'community' has been conceptualised across different research traditions to illustrate the importance of expanding the 'appraisal' of studies to consider more fully the social contexts in which texts included in the review were produced. This practice is relevant for those conducting meta-narrative reviews, as the purpose of this type of review is to use a "historical and philosophical perspective" in a pragmatic way to make sense of diverse literature (Potss *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, the aim of the meta-narrative review is to develop a 'story line' of how research on a given topic has changed over time and across research traditions (Greenhalgh *et al.*, 2005a, 2005b; Wong *et al.*, 2013).

A key contribution of the meta-narrative review I conducted was attributing the changes in different conceptualisations and theorisations of 'community' to the different social, cultural or economic shifts taking place in the world, which influenced the writings of scholars at a specific time (Jamal *et al.*, 2013a). This is an important contribution because it not only points to which studies 'link up' to form a 'story line' (i.e. narrative) of the unfolding of research on a topic, but also meaningfully suggests how they do so by drawing out the potential influences around the forming of different research traditions (Jamal *et al.*, 2013a). For example, in my review the shifts in the theorisation and conceptualisation of the term 'community' were shaped largely by the emergence of the state, industrialisation, globalisation and advances in communication. Much existing work in meta-narrative reviews (Greenhalgh *et al.*, 2005a, 2005b, 2009) focuses on the internal theoretical coherence of story lines of research, rather than how they are embedded in real social-historical relations. By contrast my approach seeks to re-situate theoretical meta-narratives within their social-historical context, and thus provides a more sociologically grounded description of the evolution of knowledge on a given topic (Jamal *et al.*, 2013a).

Such an approach attends to the duality of *structure* and *agency* in the production of knowledge: social-political structures are determinants in shaping knowledge claims; and knowledge claims in turn organise these structures. In other words, theorisations or understandings of a given topic may shift in light of changes in social relations at a given time period. This knowledge in turn re-constitutes the social world as it influences policy makers,

practitioners and other power holders to intervene in particular ways. Therefore, a more sociologically grounded critical appraisal of texts in meta-narrative reviews might consider appraising texts on their rationality, validity and reliability, as well as scrutinising the social-power arrangements within which they were produced. Such an approach contributes to more reflexive practices in reviewing and provides a more nuanced understanding of the research being reviewed. It can also aid consumers of reviews in evaluating research within its social context and thus may be more useful in translating such knowledge.

## 7 Conclusion

My research makes a relatively rare attempt at harnessing a sociological thinking to make public health science more social. In this overview, I have illustrated that critically engaging with qualitative methods and theories allows us to make sense of the social context of health. Giddens' (1984, 1991) theory of structuration was instructive for understanding that, social structures (e.g. gender, socio-economic status and institutions) influence people's actions, but actions also reconstitute social structures. This general theoretical framework provided a clear lens through which to synthesise my publications as a coherent whole. While I had limited scope to engage with other theoretical perspectives in this critical overview, there are indeed a number that are relevant and which I plan to integrate into my future research. For example, theories of ritual and interaction (e.g. Erving Goffman, 1959; Victor Turner, 1975) would be useful for interpreting micro-social dynamics between students or students and teachers in school contexts; theories of gender performativity (e.g. Judith Butler, 2002) would also be useful for understanding how young people *do* gender and construct identities in different contexts.

Nonetheless, Giddens' (1984; 1991) emphasis on the duality of structure and agency remains integral to an understanding of the social determinants of health. It is useful for providing a framework through which to assess research and practice, and for developing theories which could inform the design and evaluation of complex interventions. I have applied this theoretical orientation in two domains of research:

The first examined the social processes through which schools might influence young people's health via meta-ethnographic synthesis (Bonell *et al.*, 2013; Jamal *et al.*, 2013b) and primary qualitative research in London (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013; Jamal *et al.*, 2015). In this regard, I provided new empirical data of young people's views and experiences of school and health and suggested how these relate to wider social contexts of gender and socio-economic status as well as to institutional policies and practices. Through an interpretation of my qualitative research, I have independently refined Markham and Aveyard's (2003) theory of human functioning and school organisation to elaborate the importance of young people's agency in constituting school structures (Jamal *et al.*, 2013). My research on school health has made significant empirical and theoretical contributions in the field. Despite considerable policy interest in 'whole school' interventions to improve student health and research on the effects of schools on health (which I have also contributed to), the evidence regarding the processes through which these effects occur had not previously been systematically reviewed. The 'socio-

ecological' approach which has been gaining traction in school health research had also under-examined the interplay between student agency and school institutional factors, and empirical studies in the discipline tended to neglect the importance of wider structural factors including gender, class and ethnicity. My primary research in secondary schools in London explored how students' lived experiences of health-related behaviours such as bullying and eating practices relate both to the school environment and to norms and processes in the wider society (Fletcher *et al.*, 2013; Jamal *et al.*, 2015).

The meta-ethnography approach was a valuable approach to evidence synthesis as it facilitates theory building via translating similar findings across studies (Noblit and Hare, 1988), but I acknowledge that (contradictory) data could have been lost in this process. Also, most of the qualitative studies synthesised were conducted in urban and disadvantaged contexts where students and teachers have the least in common. This bias is reflected in the extended theory of human functioning and school organisation I develop, which tends to emphasise the 'disconnection' between the school institutional 'orders' and student-led 'orders'.

The meta-ethnography was useful in identifying clear gaps in the evidence, one of which was a limited focus on gender in schools and the views of girls. I therefore conducted primary research on girls' perspectives of school bullying. This was an important exploratory study as it provided deeper understanding of unfamiliar phenomena. However, it was conducted with a small sample of two schools and thus the data is illustrative rather than comprehensive (Jamal *et al.* 2015). Overall, my qualitative research focuses on the views of students, and future research I pursue will explore these alongside views of school staff members to get a better understanding of staff-student relationships and its connection to institutional processes.

In general, my qualitative research adds to the critical mass of research produced by other scholars in the field providing a more complete picture of school health. Together, the systematic reviews and primary research will enable developers and practitioners of school health interventions to look beyond simple health education programmes and attend to the context in which students live, socialise and learn to create conditions more supportive to health.

The second domain of research is concerned with highlighting the need for reviewers to adopt more critical and reflexive practices to gain a fuller understanding of the ways in which knowledge in systematic reviews may be socially produced. While these issues have been a central concern to sociologists (see for example, Weber, 1947; Beck, 1994; Bourdieu and Wacquant, 1992), anthropologists (see for example, Geertz, 1980, 1988) and to a lesser extent

public health scientists (see for example, Lupton, 1995; Inhorn and Whittle, 2001; Green 2009) engaging with ‘problems of reflexivity’, systematic reviewers have paid it relatively little critical attention. It is this gap in the discipline which my methodological research in systematic reviews is oriented towards and to which I make two contributions.

The first is related to public participation in systematic reviews. The contribution of my research in this area has been not only to describe the processes of public involvement, which the current literature is overwhelmingly focused, but also to specify how and where this impacted on systematic review outputs. In this overview I have extended this contribution to consider how we might theorise *agency* within participatory spaces related to systematic reviews. A fuller understanding of what enables and constrains the agency of public participants and researchers is critical to developing participatory practices that are meaningful for those involved. While my research on young people’s participation in systematic reviews is original in focusing on both processes and impacts of involvement, this was a post-hoc exercise. During the research process, we did not have an explicit aim to critically examine challenges and opportunities of overtly participative systematic reviews. Future research should do this, as well as consider what enables and constrains involvement and if it is meaningful and desirable to participants, because, as stated earlier, the evidence base on this is weak.

The second methodological contribution is related to extending the scope of meta-narrative reviews to account for the *social structures* of knowledge production (Jamal *et al.*, 2013a). I highlight the need for reviewers to critically engage with the social structures in which texts are written so as to better understand the circumstances in which knowledge claims are made. Such an approach contributes to more reflexive practices in reviewing and, through re-situating research within wider social structures, provides a more sociologically grounded description of research (Jamal *et al.*, 2013a). This approach to reviewing however is resource intensive and requires interdisciplinary research teams to make connections between the studies identified and wider structural considerations.

All of my quite diverse publications represent in different ways an attempt to bring a sociological sensibility to bear on public health research. Some of the submitted publications do this explicitly (section 5: school health); while others have hinted at this possibility (section 6: systematic review methods). Writing this overview has given me the space to elaborate and extend my thinking from individual publications to bring this to fruition. The process of writing this overview has made clear that the sum of these publications is greater than their individual parts. Taken together, my research aims to situate an understanding of health within a



framework of larger social processes. This research is important because a public health science oriented towards equitable improvement of people's lives will require attending to the connections between health and their social contexts. My current research agenda is focused on theory-driven evaluation of complex public health interventions. It directly builds on the work presented in this overview and maintains a commitment to an application of a 'sociological imagination' to understanding health.

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## Appendix 1. Full text publications submitted for PhD (chronological order)

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Systematic review of the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health: evidence mapping and synthesis

Chris Bonell, Farah Jamal, Angela Harden, Helene Wells, Will Parry, Adam Fletcher, Mark Petticrew, James Thomas, Margaret Whitehead, Rona Campbell, Simon Murphy, Lawrence Moore

### Executive Summary\*

*\*The full text document is too long to include as part of this appendix. It is freely available online at:*  
[http://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf\\_file/0016/71161/FullReport-phr01010.pdf](http://www.journalslibrary.nihr.ac.uk/data/assets/pdf_file/0016/71161/FullReport-phr01010.pdf)

### Background and rationale

UK young people have among the worst health in Europe. The effects of curriculum-based health-education interventions in schools show mixed results. A complementary 'school environment (SE)' approach has been to change the school physical and social and cultural environment to promote health.. This report presents a systematic review of SE studies addressing multiple questions and using diverse types of evidence.

School-environment (SE) interventions are supported by the WHO framework for Health Promoting Schools (HPS). A Cochrane review of HPS interventions (which address SE alongside parent/community involvement and curriculum) is underway. Our review is different because it focuses on interventions addressing the school environment alone in order to isolate environmental effects (which are not possible when combining environment with curriculum components). Process evaluation studies are also reviewed as they are useful for informing decisions about the wider implementation of interventions. Since health outcomes also vary between schools in the absence of specific interventions and research suggests that these differences are attributable to school-level measures of the school social and physical environment, we have also included quantitative studies of school-level effects in our review. Though existing reviews have examined such research, they have not drawn authoritative conclusions because of methodological limitations in the studies they have included. We have therefore applied more rigorous inclusion criteria to review quantitative studies of school-level health effects. We also review qualitative studies examining the processes underlying such effects

### Aim and research questions

This systematic review aims to synthesise evidence relating to the health effects of SE interventions and of school-level measures of the social and physical environment and the processes underlying these. The review was conducted in two stages. In stage 1, we identified and descriptively mapped a broad array of potentially relevant literature, including research involving all aspects of the school environment and student as well as teacher health. Stage 2 focused specifically on student health and defined the school environment more narrowly in terms of how schools are organised/ managed, how they teach, how they provide pastoral care

and discipline, and/or the school physical environment. It involved five in-depth reviews to address the following research questions (RQ):

RQ1: What theories and conceptual frameworks are most commonly used to inform SE interventions or explain school-level influences on health? What testable review hypotheses do these suggest?

RQ2: What are the effects of SE interventions (modifying how schools are organised/ managed, how they teach, provide pastoral care to and discipline students, and/or the school physical environment) which do not include health education or health services as intervention components and which are evaluated using prospective experimental and quasi-experimental designs on health and health inequalities among school students aged 4-18 years? What are their direct and indirect costs?

RQ3: How feasible and acceptable are the SE interventions examined in studies addressing RQ2? How does context affect this?

RQ4: What are the effects of school-level measures of school organisation/management, teaching, pastoral care and discipline, student attitudes to school or relations with teachers, and/or physical environment (measured via 'objective' data rather than aggregate self-reports from the same individuals who provide data on outcomes) on health and health inequalities among school students aged 4-18 years examined via multi-level quantitative designs?

RQ5: Through what processes might these school-level influences occur, examined via qualitative research?

We review each of RQs1-5 above in separate chapters. We then assess the review hypotheses developed under RQ1 in relation to the totality of empirical evidence in our final chapter's overall synthesis.

## Methods

### *Stage 1: Identifying and describing the literature*

To locate evidence and theory, 16 databases were searched. *A priori* criteria were developed to identify relevant references based on title and abstract, and these were descriptively coded (e.g. country of study, health topic, school-level, etc.) to develop an evidence and theory map. We consulted with key stakeholders, including young people, about the map and the implications for stage 2.

### *Stage 2: In-depth synthesis*

An in-depth synthesis was conducted for each of the five research questions. Specific exclusion criteria, quality-assessment and data-extraction tools were developed for each synthesis. Additional searches were conducted by checking references of included reports and contacting study authors. A narrative synthesis approach was used for RQ1-4, and a meta-ethnography approach was used for RQ5.

## Results

A total of 1,144 references were included in the evidence and theory map. Most were references to primary research conducted in high-income countries. The main health topics



identified at the mapping stage were student violence, bullying, harassment, diet and physical activity. The main aspects of the school environment identified were school management/policies, catering services/vending machines, and sport/active transport..

The findings of the theory map and the consultations with key stakeholders suggested that the most important school-environment interventions and determinants to focus on were those relating to how schools are organised and managed, how they deliver teaching, pastoral care and discipline, and schools' physical environments.

### *RQ1: theory synthesis*

A total of twenty-five theories were cited in either stand-alone theory papers or empirical reports addressing RQ2-5. The most commonly cited theories were ecological systems theory (cited in n=10 reports); social control theory (n=6), social disorganisation theory (n=5), social learning theory (n=5), theory of human functioning and school organisation (n=5) and social cognitive theory (n=4).

- Inclusion criteria were developed to assess which theories should inform our primary and secondary review hypotheses. Three theories informed our primary review hypotheses social capital theories - schools will foster health by having a stable student and staff body, good relationships between staff and students, and a positive school ethos of stable, shared norms;
- social development model - schools reduce anti-social behaviour by providing opportunities for students to participate fully in learning and community life, develop the skills necessary for such participation and ultimately enable students to gain recognition;
- theory of human functioning and school organisation - schools foster student autonomy and health by reducing social boundaries between staff and students and among students, and ensuring student-centred framing of learning, management and other school systems.

### *RQ2: Outcome evaluations*

Sixteen reports of ten studies were included which evaluated the outcomes of interventions aiming to modify the school environment without simultaneously addressing school health curricula. Of these ten studies, six were RCTs and four were quasi-experimental studies. Across all reports, more measures were reported as significant benefits than as not significantly affected and none reported significant harms.

Five outcome evaluations examined interventions which encouraged staff and students to build a stronger sense of community and/or better inter-personal relations at school. Such studies have been conducted in a range of school settings in elementary, middle and secondary/high-schools. All except the Healthy School Ethos (HSE) intervention (UK) were conducted in the USA. Evaluations reported benefits regarding some but not all measures of emotional health, conflict resolution, aggression, victimisation and perceived student safety. However, the strongest evaluation in this category, the Aban Aya Youth Project (AAYP), found SE change compared to curriculum-only to be associated with fewer significant health benefits.

Two RCTs assessed an intervention which combined changes to US middle schools' food and physical activity environments alongside actions which aimed to empower students to contribute to achieving these changes. These were well conducted and both reported intervention benefits for student physical activity but not healthy eating. Mediation analysis in the Healthy Youth Places (HYP) study suggested that student empowerment partly explained

intervention effects. Three quasi-experimental evaluations of an intervention to improve playgrounds in English primary schools reported mixed findings on students' physical activity with indications that benefits were greater for younger children and where break-time was longer.

The outcome evaluation studies provide little information on the likely impact of SE interventions on health inequalities. Two studies of playground interventions reported costs though none reported on cost-effectiveness.

### *RQ3: Process evaluations*

We examined process evaluations of interventions included in our review of outcome evaluations. Six reports of four separate studies were included. These employed various research methods, most frequently drawing on quantitative data collected from students and/or teachers. These reported positively on intervention feasibility, fidelity, reach and acceptability. The single study that examined context suggested that it was important, facilitating implementation where this built on schools' existing ethos and where senior staff championed the intervention.

### *RQ4: Multi-level studies*

Multi-level studies measure outcomes at the individual level and explain these in terms of school-level and individual-level student characteristics. Unlike ecological studies they can disentangle the effects of school-level factors that can also be represented at the individual level. We included 42 reports of multi-level studies (drawing on a total of 34 different datasets) examining the health effects of school-level factors measured 'objectively' (i.e. not merely aggregating data from individuals from whom outcome data was collected). We confined our narrative synthesis to ten reports which adjusted for key potential confounders and which didn't over-adjust for factors that might mediate school effects on health.

We found consistent evidence from studies of middle schools in the USA (n=1) and secondary schools in the UK (n=3) that schools with higher academic attainment and attendance than would be expected judging from the social profile of their students (i.e. a 'value added' measure) had lower rates of substance use. The US study also reported these schools have lower rates of group-fighting and suggests that these school effects are generalisable to low-income, ethnic-minority young people.

Findings on the influence of school policies were mixed. A German cross-sectional study of secondary schools reported that a complete smoking ban for students at or around school was associated with reduced smoking. However, a cross-sectional survey of secondary schools in the USA and Australia found no association between various forms of school smoking policies (including policies with constructive sanctions for students caught smoking) with any measures of student smoking. These differences between studies may reflect a 'ceiling' effect for the impact of smoking bans, which have already been widely implemented in US and Australian but not German schools. A cross-sectional study of Dutch secondary schools reported no associations between school policies on alcohol use at school or school sanctions and heavy drinking among students age 12-16.

A cross-sectional study found that students in US middle schools with larger total campus and playground areas per student had higher rates of physical activity at school. A cross-sectional study of US high-school students found that the number of unobservable/unsupervised places at school was associated with some measures of the use of alcohol and marijuana in school in

the previous 12 months but not overall use in the past year. Finally, a cross-sectional study reported that the following school-level factors were not associated with alcohol use among students age 13-14 in rural schools in the USA: whether eighth-graders are located within the same school as high-school students or are in separate schools, school size and pupil-to-teacher ratio.

These multi-level studies provide little evidence on the impact of schools on health inequalities. Only one well-adjusted study of school effects examined subgroup effects (defined in terms of baseline health behaviour rather than socioeconomic status) and found no significant differences.

#### *RQ5: Qualitative studies*

Twenty-one qualitative studies were synthesised to explore the processes through which school-level influences might occur. Various pathways were identified. First, aggressive behaviour and substance use may be students' active responses to schools where they feel educationally marginalised or unsafe, which may in turn exacerbate disengagement and anxiety. Second, positive teacher-student relationships appear to be critical in promoting student wellbeing and limiting risk behaviour, although certain aspects of schools' organisation may have the potential to undermine these. Third, because of having so little involvement in decision-making in schools, students can fail to develop what social control theory defines as a 'stake' in their school, thus increasing the likelihood that they will instead look for a sense of identity and social support via health-risk behaviours. Fourth, students' lack of satisfaction with school can cause them to seek sources of 'escape', either through heavy drug use and drinking, or by leaving school either at lunchtime or for longer unauthorized spells.

#### Conclusions

We focused on how schools are managed, designed and built, and provide learning and teaching, pastoral care, and discipline. There is evidence for the potential of SE interventions addressing these to promote health but the evidence is far from definitive. Five outcome evaluations examined interventions encouraging staff/ students to build stronger sense of community and/or better inter-personal relations in a range of US/UK school settings. These evaluations generally reported benefits for measures related to emotional health and aggression. Two evaluations assessed interventions modifying American middle-schools' food/physical-activity environments and empowering students' involvement in this, reporting benefits for physical activity measures but not diet. Process evaluations positively reported on interventions' feasibility, fidelity, reach and acceptability. To develop a fuller picture of the effects of SE interventions, the results of our own review should be read in conjunction with those of the Cochrane review of HPS interventions, which include SE alongside curriculum and parent/community components.

Outcome and process evaluations were subject to methodological limitations, and were not informed by nor aimed to test any of our review theories. Most of the interventions employed multiple components addressing different aspects of schools' organisation and practice so they do not lend themselves to testing specific hypotheses. However, the evidence from these lends broad support to each of our three primary hypotheses arising from the social development model (regarding the importance for health of participation in school activities), social capital theory (regarding the effects of trusting relationships), and the theory of human functioning and school organisation (regarding the importance of eroding rigid social boundaries between staff and students and more student-centred framing of activities will enable better health outcomes).

The multi-level studies provide greater insights regarding our review hypotheses, most notably regarding the theory of human functioning and school organisation, which several studies explicitly aimed to test and provided evidence for.

The meta-ethnography of qualitative studies also supported the theory of human functioning and school organisation, suggesting that a lack of safety at schools, weak student-staff relationships, lack of student participation in decisions and educational disengagement may harm student health.

We have concluded that although existing interventions suggest the potential for SE interventions to promote young people's health, the evidence base is currently far from definitive. There is a need for better-conducted RCTs, studies outside the USA, and interventions focused on outcomes other than violence, healthy eating and physical activity. The multi-level studies and qualitative evidence reviewed have suggested potential new foci for intervention studies, such as: interventions addressing student engagement, attainment and attendance, student participation in decisions, and school physical environment. More trials are also needed to improve the evidence base concerning interventions addressing school community-building and inter-personal relationships particularly in secondary schools and outside the USA. Randomized trials of playground improvements are also required.

### Funding

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The school environment and student health: a systematic review and meta-ethnography of qualitative research

Farah Jamal, Adam Fletcher, Angela Harden, Helene Wells, James Thomas, Chris Bonell

## **Background**

Childhood and youth are critical stages in the life-course for improving population-level health and reducing health inequalities. Multiple health-risk behaviours such as smoking, drinking, drug use (hereafter described collectively as 'substance use'), violence and sexual risk are known to cluster together among the most disadvantaged groups of young people [1], suggesting the need for new common intervention strategies in schools [2]. This paper reports on a meta-ethnography of qualitative studies examining the processes by which schools' social and physical environments influence young people's health. This qualitative review was undertaken as part of a larger systematic review which also included theories and evidence from outcome and process evaluations and multi-level model (MLM) studies in order to build a comprehensive picture on how the school environment influences health [3]. Systematic reviews have consistently suggested that health education aiming to address these concerns by improving young people's knowledge about health risks and modifying peer norms have relatively small and inconsistent results [4]. Socio-ecological approaches which address multiple-levels and contexts offer a complementary approach to changing behaviour via addressing upstream determinants [5]. These have the potential to ameliorate health inequalities [6]. One example of a socio-ecological approach is via interventions which change the school environment alongside curriculum-based education. This approach is supported by the World Health Organisation's (WHO) framework for 'Health Promoting Schools' [7].

Markham and Aveyard [8] developed a theory of human functioning and school organisation, integrating theoretical conceptions of parenting [9] and cultural transmission in education [10]. Their theory focuses on how schools can promote health by enabling students to fulfil their capacity for autonomy, practical reasoning and affiliation through, what Bernstein termed, its 'instructional' and 'regulatory' orders. The instructional order is the way in which a school enables students to learn, both formally and informally. The regulatory order is the way in which a school aims to encourage norms of good behaviour and students' sense of belonging. The theory suggests that schools in which many students become detached (from the regulatory order), disengaged (from the instructional order), and/or alienated (from both) will report poorer health outcomes. Schools can maximise student commitment to the instructional and regulatory orders by eroding unnecessary boundaries, for example between staff and students, and between different areas of learning; and by ensuring that both learning and decision-making in schools is student-centred.

Subsequent empirical research has aimed to test this theory. Three English studies [11-13] and one American study [14] found consistent evidence that schools with higher academic attainment and attendance than would be expected judging from the social profile of their students (which is an indirect measure termed 'value-added') had lower rates of substance use. For example, a longitudinal study by Tobler and colleagues [14] found that 'value-added' American high-school institutional environments have significantly lower rates of substance use and violence. These studies support a 'school environment' approach for reducing youth substance use and other risk behaviours [15]. However, these MLM studies of 'school effects' on student health only provide relatively weak evidence in support of a theory of human

functioning and school organisation for several reasons. First, they rely on quite a crude measure of the school social environment based on a school-level summary score of the extent to which the students in the school achieved higher academic attainment and lower rates of truancy after accounting for their socio-demographic profile [16]. Second, the statistical correlations observed between higher value-added scores and lower rates of risk behaviours do not equate to direct evidence that students were more committed to the instructional and regulatory orders at these schools, nor what organisational factors influenced this. None of the MLM studies examined causal pathways.

Furthermore, these quantitative studies only offer very limited guidance on how the school context enables or constrains students' health behaviours, or how students' family backgrounds relate to these processes. For these reasons, qualitative evidence was included as part of the larger project to build a comprehensive picture on the effects of the school environment on young people's health. Qualitative research is useful for exploring students' lived experiences of schooling and how this may influence their health. This review reports the first meta-ethnography to address the question: *through what processes does the school environment (social and physical) influence student health outcomes?*

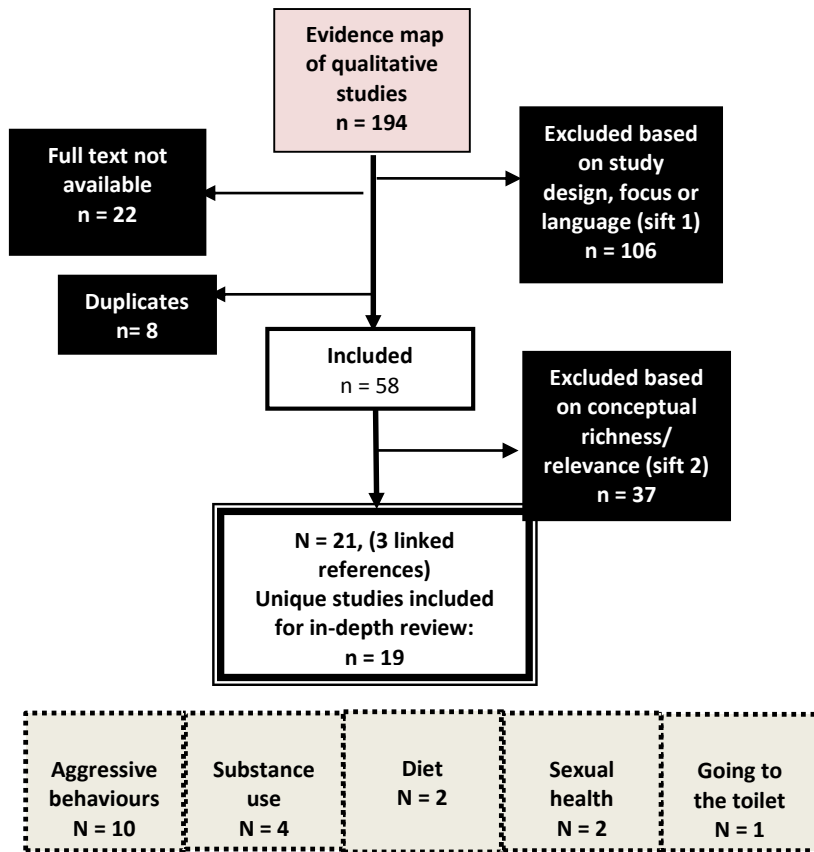
## Methods

The study adheres to PRISMA guidelines for systematic reviews.

### Searching and evidence map

The review was undertaken in two stages. In stage 1, sixteen bibliographic databases were searched between July and September 2010. A comprehensive approach to database searching was used in order to identify theory, outcome and process evaluations of school environment interventions, ecological and MLM studies of school effects as well as qualitative research on accounts of how school environment influences are implicated in health behaviours and outcomes. References (n = 82,775) were retrieved and screened to identify relevant studies (n = 1,144). Relevant studies were mapped (based on their titles and abstracts) to describe the types of question(s), setting(s) and population(s) they focused on. A diagram of the flow of literature through the review is provided in Figure 1 and the published protocol describes search strategies and exclusion criteria for stage 1 in detail [3]. An evidence map was produced and academic/policy stakeholders and young people were consulted to inform priorities for in-depth reviews (stage 2), which included the synthesis of qualitative research through meta-ethnography reported here. In-depth reviews focused on student (but not staff) health and were limited to studies which examine school environments in terms of: organisation and management; teaching, pastoral care and discipline; student attitudes and relationships with teachers; and physical environment.

Figure 1. Flowchart of qualitative studies from evidence map to in-depth review.



## Exclusion criteria

Prior to the in-depth synthesis, references to qualitative research studies (n = 194) included in the evidence map were screened using the full text and excluded if they: were found to be not relevant on retrieval of the full paper; did not provide an account of how student health is influenced by features of the school environment; did not report on the aspects of school environment listed above; were not a qualitative study; or were not reported in English. Reports were double screened by two reviewers and any discrepancies were discussed until agreement was reached. A second set of criteria was then applied to all included reports in order to limit the review to relevant reports which provide findings conceptually rich enough to facilitate meta-ethnography. A scale of 'high', 'medium' and 'low' was used to rate: conceptual richness (i.e. do authors go beyond a description of the findings and interprets them to develop concepts, theories or metaphors?); relevance in terms of research aims; and relevance of findings for addressing our research question.

## Data extraction

We adopted an inclusive approach to data extraction [17] whereby reviewers extracted all relevant data presented in a study according to a standard proforma. Relevant data were: a) the study context (e.g. country, participant characteristics, sample size, research methods); and b) findings of the paper, highlighting themes or concepts which the study authors report and including author interpretation. Four reviewers extracted data, using the guidelines, on a randomly selected sample of two study reports to ensure thoroughness and consistency. All other reports were split between two reviewers and were checked by another reviewer and any

disagreements were resolved by discussion. The data extracted provided a broad overview of the included studies. Reviewers however returned to reading full-text papers during the synthesis process in order to immerse themselves in the data. This is common in qualitative reviews where authors move between reading primary studies, data extraction, synthesis and interpretation in several cycles [17].

### **Quality assessment**

Studies that met the above criteria for inclusion were assessed for methodological quality using criteria from EPPI-Centre health promotion reviews [18]. The quality criteria addressed the rigour of: sampling; data collection; data analysis; the extent to which the study findings are grounded in the data; whether the study privileges the perspectives of children and young people; the breadth of findings; and depth of findings. The tool was piloted by four reviewers to ensure consistency and all remaining reports were assessed by two reviewers and checked by a third reviewer. Based on this assessment, reviewers rated the study overall on a 'low', 'medium' and 'high' scale. Reports were not excluded based on these quality assessment ratings; instead they were intended to inform our interpretation of findings.

### **Synthesis**

Studies were synthesized using a meta-ethnographic method adapted from Noblit and Hare's [19] approach. This method involves treating interpretations and explanations in original studies as data and relating, translating and synthesising these 'data' sources via four steps.

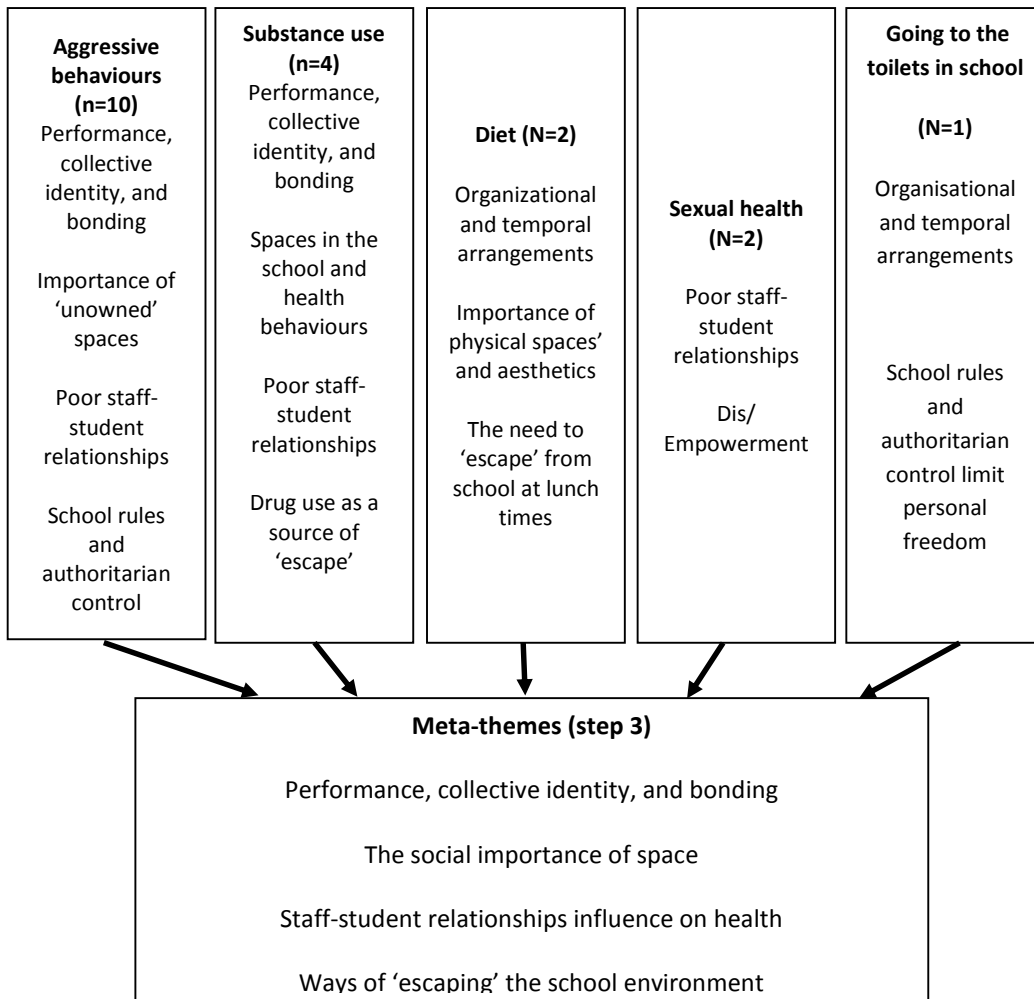
Step 1: Reading and re-reading the studies to gain a detailed understanding of their findings, theories and concepts. To preserve the meaning of, and relationships between, concepts within an individual study, memos were used to describe 'second order constructs' (i.e. authors' interpretation of the data) regarding how school-level influences on behaviour and health outcomes may occur.

Step 2: In order to determine how the studies were related they were grouped according to health topics which the included studies were mostly concerned with (aggressive behaviours, substance use, diet, sexual health, and rules for going to the toilet) and the key concepts from individual studies within each health topic were synthesised, which resulted in lists of overarching themes for each of the five health topics (see 'Figure 2').

Figure 2. Reciprocal translation of included studies to develop meta-themes



**Over-arching themes by health topic (step 2)**



Step 3: Translating studies into one another to produce 'meta-themes' across the different health topics (see 'Figure 2'). To draw out the findings under each meta-theme, studies rated 'high' in terms of their quality and/or conceptual richness were chosen as 'index' papers from which we extracted findings, and then compared and contrasted these findings with the findings of a second study, and the resulting synthesis of these two studies were then contrasted with a third study, and so forth. Noblit and Hare [19] refer to this as 'reciprocal translation'.

Step 4: Synthesizing the (step 3) translation across health topics via interpretive reading of these meta-themes to develop a 'line of argument' regarding the process by which schools might influence health. This is presented in the discussion.

## Results

Nineteen studies were included in the meta-ethnography (summarised in Additional file 3: Table S1). Studies were conducted in the USA (n = 10), UK (n = 6), Australia (n = 1), South Africa (n = 1) and Sweden (n = 1). The majority of studies were conducted in high-school/secondary-school settings. A range of different socio-economic contexts and ethnic-minority groups were represented, although a disproportionate number of studies were conducted in disadvantaged urban contexts (n = 13) and none focused on rural settings. The results are presented below according to the four meta-themes based on the 'reciprocal translations' of studies (step 3).

### **Performance, identity construction and bonding: acting 'tough'**

Several studies developed this concept and suggested young people often need to adopt 'tough' identities at school via acting aggressively and violently, and/or by engaging in substance use. Through such performances young people can foster close relationships with 'tough' peers and achieve 'safety in numbers'. Students described as 'geeky' and who chose not to adopt 'tough' identities were vulnerable and isolated in disadvantaged, urban school contexts. This process of identity construction based on aggression and substance use thus appears to be an important source of bonding, social support and security, especially where young people feel educationally marginalised and/or unsafe [20-25].

"You smoke it [cannabis] for fun [but also] you wanna look bad. People think you're a bad boy or bad girl... with me they are cool and I'm safe with the boys here" – female student, UK [25], p. 247.

One study explicitly developed the concept of violent incidents in schools as group performances through which the norms of acting 'tough' are collectively entrenched. This was evident in the way in which bystanders create a spectacle and space for violent behaviour:

"[They] were throwing punches at each other, trying to push each other's head against the floor with all the strength that they could muster as they twisted their bodies together like twine. They were encircled by a ring of students locked arm-in-arm as they chanted in unison to the rhythm of the fighters" – ethnographic notes, USA [21], p. 51.

Through the diffusion of these norms, acting 'tough' often becomes entrenched in certain 'high risk', urban school environments [21,22,25]. This appears to reinforce existing patterns of health-risk behaviours, poor educational outcomes and teacher-student conflict in these schools, and both reflecting and exacerbating wider social and racial inequalities.

Reciprocal translation also led us to conclude that the norms around showcasing toughness may reflect the way in which the school environment maintains masculine conventions. Two studies found that young women were subjected to sexualized name calling (e.g. 'slag') and physical abuse (e.g. inappropriate touching) in schools [26,27]. This suggests that young men assert their power and reproduce existing gender inequalities in schools via such showcases of toughness.

### **The social importance of space at school: health impacts**

School spaces that are un-supervised appear to be 'hotspots' for certain health-risk behaviours. For example, aggressive behaviours and substance use were often associated with areas such as hallways, staircases, toilets, changing-rooms and empty classrooms [20,24,26,28]. Astor and colleagues [26] used the term 'unowned' to refer to these areas. In their study of five high schools, all 166 violent events reported by students could be mapped onto these 'unowned' spaces where few or no adults were present.

Several studies suggested that the large number of 'unowned' spaces in schools was the result of teachers focusing on classroom-based instruction and not the supervision of the wider school environment, which was considered beyond their professional responsibility [20,25,26,28]. Some school staff also reported avoiding potentially aggressive, 'unowned' spaces because of: fear of harm; the ambiguity of procedures; and inadequate support systems [26]. Where security guards, metal detectors and closed-circuit television cameras (CCTV) were used as alternative surveillance mechanisms in these 'unowned' spaces, students reported they were inappropriate and ineffective. For example:

"All the cameras are gonna do is videotape, you know what I'm saying? They'll fight right in front of the camera too... some of them they'll be asking, 'Can I get that tape?' – male student, USA [26], p. 29.

Students reported that CCTV at best merely displaced risk behaviours to new 'hotspots' [25]. In some American high schools the deployment of security guards in such spaces was reported to facilitate new health-risk behaviours:

"Although the guards are discouraged by their superiors from 'fraternizing' with the students, they do often develop strong emotional relationships with them; we have known some guards who encourage students to study and to go to class; we have also known others who take drugs, sell drugs to students, have sex with them, and dispense favours" – ethnographic field notes, USA [20], p. 176.

Reciprocal translation also revealed connections between the spatial and social dynamics of school dining areas and student diet [24,29-31]. It appears that young people's food choices are often constrained by the chaotic and unappealing aesthetic features of school dining areas [30,31]. For example, a study in Scotland described students' frustrations at policies which organised lunch breaks by year-group and whether students want hot or cold food, which prevented them from eating lunch with friends and limited choice [30]. Aesthetically unappealing environments (e.g. no natural light, 'cheap moulded chairs', etc.) were also implicated in poor school meal uptake [31].

Another factor which seemed to influence lunchtime experiences was the presence (or non-presence) of teachers in dining halls. Multiple studies reported that teachers used lunch periods to prepare for afternoon lessons or have 'breathing space' away from students and that

the lunch supervisors who 'policed' the dining halls did not make students feel safe, supported or comfortable, often eating quickly (if at all) to escape this environment [24,30].

### **Teacher-student relationships influence on health**

Studies consistently report that positive relationships between students and school staff, particularly teachers, are likely to be crucial to creating a healthy school environment [20,21,25,26,32-36] and that this may be particularly important for fostering students' resiliency regarding substance use [37,38]. However, poor staff-student relationships were widely reported and this appeared to be a product of three inter-related features of the school environment.

First, young people consistently suggested that teachers were disconnected from the realities of their lives, especially urban Black youth [20,25,26] and students from the most disadvantaged and chaotic family backgrounds [27,34]. Teaching practices rarely engaged these young people, who then had fewer reasons not to engage in health-risk behaviours once disengaged from school:

"I think, if you've got no hope, if you're surrounded by despair, then you don't see that following the rules, that good work and good deed will get you anywhere" – teacher, USA [26], p. 26.

Furthermore, once students felt that staff did not understand them, this appeared to limit the extent to which staff could provide credible health messages and support them to make healthy transitions to adulthood – a theme which was reciprocated across studies of student diet and substance use [25,32]. Students also felt that 'caring' or 'respectful' teachers who defined their role beyond classroom based instruction were more effective in preventing and managing 'risky'/'problem' behaviours [25,26,29].

Second, school rules to maintain discipline were usually said to be established without student input or consultation. This approach may be counter-productive as students recognize their lack of 'voice' and challenge the rules they feel are unfair and which disadvantage them [22,29,39,40], sometimes specifically through adopting health-risk behaviours, such as drug use [34]. Students also reported frustration at being treated as passive and child-like especially when already taking on adult-like responsibilities at home:

"I've had to be an adult for, like, my whole life really but oh no, they just think they always know best 'cos they are the teacher and we are the students and we've gotta listen to them" – female student, UK [34], p. 555.

Third, teachers' inconsistent application of rules was a recurring theme, which appeared to contribute to the poor student-staff relationships described above and also influence student health directly through a failure to prevent specific health-risk behaviours such as smoking and bullying on the school site [22,32].

Finally, the wider education system appeared partly to structure these poor institutional relationships and their adverse health consequences. In particular, high staff turnovers, a highly-divided market-orientated school system and target-based education policies focused on academic attainment were implicated in limiting the capacity for teachers to develop more supportive relationships [22,34].

“I can’t make anything happen here. I have no power... There’s nothing I can do. I have no voice” – teacher, USA [26], p. 25.

The market-orientated system whereby schools effectively compete for the ‘best’ students may also encourage teachers to keep problems such as aggression or drug use ‘hush-hush’ to maintain the reputation of the school, even if this meant that issues related to student health are never adequately addressed [22].

### **‘Escaping’ the school environment**

Disengaged students often ‘escaped’ the school environment, which was implicated in their account of unhealthy habits. For example, students often reported that lunch-time provided a time of ‘relief’, to ‘hang out’ with friends and ‘escape’. Fast food was often eaten on the walk back to school or in local spaces surrounding the school that young people claimed as their own:

“Just usually run to try and beat all the queues for the food and then like we go down to the wee pigeon bit, sit, ate our lunch and then probably have a fag or two and then go back up the school” – student, UK [30], p. 462.

The need to escape the school environment at lunch periods had multiple implications for young people’s health: they were less likely to purchase healthy foods provided at school; more likely to visit local shops selling ‘junk’ food and high-calorie drinks; and more likely to smoke tobacco.

Using cannabis and other drugs was also reported as a potential means of escaping anxieties about school and as source self-medication in response to exam stress or a constant sense of academic failure [38]. A British female secondary-school student explained:

“If someone can’t be bothered about school, like you’re having a bad day then have a spliff in the morning and then it’s a good day. Pressure and stress can make people take drugs. If people don’t like the environment they’re in they are not going to be comfortable and getting on at school” – female student, UK [38], p. 131.

### **Discussion**

Our qualitative synthesis suggests complex pathways via which the school environment may shape health harms at a young age. Qualitative research forms a useful complement to quantitative studies on the health effects of the school environment. It illuminates how the school environment is understood by students from different backgrounds, and explores both students’ accounts of their actions and how these are enabled and constrained by the immediate school environment, and how wider structural forces such as education policies and students’ family backgrounds are implicated in this. Qualitative research can thus unpick how agency and structure are mutually constitutive and underlie social processes operating within schools which shape school effects on health.

Through an interpretation of the synthesis, below we present a ‘line of argument’ (step 4 in the meta-ethnography) about how schools might influence health. We refine Markham and Aveyard’s [8] theory of human functioning and school organisation to elaborate the importance of young people’s agency in constituting school structures, and the importance not merely of the instructional and regulatory orders of the school but also student social structures and

networks. We argue that these two 'systems' are likely to interact in shaping school practices and influencing student health.

### **Line of argument: the structuration of school organisation and student health**

In line with Giddens' [41] notion of structuration, two systems operate in the school environment: first, the student system (comprising peer-led processes and structures); and second, the school institutional system (comprising structures and processes involving school management, teachers, school staff and technologies such as CCTV). Students not only react to schools' institutional systems for ordering instructional and regulatory practices, but they also promote their own parallel, competing versions of these instructional and regulatory 'orders' which Markham and Aveyard's theory largely ignores. As well as their symbiotic relationship in shaping health, these systems are also both influenced by common social and structural factors beyond the boundaries of the school, such as students' family backgrounds, which may constrain their sources of identity and social support, and education policies which constrain teachers' time and responses.

We found that one of the most consistent and harmful effects of the student-led institutional system on health outcomes occurs via a process of normative social 'instruction' and the diffusion of highly-symbolic 'regulatory' styles based on practices such as intimidation, violence and drug use to (paradoxically) facilitate a sense of safety and security. Once these performative rituals permeate extended networks of students and become the norm, their social and symbolic importance reproduces the institutional 'order' through student-led social control, in extreme cases, in opposition to teachers and the schools institutional processes. Consider the rigid rules students reported following when confronted with a violent incident, such as linking arms around a 'one-on-one-fight': this collective performance helps establish bonding and collective identity.

Thus, *risk* arises from students developing the autonomy to engage in behaviour which is often regarded as anti-social but which is thoroughly social in its origins, rather than stemming from an absence of students' practical reasoning, affiliation and autonomy as Markham and Aveyard suggest. This resonates with other ethnographically-driven theories explaining young people's 'street culture' [42] and 'tough fronts' in inner city high schools [43], which conceptualise young people not merely as the victims of poverty and violence but as agents struggling for meaning and survival, and ultimately reinforcing existing educational, social and health inequalities.

'Institutional authority' [8] is also shaped by broader, cross-cutting socio-cultural structures which influence the process of localised, institutional structuration. For example, where students' family and/or community culture is immersed in urban 'street culture', with relatively little hope of conventional social advancement, this will permeate the local student-network and thus shape both students' actions and, in turn, the institutions' regulatory response. State educational policies also provide an additional cross-cutting 'structure' that determine instructional and regulatory practices and, in turn, students' health. For example, it appears that incentive structures such as 'league tables' in the UK and No Child Left Behind monitoring systems in the USA can create perverse incentives for schools to focus on more 'academic' students and neglect students' general health and welfare. In the most extreme cases, the pressure of public exams or a constant sense of monitoring and surveillance can lead young people to seek sources of 'escape', either by engaging in substance use or by physically leaving school at lunchtime or for longer unauthorized spells.

## Limitations

We acknowledge that the way we have refined and extended Markham and Aveyard's [8] theory is not without its problems. There is an apparent bias in the range and nature of qualitative research synthesised here. For example, the strong emphasis on a 'disconnection' between the top-down, school institutional regulatory and instructional 'orders' and the creative, student-led systems for social regulation and instruction could partly reflect the urban and disadvantaged context of the majority of the studies, where students and teachers may have the least in common. Nonetheless, the strength of the meta-ethnographic approach is that it combines evidence from multiple sources to increase validity and moves beyond merely providing a narrative review of individual studies and instead develops higher-order explanations. The value of this meta-ethnographic approach is also supported by the remarkable consistency in the findings of studies of variable quality undertaken in a wide range of settings, which differed by school system, deprivation level and ethnic make-up. However, some of these differences may have been masked in our review in the process of translating studies.

Another limitation is that we may have lost some of the meaning and depth of key concepts and themes during 'step 2' of the synthesis in order to translate themes across studies and identify meta-themes. However, we attempted to preserve individual authors' interpretations by ensuring that all key concepts extracted from individual papers were accompanied by a narrative memo regarding how they were developed and connected in order to refer back to, and report, these relationships when synthesizing the findings across studies. Also, reports were not excluded based on 'low quality' scores as this could bias the review according to certain methodological approaches (e.g. interviews/focus groups rather than ethnographic approaches) and certain academic disciplines (e.g. anthropology) where methods may be less transparently reported. Studies, often from anthropology, that were rated as 'low quality' due to poor transparency in reporting of research procedure also provided the most conceptually rich data and thus contributed more substantively to the synthesis. Furthermore, the themes emerging in our review inevitably reflect the range of health topics covered in the primary qualitative studies. Most qualitative researchers exploring and theorising school level influences have focused mainly on how schools might shape risk behaviours, particularly aggressive behaviours and substance use and thus this review may be less useful for understanding how schools can support positive health and well-being, which should be the focus of future research.

The exclusion criteria were designed to identify those qualitative studies that were the most relevant to our review question and conceptually rich enough to facilitate a meta-ethnography approach which requires the presence and clarity of concepts for translation. Studies were excluded that did not examine how features of the school-environment (specifically, school type, physical environment, school management, teaching, support and discipline, student attitudes to school or relations with teachers) influences student health. We thus did not include a major body of work from sociology of education [44-46] including some studies that focused primarily on mental health. However, issues of self-esteem, anxiety and depression emerge prominently among the studies we've included in the context of substance use or aggressive behaviours for example, and this is in turn reflected in our synthesis.

## Implications for future research

There have been few conceptually rich qualitative studies focused on how the school environment as defined in this review might influence student diet and sexual health and none have passed our exclusion criteria that focus specifically on physical activity and mental health.

While there is a body of research related to these topics, particularly from the field of sociology of education, further qualitative work oriented towards public health is needed. The bias in the literature towards young people in the most disadvantaged and extreme environments reflect the sociological research and theory more broadly and future studies should explore a range of contexts in order to include more 'ordinary kids' [45] who still represent the 'missing middle' [47]. The refined theory of human functioning and school organisation presented here should also be examined via quantitative and qualitative research in differing contexts (e.g. religious, rural/sub-urban, high SES and alternative schools).

The synthesis suggests how the school environment might be transformed to promote student health in future intervention studies. First, schools may promote student safety and health by ensuring teachers spend more time with students outside the classroom and by giving students more 'voice' regarding how schools are run. Second, interventions such as enhanced supervision and monitoring of school spaces that are 'hot spots' for student risk behaviour might be the focus for intervention. Third, policies could be developed to improve the social aspects of school food environments and to ensure students feel safe eating in school dining places where healthy eating is being promoted, for example by creating aesthetically appealing food environments where teachers eat with students, and where students have sufficient time and space to eat, as well as take a break with friends. The design of these programmes should be co-produced with students themselves so as to ensure they are appropriate and acceptable. However, such interventions should be examined in randomised controlled trials before being scaled up.

## **Conclusion**

In-depth qualitative studies suggest common pathways via which the school environment might shape young people's health. Building on Markham and Aveyard's [8] theory, our synthesis suggests that the student population not only reacts to the institutionally-directed instructional and regulatory 'orders', but is also an active agent in constituting its own instructional and regulatory structures. The separation of these two systems represents a lack of cooperative functioning, shared norms and understanding between students and the institutional 'orders'; a condition most pervasive in urban contexts of disadvantage. In this context, students protect themselves and develop relationships by means of their own intervention: to build on Markham and Aveyard [8], the ways in which schools 'order' behaviour and learning indeed directly influences students' reasoning, affiliation and 'capacity' for health but this is highly constrained, and not just by the organisation of the school, but also simultaneously by the organisation, norms and behaviours of the students themselves and their peers. The creative strategies students adopt also appear to produce a vicious circle whereby acting 'tough' or 'escaping' the school may lead to even more aggressive behaviours and higher rates of substance use, which in turn further reinforces and reproduces the boundaries between student-led and institutional social systems in new ways – an example of structuration in action.

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'We've got some underground business selling junk food': Qualitative evidence of the unintended effects of English school food policies

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## **Introduction**

Obesity increased rapidly in high-income countries during the latter part of the 20th century (Strauss and Pollack, 2001). In 2009, 31 per cent of boys and 28 per cent of girls aged two to 15 in England were overweight or obese (Department of Health, 2010). Rates are similar in Scotland and even higher in Wales (Bromley et al., 2011; Welsh Government, 2010). It is predicted that by 2025, 14 per cent of the British population aged under 20 will be clinically obese (McPherson et al., 2007) and health inequalities due to obesity will continue to increase (Stamatakis et al., 2010). In addition to the long-term health risks, obesity during childhood and youth is associated with major adolescent health problems such as type-2 diabetes and depression. Being overweight during youth is also associated with a range of adverse psychosocial outcomes including lower self-esteem and quality of life (Griffiths et al., 2010).

These trends have been described as a health and economic 'time bomb' (Department of Health, 2003), which has prompted greater emphasis on early intervention and obesity prevention in the UK focused on children, families and schools (Department of Health, 2008). Following Jamie Oliver's high-profile campaign to improve British school lunches, the school food environment in particular has become an issue of major public interest and political importance (Morgan and Sonnino, 2008). Since 2009, all state 'maintained' schools in England – funded by central government via local authorities – have been subject to new statutory nutritional standards, which restrict the sale of less healthy products (such as biscuits and chips) and completely prohibit the sale of chocolate, other confectionery and sweetened drinks (House of Commons, 2008). This focus on addressing school food provision is supported by the World Health Organization's Global Nutrition-Friendly School Initiative and such environmental approaches have been pronounced as a 'common sense cure' to obesity (Ebbeling et al., 2002).

However, the evidence to support the effectiveness of greater restrictions on school food is extremely limited, with no reports of reductions in students' body mass index (BMI) due to such policies (Jamie and Lock, 2009; Larson and Story, 2009; Van Cauwenbergh et al., 2010). In this article, we present evidence that such policies may have harmful unintended consequences. To unravel and theorise the process via which these unintended effects may occur, we draw on Giddens' notion of 'structuration' as an over-arching theoretical framework, and situate Paul Willis' (1977, 1990) concepts of 'counter-school' cultural resistance and youth 'proto-communities' within this, to explore the dynamics of agency and structure in this context of greater regulation of secondary school food provision in England.

Giddens' (1984) theory of structuration is instructive for understanding that, while social structures are constructed through human agency, agency is itself both enabled and constrained by these structures within which individuals assess and make their choices; in turn, actively shaping and reconstituting social structures. Young people's health-related behaviours are one example of this structuration in action. For example, heavy alcohol and drug use is both a cause and a consequence of social exclusion through which wider inequalities are reproduced (Fletcher et al., 2009; Pavis and Cunningham-Burley, 1999). The formation of students' dietary behaviours can also only be fully understood within this dynamic, structural context (Moore et al., 2013; Winson, 2008). Without recognising this duality of

structure and agency, we may ignore the potential for new social interventions and policies to have harmful effects as people respond actively but in unexpected ways (e.g. Walker, 2007).

Willis' (1977) classic ethnographic study of the working-class 'lads' at a secondary school in the West Midlands (England) illustrated not only how students' identities and actions emerged in opposition to secondary schools' institutional features, but also how their counter-school cultural resistance both reflected and reinforced existing structures of inequality. Although criticised for under-estimating the plurality of different cultural responses among working-class pupils (Brown, 1987), this concept of counter-school cultural resistance illustrates not only the duality of agency and structure in shaping behaviour but also how specific institutional rules and students' cultural and material resources simultaneously enable and constrain this process (Giddens, 1984). Willis' (1977) study formed part of a wider body of work at the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies on the resourcefulness of young people in resisting those identities ascribed to them by dominant social institutions (Hall and Jefferson, 1976) and in finding new spaces and styles to disrupt the intended 'orderly sequences' of political systems (Hebdige, 1979).

Re-visiting the issue of youth culture 25 years after his seminal study of working-class counter-school groups, Willis (2003) described the breakdown of traditional class-based social identities as a result of technological change, 'cultural modernisation' and consumerism. Young people's identities have become more reflexive and increasingly based on their common consuming interests (Willis, 2003). However, this is not to say that young people are no longer doing their identity-work collectively. Rather it is the common cultures themselves which have changed: if the 'lads' were *proto-workers* who identified with the common culture of their local factory and working-class 'estates', then young people are now connected via *proto-communities* based on their shared styles and interests (Willis, 1990). Nor does this mean that young people's identities are no longer powerfully shaped by their social or economic position, with only the *appearance* of greater choice, control and opportunity created (Furlong and Cartmel, 2007; Henderson et al., 2007). In fact, this greater invisibility of class merely masks enduring inequalities in Britain, including in students' experiences of, and attainment at, secondary school (Reay, 2006).

Despite long-standing recognition of secondary schools as sites of active, cultural resistance, the responses of students and staff to new school food restrictions have not been examined, and sociological studies of what food means to young people and how they use food remain very rare. Informed by the theoretical framework outlined above, we draw on qualitative data to explore how students and staff view the school food environment and examine how recent policy reforms, including the prohibition of certain products, may have influenced their attitudes and actions. In doing so, this article also responds to the appeal of sociologists of health and illness for empirical public health research which studies the lived experience of 'risk behaviour' (Rhodes, 1997) and recognises the importance of social context and structures in shaping and enabling such behaviour (Scambler, 2011; Williams, 2003).

## Methods

This article draws on qualitative data collected during two research projects undertaken in English secondary schools during the 2011–12 and 2012–13 academic years. The first ('study one') involved a pilot trial and process evaluation to explore the feasibility and acceptability of a new whole-school restorative approach to preventing aggression and bullying in English secondary schools. This was not a study about the school food environment nor students'

dietary choices at school per se, although it involved in-depth qualitative research at four schools over the course of one school year (2011–12) during which time the new school food policies and their effects were a consistent theme in student and staff accounts of school life. A separate study ('study two') was conducted between June and October 2012 and involved qualitative case-study research at two secondary schools in London to explore the social dynamics and spatial patterning of girls' health behaviours. In study two, open-ended interviews and focus groups conducted at the first school indicated the presence of extensive black markets in food and, informed by this and the parallel evidence emerging from study one, research in the second school included additional specific questions on the issue of school food to investigate this further.

Taken together, these studies provide rich qualitative data from six secondary schools in London and south-east England, which vary widely in terms of their size, socio-economic profiles and overall Ofsted (English school inspectorate) rating (Table 1). In study one, four matched-pairs of secondary schools were recruited according to their Ofsted-rating of school effectiveness and overall rate of eligibility for free school meals (FSM) prior to random allocation to the intervention group ( $n = 4$ ). In-depth qualitative research was conducted in these four schools ('Goldstone Park', 'Railside High', 'Whitehorse Road' and 'Williamson High'). In study two, two all-girls schools in East London ('East Grove' and 'The Crescent') were recruited to explore young women's lived experiences of school in two multi-ethnic, all-female school institutional environments.

Table 1. School-level characteristics (see end of manuscript).

Across the two studies, 129 students took part in focus groups, with a further 20 interviewed individually; and 20 staff took part in focus groups with a further 16 interviewed individually (Table 2). In study one, four focus groups with year-eight students (aged 12–13) and one focus group with staff were undertaken at each school: five to 10 students were purposively recruited and grouped according to their gender and teacher-reported level of school engagement; four to six members of staff, including management, teaching and non-teaching staff, participated. Additional year-eight students ( $n = 13$ ) and a range of school staff ( $n = 16$ ) were also recruited to take part in semi-structured interviews to explore their views of the intervention being piloted and provide further contextual data on the school environment. Focus groups and interviews took place on the school site in private meeting rooms. Two researchers were present during the focus groups and used participatory mapping techniques to promote discussion about the school environment. In study two, students aged 12–17 were recruited via an assistant head teacher: at East Grove, 11 students aged 12–15 participated in a focus group on the school site and seven students aged 16–17 also participated in semi-structured interviews held in a private office at the University of East London (UEL) campus; at The Crescent, six students aged 12–15 participated in a focus group on the school site.

Table 2. Student and staff samples (see end of manuscript).

Although neither study focused exclusively on school food policies or environments, eating and drinking can be closely linked to experiences of bullying and aggression, and are key health behaviours, thus students in both studies were asked about their experiences of eating at school (e.g. 'where do you eat lunch while at school?', 'what do you like/dislike about your canteen?'). The semi-structured nature of the focus groups and interviews also provided the opportunity to explore students' and staff views about food policies. For example, as young people discussed their involvement in creating new food markets, this was explored further through additional probes (e.g. 'why do you think students buy and sell food at this school?'),

'where does this take place?'). Furthermore, in both studies, the use of observations and field notes provided an additional source of data.

All interviews and focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Using Nvivo software, students' and staff accounts were re-analysed for this article with a specific focus on the school food environment, including: alternative/illicit sources of food and drink; sources of identity, status and bonding relating to food and consumption at school; and, schools' policies, practices and other aspects of school life potentially relevant for understanding the ramifications of the new school food policies. Techniques associated with thematic content analysis and grounded theory were used to analyse the data within this framework (Green and Thorogood, 2004), initially using open/in-vivo coding based on the respondents' own words; with memos being used to record emerging themes and make interconnections across schools and studies. Further analyses focused on more detailed coding to interpret the meaning of, and relationships between, the initial themes and patterns within and across schools. Field notes and the maps produced by students in the focus groups in study one were also analysed to provide additional insights into contextual factors which might influence student eating practices. The findings are presented below (all names are pseudonyms). Ethical approval was given by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine research ethics committee (study one) and the UEL research ethics committee (study two).

## Findings

Student dissatisfaction with school food provision was a recurring theme at all six schools. The issue of prohibitive restrictions and the emphasis on the sale of 'healthy' products was strongly implicated in this. For example:

I can get a free school dinner, but I don't want to. I think because it's too healthy. Sometimes you should have a change, but they are just sticking to that and that is why I think more children have pack[ed] lunch and all that. (Female student, 13, The Crescent)

While the new school food standards prohibit the sale of certain products in school, students are still allowed to bring food *into school* with relatively few restrictions on secondary school packed lunches. Students and staff across all the schools studied described black markets which had developed to meet the demand for confectionery, snack and 'junk' products no longer provided by schools, as well as energy drinks which are totally prohibited from being consumed in schools. For example:

We go to Asda, and then buy something cheap and then sell it on [to] make a profit [...] Kitkat, cookies, Chewits [sweets], drinks, doughnuts, anything! (Male, 12, Railside High School)

People do sell food in school. You can buy like cookies from Sainsbury for 65 p[ence]. (Female, 15, East Grove)

A boy was caught selling with a crate [24 bottles] of Lucozade in school last year [2010–2011]. (Learning support manager, Williamson High School)

One student at Railside explained that he could always 'find a bargain' and 'sell it more expensive' due to the extremely low cost of some supermarket produce. This formula was seen by several students as relatively simple and low risk. For example:

You could get a packet [of cookies from Asda] for 50 p[ence]. You'll sell the whole packet for a pound or you'll sell one each for 50 p[ence]. (Female, 13, Railside High School)

Supermarkets therefore essentially act as wholesaler in this illicit supply chain, with students working as local retail agents to provide a service similar to that provided by local convenience stores, with greater accessibility and social contact offsetting the additional economic costs. Prices were generally deemed to be 'reasonable' in the context of heightened demand for sweet snacks and confectionery products, and also compared to the price of food in both the school canteen and some local shops:

You can sell things in school, but you are not supposed to [...] Like sweets, chocolate so some people sell food. The prices are so reasonable and they make a profit. They buy it for a pound and sell five for 50 p[ence]. We all know they are making a profit, but it is just like *we are at school, we want this food, we are gonna buy it!* (Female, 14, East Grove)

It's still cheaper than the [local] shops as well 'cos people get it from supermarkets and bring it in. (Male, 13, Railside High School)

This trade in re-selling snacks and drinks was also facilitated by new mobile technologies such as Blackberry Messenger. One student explained:

It happens quite a bit over Blackberry Messenger 'cos I have a Blackberry there's loads and loads of specific messages saying 'Who's selling?', 'I'm selling this', 'I'm selling that'. (Female, 13 Railside High School)

Students often suggested that black markets in products such as supermarket cookies, chocolate bars and energy drinks were an active response to recent legislation and new school policies, particularly the removal of vending machines and prohibition of certain products. For example:

We've got some underground business selling junk food. It is just the school can't force you to do anything. You need to be more educated with it. You cannot just force kids, or say 'you can't do this because it is bad for you'. (Female, 15, The Crescent)

However, while new school food legislation may have stimulated this phenomenon, it was apparent that such 'underground businesses' were also simultaneously driven by other features of secondary schooling and societal stratification, which one deputy head teacher described as a 'perfect storm' for junk food. We first describe how students are developing their own low-cost school food environments away from the dangers of the school canteen, enabled by resources such as the proliferation of local supermarkets and new mobile phone technologies described above.



Second, we present data to theorise the *social value* of this illicit trade in food and drink as a new source of identity, 'thrills' and opposition to school, and the enduring relevance of class-based stratification for such counter-school cultures. Finally, we describe accounts regarding how staff either passively or actively support this, and how this is another inadvertent harmful consequence of market-orientated education policies.

#### *Finding a 'Bargain' and 'Calm' outside the Canteen*

Students reported that the school canteen was unpopular not only because of the greater emphasis on 'healthy' products but also because of the high price of this healthy food:

They think of health options in the canteen, but because they have recently become so expensive, people would rather go and buy chicken and chips which costs one pound.  
(Female, 16, East Grove)

Younger students at Railside High School, who were not allowed to leave the school and had set up a local market for trading and distributing snack food, also complained that the few remaining 'nice' options were increasingly expensive and represented poor value for money:

*Gavin:* Bacon rolls are nice.

*Neil:* That's expensive though, a little bacon roll like that for a pound [demonstrating the size with his hands].

*Gavin:* It used to be like 70 p[ence] or something.

*Simon:* Yeah, it used to be good and then they changed the catering company.

The price of school food thus appeared to be working in parallel with the prohibition of popular products in driving new underground markets in food and drink, especially at schools in poorer areas such as Railside and The Crescent. This illicit trade in prohibited food and drink products was so extensive at these schools that students often made comments such as: 'There isn't a staff or student who doesn't know about it'. The unpleasant and over-crowded nature of the school canteen also appeared to provide an additional push towards the underground economy at these schools, although this was a cross-cutting theme across all school contexts. Students frequently characterised their school canteens and dining areas as 'noisy', 'crowded' and 'dirty'.

Researchers' observations supported this sentiment and many students appeared largely to avoid the canteen where possible and set up new food environments in the playground, corridors and classrooms. In study one, those students who took part in the focus groups completed a mapping exercise to explore how aggressive behaviours were associated with different areas: 'pushing', 'shoving', 'shouting', 'swearing', 'fighting' (including 'food fights') and 'theft' were commonly mapped onto the school canteen. As well as not feeling safe, several students also expressed frustration at the chaotic, rushed nature of the dinner hall in which they often had insufficient time to eat as a result of fights or other incidents. For example:

There was a fight the other day, okay, and it started probably at ten, like five or ten, minutes into lunch [so] they kicked everyone out of the dinner hall but they didn't give us

time at the end to get our dinner [...] Like some people didn't even get lunch. (Female, 12, Goldstone Park)

Students frequently reported wanting to escape this environment and spend their lunch-break with friends in their own social spaces. Within these alternative, largely unsupervised, areas such as the playground, corridors, empty classrooms and toilet blocks, students could regain control over their patterns of food consumption, actively creating their own distribution systems and spaces for eating. However, these underground economies also have a deeper cultural context as *counter-school food cultures* appear to have become another way in which proto-communities of young people can define themselves in opposition to schools.

### *Eating as Identity-work and New Counter-school Cultures*

It is clear from these new data that food and drink choices now constitute an important source of identity and status for some students. For example, Lucozade and other sports and energy drinks appeared to be an important symbol of masculine, sports-participation for young men. Several students also described that since students are identified in terms of what they eat, lunches provided by parents and having the 'wrong' products could be a source of anxiety and embarrassment. A female student at Railside High School highlighted this during a focus group discussion:

*Stacey:* There are some people who'll be like, who'll go round, who'll be like [mimicking looking around] 'Oh my God, I've got peanut butter in my sandwich, I must not show them!'

*Others:* Yeah! [laughing]

*Stacey:* But some students they'll be seeing her [saying] 'She's the girl that eats peanut butter sandwiches, NOOOO!' [group laughter] – but not as, oh my God, she's that really nice person who gave me five pounds 'cos I had no money. They see her as the girl who eats peanut butter sandwiches!

Not only did food choices appear to constitute an important, and often fraught, part of students' identity-work at school, but engagement in black marketeering could itself fulfil a highly symbolic role as an expression of anti-school resistance. This was especially apparent at The Crescent and Railside High School. Both are very large schools with high rates of students from poorer families, eligible for free school lunches. However, despite more students being entitled to free lunches, the underground economies in food appeared most extensive at these schools because they were not simply meeting students' demands for affordable food but also represented a new counter-school response for students from poorer families seeking to resist what they see as prohibitive institutional constraints more generally. Such constraints related not only to the new school food environment but more importantly also to the broader institutional environment at these schools. For example, the 'lads' at Railside who had become heavily involved in this do-it-yourself school lunch trade reported simmering resentment towards being placed in isolation by school staff:

It's mostly the people that are like bad in the school, and say are like kicked out of lesson because they got sent parking [isolation], then they just come out in an angry mood [...] they just want to have a laugh. (Male student, 13, Railside High School)

The female students most involved in these new black markets also presented themselves as anti-school students who didn't fit into the academic-orientated ethos of their school and were frustrated that their middle-class teachers were disconnected from the realities of their everyday lives:

The teachers don't really care, they don't really care what happens at home, they just care about the grades. (Female, 15, The Crescent)

You just sit there [in detention], and like the teachers are [...] having, like, some conversation like a mother's meeting at the back of the hall, like really loud and they're like, 'I bought my new puppy this weekend'. And then, like, as soon as someone does wrong you get an extra half an hour [detention] ... (Female, 13, Railside High School)

These students situated their own and others' actions regarding the establishment of school 'junk' food markets within the context of broader resistance to the many restrictions placed on them at school:

They said that we are not allowed mobile phones. I am sure every person here and every person in my form class has a mobile phone on them either switched off or silent. They say that we are not allowed chewing gum, so many kids have chewing gum or bubble gum. If they are going to restrict us and say we are not allowed junk food or crisps or something, obviously, we are just going to do the opposite because that is what teenagers like to do. They don't actually listen to [being] ordered, they just do whatever they want. (Female, 14, The Crescent)

The black market can therefore be seen as an active cultural response to the rules *imposed on students at school*, particularly at those schools with large numbers of students from poorer households. This may also reflect broader family and community opposition to the dominant middle-class 'healthist' culture imposed within schools (and society more widely). One student explained that her family encouraged her to have a takeaway on Friday:

My dad gives me two pound a week, which is sad because I am free school dinners anyway. He just thinks take that two pound for Friday for a takeaway! (Female, 15, The Crescent)

Such cultural opposition to some extent echoes the clash of the middle-class school culture and working-class community and family culture observed by Willis (1977). While such overt class connotations are now less obvious, the alienation and disengagement of working-class students has been ignored rather than eradicated. Like Willis' 'lads', these new proto-communities of students were smuggling food and drink products into school and illicitly trading them to develop their social identity and to bolster their counter-school and economic capital. For example, the 'football lads' at Railside reported the iconic status being granted to 'super sellers' who were making up to £70 a day. It was seen as an equally profitable but much 'safer' form of underground economic activity than selling drugs, and associated with little or no punishment:

*Neil:* It's the same thing, it's not selling drugs but it's the same thing.

*Mikey:* Because you're not allowed to sell drugs.

*Neil:* The guy's just making a profit out of someone else's product [but with food and drink].

*Mikey:* And when they [school staff] catch you they just take your stuff that you get [back] at the end of the day.

Disengaged rebellious female students also appeared to see (re)selling food and drink in school as both an opportunity to make a few 'bucks' and as a rare source of excitement at school:

[It's] the thrill of it, you know it is always exciting when you have a couple of bucks in your hand and you can spend it on whatever you want and get it from people, it is just more money and more thrill. (Female, 14, The Crescent)

However, while the institutional environment enabled some forms of counter-school opposition, students can only partially penetrate this and the act of resistance ultimately reinforces students' marginal position (Fletcher et al., 2009; Willis, 1997). In this case, the process of 'trading up' food in schools may reproduce existing health inequalities as disengaged anti-school students increase their junk food consumption. For example, one female student explained how her friend could now afford a 'KFC' after selling enough supermarket cookies. Furthermore, these new counter-school food cultures were not universally supported and divisions appeared at The Crescent, where some students characterised others as 'desperate' or 'disgusting' in resisting the school food environment. At Railside, more engaged middle-class, pro-education students and senior school staff also offered narratives portraying such behaviours either as desperate or worthy of pity:

People try and make a profit out of like buying a pack of like a pack of five KitKats, Crunchies, Mars bar, bring them to school and then sell them for something like 50 p[ence]. And they make up the worst excuses [like] 'My nan's got a tumour – buy a KitKat!' (Female student, 13, Railside High School)

Some people think it's cool to have like a can of KA [carbonated fruit drink] ... 'I've got KA guys!' 'Fuck – no way!' [mocking excitement]. (Female student, 13, Railside High School)

It's the poor ones that do it for money. It's the parents that probably send them with the stuff. (Senior teacher, Railside High School)

This exemplifies the 'hidden' tensions and injuries of class which still stalk secondary schools (Reay, 2006), as working-class identities are less culturally visible but the stratification, alienation and restraint of these poorer students persists.

#### *Marketisation Harms: Hiding Problems and Counter-school Lunchtime Supervisors*

These data also provided further evidence regarding the harmful health effects of market-orientated education models (Bonell et al., 2012; Fletcher et al., 2010). An over-arching theme across both studies was that school staff were narrowly focused on their 'core work' of

managing their own classrooms to achieve school-level and individual targets regarding student attainment, and that they increasingly withdrew from pastoral and whole-school disciplinary roles. Staff were thus reluctant to 'get involved' in enforcing the new statutory bans, which were seen as beyond the scope of such 'core work', and students themselves recognised this:

I actually think they do know, but they don't want to get involved. (Female, 17, East Grove)

We're not allowed to actually sell things inside school yet Rosie was selling it around in PE with teachers around. (Female, 13, Railside High School)

The head teacher at Railside, which is rated as an 'outstanding' school by Ofsted inspectors, openly acknowledged that neither school inspections nor 'league tables' focus on healthy eating and as such it was a low priority. The advent of parental 'choice' (in theory at least) and greater competition between schools may also encourage schools to deny the existence of health and social problems among their students, and therefore encourage staff to deny rather than address new counter-school black markets in prohibited food and drink. Students reported that while staff were concerned about the school's reputation, in reality they didn't care about new black markets in junk and snack foods:

When I go past someone, they are having junk food, *it is not like 'health'* whatever it says on the [school] website! I don't think it is, because [the teachers] *they may want to paint a picture like that* and they want to show it [but] I don't think so. (Female, 15, The Crescent)

Furthermore, as they focused on maximising academic attainment, school managers and teachers admitted they are rarely present in the school canteen and other communal areas at lunchtime. A senior member of staff at Williamson High School also described the increasing rate of staff turnover during her career as the 'premiership football manager syndrome', with few staff remaining in post for long periods of time, which also further limited teachers' and managers' involvement in the school community 'beyond the classroom'. To paraphrase Jane Jacobs (1961), there were *insufficient eyes on the school* at break and lunchtimes at these schools. One teacher felt that staff were now rooted in their own rooms:

I'm in my class at breaks [...] it's an on-going project [by the school management] not to have a staff room. A lot of other teachers used to, you know, to go down for break and lunchtime in the staffroom and be with other teachers and move [around]. Not any more. (Teacher, Railside School)

Students reported how temporary lunchtime supervisors were left out-numbered and reluctant to intervene:

They usually have one lady there. At lunchtime it is her against a group of like 150 teenagers running round and round and she can't control them [...] The power that she has is very little. (Female, 17, East Grove)

At one school, students even reported that these lunchtime supervisors would themselves capitalise on the demand for popular snack products such as crisps no longer sold in school. A student explained:

The dinner ladies started coming in and selling crisps and stuff [...] I bought crisps, yeah, they came and they were selling for something like 20 p[ence] a crisp packet [from] a Walker's packet, a big [multi]packet and they were selling the little crisps out to anyone who wanted it. (Female, 14, The Crescent)

This example of the external school lunch supervisors resonates with Devine's (1995) research on private security guards deployed in American high schools, who came from the same deprived communities as students, had little stake in the school, and either failed to prevent, or actively engaged in, drug dealing or sexual harassment on school premises once teachers were no longer present.

## Discussion

These data suggest that simple, supposedly 'common sense' solutions to poor diet and obesity are insufficient and can even have unintended, potentially harmful, consequences. Although legislation focused on regulation and the control of certain health-related behaviours can be effective (e.g. banning smoking in public spaces), outright prohibition often fuels new underground economies and potentially greater health harms (Edwards, 2004). The National Prohibition Act in the USA in the 1920s, which was designed to reduce health harms by banning the production and sale of alcohol, simultaneously created new problems as prohibition was resisted via black marketeering. Underground economies are also common in times of austerity and rationing, where they are an important distribution channel for illegal goods and circumventing retail controls (Neuwirth, 2011; Roodhouse, 2013). While dissatisfaction with school food is far from new and illicit food markets may have always existed in some schools, recent legislative changes appear to have intensified such underground activity. It is notable that other qualitative studies of anti-school peer groups and school food undertaken in England prior to more restrictive food standards do not report such black markets operating (e.g. Lloyd et al., 2009; Wills et al., 2005), and many students and staff we spoke to attributed the rise of black markets (at least in part) to the new school food legislation.

Even if the new legislation has provided additional impetus for students to set up such 'underground businesses', other environmental and structural drivers are also at play. As with teenage motor vehicle accidents (Allen and Brown, 2008), policy makers may have inadvertently created another 'perfect storm' for adolescent health risk. In this case, the perceived high cost and poor value of 'healthy' food (particularly for students from poorer communities) provided in rushed, over-crowded canteen environments, in the context of stay-on-site lunchtime policies, and in the absence of staff who have any stake in the school community, drive students to create new food environments. Previous qualitative studies have highlighted similar unpopular features of the school canteen (Pike and Colquhoun, 2009; Wills et al., 2005). The present study also suggests the importance of situating these problems in the context of market-orientated education policies, which encourage staff to focus only on key attainment metrics and hide public health problems. The close proximity of supermarket outlets to some schools also appeared to fuel the underground trade in illicit food. Narrow policy responses, which only focus on restricting choice and prohibiting certain products within

schools, ignore these 'ecological' drivers of poor diet and obesity (Lang and Rayner, 2012; Moore et al., 2013).

While the cultural meaning of food has long been recognised by anthropologists (e.g. Douglas, 1975; Levi-Strauss, 1969), limited attention has been given to the meaning and representation of food in sociological studies of youth cultures and transitions (Wills, 2005). This study suggests the centrality of such consumption practices for identity construction and bonding at school, including as a source of opposition to school among proto-communities of students coalescing around more fluid, and thus less predictable, sources of common culture (Willis, 1990). Structuration is a useful lens when exploring such unanticipated consequences of well-intentioned policies. This is structuration in action: school environments are not static, externally controlled structures; local agents have their own resources and the capacity to act creatively to reconstitute this environment. Enforcing unpopular, mono-factorial public health responses within a highly complex ecological system ignores individuals' transformative power. This study also supports the view that consumer culture and product-branding specifically enable these new youth 'tribes' to create new forms of contemporary sociality (Maffesoli, 1996; Milner, 2004) and that such 'post heroic' subcultures are often highly interactive with capitalist enterprise (Clarke, 2003).

However, this should not obscure how enduring class-based stratification continues to powerfully shape both schooling and youth cultures: new proto-communities coalescing around more commercially orientated, shared styles and tastes may be less predictable but their identity and rebellion remains a product of jagged structural divisions within British society. Diane Reay's (2006) working-class 'zombie' is not only stalking the classrooms of English schools but also resisting the new 'healthist' food culture. The young black marketeers described here are Willis' (2003) foot soldiers of modernity, actively enabled by new technologies, supermarket economics and market-orientated educational policies, still adopting oppositional identities based on their shared patterns of consumption, and still undermined as 'disgusting' and 'desperate' by pro-education middle-class students and staff. This represents an extension of 'chav' discourses into school food and further vilification of working-class students based on their consumption (Hayward and Yar, 2006; Jones, 2011). Such middle-class practices add up to a powerful collective class action in the field of education (Reay, 1998).

These qualitative data have been valuable but this research is not without its limitations. The data were collected at only six schools and our data may not reflect the experiences and perspectives of all students, even within our sample of schools. Neither study specifically aimed to explore school food policies a priori. Nonetheless, the open-ended approach to investigating various aspects of the school environment exposed that underground food markets exist across the schools participating in this research. That this was apparent despite neither study looking specifically for this is perhaps evidence of the extent of these problems. Further evaluation is urgently required as bans appear to be subverted and cannot be assumed to be effective; including research to explore the views of school staff in more depth and how the emergence of black markets may vary in different contexts. Policy makers could also seize the natural experiment currently in operation in England by comparing students' diet and BMI at schools with 'academy' status, which are not subject to the same statutory restrictions, and state-maintained schools.

## **Conclusion: A New Nation of Shopkeepers?**

Britain has long been considered a 'nation of shopkeepers' – Adam Smith used the term in *The Wealth of Nations* in 1776 – and we may now be rearing a new nation of shopkeepers in English secondary schools. Schools have long been a place of working-class resistance to state intervention and these underground distribution systems for food and drink represent a further example of counter-school resistance in the face of both greater restrictions on school food and also the persistently constraining nature of wider school institutional features. From a public health perspective, these findings are alarming as they suggest young people still have easy access (perhaps easier access than ever because of the proliferation of supermarket outlets) to 'junk' food, calorific snack products and sweetened drinks while in school. New school food standards introduced in 2009 may therefore be another case of a well-meaning policy with unintended harmful consequences, potentially exacerbating health inequalities if any harmful effects are concentrated in the most disadvantaged schools. A more appropriate starting point for improving diet through schools would be more a democratic intervention to give young people a greater voice and therefore the opportunity to shape the school food environment more legitimately, rather than increasing restrictions until they set up their own underground convenience stores.

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Table 1. School characteristics

	Study 1 Schools				Study 2 Schools	
2011 DfE data	Goldstone Park School	Railside High School	Whitehorse Road School	Williamson High School	East Grove School	The Crescent School
Ofsted inspection rating	Satisfactory	Outstanding	Satisfactory	Good	Outstanding	Outstanding
Age range	11-16	11-16	11-18	11-18	11-18	11-16
Gender	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Mixed	Girls	Girls
School type	Community	Foundation	Voluntary aided	Community	Voluntary aided	Community
Current admissions policy	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive	Comprehensive
Total number of students on roll (all ages)	859	1000	767	905	1375	1351
Percentage of all students achieving A*-C GCSEs in English and maths	64%	51%	53%	51%	79%	74%
More that 20% of students eligible for FSM	X	✓	✓	✓	X	✓

Table 2: Student and staff samples

	Student Focus Groups (n)	Staff Focus Group (n)	Interviews with students	Interviews with staff
<b>Goldstone Park School</b>	✓ (31)	✓ (5)	✓ (4)	✓ (4)
<b>Railside High School</b>	✓ (24)	✓ (5)	✓ (4)	✓ (5)
<b>Whitehorse Road</b>	✓ (24)	✓ (4)	✓ (1)	✓ (4)
<b>Williamson High School</b>	✓ (33)	✓ (6)	✓ (4)	✓ (3)
<b>East Grove School</b>	✓ (11)	X	✓ (7)	X
<b>The Crescent School</b>	✓ (6)	X	X	X
<b>Total participants</b>	<b>129</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>16</b>

Reviewing conceptualisations of community: reflections on a meta-narrative approach

Farah Jamal, Marcello Bertotti, Theo Lorenc, Angela Harden

## **Introduction**

Research synthesis is the art and science of collecting and organising information from research literature in order to arrive at a more comprehensive picture of the topic being studied than is possible from examining individual studies (Gough et al., 2012). In principle there are many ways of combining studies in a synthesis and different methods will be appropriate in different circumstances. Methods are well developed for systematic review and statistical meta-analysis of trials evaluating the effects of interventions. In recent years, there has been growing interest in interpretive approaches to the synthesis of diverse research types including the many types of qualitative research (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009; Hannes and Macaitis, 2012; Harden and Thomas, 2010). Interpretive approaches to reviewing fall at the idealist end of the realist–idealist continuum and, in contrast to traditional systematic reviews, explicitly adopt an iterative approach with fewer a priori procedures (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009).

One such interpretive approach – and the focus of this paper – is the meta-narrative review, which was first developed by Trisha Greenhalgh and colleagues in the course of conducting a review to address the question of how innovations in health service delivery and organisation can be spread and sustained (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; Greenhalgh et al., 2005b). This method of research synthesis places at centre stage the importance of understanding a complex topic area critically and across many areas of research (Gough et al., 2012; Greenhalgh et al., 2005b; Wong et al., 2013). Recognizing that much of the illuminating research literature may have been conducted in many different fields, not just in healthcare, Greenhalgh and colleagues started with an initial search to map the diversity of perspectives and approaches. This search was primarily guided by intuition, informal networking, ‘browsing’ and tracking references of references and aimed to identify relevant seminal studies. Seminal studies – contributions that are of central importance to a research tradition because they report a major breakthrough, insight or a new synthesis of ideas – were used to identify 13 ‘storylines’ of research on the diffusion and spread of innovations. The unfolding ‘storyline’ of a research tradition was taken as the unit of analysis. The key features of each research tradition were mapped by their historical roots, scope, theoretical basis, research questions asked, methods used, empirical findings, historical development of the body of knowledge, and strengths and limitations of the tradition. Primary studies were then critically appraised for their validity and relevance to the review question, key results were extracted and comparable studies were grouped together resulting in seven key themes of the diffusion of innovations which were synthesised in a narrative account. Recommendations for research and practice were then developed via reflection, multidisciplinary dialogue and consultation with the intended users of the review.

The meta-narrative review might be best characterised as a method for *sense-making* of complex topics where there is dissent about the nature of what is being studied (Greenhalgh et al., 2005a). The method was informed by Thomas Kuhn’s 1962 book *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, where Kuhn proposes (using historical examples from the physical sciences) that groups of researchers view the world through a particular lens or ‘paradigm’ – which is a set of common beliefs and agreements about how problems are understood (Kuhn, 1962). These agreements guide research efforts of the group for a period of time (referred to

as 'normal science'), before anomalies appear and put the paradigm in crisis, where we then see new concepts, methods or understandings emerge (referred to as a 'paradigm shift'). According to Greenhalgh and colleagues (Greenhalgh et al., 2004; 2005a; 2005b; 2009; Wong et al., 2013: 6), the 'meta narrative' is the shared set of concepts, theories and preferred methods taken on by a group of scholars who form a research tradition. 'Meta-narratives' are storylines that unpack how research unfolds and changes over time within a research tradition 'in such a way that a "plot" emerges, in which key scientific discoveries and insights lead to further work that adds pieces to an agreed jigsaw or, less commonly, to work that shakes the foundations of the prevailing paradigm' (Greenhalgh et al., 2005a: 427).

The review discussed in this paper focused on unpacking concepts of *community* in light of the central role the term community has taken in the rhetoric and agenda of policy makers in recent years, particularly the UK coalition government's flagship 'Big Society' programme, which proposes to shift the balance of support provided by government to community and voluntary action (House of Commons, 2011). This political discourse resonates historically in Europe and internationally where there has been a shift in the relationship between government and citizens, placing welfare at the 'community' level (Ishkanian and Szreter, 2012). We found that while the term 'community' has been adopted and appropriated by those working in policy and practice as a tool and metaphor for an improved way of life, the meaning of the term as conceptualised in the academic literature is highly contested and continuously changing. We thus endeavoured to use a meta-narrative approach to investigate the question: how has community been conceptualised across time, disciplines and research traditions?

In this article we will discuss the processes and challenges of applying a meta-narrative approach in our review. The full findings of the review are reported elsewhere (Bertotti et al., 2012). We report here on how we applied and adapted Greenhalgh's steps to the meta-narrative review and the challenges that arose at each point. We also discuss the strengths and limitations of the approach we took and consider new avenues for methodological development.

## **The review process**

Different review methods are underpinned by various epistemological positions (Barnett-Page and Thomas, 2009). The meta-narrative review has been categorised as a highly constructivist approach to knowledge or what Spencer et al. (2003) term 'subjective idealist'. In other words, it proposes there is no shared reality that exists independently of human constructs. Rather, knowledge is a product of its disciplinary paradigm. In our endeavour to conduct our meta-narrative review therefore, we began by adopting a critical stance towards the literature and neither sought, nor expected, to find one final non-contestable answer to our review question (Gough et al., 2012).

As a starting point we used the process outlined in Greenhalgh et al.'s (2005a) study of diffusion of innovations in health research, which outlines the following phases of a meta-narrative review: a) planning; b) searching; c) mapping; d) appraisal and synthesis; and e) recommendations. We describe the steps we took in our review according to these phases (Figure 1), reflecting at each step the challenges that arose and ways in which our approach differed from Greenhalgh and colleagues. As noted above, interpretive reviews tend to be iterative in nature so whilst we present a linear set of steps and phases, we often went back and forth in the process. A key over-arching difference between our approach and that outlined by Greenhalgh and colleagues was that because our research question was concerned with the conceptualisation of a term we were primarily interested in analysing concepts, theories and metaphors within the literature. In contrast, Greenhalgh and colleagues analysed concepts, theories, as well as preferred methods, including

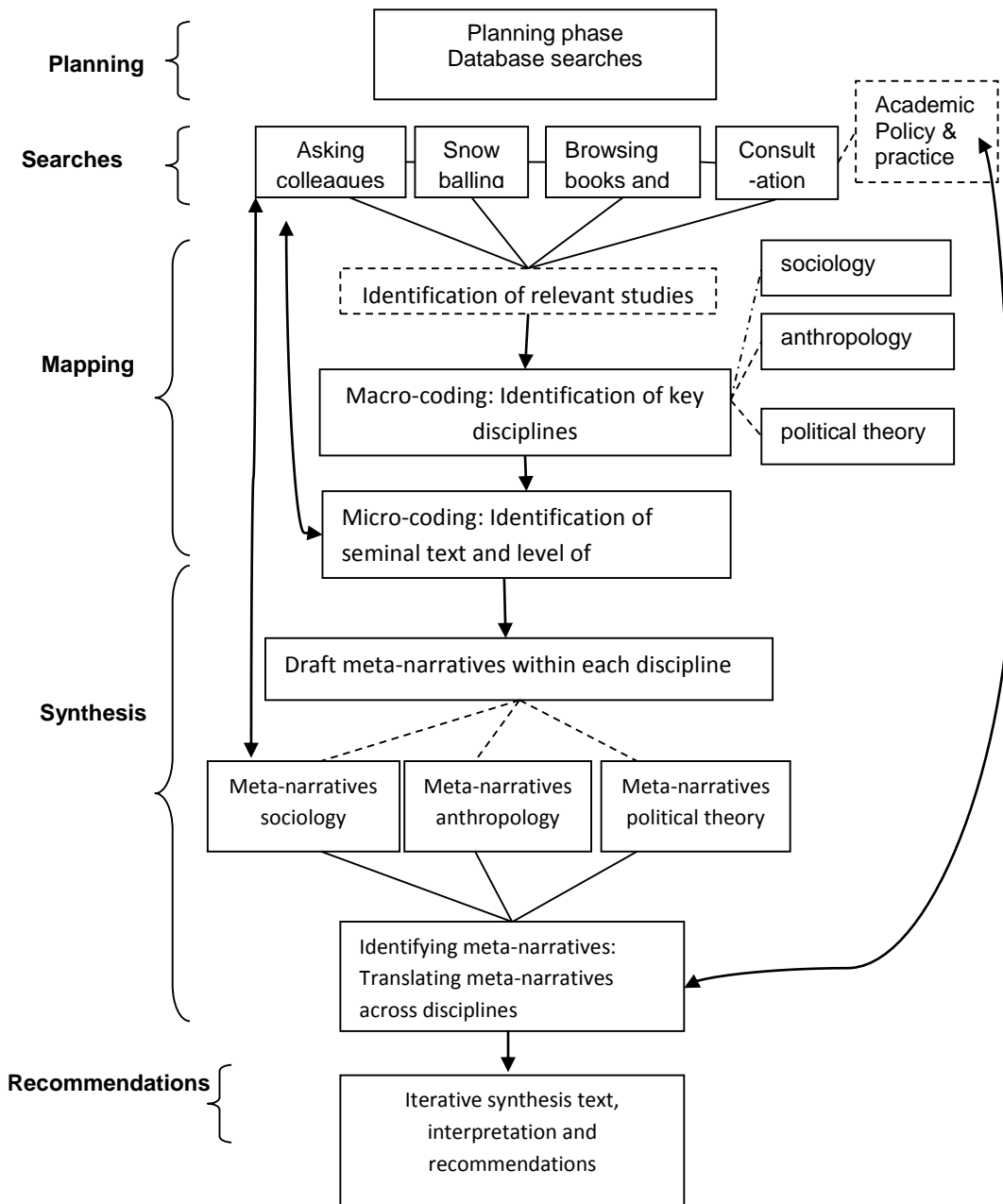
identifying quality criteria against which empirical research was judged. We did not extract data relating to methodologies of the texts we synthesised and we did not embark on a critical appraisal of studies and thus our findings do not capture the differing methodological approaches favoured in different research traditions. Assessing the quality of theories and concepts derived from research is a contested area, and we did not have the resources to conduct a meaningful appraisal. Conducting such an appraisal would be a useful extension to our work in this review. In addition, while the authors we included adopted a variety of theoretical and philosophical positions in our review, we did not systematically extract data related to these positions as we found that categories (e.g. positivist, interpretive, critical, recursive) overlap considerably and authors often resisted categorising their own theoretical position. Another key difference was our synthesis approach. Our map identified 10 'meta-narratives', which we then synthesised to develop a rich narrative text of how the research on community unfolds over time across all meta-narratives. Unlike previous meta-narrative reviews, our synthesis focuses on the historical context of the meta-narratives, particularly drawing on how knowledge is embedded in real social and political relations. Thus, our theoretical perspective shifted accordingly towards a more realist position. This is elaborated on in our discussion section.

#### *a) Planning phase*

The first step in a meta-narrative review is to determine if the review topic is a 'good fit' for a meta-narrative approach. An important question to ask is whether the topic has been studied by scholars working across different disciplines of study and whether different methods, philosophical approaches and/or understandings have changed over time. With respect to our research topic, 'community', we found that though the term has been used widely both in academia and policy, the meaning of community is highly contested (Hillery, 1955). For example, Williams (1976) famously argued that community is treated almost universally as positive. However, many scholars have disputed this understanding, noting the darker side of communities relating to exclusion, inequality, oppression and social divisions (Crow and Maclean, 2006; Hoggett, 1997). The research literature on communities therefore covers multiple research traditions across a range of disciplines of study with different underlying philosophical assumptions and methodological approaches: the topic is thus well suited to a review using a meta-narrative approach as the research literature is diverse, heterogeneous and has changed over time.



Figure 1. Process of conducting meta-narrative review on concepts of community



Our research question was phrased as ‘what are the conceptualisations of community within and across disciplines of study?’ Since the aim of the review was to track how the concept of community had changed across traditions and over time, we did not develop a working definition of the term ‘community’ at the outset, so as not to restrict the parameters of our search and our thinking more generally. We sought very broadly to identify literature that explored the meaning and conceptualisation of the term ‘community’. Previous meta-narrative reviews similarly found that setting clear inclusion criteria was not possible early on as definitions were fuzzy and contested (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

We set up two stakeholder groups that we could draw on for consultation and reflection throughout the review process. One group was comprised of academics with an interest or expertise in research on community drawn from different departments at the University of East London, where this project was based, including Sociology, Cultural Studies, Education, Health, Sport and Bioscience, Psychology, Architecture and Environment Science. The second group was comprised of people working in policy and practice and was set up to better understand how community was conceptualised for those people that work with or for communities in the real world setting. This group included representatives from local authorities, housing associations, local and national charities, community networks and neighbourhood groups. Stakeholder consultations were useful at this stage to get a sense of the various contested definitions and meanings of community and the various ways people draw on, work with or develop communities in policy and practice. This confirmed that our research question and synthesis approach were appropriate.

#### *b) Search phase*

We used several methods to search for literature. As well as informal browsing and targeted searches of electronic databases (Jstor, Science Direct, Eric, IBSS and Medline) using search terms for ‘community’ combined with search terms for ‘concepts/theories’ (which yielded 216 texts after removing items not relevant based on titles), we also utilised informal networking with colleagues and experts, and requested references from both our academic and policy and practice stakeholder groups. We also used ‘snowballing’ techniques such as reference searching. This is an effective method for identifying relevant literature as it is common practice among scholars to engage with the existing research landscape and reference key texts in order to position their own work and contribution in a publication. Sources from our database search were inputted and managed by the systematic review software tool, Eppi Reviewer 4 (Thomas et al., 2010) and other sources were manually handled.

We found that browsing, informal networking and snowballing yielded the most relevant texts. Stakeholder consultations were less useful as a resource for identifying specific texts that might be included in the review. Similar to previous meta-narrative reviews (Greenhalgh et al., 2009), we found that texts from electronic database searches were a useful starting point for reading and ‘snowballing’, but were mostly not relevant for our review, with only three texts from these searches included in our synthesis. Electronic database searches tended to pick up empirical studies published in journal articles, and much of the relevant literature for our review had been published as books. The latter are not well indexed on bibliographic databases, which are focused on cataloguing the content of journals. Bibliographic databases are also relatively recent and were not useful for locating older texts.

#### *c) Mapping phase*

Through searching, we got a feel for the range of literature ‘out there’. We found that the literature related to the conceptualisations of community was produced across a range of

different academic disciplines. The central task of the mapping phase is then to identify the seminal studies. As noted earlier, seminal papers are contributions that are of central importance to a research topic because they report a major breakthrough, insight or a new synthesis of ideas. Seminal studies also plant the seeds for future work in a given area.

Mapping was undertaken in the following steps:

- (i) Our first step was to code texts based on their academic discipline in order to produce a map of the range of academic disciplines represented among studies in our database. We developed an initial list of academic disciplines,<sup>1</sup> which was discussed among members of the research team and circulated to the academic stakeholder group to ensure that it was comprehensive and appropriate. Texts were then divided among three members of the research team who assigned each text to a discipline on the list. Prior to individual coding the research team collaboratively coded 10 random studies so as to ensure consistency. We found, as others have previously suggested (Abbott, 2001), that disciplinary boundaries are at times arbitrary and ambiguous. It was decided that coding would therefore not be mutually exclusive so a text could potentially be characterised as both 'sociology' and 'anthropology'. From the results of the coding, we found that most texts were concentrated in the disciplines of sociology, anthropology and political theory: these became the *disciplines of focus* for our review. The process of assigning disciplinary frames to the literature has not been explicitly explored in other meta-narrative reviews, perhaps because they have usually not been as broad in scope as our review.
- (ii) To identify seminal texts, all sources in our database were assessed according to the following criteria, adapted from Greenhalgh et al. (2009):
  - Is the paper part of a recognised research tradition? That is, does it draw critically and comprehensively upon an existing body of knowledge and attempt to further that body of knowledge?
  - Does the paper make an original contribution into the meaning or conceptualisation of community?
  - Has the paper subsequently been cited as a seminal contribution by researchers in that tradition?

Two reviewers (MB and FJ) completed this assessment for an initial sub-set of texts working independently at first and then meeting to compare assessments. Once the reviewers had reached a broad agreement on how to assess texts according to the criteria, studies were divided between the reviewers. On reflection during this process, the way in which we applied the criteria was too inclusive. Studies that passed the criteria reported they were making an original contribution and many were subsequently cited by other scholars, however the degree to which their work actually shifted the understanding or approach in a research tradition varied considerably and we were unable to capture such variation by these criteria. We hence re-assessed our texts to identify those texts that could be considered to be foundational in that they set the groundwork for an entire research agenda. Such texts are continuously cited in published work on the topic of community and the authors were major contributing scholars both on the topic of community but often also commonly identified in later works as foundational to the discipline to which they belonged. Many of these studies go back to the 19th and early 20th centuries, or even further: for example, foundational authors in sociology include Ferdinand Tönnies, Karl Marx and Émile Durkheim. The identification of our seminal

studies was unavoidably somewhat subjective; as recognised by previous researchers, picking out story threads from a mixed bag and broad mass of knowledge often involves choices that are “irrevocably subjective and negotiable” (Greenhalgh et al., 2005a: 427). Having now identified our academic disciplines of focus and seminal studies, we requested suggestions for further references from colleagues working in the field and checked the reference lists of our included texts in order to identify further texts in order to build up detail for each study.

- (iii) For each of our seminal works we extracted information related to: a) the historical roots: the preceding ideas, historical time period and theories or orientations which the study builds on; b) the scope: the aims, parameters or assumptions taken as a starting point; and c) the conceptualisation of community proposed. These extracts were grouped according to academic discipline and reviewers then read and re-read extracts within the grouping. Interpretive methods were used to identify a draft set of storylines or meta-narratives within each discipline. This was done by linking studies that generally shared a set of concepts, theories and/or preferred methods. A draft set of meta-narratives was identified corresponding to each of our academic disciplines.
- (iv) Reviewers circulated a list of meta-narratives corresponding to each academic discipline among the team and then met to discuss them. At the first meeting each reviewer described the meta-narratives according to their reading of the literature. This was debated, discussed and the meta-narratives and their associated texts were refined and developed over several days. At a second all-day workshop, reviewers aimed to identify meta-narratives that seek to illustrate how community has been conceptualised *across all our disciplines of focus*: anthropology, sociology and political theory. We began by producing a matrix where meta-narratives within each research discipline were juxtaposed in order to identify commonalities and differences. This was essentially a thematic synthesis of themes. We finally identified 10 meta-narratives (which 41 seminal texts are mapped on), which are summarised in Table 1 and organised by: a) the relevant academic discipline(s) the meta-narrative draws from; b) historical roots; c) scope; d) conceptualisation of community; and e) a selection of key authors.

#### *d) Synthesis phase*

We then looked across disciplines to develop a narrative text addressing the question: ‘How has research across the meta-narratives unfolded over time?’ We present in Table 2 a summary version of our ‘big picture’ narrative on how community has been conceptualised across disciplines.

**Table 1.** Meta-narratives identified in a review of the conceptualisations of community.

Meta-narrative	Focus discipline (of most relevance)	Roots (historical and/or academic)	Scope	Community conceptualised as	Selected key authors
<i>Commonality</i>	Anthropology	Natural; primordial	Human society as a natural phenomenon and the study of distant 'others': villages, tribes, nomadic groups.	Emphasised homogeneity or commonality as the basis of community formation. Community was considered the location of research, rather than the object of research (i.e. a question to be investigated).	Levi-Strauss; Turner
<i>The public sphere and</i>	Political theory	Aristotle; pre-modernity	Rather than emphasising who constitutes the state	'Community' was first considered to	Aristotle; Paine

<i>formation of 'community'</i>			(insiders/outside), Aristotle looks to the values and principles (which are formalised in a set of internal arrangements/ constitution) that characterise how people associate. Later scholars reconsider the role of state; the influence of non-formal associations in sub-state spheres and civil society.	be formed and sustained by the set of values and principles that characterise associations between people in a state. Later, it was considered that people could also come together in non-state domains to cooperate in common affairs.	
<i>Transitional perspectives on community</i>	Sociology; anthropology	Industrial revolution	Preoccupation with the transformations following the industrial revolution and the impact this had on traditional forms of association. (For example, Tönnies:	Tönnies: Community is characterised by moral, localised and intimate relationships that would no	Tönnies; Durkheim; Marx

			gemminshaft/community to gishenshaft/society; Durkheim: mechanical to organic solidarity.)	longer hold significance with the emergence of 'society'. Durkheim: workforce specialisation requires interdependence and thus new forms of solidarity. Marx: Industrialisation can negatively impact traditional ways of life (i.e. increase alienation).	
<i>Community in urban life</i>	Sociology; anthropology	Human ecology; emergence of urban spaces;	Cities were considered to represent unique social and cultural spaces that	Community is often characterised as	Park; Wirth; Burgess; Redfield;

		The Chicago School	play a role in the shifting of how human organisation functions, as well as a microcosm through which to understand human behaviour. There is an increasing concern about alienation and ethnic segregation in US urban areas, but also a recognition that urban areas can be sites for positive change. The focus is on the complex urban space in shaping community rather than the family or village.	dense, diverse and transient. Emerging theories from the Chicago School include: e.g. urban ecology; concentric rings; social disorganisation theory; zones of transition.	Hannerz; Gans; Downey & Smith
<i>Community Studies</i>	Sociology	Tonnies; network analysis	Focuses on the relationships between individuals (e.g. kinship, friendship, networks) in communities.	Community is primarily networks of solidarity between	Crow & Allan; Brint; Young; Willmott; Arensberg;



			Relationships themselves are the unit of analysis rather than space or locality.	individuals rather than space or locality.	Bell & Newby; Bulmer; Frankenberg
<i>Mobilising and generating community</i>	Sociology	1960s; community development	Urban development and renewal at this time looked to changing physical spaces, often at the expense of the poor. In response, community mobilisation looks to providing 'voice' to marginalised people around common social concerns.	Community is an ideal to be aspired to through collective action for the fulfillment of common interests/goals. It is not a natural phenomenon, but a social construction.	Brent; Marx
<i>Individualist and communitarian approaches to community</i>	Political theory	John Rawls; Theories of Justice	The debate has focused on the critique that individualists/liberal theory neglects the primacy of social relations.	Communitarians consider community to be source of identity formation. Two	Rawls; Sandel; MacIntyre; Etzioni; Jordan; Gray; Frazer

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popular  
branches of  
scholars in the  
communitarian  
tradition are  
orthodox and  
radical where  
the former  
emphasis the  
necessity of a  
singular  
community and  
the latter  
considers the  
existence of  
multiple  
communities  
while still looking  
to issues of  
membership,  
commonality  
and solidarity

				(alongside other concerns such as: markets, economy and multiculturalism).	
<i>Symbolic approaches</i>	Sociology and anthropology	Durkheim and Weber; Anderson	Face to face communication is not necessary to establish community. Community is a relational concept. It is determined by defining who is in and who is out.	Communities are constructs built on sentiments and symbols (in the minds or imaginings of members).	Cohen; Anderson; Barth; Bourdieu
<i>Market economy perspectives on community</i>	Political theory; sociology	Rise of market economies; communitarianism	Links social and economic structures to political discourse on community. A strong trend in this tradition has been to look at the role of communities in establishing trust in society.	Communities are not normative/ ideal to be aspired to in their own right but are promoted for the economic advantages that	Fukuyama; Putnam; Gorz

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				they are supposed to produce (through social capital; trust). On the other hand, communities are also threatened by the operation of market economies.	
<i>Globally oriented approaches</i>	Sociology; anthropology	Hyper-modernity; globalisation	New forms of interaction and commonality/difference are explored in era of globalisation and hypermodernity.	From local to transnational flows. Community is discussed in the context of identity, and place and the centrality of geography and	Auge; Olwig & Hastrup; Appadurai; Gupta & Ferguson

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location are challenged. Concept of 'thin' communities (e.g. weak ties over the internet) and 'thick' communities based on strong ties.

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**Table 2.** Summary of narrative tracing the conceptualising of community across anthropology, sociology and political theory.

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The shifts in the meaning and conceptualisation of community have been shaped largely by the emergence of the state, industrialisation, urbanism and more recently, globalisation and communication advances. It appears, therefore, that new ways of *understanding community roughly tend to unfold in reaction to historical developments in political, social, cultural and economic life.*

In *pre-modernity*, early anthropologists emphasised the collective as the setting of social life. They tended to study villages, tribes and distant ‘others’ that were considered to be culturally and socially homogeneous communities. Community was assumed to exist and was not yet considered a question for investigation. It was only much later that anthropologists would consider community to be the most important subject matter in the discipline. In contrast, scholarly work on community in political theory can be traced to the rise of liberalism, where ideas of freedom, rights and justice and their political and social context were heavily theorised. Notably, scholars studied the role of the state (Aristotle), and the role of civil society and non-state domains (e.g. Rousseau, Paine) in shaping relationships.

The explicit theorisation of community began with advances in *industrialisation* in the 19th century, when the seminal group of scholars, Tönnies, Durkheim and Marx, considered the impact of the modern environment on traditional or rural forms of life. For example, Tönnies suggests that community is characterised as rural, moral and intimate, while society in the modern era is individualistic, instrumental and impersonal. For Durkheim, individuals move towards ‘organic solidarity’ in modernity where the specialisation of work leads to a necessary interdependence between people. Marx on the other hand criticised the alienation that was derived from production in capitalism.

Increasing *modernity* gave rise to urbanism in the 1920s/30s, which ignited new questions about community for anthropologists and sociologists within the ‘community and urban life’ meta-narrative. Cities were considered to represent unique social and cultural spaces that play a role in shifting how human organisation functions, as well as a microcosm through which to understand human behaviour. Community in these urban spaces was often considered to be dense, diverse and transient. The Chicago School guided research in this area and developed new theories of community in the context of the modern environment.

In the 1960s, the community studies tradition developed by both building on and critiquing the emphasis that many urban anthropologists/sociologists put on space as the unit of analysis. This tradition is concerned with studying all types of relationships outside the household and has a particular focus on researching social issues. The community studies tradition led to a substantial growth in empirical studies primarily based on case studies and participant observation, stimulating a more interpretive approach. Closely related to community studies is the idea of ‘generating or mobilising community’, which developed to some extent in reaction to urban development ignoring the social concerns of the poor. Community, for this tradition, is considered to be an ideal to be aspired to through collective action for the fulfilment of common interests. It particularly looks to provide a “voice” to

marginalised people around social concerns through collective action for the fulfilment of common interests.

Community in political theory returned as a central question with the rise of debates between individualists and communitarians. Individualists are concerned with moral worth and the importance of the individual. Communitarians emphasise human associations as the source of identity formation, and thus the idea of a community becomes important for human organisation and behaviour. More 'radical' strands of communitarianism consider the existence of multiple forms of community, attaching importance to ideas of membership and solidarity while still accounting for changing socio-economic factors. The increasing impact of market economies on modern environments evoked another tradition that linked political economy with communitarian relations. A strong trend in this tradition has been the examination of the role of communities in establishing trust and from that 'social capital'. Communities, for these scholars, are promoted for the economic and political advantages that they can produce.

More recently, the importance of embodied interaction as an important requisite for community was challenged by scholars, who were instead focused on the way in which 'worlds of meaning', imagining and sentiments function in modern societies to construct ideas of community and cooperation, thus separating the idea of community from interaction. Whilst previous traditions focused their analysis on interactions between individuals and groups, this meta-narrative is more interested in what occurs within the individual. The emphasis is on the symbolic and imagined nature of communities.

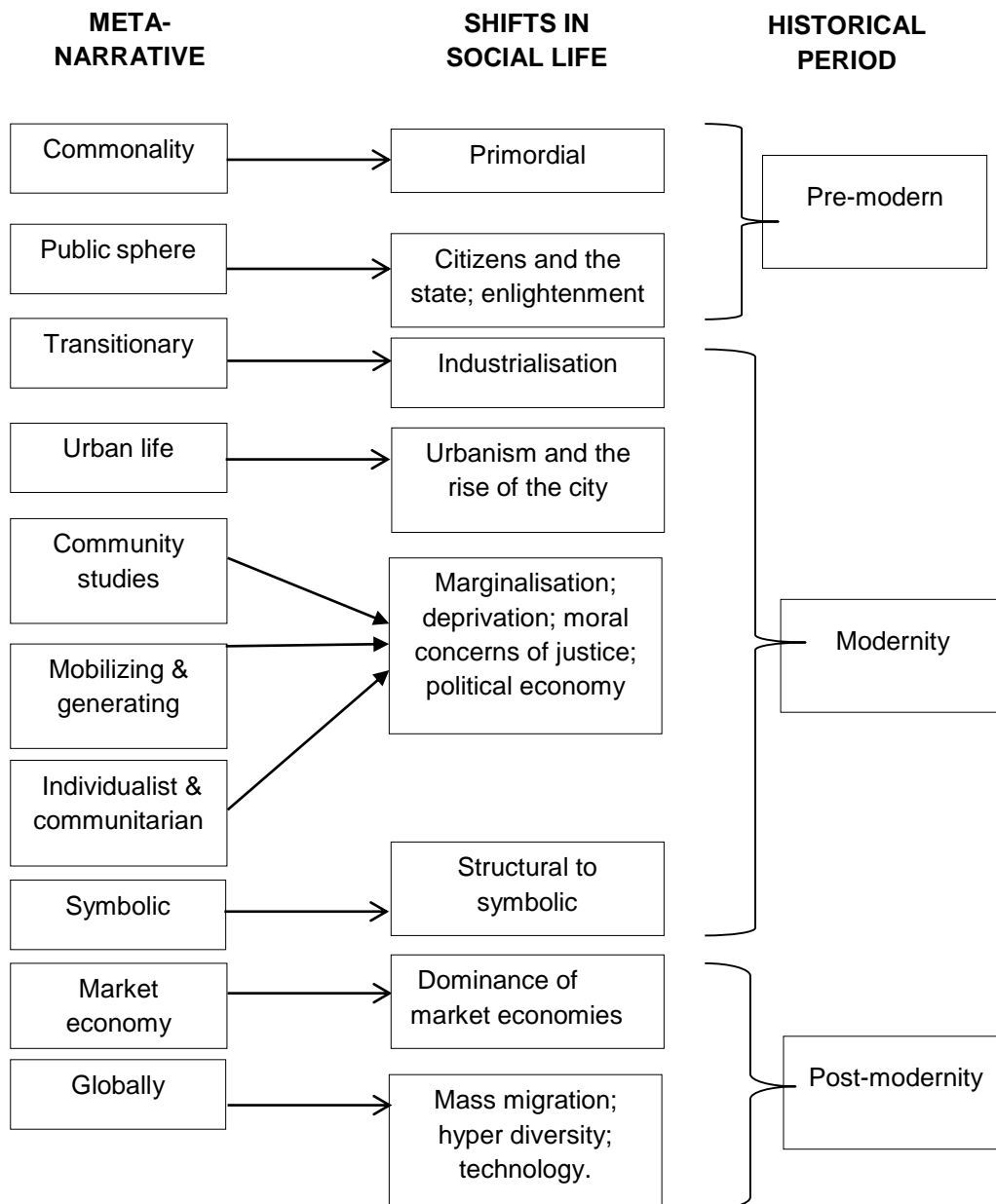
Arguably, we have now entered an era of *post-modernity* characterised by super-diversity, globalisation and new ways of communication. In this context, researchers across disciplines have further challenged the centrality of geography in the research on community. Scholars look to issues of identity and bonding in the context of technology, mass migration and diversity and how this, if at all, relates to 'place' in the study of community.

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Developing meta-narratives within each discipline and then looking across all disciplines and over time was useful because it allowed for highlighting similarities and conflicts in the conceptualisations. Looking across disciplines also highlighted where disciplinary boundaries diverged and merged. For example, it seems that there was a disciplinary turn in anthropology where it became synonymous with a method of conducting research (i.e. ethnography) and thus many scholars, for example from the Chicago School conducting field work in US neighbourhoods, could not be identified as either anthropologists or sociologists. Greenhalgh and colleagues (2005a) have stated that this sort of 'double-handling' was crucial in their review because it enabled them to highlight conflicting findings which could then be explored in terms of contestation between incommensurable paradigms. In our review, we did not feel that conflicting conceptualisations could be attributed to any incommensurability between paradigms. Rather, we felt that different conceptualisations of community emerged at different historical periods. The conflicts between conceptualisations were thus likely more attributable to the different social, cultural or economic shifts taking place in the world, which influenced the writings of scholars at a specific time. This is an important contribution as it suggests not only which studies 'link-up', but also meaningfully suggests how they do so by drawing out the potential influences around the forming of different research traditions. Therefore, by

outlining the historical context of the meta-narratives, our review explicitly accounts for the wider social dimension of knowledge. Figure 2 illustrates how the meta-narratives can be mapped within a historical context.

Figure 2. Mapping meta-narratives in a social-historical perspective





### e) Recommendations phase

At this stage we convened a seminar inviting both our academic and policy and practice stakeholder groups to help verify and interpret our findings. We asked stakeholders to comment on the comprehensiveness of our results and the usefulness of the synthesis in helping to make sense of the complex and diverse literature.

Stakeholders agreed that the 10 meta-narratives produced were a crucial resource and suggested that they appropriately outlined the trajectory of research across our focus disciplines. They noted that the pragmatic approach of looking at early 'foundational' scholars was appropriate as this laid the groundwork of conceptualising community and that many of the questions posed then, continue to inform research agendas on community today.

Stakeholders broke off into smaller working groups where they discussed how our results might help in informing practical work related to community. It was concluded that the results broadened perspectives about what a community is beyond a simply geographical notion of a group of people who live close to one another, which was almost always the default definition. Our findings also suggested that the assumption that communities exist and are a requisite function of social life should not be taken as common sense. Practically, this means for example that a community may need to be built (via creating common imaginaries or sentiments for example) before being appropriated for intervention. Our stakeholders said that by taking a historical approach to reviewing the literature they could better grasp how community is a continuously changing concept. One working group at our seminar likened our meta-narratives to a tool-kit of the many ways we can conceptualise community and that this sort of conceptual tool-kit is valuable to draw on for developing policy or intervention that is informed by theory. As communities are the site for many public health and social policy interventions, an avenue for future research might also be to map practices of community engagement interventions against our meta-narratives to consider whether the full range of conceptual approaches has been used and where innovation in policy and practice might be identified.

## Discussion

Unlike traditional reviews that are often conducted in a series of linear and sequential steps, derived from an a priori protocol, this review involved continual iteration and retracting of steps. The review process is best described as 'feeling your way' through the literature, moving between searching for studies, immersing in text, focusing the review, extracting data, synthesis and interpretation in several cycles. This process of continual iteration is appropriate for interpretive reviews and has been effective for the purposes of *making sense* of highly complex topic areas, across many areas of research.

By taking a meta-narrative approach to reviewing the conceptualisations of community within and across disciplines we were able to identify a set of narratives outlining the scope and roots of different conceptualisations of community which resonated with both academics and professional groups. The meta-narrative approach gives us the capacity to investigate how seminal books and papers on a given topic inspire programmes of theory building and empirical research. It also allows us to compare and contrast the literature in a structured way. Take for example, Benedict Anderson's (1983) seminal text *Imagined Communities*. In this book, Anderson presents a conception of the nation as a community that is socially constructed or 'imagined'. It is imagined because, according to Anderson, it is not possible for every individual to know and relate to everyone else, but in the minds of each individual is the image of their comradeship. Anderson's conceptualisation emphasises the role of constructing

symbols and representation in community formation. In a similar vein, seminal author Anthony Cohen (1985) encourages a shift away from the traditional sociological preoccupation with the 'structure' of community to an emphasis on 'a symbolic community which provides meaning and identity' (Cohen, 1985: 9). For Cohen, community is symbolically constructed by codes and values that provide members with a sense of identity. We see both Anderson and Cohen belonging to the meta-narrative: 'symbolic approaches'. We can contrast this wave of scholarship which looks to illuminating the process of creating and embodying the meaning of community in the hearts and minds of individuals to previous conceptualisations that focused on functionality and locale as central to its definition. The 'symbolic approach' has then paved the way for other scholars to conceive of new forms of community in an era of globalisation and hypermodernity that look beyond the limits of physical spaces (for example, virtual communities, and diaspora communities). Therefore, by adopting a Kuhnian approach, we are able to identify a number of key texts that shift the direction of thinking around community and inspire new scholarship, and by mapping these texts, are able to identify the attachments and developments that gave the ideas prominence.

In our review, the historical dimension and in particular the breadth of chronological scope, allowed us to consider what external factors in social, economic or political life might influence the emerging narratives. We find that the key strength of the meta-narrative approach is that it works in *making sense* of complex and diverse literature. Some may consider our handling of this literature reductionist or simplistic. Arguably, however, the simplification of this material may be valuable. Conceptual and theoretically oriented literature is often dense, complex and uses an internal jargon to the discipline in which it is conceived. By simplifying this knowledge, we feel that wider audiences can potentially draw on it for research or practice. We suggest therefore that the meta-narrative approach to reviewing is usefully applied to this type of literature. As already suggested, this approach may help to bridge gaps between academic theorists on the one hand, and practitioners and policy-makers, or researchers in more applied fields, on the other. It may also be of value in the process of theory development itself, in drawing together insights from a broad range of different fields and disciplines.

Our approach, while closely following existing guidance on meta-narrative reviews (Greenhalgh et al., 2005a; Wong et al., 2013), also diverges somewhat from the approaches adopted by Greenhalgh and colleagues. Most obviously, the scope of this review is considerably broader than most published meta-narratives, with respect to both the range of conceptualisations and to the historical periods covered. As already suggested, this may have meant that key texts and concepts were covered in insufficient depth in order to translate concepts across studies to identify storylines. Another difference is that because our research question was concerned with the conceptualisation and theorisation of a term, we focused primarily on analysing higher order abstractions, that is, concepts, theories and metaphors within the literature and did not examine methodologies or empirical results of seminal studies in depth. Our approach is novel in seeking to relate meta-narratives, and the shifts and contacts between them, to the concrete social, economic and political changes underlying the different theoretical approaches. Much existing work in meta-narrative review as described by Greenhalgh and colleagues (2004, 2005a, 2005b) focuses on the internal theoretical coherence of narratives, rather than their embeddedness in real social and political relations. It also tends to reinforce the traditional dualism of critical qualitative research and positivist quantitative research (Greenhalgh et al., 2005a) as narratives tend to collapse in this dichotomy, which is increasingly questioned by social theorists (Latour, 1993). By contrast, our approach seeks to re-situate theoretical meta-narratives within their historical context, and to provide a more sociologically grounded description of the evolution of paradigms. As already suggested, much previous work on meta-narrative reviews rests on a constructivist theory of the social. By contrast, our findings indicate that the multiplicity of narratives about community

is at least partly driven by real historical changes in society itself. This suggests that this multiplicity could be accounted for within a realist ontology of the social (i.e. view that theories refer to real features of the world, but that our knowledge of the world is inevitably interpretive and provisional rather than representational), without invoking idealist or constructivist meta-theories.

We suggest that a promising avenue for the further development of meta-narrative methods could draw on Foucault's sociological and historical approach to the relationship between power and knowledge (Foucault, 1972). Take for example Foucault's seminal book *Madness and Civilization* (1965) on the way that 'madness' is constructed by society and its institutions. Shifts in the conceptualisations of 'madness', for Foucault, don't represent a sense of progress of knowledge but changes in discursive relations and a given time period. This approach stresses how claims to truth are claims to power and how the exercise of power is legitimised in terms of knowledge.

We discuss Foucault's approach to knowledge as it has implications for how we develop a synthesis method that seeks to essentially capture the history of knowledge on a given topic. Taking a Foucauldian logic, a concept such as community, for example, is not one whose history can be neatly unfolded in a progressive accumulation, but is better understood as a product of wider relations in social life. If we had considered a Foucauldian approach to understanding complex and heterogeneous literature we thus may have been able to give even more consideration to the wider social, economic or cultural determinants that shape knowledge in a given topic area. If we take a Foucauldian approach to reviewing we may ask a different set of questions such as: what are the processes in which topics become known? How do these topics become established and used? The emphasis on the review then is highlighting the practices that introduce topics to the knowledge sphere. In other words, how do disciplinary practices operate in order to create knowledge-power?

## **Conclusion**

The meta-narrative review as first developed by Greenhalgh and colleagues is a worthwhile approach to add to the economy of review methods available. The meta-narrative approach provides reviewers with a framework that allows us to navigate through complex literature in an organised manner while also being flexible enough to adjust according to individual review questions. We commend Greenhalgh and colleagues for drawing attention to the need to take account of the historical and philosophical context of studies. We recommend that a crucial avenue for methodological development however is to begin thinking beyond the 'Thomas Kuhn logic' which informed Greenhalgh's method and consider for example, Foucault's sociological and historical approach to the relationship between power and knowledge.

## **Funding**

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## **Note**

1. [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_academic\\_disciplines](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_academic_disciplines)

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Consulting with young people to inform systematic reviews: an example from a review on the effects of schools on health

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## **Introduction**

There has been increasing recognition internationally that research should involve patients and the public on topics relevant to their lives.<sup>1,2</sup> A key driver in the health sector has been the World Health Organisation's Declaration of Alma Ata which states that people 'have the right and duty to participate individually and collectively in the planning and implementation of their health care'.<sup>3</sup> This extends to children and young people, who have the right to express their views freely in all areas that they are involved in, as enshrined in Article 12 of the convention on the Rights of the Child.<sup>4</sup> Children and young people are recognized as competent social actors capable of making sense of their lives and are considered stakeholders in decisions about their health needs and behaviour, alongside professionals and other adult stakeholders.

Involving patients and the public, including young people, both in the generation of research and its use enhances the opportunity for optimal health outcomes.<sup>5</sup> It is also supported by ethical and political arguments that highlight the rights of service users to have their views heard, and the accountability and governance of publicly funded activities.<sup>6,7</sup> Indeed, the cornerstone of evidence-based medicine is now the integration of clinical expertise, best evidence and patient values into the decision-making process for patient care.<sup>8</sup> The move towards more participatory approaches in health research thus reflects an ontological shift which highlights the value of a more phenomenological approach grounded in the lived experiences of those being researched.<sup>9</sup>

Public involvement in health care has become important internationally in both service development and research<sup>10-12</sup>, particularly in regards to systematic reviews. Systematic reviews aim to identify, appraise, select and synthesise research evidence on a particular topic, providing a balanced overview of evidence and thus have greater influence over policy decisions, and in turn people's lives, than individual studies.<sup>13</sup> The range of public involvement can be simplified into three key approaches: publically led (the public designs and undertakes the research and researchers participate at the invitation of the public), collaboration (an on-going partnership between researchers and the public); and consultation (researchers seek the views of the public on key aspects of the research).<sup>1, 14</sup> The continuum of participation, however, should not be interpreted as suggesting that more participation or control is necessarily better. The choice of approach to participation should be closely linked to the purpose and desired outcome of the research.

Consultation methods are most commonly used for systematic reviews.<sup>1, 14</sup> Consultation involves the researcher asking patients and the public about their views and using these to influence decision-making, interpretations of evidence and/or the language used in research.<sup>9</sup> The approach allows the researcher to obtain views which may then contribute to the research process, but is not necessarily committed to act on them. More collaborative approaches to consultation require reviewers to work on an on-going basis with patients and the public throughout the review. Typically this is done via an 'advisory' group that meets with

researchers at several points to discuss progress and help determine the direction of the review at key decision-making stages.<sup>13</sup>

As patient and public involvement in systematic reviews becomes increasingly common, there is a need to share experiences and critical thinking about the processes, outcomes, benefits and challenges of involvement, which is currently absent in the published research. While some case studies exist<sup>15-19</sup> examples of how to involve children and young people in systematic reviews are particularly limited.<sup>16, 17</sup> There is also a general tendency to emphasise processes of involvement<sup>18</sup> with few examples on how processes impact review outputs.<sup>17, 18</sup>

This study adds to the small body of case studies by describing the process of consulting with a young people's advisory group to inform decision-making in a systematic review on the effects of schools on children and young people's health.<sup>20</sup> It also extends the existing body of work by tracing how the process of consulting with the young people's advisory group led to changes in our review.

## Methods

### Description of the review

The systematic review discussed in this paper, to which young people contributed, concerned the effects of schools and school environment interventions on young people's health.

In the context of numerous systematic reviews and evaluations highlighting the disappointing results of health education programmes delivered via the curriculum, we assessed the potential of other approaches to improving health in schools, such as through modifying the 'school environment'. Rather than treating schools merely as sites for health education, the 'school environment' approach treats schools as physical and social settings which can influence health. School environments can influence health directly by addressing, for example, school food provision or bullying policies and can shape health indirectly via addressing, for example, student disengagement or staff-student relationships which may impact on health. While this is a growing field of public health research, few reviews had been conducted on school environments and health and these either did not report the accumulation of recent research<sup>21</sup> or focused only on certain outcomes.<sup>22, 23, 24, 25</sup> Therefore, a research team based in the United Kingdom (UK) led by academics in the fields of public health and sociology with expertise in systematic reviews sought to search comprehensively, map and synthesize the available international research on the effects of the *school environment* on health.

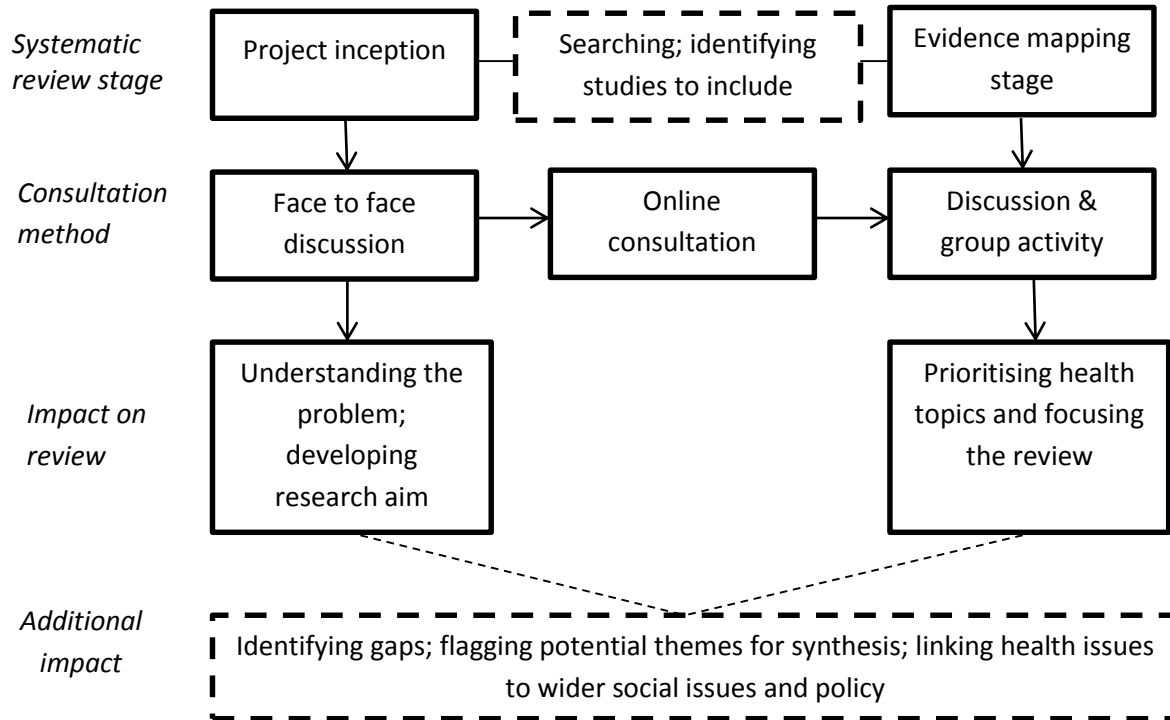
The review was conducted in two stages. In stage 1 we produced an 'evidence map' where we identified a broad array of potentially relevant literature and descriptively coded characteristics of the studies. In stage 2 we conducted five in-depth reviews corresponding to our review questions which examined: a) theories of schools' influences on student health<sup>26</sup>, b) outcome evaluations of interventions modifying the school environment to promote student health<sup>27</sup>, c) process evaluations of these interventions, d) multi-level studies of the effects on student health of school-level factors<sup>28</sup>, and e) qualitative research on the processes by which the school environment influences student health.<sup>29</sup> We identified two separate stakeholder groups to provide expert advice on the review: (1) adult professionals working in policy, practice and research; and (2) young people. The focus of this paper is the young people's advisory group. Details on the methods of our review including the flow of literature can be found elsewhere.<sup>20</sup>

### *Involving young people in the review process*

While this review of international studies was led and conducted by researchers, we wanted its outputs to be sensitised to the perspectives of young people from a UK setting to help ensure its relevance. Therefore, we chose to consult with an advisory group of young people. The consultation approach we used had the advantage of providing structured and relatively quick (compared to other more collaborative approaches) opportunities to seek views at key decision stages, while researchers retained control of the overall conduct of the review. We felt a more collaborative approach would have been extremely time consuming and costly (e.g. training young people as reviewers), with limited evidence of added value to outputs. Two face-to-face advisory group consultations, supplemented with an online discussion forum, were conducted with DECIPHer's young people's public involvement group called ALPHA (Advice Leading to Public Health Advancement). DECIPHer is a UK Clinical Research Collaboration public health research centre of excellence focusing on the health of children and young people. With a commitment to involving children and young people in the research process, a panel of young people (the ALPHA group) was formed by DECIPHer. At the time of our review, twenty-five young people (aged 14-19) from Bristol and South Wales were registered in the ALPHA group. The group was recruited via existing youth provisions and advertisements in the local press and online. Participants were predominantly white and middle class, with a small number of ethnic minority participants. There were no specific healthcare needs that required special arrangements for their participation. The group met monthly and sessions attracted on average 12 members. Young people participating in the programme were trained in research including sessions on public health, the research cycle, ethics procedures and reviewing materials. The sessions were supported by qualified youth workers (individuals who facilitate voluntary, associational and informal learning with people aged 14-25) with extensive experience of facilitating youth groups. This group was chosen as an advisory body for our review because it allowed access to an established group of young people already familiar with health research who met frequently enough (once per month) for us to seek their views at the decision stages of the review. Members were not rewarded directly from researchers. However they received £15 vouchers for their monthly participation (not specific to this research project), had food and transport provided and were eligible for an annual residential/ teambuilding activity. Consultations with the ALPHA group were conducted at two key points: at project inception, for advice on setting the scope of the review; and at the review mapping stage, for advice on focusing the review on key priorities (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. Summary of consultation process and impact



### *Project inception – setting the scope of the review*

Consultation at this stage consisted of face-to-face and on-line consultations. Thirteen young people participated in a face-to-face consultation in meeting rooms at the University of Cardiff in September 2010. The session lasted just over one hour and was facilitated by two researchers with oversight from a young people research officer, who is a qualified youth worker. The purpose of the consultation was to find out what the terms 'health' and 'well-being' meant to advisory group members and to elicit their perspectives on how schools can impact on their health and well-being with a view to informing the development of our review questions. The session was designed to be as interactive as possible. A five minute presentation was given by researchers to explain the aim of the session. Small group discussions were used to explore: their understanding of 'health' and 'well-being'; how schools could affect health and well-being; and what a good/bad school for health and well-being would be like. Key discussion points were then fed back to the group and participants identified priority areas for school health and well-being. Researchers took extensive notes during the consultation which were then scrutinised for key themes relevant to the review.

Online consultations provided an opportunity for additional participation. A social networking site was launched hosted by the online company Grou.PS (<http://grou.ps/home>). Advisory group members were invited to join the online group and provide any further views on the topics discussed at the face-to-face consultations via the online discussion room which they could access at their convenience. To register on the site, members of the advisory group emailed a member of the research team for log-in details. Advisory group members were able to create an avatar profile if they wished to remain anonymous.

### *Evidence mapping stage – focusing the review on key priorities*

Having consulted with the advisory group regarding the scope of the review, we produced a descriptive map of the available research evidence. Our searches identified 1017 studies that met the inclusion criteria set out for the review. Studies were descriptively coded based on title and abstract to identify key characteristics (e.g. study design; the feature of school examined in the study (e.g. policies, catering); health topic).

The evidence map showed that the research landscape was extensive and focused on diverse health topics across a range of school environment features (such as physical infrastructure, teaching, policies, catering, management, pastoral care). To produce a manageable synthesis of evidence, we needed to focus the review on a smaller number of health topics and features of the school environment, which had credibility with young people.

A second consultation was therefore conducted to establish which health topics young people viewed as a priority for us to focus on. This consultation was conducted with 13 young people (with considerable overlap from the first consultation, with the exception of four new members) from the ALPHA group in May 2011. Two researchers and the same young people's research officer facilitated a group discussion and a consensus development exercise.

The advisory group was presented with a list of the most common health topics identified in the evidence map including: anxiety; injury; pregnancy; obesity; young offending; smoking; drug use; violence; sexual risk behavior; school disengagement; and sexual health. Researchers probed the group to discuss which health topics were most relevant to them, why and in what context. Views were orally summarized by researchers back to the group throughout the consultation to help ensure accurate representation. Discussions continued until all health topics on the list were discussed. One researcher collected unstructured written notes of young

people's views (which were later summarised in bullet points thematically by health topic after the consultation event). The final list of health topics was agreed by the group. This list was then written on to individual sheets of paper and distributed to each group member. Group members were then asked to vote individually (using stickers) on the sheets provided for the topics they thought were important to consider in the review. They could allocate their stickers as they liked, either all against one health topic, or more evenly spaced. When all had placed their votes, the sheets were collected and researchers recorded the most popular topics, which were then shared and discussed as a group. During the group discussion, researchers confirmed whether the final tally of votes was acceptable to the group, and gave members an opportunity to explain their choice of voting or provide any comments. The process we used was similar to another review from sexual health promotion.<sup>15</sup> The consensus method allowed young people who were uncomfortable or disliked participating in group discussion, to contribute views via the anonymous individual voting activity. In this way, consensus methods addressed the inequality of participation and the tendency of open discussion to be dominated by a sub-set of voices.

## **Results: using the consultations to inform our systematic review**

### *Understanding the problem and developing the research aim*

At the outset of our review we developed broad research questions geared towards developing a map of evidence and theories related to the review. The advisory group was consulted at this stage to get a sense of the health topics important to them and what features of schools they perceived were important to health. We drew on their views (presented below), alongside the views of the adult professional advisory group, and our own interests as researchers to finalize the review questions to inform stage 1 'evidence mapping' which would set the parameters of our searches and inclusion criteria.

The consultations with the young people's advisory group highlighted the importance of considering mental and social health outcomes alongside physical health. Physical well-being was only briefly discussed, often referencing well-known public health messages to eat healthily (e.g. 5 A DAY – a national campaign to encourage the consumption of at least five portions of fruit and vegetables each day). Discussions focused on social relationships between students, mental well-being and student-staff relations. The advisory group also confirmed the importance of examining the effects of learning and teaching and student participation on health in schools. For example, having a good relationship with teachers at school was considered crucial to happiness and academic success (e.g. doing well in exams); the opportunity for students to have a say in the running of schools was seen as a way of promoting well-being and student councils were seen as a positive example of this. This was consistent with our own interest as researchers on the influence of schools' social environments on health. While the review would have focused on the school social environment without any input from the advisory group, it was reassuring to researchers that the young people also cited this as an important feature of the school environment.

By contrast, the initial consultation also identified an important area we had not previously considered. The advisory group highlighted the importance of the physical environment, making connections between poor toilets, canteens and classroom facilities with poor health and well-being. For example, one participant explained that their school had refused to provide toilet paper after students used it to block the sinks. Other group members explained that large class sizes meant classrooms were often cramped. This resulted in discomfort for students and less attention and control from teachers, which group members felt negatively affected their ability to learn. The consultation thus proved invaluable in identifying the school physical

environment as an important feature of the school environment, which might have been overlooked by researchers.

The advisory group discussed the importance of a wide range of health topics and features of the school environment, which they stressed, were irrevocably interlinked. For example, group members suggested that some students might cope with exam stress by eating unhealthy foods during their revisions or by using drugs. They also raised the important issue of physical space in schools and its impact on health. This called for an exploratory review that necessarily involved diverse groups of interventions, school-level influences and which considered both student and staff health. We therefore developed a broad approach to searching electronic databases to take account of the multidisciplinary nature of the review and developed our inclusion criteria to address themes emerging in consultations (see protocol<sup>30</sup>). We were aware that this would yield a large number of studies, but further consultations would allow us to narrow our scope at the mapping stage once we had a sense of the characteristics of studies across the research landscape.

### *Setting key priorities and focusing the review*

The evidence map was presented to the young people's advisory group whom we consulted for a second time to help focus the review for the in-depth synthesis.

The result of the consensus exercise identified *relationships* as the most important health related issue for advisory group members, as they suggested that most other health issues tended to stem from this. The second was *anxiety*, which was identified as a common outcome of poor relationships and was expressed in a variety of risk behaviours such as drug use and self-harm. There was complete consensus on the importance of these two health topics. In their discussions, the advisory group reiterated messages from the first consultation: they were concerned with social aspects of schools, such as relationships between students and between staff and students; the importance of mental well-being; student voice in developing policies in schools; and the importance of the physical environment, such as outdoor space and school facilities (e.g. canteen).

### *Impact of consultation on review*

In sum, four key issues related to school health emerged consistently in group consultations: physical environment, learning and teaching, student participation and social relationships (between students and between staff and students). Informed by these, our review focused on: how schools are organised and managed; how they deliver teaching, pastoral care and discipline; and schools' physical environments. These reflect more 'upstream' determinants of health than proximal determinants such as what food schools provide or how they deliver physical education.

We also decided to focus on studies related to student rather than staff health. This was not informed by our consultations, but was a pragmatic decision to help ensure the review was manageable and coherent in terms of scope (of the topic) and scale (in terms of how many studies would be included).

The final decision of how to focus the review was informed by various factors including: what features of schools (e.g. social relationships or discipline and pastoral care) are most pertinent to testing the hypotheses to be derived from our review of theoretical literature; which have been least focused on in existing reviews; which were of most interest to our advisory groups, both young people and adult professional groups; and which we, as researchers, were most

interested in. We found that young people's views of what to prioritise or how to conceptualise the school environment were consistent with the adult advisory group, the theoretical literature and our own research interests. This congruence provided us with the confidence and rationale to make decisions in our review.

In addition to helping steer decisions, the young people's advisory group views were also valuable in flagging potential gaps in the evidence. For example, in the first consultation, group members identified 'physical appearance' or 'self-image' as a health concern. Positive self-image was important in establishing self-esteem and developing friendships. Young people that were considered overweight did not 'fit in' and were often left out of friendship groups. The group also highlighted the pressures involved in having the 'appropriate' image, for example being 'cool' or 'pretty', which could result in feelings of anxiety and stress. We did not identify studies in our review that explored the social pressures of physical appearance on young people, thus suggesting a new avenue for investigation. This finding highlights the value of involving patients and public in setting research agendas.

Group members at both consultations also pointed out that different aspects of health and well-being are interlinked. For example, in the second consultation group members suggested that anxiety often leads to drug use, which in turn could lead to poor student-staff relationships. This highlighted that the boundaries of the review which separated the 'core business' of schools from health and well-being activities are more fuzzy in practice and that in conducting our review we should be careful not to falsely dichotomize studies on this basis. This was consistent with the established literature which suggests that seemingly separate health issues are irrevocably connected.<sup>31</sup> This helped inform how we approached our synthesis. For example, in the qualitative synthesis we used a meta-ethnography approach<sup>32</sup> whereby we initially grouped included studies based on health topics, identifying key themes and concepts within each of these. However, recognising the overlap and interconnectedness of health issues and features of schools (e.g. canteen environment, outdoor space, bullying policies), we then synthesized themes across health topics to identify a set of 'meta-themes' which cut across all health topics and features of the school.

The consultations also provided the team with 'early signals' of themes of salience in our qualitative and multilevel synthesis. For example, young people in our advisory group stressed in the first consultation that the pressures of academic attainment in schools were connected to health risk behaviours such as drug use, over-achieving, disengagement and self-harm. They also felt that teachers were more committed to achieving good student attainment on exams than to well-being. These themes also emerged prominently in studies we included in our qualitative review. We discuss this at some length in our full review and suggest that the increased marketisation of education may have serious health implications for students.<sup>20</sup>

Another 'early signal' highlighted by the advisory group was that student participation in decisions at school were important for health and well-being. This featured prominently in the studies we included and we discuss this as a main recommendation in our report.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, in addition to informing decisions in the review, the consultations helped ensure that the professional research perspective or bias was not the only one brought to bear on interpreting the literature.

The first consultation with the young people's advisory group identified how wider societal structures such as social class impact on school health. According to the group, schools from areas of higher deprivation may have fewer resources and larger class sizes which could negatively affect well-being. They also mentioned that an awareness of fellow students' social class could affect the atmosphere in a school. Amongst students in some schools there was an

emphasis placed on how much your parents earn, how you speak, where you live and students could be made to feel out of place or ashamed if they were from a poorer background. This was consistent with our own concern that the review should actively search and identify data related to inequalities. Unfortunately, few data on this were available to include in our review. However, we were able to make links between data emerging from individual studies to the wider context of education policy in the review (e.g. the marketisation of education and its impact on health inequalities).

### *On-line and face-to-face consultations*

Online consultations were not a successful engagement medium. Only two group members registered on the website and only one posted their views (consistent with that reported in face-to-face consultations). When asked why there was such little activity at the second group consultation, there was a feeling that a proprietary online social network was not favoured as it would require logging in for a single purpose: to comment on our research. The advisory group felt that integrating their involvement in research into a medium which they (and crucially their wider social network) were already engaged, such as Facebook, would be more desirable, in contrast to a standalone platform.

The group consultations on the other hand were successful in engaging young people and yielded rich data that informed key decisions in our review. All young people participated in providing views either via open discussion or smaller group or individual activities (i.e. individual voting exercise). While we did not formally evaluate this aspect of our work, young people appeared generally happy to work within the structure we provided and understood many of the terms and approaches we used, likely as a result of their training as part of the ALPHA group.

## **Discussion**

This paper has described the process of consulting with a young people's advisory group and the impact this had on our systematic review of on school health. In sum, there were a number of benefits of involving young people via face-to-face consultations: their participation helped ensure that issues which were important to young people were considered; they flagged 'early signals' of key issues for the synthesis; and provided researchers with confidence in their decision-making at key stages of the review. A summary outlining how the consultations impacted on review outputs is provided in Table 1.

While face-to-face consultations yielded important insights for our review, the online consultations were not as successful as young people reported they were averse to signing up to social networking platforms they were not already familiar with. Nevertheless, there are a number of benefits of web-based consultations, such as providing researchers with greater flexibility to elicit views when unanticipated issues arise and potentially being more convenient for advisory group members.<sup>33</sup> Future research should test this approach using popular social networking sites and mobile applications and work with young people to develop this approach.

While consultation is a relatively less intensive method of involvement on the continuum of participation<sup>11</sup>, we found it to be appropriate for this research. We feel that to have meaningful involvement of the public in a review, the context in which participation is sought should determine the nature of the participatory approach. Our systematic review was intentionally researcher-led, meaning that decisions ultimately lay with researchers and the review was carried out and disseminated by researchers. However, we wanted our focus to have relevance in the real world and be sensitised to the views of young people. Consultations were

an ideal mechanism to achieve this. Thus, while young people played a role in informing the review in various ways, as outlined above, their contribution was a *component* of wider factors of influence, rather than a *driver* of decision-making.

This paper has provided a description of not only the process of involving young people in systematic reviews, but also the impact of doing so on the review output, an area which has been neglected in previous accounts of participatory research<sup>34</sup>. However, our study is not without limitations. In conducting the consultations with young people we did not have an explicit aim to critically examine the processes, challenges and opportunities of overtly participative systematic reviews. This paper was developed at the conclusion of our review and arose from reflections by members of the research team with an interest in the potential of participatory research in the context of systematic reviews. Future research should explicitly aim to investigate the process and challenges at the outset, as well as consider what young people think and feel about being involved in participatory research, as the evidence base on this is weak.<sup>35</sup> Generally, we felt the young people involved were able to be honestly express their views during discussions. This might be because they knew one another through membership on the group, but attended different schools and/or they received training in the value of research. The presence of a trusted youth worker appeared to facilitate conversation. In addition, the ALPHA group predominantly consisted of white, middle-class young people and thus views may not be applicable to the experiences of young people from other 'social locations'. It would have been valuable to also illicit views from children to reflect a broader age range, but due to limited resources, this was not possible. Nonetheless, the ALPHA group is an invaluable resource for those wishing to involve young people in research. There should be more work establishing young people's panels in different places and the ALPHA group is a good case example of how this can work to improve research and outcomes (e.g. self-esteem) for young people themselves.<sup>36</sup> Finally, we hoped to involve young people at the end of our review to share our results but were unable to do this due to limited resources and time. Future work should plan to conduct consultations at the end of the review because stakeholders have a right to know where researchers have/have not included their views and their input could help researchers to explain and disseminate research to a wider audience, bridging the gap between the public and researchers.

## Conclusion

This paper highlights both the process and impact of consulting with young people in a systematic review on the effects of schools on student health. We conclude that consultations via an advisory group of young people are a valuable way to carry out systematic reviews because they are based on an ethical and political framework of participation. Consultations also support the decision-making process while ensuring that the professional research perspective is not the only one bringing to bear on the literature; and may give reviewers an early sense of what key themes are likely to emerge in the synthesis.

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The social ecology of girls' bullying practices: exploratory research in two London schools

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## **Introduction**

The World Health Organisation considers bullying to be a major adolescent health problem and the prevalence, harms and costs of bullying make addressing it a public health priority (Krug et al. 2002; McKee and Raine 2011; Scott et al. 2001). Definitions of bullying in the literature vary. However, the commonly held view is that bullying is long standing or repeated negative behaviour that is intentional and that involves an imbalance of power (Olweus 1993, Roland 1989). Bullying among young people may take physical, verbal, relational or social forms. Physical bullying (e.g., hitting, pushing) and verbal bullying (e.g., name-calling and teasing) are typically considered to be a direct form, while relational or social bullying (e.g. social exclusion and spreading rumours) refers to an indirect form. There is evidence that direct and indirect bullying and victimisation are associated with health risk behaviours such as substance use (Forero et al. 1999; Juvonen et al. 2003) as well as poorer psychological health status, school avoidance and poor academic performance (Rigby 2003a, Kaltiala-Heino et al. 2000, Swearer et al. 2010) although causality in either direction is possible. Youth bullying may also reinforce existing socioeconomic inequalities, as low socioeconomic status at family and school levels is associated with increased risk of experiencing bullying (Jansen et al. 2011). Schools are the most important site of bullying, as this is where it most often begins, and where young people are most concerned about bullying and victimisation (Chamberlain et al. 2010).

Research on school bullying, beginning with the seminal work of Olweus in the 1970s, has historically been dominated by psychologists examining characteristics of the individuals involved as bullies, victims, or bully-victims, in terms of personality traits and emotional and social cognitive abilities (Swearer et al. 2010; Smith and Brain, 2000; Ma et al. 2001). More recent sociological research has critiqued this approach and adopted a socio-ecological perspective to school bullying, focusing on the roles of peer group dynamics and social positioning (Eslea et al. 2003, Besag 2006, Duncan 1999, Macdonald and Swart 2004; Dance 2002, Pauelle 2013); and school ethos and discipline (Espelage and Swearer 2003, Jamal et al. 2013, Rigby 2003, Bibou-Nakou et al. 2012).

While this socio-ecological approach has led to a more complete picture of school bullying, there are some gaps in the literature. In particular, the interplay between student agency and institutional factors at the school level, and the peer social system promoted by students, has been under-examined. Empirical studies of bullying have also neglected the importance of wider structural factors such as gender and ethnicity.

Integrated whole-school approaches have been recommended as responses to bullying (Olweus 2010; Eslea and Smith 1998), but evaluations of interventions based on these approaches have yielded mixed results (Rigby and Bagshaw, 2003; Smith et al., 2004; Bauer et al., 2007; Merrell et al., 2008). Further research is needed to explore how students' lived experiences of bullying relate both to the school environment and to norms and processes in the wider society. This understanding could help in enabling whole-school interventions to

better address bullying by changing the context in which students live, interact and learn to create conditions more supportive of good relationships.

While gender has been examined, this has mostly focused on gender differences in bullying (Giles and Heyman, 2005; Vaillancourt et al. 2003), as well as how gender is socially constructed within schools and the processes involved in 'doing gender' in the context of bullying (Duncan 2004; Lahelma 2002; Renold 2005; Ringrose 2008; Ringrose and Renold 2010, Youdell 2006). However, these studies have generally not investigated how gender might be implicated in processes by which the school environment acts as an ecological determinant of bullying behaviours.

This study aims to address these gaps in the literature by focusing on the views of girls, as their voices have been marginalised in discourses of 'risky behaviour' and school achievement that overwhelmingly focus on boys, reinforcing some fallacious assumptions in research and policy that girls no longer face problems in school (Keddie 2009, McRobbie 2008). The study investigates the processes via which the school physical and social environment influences bullying practices, and considers how gender is implicated. In order to theorise these processes, we draw on Giddens' (1984) structuration theory. Giddens argues that social structures are constructed via agency and agency is both enabled and constrained by these structures. In this context structures would include both school environments and the wider social organisation they reflect. With respect to gender, structuration theory suggests that while gender roles constrain everyday practices, they are also shaped by those practices, in processes of 'identity work' which reconstruct roles in the process of their performance. The theory also indicates that this recursive relationship between agency and structure is mediated by institutional settings. This study considers whether bullying practices can be seen as 'identity work' in action, particularly with respect to gender, and how this understanding might shape our view of their relationship to the school setting. While this is a small-scale qualitative study, research of this kind allows us to capture students' lived experiences of schooling and adds deeper understanding of unfamiliar phenomena without making an exaggerated claim for generalisability. This paper provides original insight into bullying as experienced by girls focusing on the following questions: (1) what are students' accounts of bullying practices, (2) how are these enabled and constrained by the school environment, and (3) how is gender implicated in this?

## **Methods**

This paper arises from a larger exploratory project, which involved two focus groups, seven interviews and an analysis of school policy documents related to bullying in two schools in London, and aimed to look at the ways in which schools' social and physical environments shape health behaviours (e.g. eating, drug and alcohol use, bullying and aggressive behaviour) from the perspective of girls. Most girls participating in the project identified bullying as an important issue in their school and the majority of the discussion time was spent on the topic; it is thus the focus of this paper.

The CASS School of Education and Communities at the University of East London provided a list of secondary schools with which they had links. A list of thirteen schools was obtained, and we contacted 12 of them (one was an all-boys school) to participate in the study. Two schools, Eastgrove and Crescent (pseudonyms), volunteered to participate. Other schools did not respond or reported having no time to participate.

Eastgrove is a voluntary aided school. It has an all-girls main campus for students aged 11-15 years and a separate mixed sex centre for girls and boys aged 16-18 years. Ninety percent of

the school population are minorities (the largest groups being African or Caribbean), 36.3% do not speak English as a first language and 16% of students are eligible for free school meals, closely matching the national average of 15.9% (DfE, 2011). Crescent is a community school for girls 11-16 years with 92.5% of students not speaking English as a first language (the composition of minority students was not available, though the school sits within a predominately South Asian neighbourhood) and 30% of students are eligible for free school meals, well above the national average. Both schools are located in one of the most deprived boroughs in the UK, characterised by low incomes, low levels of qualifications and skills, poor housing and poor health. Both schools are rated 'outstanding' according to Ofsted.

Qualitative data were collected at Eastgrove and Crescent between July and October 2012 via two focus group discussions (one in each school) with girls 12-15 years and seven semi-structured interviews with girls 16-18 years from the mixed sex centre at Eastgrove (we included the views of these older students in our study as this age group has traditionally been less researched). The use of focus groups is common for exploratory research (Hughes et al. 2002). Focus groups are useful for understanding mutual experiences and identities, identifying cultural knowledge shared among participants and providing access to the language participants use to explain their experiences. They are also useful for enabling girls to discuss how the school environment shapes their experiences. The limitation however is that they may insufficiently capture the range of individual experiences.

Interviews, rather than focus groups, were conducted with the 16-18 year olds from Eastgrove for pragmatic reasons: the research at Eastgrove was undertaken at the end of term period making it difficult to coordinate a focus group as older students had different schedules and were busy preparing for exams. Interviews allowed greater flexibility as individual students could choose a time that was most convenient to them.

For the focus group discussions at both schools, a teacher was informed about the aims of the study by telephone and sent a leaflet describing the project. The teacher was asked to recruit a group of students that broadly reflected the student community (including both pro-school and disengaged). Teachers provided these students with a leaflet written for an adolescent audience describing the project. It appeared that girls recruited for the focus group at Crescent were all 'pro-school' students and girls recruited for the focus group at Eastgrove were from various social positions. In general, participants knew one another but were from different classes and year groups. For the interviews with Eastgrove students, a teacher forwarded an email and leaflet describing the project to students. Interested participants then contacted [author name] via email to set up an interview date and time.

At Eastgrove, 11 students aged 12-15 participated in a focus group in the school courtyard, and seven students aged 16-17 participated in semi-structured interviews held in a private office at the University of East London. At Crescent, six students aged 12-15 participated in a focus group in the school library. Informed consent was sought from all students and for students less than 16 years, their parent or carer also gave informed consent. All participants received a £10 voucher. The study was approved by the University of East London ethics committee.

The focus group discussions and interviews began with a presentation of the aims of the larger research project: to understand how the school social and physical environment influences students' health behaviours. Young people were asked to identify what health topics they felt were most relevant to their school or important to them. A list of topics, including bullying, sexual harassment, eating and physical activity, mental well-being and tobacco and substance use was presented on large chart paper to guide the discussion. In both focus groups and

interviews girls consistently directed the conversation to bullying as a key aspect of school life. Topic guides consisted of open-ended questions and prompts to collect information related to, for example: locations in the school important to health behaviours (e.g. what do you like or dislike about the canteen); and the social dynamics of engaging in risk behaviours (e.g. how does a fight or argument unfold in the school). However, the topic guide was covered in a flexible manner in order to allow conversations to progress in their own words. Focus group discussions and interviews were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Although the main source of data was accounts from girls themselves, this was supplemented with an analysis of publically available documents from the school websites. We searched the websites of Eastgrove and Crescent and read all documents with titles related to school rules, policies, conduct, principles, practices and/or standards. The documents pertinent to bullying were then included in the analysis. This included Eastgrove's anti-bullying policy (updated 2012) and Crescent's gender equality policy and exclusion policy (updated 2010). Crescent did not have a specific bullying policy on their website but a bullying policy was referenced in other policy documents.

Students' accounts of bullying and related behaviours and schools' policies related to bullying were selectively coded and extracted from the transcripts and documents, read and re-read in-depth and analysed thematically. For focus groups and interviews initial open coding was conducted which stuck closely to respondents' own words. Emerging themes were recorded and memos written. Subsequent stages involved axial coding to identify relationships between initial themes and patterns in the data, and interpreting the meaning of themes and patterns. The analysis attempted to go beyond describing a set of observations by using interpretation to explain bullying processes grounded in the narratives of young people. As a further stage in the analysis, the content of school policies were compared and contrasted with thematically organised data from focus groups and interviews, to further develop the analysis.

## **Emerging Themes**

### Sexual bullying practices in schools

Girls at Eastgrove and Crescent largely reported bullying practices such as spreading rumours, name-calling and teasing relating to girls' sexuality.

"They gossip, they spread rumours, they make fun of what music you listen to and seriously I was called a lesbian because I did not find One Direction [boy band] attractive..." - Focus group, Crescent.

Homophobic insults, for example being labelled a 'lesbian', were considered by all girls to be threatening and as one girl from Crescent said, could "ruin your reputation". Through such bullying tactics, girls appear to police one another's sexual identities in these schools, entrenching heterosexual norms as dominant and desirable.

"There was an incident once, I actually saw these two girls were [*makes a kiss face*], but they weren't actually [*kissing*], but they were really, really close to each others face... They are lesbians [*all girls make 'eww' and 'hissing' sounds in disapproval*]" – Focus group, Eastgrove.

"They call you a lesbian, even if you are not and if you are bisexual or something, they think you are disgusting and then they stay away from you" - Focus group, Crescent.

Girls participating in focus groups at Crescent and Eastgrove also reported the aggressive ways in which their bodies were scrutinised by their peers. These were considered by girls as highly “embarrassing” and included lifting skirts, pulling on bra straps and slapping bottoms. As one girl explained:

“These girls just run and slap you on the bum and they snap your bra strap, just to see if I was wearing a bra, its disgusting” – Focus group, Crescent.

While Crescent’s gender equality policy states that the school will “*take appropriate action in cases of sexual harassment and sexual discrimination*” it appeared that in practice, teachers and students at both Crescent and Eastgrove did not always recognise these behaviours as abusive because it occurred among girls, rather than between girls and boys.

“It should not be happening in the school and if you try to report a sexual harassment, the teachers do not take it serious, because it’s not a boy doing it” – Focus group, Crescent.

“To be honest if it was a boy pulling a girl’s skirt it is a bit iffy, but girls pull each other’s skirts up” – Focus group, Eastgrove.

Sexual bullying was also commonly experienced by the older girls we interviewed from the mixed sex education setting at Eastgrove.

“ At lunchtime we have to get ready for lessons switch over, there will be this group of boys where we walk [it] is where they hang out in the school.... But when they open the door, the way they look at you is like they are molesting you with their eyes if that’s possible. They look at you and then they might go [*makes sniffing noise*] ‘do you want to be in my league’ or something. I think I heard one of the boys slapped a teacher’s bum” – Interview, Eastgrove.

“One time, I was even in my classroom and two lads came up to me and started like “hey babe do you want to be my bitch” and things like that.... It can happen everywhere” – Interview, Eastgrove.

“Even though it would be classed as like sexual harassment, nobody would say that so if someone came up and slapped your bum or whatever or would just be like ‘oh your boobs look nice’ or whatever, they [the school] would just say it is the norm, because that is what boys are like and stuff like that” – Interview, Eastgrove.

Another girl explained in an interview that when she reported this type of abuse from male pupils to a trusted female teacher no action was taken to address the issue. The teacher recognised that this form of sexual abuse was common, but rather than challenging it, her advice was to ‘get used to it’.

“She [teacher] says that I will get used to it but she says it in a way that I have to watch [out for] myself. She has to watch herself and that is what she is saying. If she has to watch herself then I definitely have to watch myself” – Interview, Eastgrove.

These examples highlight, as other research has previously done (e.g. Ringrose and Renold 2009, Keddie 2009, Walkerdine 1990), the ways that boys’ sexual harassment towards girls is reinforced and normalised in these schools. In the context of girl-to-girl abuse, the findings suggest that similar to the ways in which some expressions of boys’ aggressive behaviours are

attributed to normal 'boy-like' behaviour, peer abuse based on sexuality and appearance among girls may also be attributed to normal 'girl-like' behaviour by teachers. Indeed, other research has suggested that some teachers consider these interactions as natural aspects of adolescent relationships and the hormonal 'explosion' of this developmental phase (Bansel et al. 2009).

These processes of gender regulation in schools has previously been described in studies exploring issues of masculinity, heterosexist and homophobic harassment, gender and sexual relations, and school based sex(uality) education (see for example, Pascoe 2011, Mac an Ghaill 1994, Renold 2005). While we recognize that there are differentiated patterns of identity construction, whereby individuals and peer groups draw on various resources to develop identities, it appears that among girls in this study, the norms of femininity still appeared to remain dominant. In the context of the mixed sex setting at Eastgrove, sexual harassment was common whereby boys directed verbal (name-calling) and physical (touching, slapping) abuse towards female students (and sometimes teachers), highlighting the pervasiveness of gender inequalities in the school environment. This suggests that Giddens' (1991) account of reflexivity in high modernity may have separated identity from tradition too sharply as hegemonic ideals of gender continue to structure and reproduce modern identities. Nonetheless, the data allow us to see how structure and action work together: sexual(ity) based bullying practices in these schools reproduced gender as a social category. In turn, the norms around these forms of gendered interaction were also reflected and reproduced by the way in which the schools in this study maintained dominant gendered conventions by sometimes ignoring that sexualised bullying practices were occurring.

#### Dynamic group process of peer abuse

Eastgrove's anti-bullying policy reports a school wide survey conducted by the school in 2012 which states that bullying at the school is most often characterised as verbal bullying (name calling, and threatening) and indirect bullying (social exclusion); and that most bullying was perceived by girls as:

*"Carried out by groups rather than individuals"* – Eastgrove anti-bullying policy document.

Indeed, one of the strategies recommended to students to avoid bullying is to *"make friends"*. However, despite recognising the salience of peer groups in the school environment, the anti-bullying policy at Eastgrove had been set to identify individual bullies and victims whereby victims of bullying are told to be prepared to *"identify who is behaving like a bully"*. This dyadic approach was challenged by girls in this study who stressed that there were "stories" involved in their social interactions and that identifying individual bullies or victims was not always useful or possible.

*"But I think the stereotype that there is a victim and there is a bully and then this bully is just doing it for no apparent reason, that is just really rare..."* – Focus group, Crescent.

*"... It is so much different to what is going on in the school [how the school addresses bullying] and what the inside story is, I think the teachers most of the time think of it as the generic story of bullying, this girl did this and this girl did that, but there is so much more to explain in the story..."* – Focus group, Crescent.

Ethnographic studies (Eder 1985; Adler 1995; Besag 2006) have previously revealed the 'clique' to be the central structure in the social organisation of young people, resulting in circles of power

characterized by shifting cycles of inclusion and exclusion (Carrera et al. 2011). Girls in focus groups at Eastgrove and Crescent similarly stressed the importance of peer groups in their schools and explained that ‘fitting in’ and ‘finding your group’ were imperative to avoid being seen as vulnerable and that for some girls bullying others was a way in which to maintain your position in a peer group.

“...Everyone needs to fit in. Hang out with the right kind of crew, have the right friends and just be a part of what everyone is, no matter what you do, you have to fit in” – Focus group, Crescent.

“There was this one girl who went into a friendship just to get another girl jealous.... she actually sparked a big fight” – Focus group, Eastgrove.

“Some people want to even just show off to their friends, like ‘yes I am going to fight this person, so I am going to bring them out here so everyone can see’... – Focus group, Eastgrove.

Fletcher et al (2009a; 2009b; 2009c) in their studies of secondary schools in London as well as ethnographic studies from the US (Paulle 2013, Dance 2002) have suggested that the desperate need to fit in at school in order to avoid aggression and ensure safety may lead young people to feel obliged to engage in risky behaviours such as smoking, drug use or violence as these ‘tough’ behaviours are protective tools that facilitate social bonding with peers, particularly in ‘rough’ inner-city schools. Similarly in this study, the process of ‘fitting in’ with a peer group and establishing group boundaries among girls appeared to involve a level of peer abuse.

Therefore, girls’ accounts in this study suggest that bullying behaviours are not always characterised by consistent disparities in power as embodied in the classic definition of bullying (Olweus 1993). Rather, the girls suggested that the repeated acts of aggression are more fluid with regard to the bully and victim role highlighting that there are complex “stories” of social interaction. This is particularly important as it raises the possibility of school policies actually exacerbating bullying risk by reifying the roles of ‘bully’ and ‘victim’, causing more stability in these roles than there would be otherwise. Indeed, previous research has stressed the prominence of the dual bully-victim role (Jacobson 2012). The view of bullying as characterised by disparities in power between individuals also tends to obscure its structural role in maintaining inequalities and policing acceptable roles, especially gender roles, which are highlighted by a more socio-ecological approach.

### The social importance of space in the bullying context

To avoid being targeted by bullying in the school environment it was important to belong to a friendship group, but also for your group to occupy the appropriate physical ‘space’ in the school environment to call your own. Social groups informally occupied spaces in the school environment at Eastgrove and Crescent such as benches, corridors, lunch tables or areas in the school field and girls protected these boundaries.

“If you were to sit in someone else’s bench or sit at someone else’s table in the playground, that person that would normally sit there would come and they would maybe like patronise you and say that it’s my place” – Focus group, Crescent.

“The girls in the older years expect that if you come into their territory, they expect you to move” – Focus group, Eastgrove.



Boundaries between peer groups are thus both socially, as well as spatially distributed in the school environment. Some girls suggested that mobility within the school is often restricted by your social position:

“If you don’t have many friends in high places, you are restricted in the school... you can’t just go places if you don’t know the right places to go for you” – Focus group, Crescent School.

“The popular group would stay in the common room and the geeks will stay in the study area”– Interview, Eastgrove.

“One of my friends, she was hanging out with us, she was a tag along. She told me that she did not want to interfere; she was just hanging out with us because she hasn’t got anywhere to sit, to go to...” –Focus group, Crescent.

Girls in interviews and focus groups at both schools suggested that some spaces in the school environment were ‘open’, meaning they were not controlled by peer networks. These were always learning spaces such as classrooms, libraries and computer rooms which ‘floaters’ or ‘loners’ would frequent during lunch or before and after school to keep busy doing school work, reading or playing computer games:

“A lot of people they don’t want to be seen as a loner, so they go to the computer, they disguise themselves either doing their homework, maybe taking a book out, just pretending to read” – Focus group, Crescent.

While various practices of peer abuse such as gossip or rumours, name-calling, verbal taunting and general ‘meanness’ were said to happen anywhere in the school environment, girls in focus groups and interviews suggested that physical aggression tended to be located specifically at spaces and times (before or after school and at lunch or break) that were unsupervised by teachers or other staff to avoid “exclusion”. These were most commonly unused classrooms, toilet areas, canteens, secluded outdoor areas of the school such as the ‘courts’ or at bus stops or local parks just outside the school grounds.

In discussing incidents of aggressive behaviour at Eastgrove, the girls mentioned that due to ‘turf wars’ on school grounds (violence involving students from different neighbourhoods), the school introduced a surveillance policy where police patrolled hallways, classrooms, corridors and outdoor spaces once a week. At Crescent, some girls reported that CCTV cameras were placed just outside the toilets, although other girls in the focus group said this was a myth. Nevertheless, these surveillance approaches were considered by most students to be ineffective in deterring fights as they would be displaced to other unsupervised locations or times. Some girls expressed frustration with this approach to discipline. This is exemplified in the remarks by an older student:

“It is like they are watching to see and hope that something goes wrong so that they can do something” – Interview, Eastgrove.

However, other students felt that it may be necessary to have these forms of surveillance mechanisms in place, at least for older students.

“I understand why it would be in [the mixed sex centre for 16-18 years]... but I do not understand why Eastgrove [12-15 years] has to have a Police Officer on the school”– Interview, Eastgrove.

“I feel you are being watched all the time, but I guess sometimes it is necessary” – Focus group, Crescent.

Girls in both interviews and focus groups suggested that the motivation to bully others was often to showcase ‘toughness’, ‘status’ or to build and maintain a reputation. It was important therefore, that physical fights or verbal confrontations occurred at places and times where there were crowds of students.

“When you have a crowd you are more likely to do it because you want people to feel like ‘oh did you see what happened’ but when you are in a secluded place with only 10 people around you it is not going to be news, so people just want it to be a bit of news” – Focus group, Eastgrove.

In sum, the data points to the social importance of space in the context of bullying. While Giddens is emphatic that routine patterns of behaviour are structured temporally and spatially, he challenges the salience of localised or situated sociality in a period of late modernity whereby social interactions are said to have become disembedded from local contexts and “restructured across indefinite spaces of time-space” (Giddens 1991, p. 21). From this perspective, it can be argued that in late modernity experiences and interactions are increasingly technologically *mediated* (via online communication) rather than locally or physically *situated*. This process of ‘disembedding’ is apparent among our sample in the way in which bullying practices employ the Internet and mobile phones:

“I think it is from mobile phones, emails, all of that because gossip starts from there and then it builds up...” – Focus group, Crescent School.

On the other hand, accounts from girls at these schools suggest this has not altogether replaced localised or situated social interactions, which are still spatially patterned in the school environment. Indeed, Eastgrove’s 2012 school bullying survey reported in their anti-bullying policy stated that “*whilst the abuse/misuse of social network sites and blackberry messenger is becoming more frequent... less than 5% of pupils have reported experiencing this*” – Eastgrove anti-bullying policy.

### The importance of teacher-student relationships in the bullying context

Most girls in interviews and focus groups reported that teachers were ineffective in reducing or addressing bullying in the school. According to some girls, a key factor attributed to this was teachers’ narrow focus on preparing students for examinations and other assessments:

“Even when they find out [about an incident of bullying], they don’t take it as something very important. As long as the grades are good and the reputation is good, that is enough for them” – Focus group, Crescent.

“Compared to primary, [in] secondary you have got more responsibility so the teachers don’t care and there is a lot of students to take care compared to primary” – Focus group, Crescent.

Generally, girls appeared to want more ‘understanding’ teachers that were available to discuss their circumstances at home, showing an obligation to students’ wellbeing beyond academic achievement.

“They don’t really care what happens at home, they just care about the grades and if my grades were dropping, one teacher was worried about what was happening at home and another thought I was just being really lazy.... They should be more understanding”  
– Focus group, Crescent.

Also, teachers at these schools may have lacked the necessary ‘cultural capital’ required to identify and intervene when bullying was occurring. At Eastgrove, girls explained that teachers sometimes did not intervene in incidents of bullying in schools because they were unable to differentiate the signs of a fight beginning on the basketball courts, from dancing that (African and Caribbean) girls did outdoors at break times.

“Like when it is hot days, we tend to gather in a big circle like a big crowd and people start doing the chants and dances [*girl shows dance and chant*], having fun and stuff, but so that tends to look like it [a fight] because some people are going in the middle and stuff [to dance]... so sometimes when there is actually a fight, teachers might brush it off as them dancing” – Focus group, Eastgrove.

It appeared that as a result of teachers’ narrow focus on academic attainment in these schools, some forms of bullying were often inappropriately addressed or at times, altogether ignored. This is likely linked to Education policy in England which increasingly encourages schools to maximise students’ academic attainment, and this is often at the expense of their broader wellbeing, personal development and health (Bonell 2014). Previous studies have consistently reported that students are more likely to feel safe or supported when they have positive relationships with teachers, characterised by providing support beyond classroom instruction (Fletcher 2009a, Plano Clark 2002).

## Discussion

This study presents qualitative data on the nature of school bullying from the perspective of girls. It is original in using Giddens’ (1984) structuration theory to help us unpick how bullying practices in our two schools appeared to be connected to social structures in a dynamic way. Based on the accounts in this study we theorise that girls in our sample were active agents struggling for identity and desperate to ‘fit in’ at school, and through this socialisation process, at times used their own resources (e.g. social position; occupied spaces) to bully one another and (re)develop or maintain a social order. These practices reconstituted the social and physical environment at schools in this study, at times creating a climate of peer abuse. Importantly, these social processes of bullying unfolded across the physical spaces of the school (e.g. benches, canteen), pointing to the social importance of space in the everyday behaviours of agents. The schools in this study in turn also structured bullying practices via prevention and conflict resolution practices that identified girls as either bully or victim, masking the complex social dynamics of bullying where bully and victim roles are shifting and situated within a ‘story’ of social interaction. Thus, this paper suggests that bullying is not always best understood in terms of stable asymmetric victim and perpetrator roles, as embodied in the classic definitions of bullying in research. The view of bullying as characterised by disparities in power between *individuals* also tends to obscure its structural role in maintaining inequalities and policing acceptable roles, especially gender roles, which are highlighted by a more socio-ecological approach. The pervasiveness of bullying in the schools we studied can also be set in the context of wider structural forces such as market-oriented education policies which contribute to school climates narrowly focused on attainment at the expense of physical and psychological health problems experienced by girls (Arnot 1999).

In terms of gender, structuration is useful in exploring how sexualised bullying practices reproduce gender as a social category via the policing of bodies and sexuality among girls and overt sexual harassment from boys. Simultaneously, the schools in our sample, in not recognising these forms of peer abuse as bullying, are also involved in the production of gender in the school environment. While Giddens' theory of structuration has been useful, our findings suggest that in terms of identity construction, Giddens does not adequately recognise the continuing role that traditional gendered and sexual discourses play in structuring the identities of the schools and girls in our study. Unlike social class, gender is overt in identity work. Thus, it appears that reflexivity interacts with traditional gendered frameworks (Ashe 2004). That is, young people draw on various resources to construct self-identities, but identity is still tangled in collective processes of identification, albeit in new cultural forms.

While this exploratory study has helped to illuminate how bullying is enabled and constrained by the school environment, it is not without limitations. Above all, the study involved a very small sample of students from two schools in London, thus the findings are illustrative rather than comprehensive. While the qualitative data is highly instructive for generating theoretical insights and identifying priorities for further research, the data presented are not necessarily generalisable. Students participating in interviews or focus groups were recruited as part of a larger exploratory project examining a wide range of health behaviours, and thus data collection did not solely focus on bullying. The broader focus however enabled us to get a sense of how pervasive bullying is to girls' everyday lives as girls across interviews and focus groups identified this topic as important thus allowing us to establish rather than assume that bullying is a key issue. As teachers recruited participants for this study our sample may not have included students from different 'social positions' in the school and voices of pro-school students may have dominated. The focus group at Eastgrove was likely too large to facilitate an open dialogue whereby all students had the chance to contribute meaningfully. The use of focus groups may have led some participants to withhold speaking openly about their experiences in front of others with whom they have ongoing contact or who are of a different age or year group. Thus we may have missed age based nuances, as group conversations with girls tended to emphasise shared experiences rather than contradictory views. Focus groups may also lead to impression management whereby participants tailor their views and presentation in order to influence how they are perceived by others. We also acknowledge that the lack of emphasis on stable bully and victim identities in the accounts from girls may have been an artefact of the methods used in the study. For example, the use of focus groups rather than interviews with the younger girls [12-15 years] may have resulted in girls less willing to admit to bullying or being bullied in situations where power relations in the school were actually stark and stable. Nonetheless, it is clear that there was considerable divergence between the concept of bullying implicit in school policies and the lived experiences of students. This study concentrated on peer social structures and how this was affected by the institutional structure; however to explore the latter in more depth would require data from school staff. Despite these limitations, this study adds to the growing body of evidence that illustrates how everyday experiences shape young people's behaviours and demonstrates the importance of investigating girls' perspectives of bullying. Such research is critical in informing interventions that are sensitive to the ways in which bullying is produced and reproduced through everyday interactions and spaces within schools. Further research should explore the potential for schools adopting a more holistic approach to traditional 'bullying prevention' which addresses the depth and range of peer abuse experienced by girls, recognises bullying as a dimension of ongoing relationships, and promotes positive and healthy interactions between students and between teachers and students.

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## Appendix 2. Complete publication portfolio

### Peer-reviewed journal publications

1. Jamal F, Bonell C, Wooder K, Blake S (2015) Let's talk about sex: gender and sexual health in English schools, *Sexual Health* <http://dx.doi.org/10.1071/SH15010>
2. Jamal F, Bonell C, Harden A, Lorenc T (2015) The social ecology of girls' bullying practices: exploratory research in two London schools. *Sociology of Health & Illness* 10.1111/1467-9566.12231.
3. Bonell C, Jamal F, Melendez-Torres GJ, Cummins S (2014) 'Dark logic': theorising the harmful consequences of public health interventions. *Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health* 69(1): 95-98.
4. Jamal F, Langford B, Daniels P, Thomas J, Harden A, Bonell C (2014) Consulting with young people to inform systematic reviews: an example from a review on the effects of schools on health. *Health Expectations* 10.1111/hex.12312.
5. O'Mara-Eves A, Brunton G, McDaid D, Oliver S, Kavanagh J, Jamal F et al. (2013) Community engagement to reduce inequalities in health: a systematic review, meta-analysis and economic analysis. *Public Health Research* 1(4).
6. Jamal F, Bertotti M, Lorenc T, Harden A (2013) Reviewing conceptualisations of community: reflections on a meta-narrative approach. *Qualitative Research* 15(3): 314-333.
7. Bonell C, Fletcher A, Jamal F, Wells H, Harden A, Murphy S et al. (2013) Theories of how the school environment impacts on student health: Systematic review and synthesis. *Health & Place* 24: 242-249.
8. Fletcher A, Jamal F, Fitzgerald-Yau, N, Bonell C (2013) "We've got some underground business selling junk food": qualitative evidence of the unintended effects of English school food policies. *Sociology* 48(3): 500-517.
9. Jamal F, Fletcher A, Harden A, Wells H, Thomas J, Bonell C (2013) The school environment and student health: a meta-ethnography of qualitative research. *BMC Public Health* 13: 798.
10. Bonell C, Jamal F, Harden A, Wells H, Parry W, Fletcher A, et al. (2013) Systematic review of the effects of schools and school environment interventions on health: evidence mapping and synthesis. *Public Health Research* 1(1).
11. Bonell C, Wells H, Harden A, Jamal F, Fletcher A, Thomas J et al. (2013) The effects on student health of interventions modifying the school environment: systematic review. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health* 67(8): 677-681.
12. Cresswell JA, Yu G, Hatherall B, Morris J, Jamal F, Harden A et al. (2013) Predictors of the timing of initiation of antenatal care in an ethnically diverse urban cohort in the UK. *BMC Pregnancy Childbirth* 13: 103.

13. Bonell C, Parry W, Wells H, Jamal F, Fletcher A, Harden A et al. (2013) The effects of the school environment on student health: a systematic review of multi-level studies. *Health & Place* 21: 180-191.
14. O'Mara-Eves A, Brunton G, Kavanagh J, Jamal F, Thomas J (2012) Community engagement in public health interventions to reduce health inequalities: mapping the evidence against policy objectives *The Lancet*, 380(3): S59.
15. Jamal F (2012) Contemporary Theorists for Medical Sociology (G Scambler). *Critical Public Health* 23(1): 125-126.
16. Lorenc T, Pearson M, Jamal F, Cooper C, Garside R (2012) The role of systematic reviews of qualitative evidence in evaluating interventions: a case study. *Research Synthesis Methods* 3(1): 1-10.
17. Lorenc T, Jamal F, Cooper C (2012) Resource provision and environmental change for the prevention of skin cancer: Systematic review of qualitative evidence from high-income countries. *Health Promotion International* 28(3): 345-356.
18. Bonell C, Harden A, Wells H, Jamal F, Fletcher A, Petticrew M et al. (2011) Protocol for a systematic review of the effects of schools and school-environment interventions on health: evidence mapping and synthesis. *BMC Public Health* 11: 453.

## Research reports

1. Bertotti M, Jamal F, Harden A (2012) A review of conceptualisations and meaning of 'community' within and across research traditions: a meta-narrative approach. London: Arts and Humanities Research Council.
2. Rizzo M, Martin A, Jamal F, Lehmann A, Llewellyn A, Marrero-Guillamon I et al. (2011) Evidence review on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of *service models or structures* to manage tuberculosis in hard-to-reach groups. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.
3. Rizzo M, Martin A, Cliff-Matthews V, Jamal F, Lehmann A, Llewellyn A et al. (2011) Evidence review on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions aimed at *identifying* tuberculosis in hard-to-reach groups. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.
4. Rizzo M, Martin A, Cliff-Matthews V, Jamal F, Lehmann A, Llewellyn A et al. (2011) Evidence review on the effectiveness and cost-effectiveness of interventions aimed at *managing* tuberculosis in hard-to-reach groups. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.
5. O'Mara A, Marrero-Guillamón I, Jamal F, Lehmann A, Cooper C, Lorenc T. (2010) Qualitative review of barriers and facilitators to access and uptake of screening and

treatment for tuberculosis in hard-to-reach groups. London: National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence.

6. O'Mara A, Jamal F, Lehman A (2010) Evidence review: Delivering better outcomes for young people by increasing the impact of targeted youth support and development. London: C4EO.
7. O'Mara A, Jamal F, Lehman A (2010) Evidence review: Supporting families, parents and carers to improve child outcomes. London: C4EO.