THE MALE ADOLESCENT'S EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING IN HIS FAMILY: A GESTALT PERSPECTIVE

by

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My husband and sons for their endless patience and support during this undertaking

“The hunger to belong is not merely a desire to be attached to something. It is rather sensing that great transformation and discovery become possible when belonging is sheltered and true.”

John O’Donahue
Source: Anam Cara (A book of Celtic wisdom)

DEDICATION

I DEDICATE THIS STUDY TO:

My husband, Grant, to whom my heart belongs completely, for his enduring, unconditional love and his support;

To my sons, Alasdair and Campbell, who belong in my heart forever, for filling my life with challenges, joy, love and laughter;

To my mother and father, my source of belonging. Thank you for your selfless love and for encouraging me to achieve my dreams.

SUMMARY

This qualitative study aimed to explore the male adolescent's sense of belonging in his family, in order to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept. In order to achieve the aim, a conceptual framework was outlined focusing on concepts central to this topic, including belonging, adolescence and Gestalt theory. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eleven adolescents in order to obtain rich data. The data collected during these interviews was subsequently analysed and several themes and categories were identified and explored by the use of a literature control.

Conclusions, recommendations and a Gestalt understanding of belonging were then presented.

KEY WORDS

Experience
Adolescent
Belonging
Family
Gestalt

STATEMENT

Student number: 0574-893-3

I declare that “THE MALE ADOLESCENT’S EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING IN HIS FAMILY: A GESTALT PERSPECTIVE”, is my own work and that all the sources I have used or quoted have been indicated and acknowledged by means of complete references.

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TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN

We hereby certify that we have language edited the Master's dissertation prepared by Ms D Easton entitled *THE MALE ADOLESCENT'S EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING IN HIS FAMILY: A GESTALT PERSPECTIVE* and that we are satisfied that, provided the changes we have made are effected to the text, the language is of an acceptable standard, fit for publication.

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CHAPTER ONE
OVERVIEW AND RATIONALE OF THE RESEARCH

1.1 INTRODUCTION

A review of the existing literature regarding adolescent development led the researcher to repeated references to attachment, connection and to the 'need to belong'. The satisfaction of this need to belong appears to have significant positive benefits during the developmental phase of adolescence, easing the transition from adolescence to early adulthood (cf. Jarvis, 2004:148; Newman & Newman, 2006: 323,333; Santrock, 2006: 400,405; Berk, 2009:425-430,434,467).

The corpus of theory on belonging has its roots in ethological and evolutionary perspectives which postulate that man's need to form and maintain bonds is a prerequisite for species survival (Baumeister & Leary, 1995:499). John Bowlby applied ethological theory to human development in the 1960s when he investigated man's need to form and maintain relationships during the first year of life (cf. Baumeister & Leary, 1995:497; Salter Ainsworth, 1995:971,984).

In the 1990s Baumeister and Leary (1995:497-498) reviewed research accumulated over decades pertaining to belonging and formulated a 'belongingness hypothesis'. This hypothesis posits that the need to belong is almost as compelling as the need for food, and that the satisfaction thereof is associated with psychological wellbeing (Baumeister & Leary, 1995:498; 505-506). The data advanced in this chapter will repeatedly point to the benefits and preventive potential of experiencing a sense of belonging.

Certain authors (cf. Newman & Newman: 2006:333; Berk, 2009:467,574-575,608,622) submit that adolescents need a significant experience of connection in their families in order to achieve a unique sense of identity and to ensure their overall optimal development. There is further agreement amongst authors that family continues to be of primary importance, despite the conflict that typically escalates during adolescence (cf.

Newman & Newman, 2006:333; Santrock, 2006:400, 405). Bee and Boyd (2004:469), Jarvis (2004:148), Newman and Newman (2006:323) and Berk (2009:467) all stipulate that the family must provide a template for experiencing the foundational benefits of connectedness, in order to enhance the adolescent's experience of psychological wellbeing and identity development.

Berk (2009:608,622,624-625) corroborates these views, stating that securely attached adolescents from warm, supportive families are more adaptive, experience better peer relationships and are less vulnerable to problem behaviours than adolescents from unsupportive families.

Adolescence is viewed, however, as a potentially turbulent time in much of the literature pertaining to this developmental phase. In this regard the World Health Organisation (WHO) and United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF) are advocating a greater degree of focus on the developmental phase of adolescence.

According to literature dispersed by the WHO [Sn:sa], at least twenty percent of adolescents will experience some form of mental illness, such as depression, mood disturbance, substance abuse, suicidal behaviours or eating disorders. As such, the WHO [Sn:sa] places an increased focus on promoting mental health in this age group and deems the pursuit of adolescent mental health to be a "necessary priority for the development of societies".

Berk (2009:466,467) indicates that adolescence is a critical stage of development, often characterised by potential crises and dangers, where depression and suicide rise sharply. Lampert (2003:151) submits that many adolescent deaths, usually regarded as accidents, may, in fact, be attributed to suicide. Furthermore, self-destructive behaviour in adolescents, such as reckless driving and substance abuse may indirectly be suicidal (Lampert, 2003:151).

In the light of the arduous and precarious task of adolescent development, and given the benefits associated with a sense of belonging, it may be that a greater understanding of the concept of belonging is particularly useful and relevant during this life phase in order to facilitate its transition.

Experiencing a sense of belonging in their families has implications for the healthy development of adolescents. From a Gestalt perspective (cf. Joyce & Sills, 2001:113; Yontef, 1993b), healthy development implies that the individual is aware of his needs and is able to adjust to the environment in order to meet them, thereby ensuring self-regulation. Long (1997:82-83) advances the idea that the adolescent's need is "for a place to belong". If belonging in his family is one of the adolescent's needs, then from a Gestalt perspective, a greater awareness of this need may be considered beneficial to the adolescent (cf. Beisser, 1970; Yontef, 1993a:249).

The focus of this study has been to conduct semi-structured interviews with adolescents in order to explore and describe their experiences of belonging in the family and to interpret this experience from a Gestalt perspective.

1.2. RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Strydom and Delport (2005b:320) state that problem formulation is the researcher's broad concept of the problem that needs to be researched. The literature study undertaken by the researcher has shown that whilst the concept of belonging is often used interchangeably with those of connectedness and attachment, what remains constant is the experience of wellbeing, happiness and positive affect that characterise the experience of belonging.

The WHO [Sn:sa] expounds the fact that parents play a crucial role in providing care and support during this challenging developmental period. Long (1997:82-83) expresses the concern, however, that the traditional family is not meeting the adolescent's need to belong. Resnick, Harris and Blum (1993) echo Long's concern, stating that interventions

for youths at risk must critically examine the ways in which opportunities for a sense of belonging may be fostered.

The researcher is a parent of adolescent males and has sought ways to make them more resilient throughout this developmental phase. The researcher has been particularly interested in promoting secure family attachments in the belief that these attachments have the greatest protective value in the successful transition of adolescents to adulthood. According to statistics disseminated by the WHO [Sn:sa], males are more likely to show emotions in ways that appear to be aggressive or socially unacceptable.

In addition, there is a greater engagement in high-risk behaviours in male adolescents than in females and suicide is more common amongst among male adolescents. In the light of these facts, the successful transition of adolescents to adulthood is considered to be more challenging for males than it is for females.

Van Heerden (2007), a Church Minister with forty-five years of experience, is of the opinion that adolescents present with problems that may be symptomatic of an overarching sense of not belonging in their families. It is Van Heerden's opinion that problems associated with adolescence such as sexual experimentation, substance and alcohol abuse, dropping out of school, depression and low self-esteem may be symptomatic of the lack of a sense of belonging within the family.

In addition, the adolescent's increasing reliance on electronic forms of communication, such as MXIT and Facebook may also stem from a lack of belonging within the family (Van Heerden, 2007). These opinions provided the necessary impetus for this study.

In accordance with Van Heerden's observations, authors such as Baumeister and Leary (1995:505-506, 508-509,511), Santrock (2006:400) and Stevens, Martina and Westerhof (2006:495) agree that the lack of secure, warm relationships within the family may be consistently associated with negative affect, depression, loneliness and anxiety in adolescents.

Berk (2009:610) notes that not experiencing a significant sense of attachment within the family results in increased susceptibility to a range of problems, including experimentation with sexual behaviours, alcohol and drugs at an early age. Berk (2009:622,624-625) observes, on the other hand, that securely attached adolescents have better peer relations and are less likely to engage in problem behaviours, such as juvenile delinquency and drug abuse than insecurely attached adolescents.

Given the afore-mentioned benefits that result when a sense of belonging exists in the family, it may be concluded that adolescents need to experience a sense of belonging in order to develop their fullest potential.

Although Bowlby (in Salter Ainsworth, 1969:969-1025) and Baumeister and Leary (1995:497-529) have developed perspectives on belonging, the literature offers no Gestalt understanding of this concept. One of the implications of this study is that, in the light of the well-documented and significant benefits associated with meeting the need to belong, Gestalt therapists may be able to understand and reconcile this concept to the paradigm within which they practise.

As indicated by Yontef (1993b), awareness is one of the primary tools of Gestalt therapy and the researcher suggests that the results of this study may result in a greater awareness of this relevant mental health concept. In addition, a greater awareness and understanding of the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family may be of benefit to parents of adolescents, as well as to both professionals and lay persons who work with adolescents.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher undertook an extensive search of websites in order to examine the existing theories and current research pertaining to belonging, and to ascertain whether any Gestalt perspective on belonging exist in the literature. These websites included: www.unisa.co.za and specifically Gestalt websites, such

as www.mgc.org.uk, www.gestaltreview.com, www.g-gej.org, www.gestalttheory.net and www.britishgestaltjournal.com.

Given that the researcher was unable to source any Gestalt understanding of the phenomenon of belonging in the literature, this study may be useful in contributing to the existing Gestalt database. In addition to the dearth of Gestalt literature concerning the concept of belonging, there is a lack of literature specifically describing the adolescent's subjective experience of belonging within the family.

Baumeister and Leary (1995:522) posit that the desire to belong may be one of "the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available to understand human nature". Taking Baumeister and Leary's opinion into consideration, it seems necessary that therapists from different theoretical perspectives should be able to incorporate this concept into their overall framework in order to utilise the concept in a manner that is congruent with their specific paradigm.

From the above discussion it may be concluded that satisfying the need to belong may have potentially preventive and protective value in the lives of adolescents. The researcher suggests that the need to belong during adolescence requires further study in order to intervene successfully in the lives of adolescents who do not experience a sense of belonging. Intervention may circumvent the negative affect and dysfunctional behaviour associated with a lack of belonging.

Information obtained from this study field may, therefore, be of benefit to all lay and professional people who work with adolescents and families. Acquiring a deeper understanding of the adolescent's subjective experience of belonging from a Gestalt perspective will further benefit professionals who work with adolescents and families within a Gestalt paradigm.

The researcher consequently undertook a phenomenological exploration of the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family in order to understand this experience from the Gestalt perspective.

For the purpose of this study the researcher will make use of a research question instead of a hypothesis. Strydom and Delport (2005b:321) elucidate the formulation of a research question as being the process whereby vague questions are formulated into a specific question regarding the subject. Cresswell (1998:170) stipulates that within qualitative research the questions will start with 'what' and 'how', in contrast to the quantitative study where the question starts with 'why'.

Based on the preceding discussion and review of the literature, the researcher has formulated the following research question for the study:

What is the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family, and how can this experience be understood from a Gestalt perspective?

1.3 AIMS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

Fouché and de Vos (2005:104) define the aim of a study as "the end towards which effort or ambition is directed". The aim of this study is to explore and describe the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family and to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept. Fouché and de Vos (2005:104) clarify that objectives are the steps that need to be taken to attain the intended aims.

In order to attain the aim of this study, the following objectives were identified:

- To conduct a literature study in order to establish a conceptual framework on belonging, the Gestalt phenomenological paradigm and adolescent development.

- To gather empirical data by means of conducting semi-structured interviews with adolescents exploring their experience of belonging within their family.

- To analyse the empirical data by means of a framework applicable for the analysis of qualitative data, and to describe and verify these findings according to the literature.

- To a) come to conclusions and make recommendations to parents with regard to male adolescents' sense of belonging within their family; and b) to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of the concept of belonging and to make recommendations in this regard to professionals who work with adolescents within the Gestalt paradigm.

1.4 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK AND PARADIGM FOR THIS STUDY

The paradigm that forms the foundation of this study is a Gestalt phenomenological paradigm. De Vos (2005b:40) utilises Kuhn's definition of a paradigm as the "… model or pattern according to which a scientist views his objects of research within his particular discipline".

The researcher's phenomenological assumptions are that adolescents create their own sense of meaning out of their experiences. This study therefore focuses on the meaning the adolescent ascribes to his experience of belonging rather than the researcher's interpretation of this experience.

The goal of exploration from a phenomenological perspective, according to Yontef and Jacobs (2005:300), is awareness or insight. Kirchner (2000) expands on Gestalt theory as a holistic, process-oriented, dialogical, phenomenological, existential and field approach. Gestalt theory gave rise to Gestalt therapy which has contact, awareness and individual responsibility at its core.

The scientific world view underpinning the Gestalt phenomenological perspective is field theory. As indicated by Yontef (2005:85), field theory is a form of exploration that takes into account the entire field of which an event is a part. Based on descriptions of the field by Yontef (2005:10) and Yontef and Jacobs (2005:300), the field, in this study, refers to the outer and inner world of the adolescent and the constantly changing relationship between these worlds.

The central tenet of holism, as outlined by Kirchner (2000), is that all elements of the whole are interrelated and are affected by each other, making the whole greater than the sum of its parts. Holism is thus defined by the principle that parts of a whole cannot be studied in isolation, but must be understood within the context of the whole. All individuals are consequently viewed as integrated wholes with the capacity for mature self-expression and the potential for growth.

The view held in this research is that each participant is a product of his field which encompasses the contexts of family and school, as well as individual thoughts, beliefs and memories. For the purpose of this study, it was assumed that each of these factors will affect the participant during interviewing.

In keeping with such an approach, the researcher practised the phenomenological concepts of bracketing, description, horizontalism and active curiosity, as outlined by Joyce and Sills (2001:17-22). The researcher, in consequence, explored the adolescent's subjective meaning and experience of himself and his sense of belonging in his family.

Yontef (1993b) describes Gestalt therapy as having an "existential heritage". In keeping with Gestalt's existential roots, this study was also conducted from an existential perspective as it has evolved from Phenomenology. In keeping with an existential approach, each individual was thus considered to be an expert on his subjective experience.

1.5 RESEARCH APPROACH

Fouché and Delport (2005:74) explain that the qualitative approach does not tend to identify variables, explain behaviour through change or create new theories, but rather to describe in detail and to learn from the experiences of the participants. The purpose of this design is to discover important questions, processes and relationships, but not to test them.

The qualitative approach was found to be the most suitable for this study, as it allows for flexibility in obtaining detailed data (cf. Cresswell, 2008:12,17). In this study the researcher attempted to explore and describe the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family.

1.6 TYPE OF RESEARCH

Fouché and de Vos (2005:105) state that applied research is the scientific planning of induced change in a troublesome situation or the solution of problems in practice. Applied research may further also have implications for the development of knowledge (Fouché & de Vos, 2005:107).

Applied research was considered applicable for this study, as it attempts to develop knowledge surrounding the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family in order to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this phenomenon.

The aim of the study was explorative and descriptive by nature. Exploration (Greeff, 2005:301) is a process whereby the researcher discovers by listening and learning from the participants. In this study adolescents were considered to be experts regarding their own experience, and as such their experience was explored from a Gestalt perspective**.**

Rubin and Babbie (in Fouché, 2005a:106) maintain that description is more likely to refer to an intensive examination of the deeper meaning of the participant's experience. For

this reason, descriptive research is ideal for describing the subjective experience of adolescents regarding their sense of belonging within their families from a Gestalt perspective.

1.7 RESEARCH STRATEGY

Creswell (in Fouché, 2005a: 268) offers a definition of the research strategy as "the entire process of research from conceptualising a problem, to writing the narrative". Fouché (2005b:269) identifies five strategies that could be used to design qualitative research, namely: biography, phenomenology, grounded theory, ethnography and the case study.

A case study can entail the exploration of a single case or multiple cases over a period of time. Fouché (2005b:272) and Cresswell (2008:13,17) describe case studies as useful when the researcher wishes to elaborate on a theory or to gain a better understanding of social issues. This study was undertaken with the aim of elaborating on and gaining a better understanding of the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family from a Gestalt perspective.

As indicated by Fouché (2005b:272), an instrumental case study is used in order to elaborate on a theory or to gain a better understanding of a social issue through an increased knowledge on the subject. Having established this, the instrumental case study was selected as the most appropriate strategy for this research, as it involves interviews with adolescents who are considered to be experts in their subjective experience of belonging in their families.

1.8 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The following section of this chapter will report on the research methodology selected for this research.

1.8.1 Conceptual Framework

A conceptual framework, according to de Vos (2005b:34), is a set of ideas about the nature of the phenomenon under investigation. This framework begins with a set of ideas or propositions on the nature of these phenomena. These will determine what questions need to be answered by the research. Maxwell (2005:33) considers the framework to be a tentative theory of the phenomenon under investigation which informs the rest of the design.

Literature pertaining to the concept of belonging, the Gestalt phenomenological perspective and to adolescent development was examined in order to arrive at a conceptual framework. The researcher undertook a broad and thorough search of books, journals and electronic sources within the fields of psychology and social work in order to establish a conceptual framework for the study.

The researcher has drawn on certain books older than ten years, as they are recognised as being classical works in Gestalt literature. A literature control also forms part of this study in which all data obtained from the interviews will be compared with the literature. The researcher has also been compelled to use two or three articles older than ten years, which are not classical works, but were particularly relevant to this study and some of the few references which the researcher could access regarding belonging per se.

As noted above, the researcher found literature regarding belonging from a Gestalt perspective limited and even absent.

1.8.2 Universe, Population and Sample

Strydom (2005b:193) defines the term universe as, “all potential subjects for the research that possess the characteristics in which the researcher is interested”. The universe could therefore include all people who comply with the requirements. As it is impossible to conduct research on such a large scale, it is assumed that smaller portions would

represent the same characteristics as those found in the universe. The universe in this study is all male adolescents who are part of a family and live in the Southern Cape.

A population (Strydom, 2005b:193) is created when boundaries are placed on the participants. This term implies that the sample is selected from the universe on the basis of certain criteria. The ultimate goal is to collect a rich description and holistic picture of the participants' experiences. The population in this study consists of all male adolescents who are part of a family, live in Knysna and are enrolled in a specific school.

In qualitative research, sampling is relatively limited; it is based on saturation; it is not necessarily representative; the size is not statistically determined; and it involves low cost and less time (Strydom & Delport, 2005a:328). A criterion relevant to this qualitative study is saturation, a phenomenon that occurs when the researcher begins to hear the same information repeatedly without gaining any new information (Greeff, 2005:294).

In the light of their apparent heightened propensity for behavioural and emotional problems during adolescence, as outlined above, the researcher has limited the focus of this study to male adolescents. The sample of adolescent participants was drawn from the population on the basis of the following criteria:

- Male adolescents between the ages of 15 and 17
- English speaking
- Part of a family where one or two parents care for one or more children
- Attending a government senior school in Knysna
- Voluntary participation

According to Strydom (2005b:194), the sample consists of elements of the population in order to understand the population from which the sample was drawn. Non-probability sampling has been used in this study, given that the exact population size and members of the population were unknown (Rubin & Babbie, 2005:244-245). Purposive sampling, as outlined by Rubin and Babbie (2005:245,247-248), has been used, whereby the sample

includes those characteristics that are most representative of the population, according to the researcher's judgement. The researcher, in co-operation with the school Principal, requested the assistance of teachers in selecting adolescents from grades 10, 11 and 12 who met the sampling criteria.

1.8.3 Pilot Study

As stipulated by Greeff (2005:294), it is essential to conduct a pilot study with a small number of participants prior to beginning the research study proper. Fouché and Delport (2005:84) suggest that a pilot study is a "dress rehearsal", where potential shortcomings are highlighted prior to the initiation of the data collection. In addition, a pilot study is useful in identifying trends. In this study, the interview format needed to be tested to identify potential weaknesses which could have compromised the quality of the data obtained.

Given the qualitative nature of this study, this pilot study was an informal arrangement with a few adolescents in order to determine whether the relevant data could be obtained from the participants. The pilot study allowed the researcher to focus on one or more areas that were previously unclear. This led to modifications in the research procedure that ensured quality interviewing during the main investigation.

Strydom and Delport (2005a:331) note that additional benefits of a pilot study include honing the communication skills required for quality interviewing, estimating the time involved in conducting the interviews, and data analysis, as well as pre-empting problems that may have arisen during the interviews.

1.8.4 Data collection

Based on Maxwell's (2005:112) recommendation to use different sources of data, data collection in this study includes the literature study, the data obtained through the use of semi-structured interviews, as well as the researcher's observations, as recorded in field

notes and memos. Whilst interviewing results in a record of what the participant said, it does not provide a direct understanding of his perspective (Maxwell, 2005:112). Additional information in the form of field notes and observations therefore allowed the researcher to draw inferences on the participant's perspective that could not be obtained exclusively through the interview data alone.

Semi-structured interviews, as specified by Coolican (2004:153), Greeff (2005:297) and Smith (2003:56), involve the use of a number of predetermined questions on an interview schedule which guides the interview process. Based on Greeff's (2005:297) and Cresswell's (2008:13,17) observation that the participant is the expert on his own experience, the format of one-to-one semi-structured interviews (see Addendum C) was selected in order to elicit the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family.

In Greeff's (2005:293) opinion, this type of interview allows for a thorough account of an individual's perceptions, opinions, facts and forecasts. Cresswell (2008:179) cites the researcher's ability to control the line of questioning as a principal advantage of semi-structured interviews, whilst Denzin and Lincoln (2003:80) claim the efficacy of this type of interview lies in the breadth of data it generates given its qualitative nature.

Maxwell (2005:110) corroborates the view that intensive interviews allow for the collection of "rich" data, namely data that is detailed, varied and revealing.

Greeff (2005:287) cautions that the recording and managing of the volume of data generated by the interviews may be challenging. It is therefore important to process the data as soon as possible in order to capture all the acquired information before it fades. The researcher managed the logistics of interviewing by obtaining permission to tape the interviews.

Cresswell (in Delport & Fouché, 2005:264) recommends that the literature study should only be undertaken once the data collection has been completed, adding that the researcher does, however, need a "strong orienting framework" of what will be studied

prior to interviewing. A balance must therefore be achieved between these two factors so that the semi-structured interviews will be based on the relevant theory.

This will result in interviews that are conducted in an informed manner with the aim of yielding rich data. De Vos (2005a:336-337) observes that tentative, preliminary analysis often begins during the phase of data collection itself, as ideas emerge for making sense of the data while still in the field.

This initial analysis is usually reflected in the researcher's observations and recorded in field notes. De Vos (2005a:336) issues the caveat that it is important for the researcher not to thoroughly analyse the data before completion of the interviews has taken place. It is necessary to avoid premature conclusions being made.

In this research data was collected until saturation was observed. Saturation (Greeff, 2005:294) occurs when the researcher hears the same information repeatedly and no longer acquires any new information. Interviews were subsequently transcribed which allowed for the researcher's immersion in the data. Once completed, transcriptions were coded for confidentiality and safely filed, ensuring that the data was organised by the time thorough analysis had begun.

Copies of all the data were made to prevent any loss of data in the event of technical problems.

1.8.5 Data analysis

Cresswell (2008:184) outlines a series of steps regarding data analysis. These steps are linear and hierarchical, progressing from the specific to the general and encompassing multiple levels of analysis. The first of these steps (Cresswell, 2008:185) is the organising and preparation of the data for analysis. This step includes transcribing the interviews, scanning the transcripts, the writing of memos and field notes, as well as general sorting and arranging of data.

The second of Cresswell's (2008:185) steps is that of reading through the data. The researcher read and re-read all the transcripts several times. As indicated by Cresswell (2008:185), initial readings have enabled the researcher to get a general sense of the participants' meaning. Notes were added to the margins of the transcripts as and when the researcher found it necessary to make additional observations.

Step three of Creswell's hierarchy of analysis followed. This involved a detailed analysis of the data, initiated by coding the data**.** Cresswell (2008:186) defines coding as "the process of organizing the material into segments of text before bringing meaning to the information". Rubin and Rubin (1995:251) similarly stated that the coding process separates fragments of the interview into distinct categories or themes, concepts, events or stages.

Step four of Creswell's hierarchy uses the coding process to generate descriptions, themes and categories for analysis. The description Cresswell (2008:189) mentions in step four refers to "a detailed rendering of information about people, places or events in a setting". Rubin and Rubin (1995:234) stated that themes offer descriptions of how people do or should behave. It is these authors' (1995:255) opinion that the goal of analysis should be to find overarching themes that explain the concept being researched and to consolidate these themes in a way that the reader can understand.

Marshall and Rossman (2006:156) state that sufficient analysis has occurred "when critical categories are defined, relationships between them are established and they are integrated into an elegant, credible interpretation". Marshall and Rossman (2006:159) note that the categories generated should be internally consistent and distinct from one another.

In step five of the analysis, the researcher followed Cresswell's (2008:189) recommendations of advancing how descriptions and themes would be represented in the "qualitative narrative". The qualitative narrative refers to Chapter Three of this study

where a discussion of the data will be presented. The final step submitted by Cresswell (2008:189) is to interpret or find meanings in the data.

This is where the researcher must ascertain what has been learnt as a result of the study. This step requires that the data be analysed in conjunction with a literature control in order to confirm what existing knowledge has been confirmed, what new questions have been generated and whether any new knowledge has been acquired.

This step leads to the final chapter of this study where conclusions and recommendations for further study will be outlined.

1.9 ETHICAL ASPECTS OF THE RESEARCH

Strydom (2005a:57) offers a definition of ethics as a "set of moral principles which is suggested by an individual or group, is subsequently widely accepted, and which offers rules and behavioural expectations about the most correct conduct towards experimental subjects and respondents". Strydom (2005a:56) suggests that studies should adhere to certain ethical aspects. The researcher therefore considers the following ethical aspects to be pertinent to this study:

- Informed consent

  As much information as possible regarding the nature of this study was relayed to the parents, participants and the school Principal (See Addendum A). Obtaining informed consent in the form of signed letters from participants and their parents is essential (cf. Strydom (2005a:56) and implies that complete and accurate information on the aims of the study is given to the participants (See Addendum B).

  The confidential nature of the interviews was also outlined in the afore-mentioned consent forms. The researcher ensured that all information conveyed was understood so that the participants could make a reasoned, voluntary decision regarding their

participation. The participants were further informed that they would not receive any privileges as a result of participating in the research and that they were entitled to suspend their involvement in the research at any time if they chose to do so.

- Avoidance of harm

Strydom (2000a:59) stipulates that information relayed to the participants should include the possible dangers to which participants may be exposed. Strydom (2005a:58) emphasises that whilst participants can be harmed in a physical and/or emotional manner, emotional harm has more far-reaching consequences. This study did not pose any physical harm to the participants but participants were made aware of the possibility of emotional distress following self-disclosure of their experience of belonging in their family.

All the participants were asked to contact the researcher following the interviews if they sought assistance with emotional issues that may have arisen during the interview. The researcher undertook to refer these individuals if it became necessary.

- Violation of privacy/anonymity/confidentiality

Strydom (2005a:61) suggests that privacy and confidentiality may be seen as synonymous. Consent forms signed by parents and participants gave the assurance that confidentiality would be respected. These forms included permission for the use of a dictaphone during the interviews. To ensure that all information was filed and handled confidentially, the researcher stored the data in coded form, the researcher being the only person able to identify the participants. Furthermore, to ensure anonymity each of the participants was given a pseudonym.

- Actions and competence of researchers

The researcher's responsibility, according to Strydom (2005a:63-65), is to ensure that he/she is adequately skilled to undertake the research, to be very careful when crossing cultural boundaries, and to avoid making judgements under any circumstances.

Under the guidance of a supervisor, the researcher ensured that an adequate study of the concept being researched had been conducted prior to the commencement of the interviews.

- Release or publication of the findings

The researcher (Strydom, 2005a:65) has an ethical obligation to ensure that the research proceeds correctly and that no-one is deceived by the findings. Based on these obligations, the researcher would be obliged to write the report as accurately, clearly and objectively as possible, in order to avoid misappropriation by the public or by colleagues. Findings must be free of any form of bias. The researcher undertook to avoid plagiarism and endeavoured to acknowledge all references in the appropriate manner.

1.10 LIMITATIONS OF THIS STUDY

In view of the fact that this study was exploratory in nature, the sample was not required to be representative of the population. This study was of limited scope, and in order to minimise variables, the researcher contained the focus to White, English-speaking male adolescents between the ages of fifteen and eighteen years. The study may have the following limitations:

- Rubin and Babbie (2005:462) indicate that the results of any study should only be generalised to the population from which it was drawn. The sample in this study

was obtained in Knysna in the Southern Cape area of South Africa and any findings may thus only be generalised to this population.

- A limitation of this study is that of gender. The results of this study are only generalisable to male adolescents.

- Another limitation is the study's Eurocentric focus. For this reason, culture as a variable in the experience of belonging in the family is identified as a direction for future research.

1.11 DEFINITION OF TERMS AND KEY CONCEPTS

Considering the diversity of some of the specified definitions, the most important concepts in this study are defined below.

1.11.1 Experience

The researcher has found it difficult to obtain scientific definitions of experience other than those taken from dictionaries. The concept is highly changeable from one author to another and is context-specific in the few instance where it was found. References are often made to, for example, spiritual experiences, parental experiences and medical experiences.

The Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary (2005, n. experience) describes experience as "knowledge or skill which is obtained from doing, seeing or feeling things". Experience may also be defined as a "general concept" comprising "knowledge of, or skill in, or observation of, something or some event, gained through involvement in or exposure to that thing or event" (Downes:[sa]).

In terms of the phenomenological paradigm underpinning this study, it is assumed that the adolescent is an expert in his own, unique experience. Experience is therefore the

subjective awareness of an individual in a given context which cannot be accurately described by anyone other than himself. For the purposes of this study the researcher used the term experience to describe everything that has happened in the adolescent's life of which he is aware.

1.11.2 Adolescence

Louw and Van Ede (1998:384) note that the term derives from the Latin verb 'adolescere' which means "to grow to adulthood". They define adolescence as "the developmental stage between childhood and adulthood".

Bee and Boyd (2004:467) define adolescence as the period beginning at approximately 11 or 12 and ending at approximately 16 or 17. This is commonly defined as 'early adolescence' or simply 'adolescence'.

According to Rice and Dolgin (2008:2), adolescence begins at approximately twelve years of age when the body starts maturing during puberty. The end of adolescence is less clearly defined and different criteria may be used to define this. Some experts consider adolescence to end once physical maturity is reached, whilst others may view it as ending when full legal status is acquired.

Various authors (cf. Radzik, Sherer & Neinstein, 2002:53; Rew, 2005:4) define the phases of adolescence as follows:

Early adolescence: approximately 11-14 years of age
Middle adolescence: approximately 15-17 years of age
Late adolescence: approximately 18-21 years of age

For the purposes of this study the term 'adolescent' refers to male individuals between the ages of fifteen and eighteen. This study therefore comprises adolescents from both middle and late adolescence.

1.11.3 Belonging

The concepts of belonging, affiliation, attachment and connectedness tend to be used interchangeably in the literature. Barber (2005) notes, for example, that the term attachment is often used synonymously with the term connectedness. Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) similarly document a lack of consensus and consistency regarding the precise use of these constructs, highlighting the disparity that exists in terms of how they are defined, structured and operationalised.

Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) define belonging as frequent, affectively pleasing interactions in the context of stable and enduring relationships where affective concern exists for the other's welfare.

Hagerty, Williams and Oe (2002:173) present a definition of a sense of belonging as "the experience of personal involvement in a system or environment so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that system or environment".

Two defining attributes were identified, namely the experience of feeling valued, needed or accepted, and secondly, the perception that the individual's characteristics fit in with the system or environment.

For the purposes of this study, belonging means being an integral part of a system in which the adolescent is valued and cared for. The system may be the family, as defined below.

1.11.4 Family

Louw and Van Ede (1998:240) define family as a social system which has a unique role structure that defines how each individual should behave and what their relationships with one another should be. The ways in which a family functions, as well as the roles

assigned to its individual members, together play an important function in determining individual members' personality characteristics.

Giddens' (2001:170) definition of family is that of a "group of persons directly linked by kin connections, the adult members of which assume responsibility for caring for their children". Kinship ties are connections between individuals, established either through marriage or through the lines of descent that connect blood relatives, such as mothers, fathers, siblings and offspring.

For the purposes of this study, the term family refers to any stable and enduring system where one or two parents care for one or more children. This understanding of family will apply even in contexts where the parents are divorced or have remarried.

1.11.5 Gestalt philosophy

Gestalt philosophy stipulates that everything in an individual's experience is organised into a configuration or Gestalt. The founder of Gestalt psychology, Fritz Perls (1951:25) defined this philosophy in the following terms: "One's visual field is structured into 'figure' and 'background'. Figure is the focus of interest - an object, patterns, etc. - with ground being the setting or context". Gestalt psychology (Yontef, 1993a:143-144) is concerned with the dynamic interplay between figure and ground and the meaning that emerges from this interplay.

For the purposes of this study, an understanding of Gestalt draws on Perls' (1951:237) understanding of the philosophy as "the active organising force of meaningful wholes", where the adolescent will be considered as the active organising force who creates a meaningful whole of his experience of belonging in his family.

1.12 SUMMARY

This chapter has provided an overview of this study, including a discussion on the topic of the study, the problem formulation, as well as the aims and objectives. The research question, procedure and method have also been included in this chapter. Chapter two will present a conceptual framework which outlines the relevant theories pertaining to belonging, the Gestalt phenomenological perspective, as well as a discussion on adolescent development.

CHAPTER TWO
A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK ON BELONGING, THE GESTALT PHENOMENOLOGICAL PARADIGM AND ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

2.1 INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to present a conceptual framework which will serve as a foundation for the empirical study in Chapter Three. As indicated by de Vos (2005b:34), and referred to in 1.8.1, a conceptual framework is a set of ideas about the nature of the phenomenon being researched. Mouton and Marais (in de Vos, 2005b:35) submit that the nature of the conceptual framework is determined by the function it has to fulfil.

For the purposes of this chapter, the conceptual framework serves the function of providing a better understanding of the concept of belonging, the central concepts of the Gestalt phenomenological paradigm, as well as the course of adolescent development.

The concept of needing to belong has been proposed in one form or another for many years by a variety of psychological theorists (Baumeister & Leary, 1995:522). Following a review of a wealth of research on this concept, Hagerty and Patusky (1995:9) asserted that a sense of belonging remains an important mental health concept. Baumeister and Leary (1995:508) made it clear that dysfunctional attachments and behaviour result from failure to adequately meet the need to belong and may persist throughout adolescence and all subsequent developmental phases.

As outlined in Chapter One (refer to 1.1), the literature repeatedly points to the benefits and preventive value of experiencing a sense of belonging. This has important ramifications for the mental health of adolescents.

There is rich data to suggest that warm, loving and committed bonds with family, are crucial in moulding adolescents into resilient, thriving youths (cf. Hagerty *et al.*, 2002:799). Resnick *et al.* (1993) concurred that experiencing a sense of belonging enhances resiliency and wellbeing in general. The authors concluded that family connectedness is the most powerful protective factor against disturbed behaviours during adolescence

Supportive ties to parents protect adolescents from peer antisocial involvements under conditions of high-stress living. Furthermore, Newman and Newman (2006:323,331) and Santrock (2006:400) expound the idea that a family atmosphere that simultaneously promotes connectedness and individuality would seem to be crucial if adolescents are to achieve identity integration.

This chapter commences with a discussion of the concept of belonging and continues with a discussion of the Gestalt phenomenological paradigm and adolescent development.

2.2 THEORIES OF BELONGING

Two theories of belonging are discussed below, namely Bowlby's theory of attachment and Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis. Bowlby's theory of attachment, as discussed by Jarvis (2004:121-122), is generally considered to be the original, fundamental theory of attachment. Attachment is a concept that is used interchangeably in much of the literature pertaining to belonging. Bowlby's theory is therefore included in this conceptual framework as the foundational study of belonging.

Baumeister and Leary's (1995:497) belongingness hypothesis is the second theory of belonging in the conceptual framework, as it encompasses three decades' of literature pertaining to the phenomenon of belonging. Based on the extent of their database, the researcher considers their findings to be a thorough review of data related to belonging.

Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) suggested that, prior to their research, much of the literature related to belonging was inconsistent, vague and/or lacking in empirical substance.

2.2.1 Bowlby's attachment theory

Attachment theory, as discussed by Bretherton (1992:45), is considered by many to be the joint work of Bowlby and Salter Ainsworth. In his review of Bowlby's theory, Jarvis (2004:123) explains how Bowlby considered the quality of a child's relationship with his mother to be an influential prototype of attachment. Furthermore, the extent to which an individual experiences a sense of belonging with his or her mother sets a precedent for meaningful relationships in the individual's future.

Jarvis (2004:23) reiterates Bowlby's assertion that an adult's need for attachment is always an effort to recapture the intimate mother-child contact first experienced in infancy. Considering Bowlby's afore-mentioned perspective, the success of the original mother-child relationship and the subsequent ability to bond successfully with others has implications for the extent to which the adolescent is able to experience a sense of belonging.

2.2.1.1 An Evolutionary basis for the need to belong

Bowlby's theory views human attachment behaviour within an evolutionary framework (Salter Ainsworth, 1969:997, 1000). The origin of this point of view is based on Bowlby's attempt to explain the survival of the human species despite the extreme and extended vulnerability that characterises infancy (Salter Ainsworth, 1969:999). Bowlby advanced the idea that the young of the human species must possess some enduring behavioural systems which guarantee parental care for a prolonged period of time and which minimise risk throughout the extended period of immaturity.

Jarvis (2004) explains how Bowlby observed a set of instinctive behaviours in neonates which elicited caring responses from adults. Based on these observations, Bowlby concluded that infants have an innate predisposition to form relationships.

According to Bretherton (1992:45), Bowlby's observation revolutionised the understanding of the child's bond with his mother and raised awareness of the disruption caused to this bond through separation, deprivation and bereavement. Salter Ainsworth (1969:1000) qualified Bowlby's work with the observation that, although the first intimate relationship a person experiences is most likely to be with the mother, this relationship may be augmented by attachments to a number of other individuals.

In a discussion of Bowlby's work, Salter Ainsworth (1969:971) explains that Bowlby arrived at a definition of attachment as a bond of affection between two individuals. By focusing his attention on the most primal origins of relationships, Bowlby was able to conclude that individuals have an innate need to belong and that this need is met in the earliest stage of life through the relationship with their mother.

2.2.1.2 Early experience of belonging as a template for future relationships

Salter Ainsworth (1969:1000, 1009) explains that the reciprocal attachment behaviour between mother and child ensures survival and establishes a solid sense of belonging well beyond the early years of development. Bowlby understood parent-infant attachment to be an adaptive phenomenon, given that it is interactional in nature (Jarvis, 2004:121).

The author elaborates on the fact that, according to Bowlby, infant behaviours such as crying, clinging and smiling form the basis of attachment behaviour. Authors such as Bretherton (1992:45) and Jarvis (2004:125) concur that the thrust of Bowlby and Salter Ainsworth's work is that a child needs his primary care-giver as a secure basis from which he can explore the world.

Bowlby claims that the child forms a mental model of this first experience of attachment and that this internal model has profound significance for all subsequent relationships (Jarvis, 2004:123). Bowlby (in Bretherton, 1992:51) concluded that, to ensure mental health, "the infant and young child should experience a warm, intimate and continuous relationship with his mother (or permanent mother substitute) in which both find satisfaction and enjoyment".

Hagerty *et al.* (2002:799) substantiate Bowlby's claims in their findings that initial attachment between infant and primary carer, based on positive caring, support, availability and nurturance is conducive to individual long-term adjustment and a strong sense of self. This research confirms that experiencing a secure sense of belonging provides a vital foundation for later interpersonal interactions and an enduring sense of being valued.

Hagerty *et al.* (2002:801) elucidate on the point that a healthy primary attachment ensures the ability to engage in healthy, functional interpersonal relationships in the future.

Bowlby's Attachment Theory submits the existence of an innate need to belong which ultimately ensures the infant's survival. A discussion of the salient aspects of Baumeister and Leary's research follows.

2.2.2 Baumeister and Leary's belongingness hypothesis

Baumeister and Leary undertook to develop and evaluate the hypothesis that a need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. As previously mentioned (refer to 2.2), Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) found that many theorists, including Maslow, referred to a need to belong, but neglected to find systematic empirical evaluation for the need to belong. Baumeister and Leary (1995:522) suggest that the error has not been to deny the existence of the need to belong so much as "to under-appreciate it".

In addition, Baumeister and Leary (1995:498) suggested that the need to belong can be almost as compelling as the need for food. Furthermore, Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) advanced the idea that much of the repertoire of human behaviour, emotion and thought is the result of a fundamental need to belong. Additionally, many of the strongest positive and negative emotions people experience are linked to the need to belong.

Just as a myriad of positive effects may be observed when the need to belong is satisfied, a variety of detrimental effects on mental, emotional and physical health are to be observed when it is not. Baumeister and Leary (1995:522) concluded that the desire for interpersonal attachment may well be one of the most far-reaching and integrative constructs currently available for understanding human nature.

2.2.2.1 Theoretical consensus regarding the need to belong

Baumeister and Leary (1995:519) concurred with Bowlby that the need to belong is inherent, having an evolutionary origin which necessitated belonging in relationships to ensure survival and reproduction. Many years ago groups would have provided food, friends and care for offspring, whilst survival tasks such as hunting or defensive strategies would have ensured protection from predators.

Baumeister and Leary (1995:519) submitted, therefore, that individuals are naturally driven towards establishing and sustaining this sense of belonging.

2.2.2.2 Baumeister and Leary's definition of belonging

Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) defined belonging as frequent, affectively pleasant interactions in the context of stable and enduring relationships where affective concern exists for each other's welfare.

2.2.2.3 B*aumeister and Leary's criteria for belonging*

Baumeister and Leary (1995:497, 500) presented a particular formulation of belonging which outlined two criteria that must be satisfied in order for a sense of belonging to be experienced.

- Frequent interaction

Humans need frequent, affectively pleasing interactions with several other people. If such interactions are not affectively pleasing, they must at least be free from conflict and any negative affect.

- Persistent caring

Interactions must occur in the framework of affective concern for each other's welfare. Individuals must therefore perceive their relationships as stable and as providing affective concern into the foreseeable future. Baumeister and Leary (1995:500,501) explained that the perception that this bond is rewarding is essential for satisfying the need to belong. Furthermore, the need to belong can only be satisfied if the person believes that the other likes or loves him and cares about his welfare.

These sentiments, which are devoid of self-interest, should ideally be mutual and reciprocal. Genuine mutuality in affect may be desirable rather than essential, however. The significant element seems to be the perception that an individual is the recipient of the other's lasting concern (Baumeister & Leary, 1995:497, 500).

In the light of the facts outlined above, it may be concluded that there must be regular contact with people with whom an individual has an enduring bond in order to meet the need to belong. In Baumeister and Leary's (1995:508) opinion, ample data exists to suggest that being accepted and included results in the experience of positive emotions such as happiness, elation, contentment and calmness.

> Conversely, Baumeister and Leary (1995:509,509,511) observed that the deprivation of good, stable relationships results in an extensive array of aversive and pathological consequences. With regard to the negative effects that become apparent when the need to belong is not met, Baumeister and Leary (1995:497) considered it appropriate to regard belongingness as a need rather than simply a want.

From the above discussion, it is clear that Baumeister and Leary translated existing data into a scientific hypothesis and a unique formula for ensuring that the need to belong is met. The work of Baumeister and Leary encompasses three decades of research into the phenomenon of belonging, beginning with Bowlby's classic work and culminating in their confirmation that humans have a fundamental need to belong.

A discussion of the Gestalt phenomenological paradigm forms the following section of this chapter.

2.3 A GESTALT PHENOMENOLOGICAL PARADIGM

This study is undertaken from a Gestalt perspective which is best understood when considered in the light of the influence exerted on it by Existentialism and Humanism.

2.3.1 Phenomenology, existentialism and humanism

Authors such as Joyce and Sills (2001:16) and Yontef and Jacobs (2005:307) trace the origin of Phenomenology to Husserl who proposed it in 1931 as a means of investigating the nature of existence. Yontef (1993b) defines phenomenology as "a discipline that helps people stand aside from their usual way of thinking so that they can tell the difference between what is actually being perceived and felt in the current situation and what is a residue from the past".

Kirchner (2000) and Colledge (2002:141) clarify that Existentialism derives from a phenomenological method of inquiry as founded by Kierkegaard. Colledge (2002:143)

traces the roots of the word ‘existential’ to the Latin ‘existere’, meaning to stand out or emerge. Existential phenomenologists strive to understand each individual existence by focusing on the individual’s unique experience. This experience encompasses loneliness, despair, alienation, meaninglessness, anxiety and death, as well as the influence of love, creativity, freedom and responsibility.

Individuals are thus considered capable of constantly re-creating and re-defining themselves (Colledge, 2002:143). An even richer understanding of human experience is gained when the humanistic and phenomenological perspectives are integrated. Humanism, as discussed by Kirchner (2000), is concerned with the individual’s proclivity to self-actualisation, and it emphasises individual uniqueness and choice.

2.3.2 The principles of Gestalt

The following principles, according to Kirchner (2000), constitute the Gestalt view of human nature, namely: holism, contact, awareness, sense of self, dialogue and the two modes of dialogue namely I-It and I-Thou. These principles will be discussed below.

2.3.2.1 Holism

Jan Smuts first used the word ‘holism’ whereby equal significance is assigned to the entire bio-psychosocial field, including the organism and its environment (Wulf, 1996). Authors, such as Latner (1973:5) and Bowman (2005:9-10), explain how holism replaces the notion of discrete, isolated particles; and as such an individual must be considered an organismic whole possessing the potential for self-actualisation.

Kirchner (2000) adds that an individual can never, therefore, be reduced to parts but must be considered as an integrated whole. According to Yontef and Jacobs (2005:300), holism therefore means that the individual is inherently self-regulating, growth-oriented and cannot be understood apart from his field.

The term ‘Gestalt’ was first used by Von Ehrenfels, who asserted that a ‘*gestalten*’ results when units of human consciousness form wholes (Wulf, 1996; Sharf, 2004:237; Latner, 1973:6). Anything that is experienced as a whole can be considered a Gestalt; and from a Gestalt perspective individuals cannot exist without forming wholes of their experiences (Garzetta & Harman, 1990:153; Latner, 2000:19).

It follows, therefore, that any attempt to analyse or dissect elements within an individual will fail to promote knowledge and may even prevent the acquisition of knowledge (Clarkson, 2004).

2.3.2.2 The Field

A variety of authors (cf. Latner, 1992:20; Yontef, 1993a:306; Lobb, 2005:25-26) describe the field as a unitary whole, where everything is inextricably linked; in other words a vast network of interaction where everything affects everything else. Parlett (2005:49) purports that the field should not be regarded as a system so much as a process in a constant state of flux.

Joyce and Sills (2001:24-25) submit that attempts to understand individual experience must include an examination of the afore-mentioned field which encompasses the individual’s inner and external world, as well as the interaction that continuously occurs between them. Brownell (2003b) therefore presents a perspective of the field as a sphere of influence, an “undifferentiated base, against which and out of which, focused needs and interests emerge”.

Laura Perls (in Rosenfeld, 1977) concurred that the greatest point of interest in the field at any given time becomes figural for an individual. The field, according to Latner (2000:23), is thus constantly re-organised according to those emerging interests that determine the differentiation between figure and ground.

Yontef (2003b:402; 2005:88) submits that personal meaning is created through this juxtaposition of figure and ground. In a healthy, normally functioning individual, as described by Yontef (1993a:143-144), there should be a fluid, spontaneous flow between figure and ground, depending on the individual's needs at any given time. Healthy functioning thus requires creative adjustment to the field in order to meet these shifting need states (Yontef, 1993a:143-144).

For the purposes of this study the parent-child relationship is regarded to be a series of contact episodes which are figural at the time they occur, but which occur against the structured ground of the parent-child relationship as it has evolved over the adolescent's lifespan (cf. McConville, 2007:6). The manner in which an individual deals with changing need states will be discussed in more detail in the following section.

- Needs and self-regulation

From a Gestalt perspective, any imbalance that occurs within an individual or in relation to the environment will be experienced as figural. Clarkson (2004:22) explains that what becomes figural for an individual generally demands gratification with its concomitant elimination of tension. Figures may therefore be need-based and will shift and change accordingly in any given context. Clarkson (2004:22) and Yontef (1993b:210-211) elaborate that the ability to achieve effective balance, in spite of shifting need states, depends on a discriminating sensory awareness that allows an individual to use what is nourishing to him and to reject what is not nourishing.

Oaklander (1988:265) similarly states that an individual is continuously trying to achieve a state of equilibrium in spite of these shifting need states through a process of self-regulation. The implication is that the individual is geared towards healthy functioning, and as such possesses the ability to self-regulate through awareness of these shifting needs. Frazao (1999) considered healthy functioning to be:

> "…an international phenomenon, that occurs at the contact boundary and which concerns the ability to relate to the environment, as unique persons, in a creative way in order to meet one's needs, maintaining at the same time, a relationship with the other, respecting this other's uniqueness."

Wheeler (2000:175) refers to the process of self-regulation as one of creative adjustment in the field. Various authors (cf. Kirchner, 2000; Crocker, 2005:73; Yontef & Jacobs, 2005:300-311) agree that self-regulation is continually disturbed by the organism's needs and regained through their gratification and elimination.

Having established the nature of self-regulation, it is clear that adolescents thus need to be considered in terms of their ever-changing needs and how they respond to them in order to achieve ongoing equilibrium.

2.3.2.3 Contact

Contact making (cf. Yontef, 1993a:143-144; Frazao, 1999) is initiated when an individual finds meaning in the field and meets changing needs through creative interaction with the field. Latner (1992:26) proposes that an individual's healthy ability to adjust, in terms of self-regulation and contact making, are inseparable. Latner (2000:27) expounds on the concept of contact as follows:

> "Contacting is the way we change and grow. It is how we come to grips with our lives, organising the field to make possible the best achievements and solutions it will support. It is the way in which the environment, the rest of the field, adjusts us to it. We call this interplay, all of it, creative adjustment, because the result is assimilation and growth and because the process of adjustment is mutual. Our achievements and solutions are made by us and given to us both in the give-and-take of our creative partnership with the rest of the field."

Contact, according to Yontef (1993a:203-204), Philippson (1997), and Nevis (2000:23-24), occurs when differences emerge out of an undifferentiated field and especially when a difference is experienced between 'me' and 'not-me'. Latner (2000:25) explains that the "event" that results from the meeting of differences is known as a "contact boundary".

Effective, healthy contact boundaries in the adolescent allow for fluid alternating between the modes of connecting and separating: being in full contact with the field when necessary and withdrawing attention from the field when appropriate (cf. Yontef, 1993a:137-138). The boundary between self and others should be permeable in order to allow exchanges, but at the same time resistant enough to retain an independent sense of self (Yontef, 1993a:137-138).

Latner (2000:36) explains that individuals pick and choose contact with their environment and often alter their experience by manipulating the contact boundary in one of several ways. The resultant contact boundary modifications are outlined below.

- Contact Boundary Modifications

  Occasionally the contact boundary becomes blurred, lost or completely impermeable, making differentiation between the self and the other problematic. Schoeman (1996:68) pointed out that when these changes occur at the contact boundary, disequilibrium may result within the individual. A further consequence of disturbances at the contact boundary is that necessary and nourishing elements are kept out of the system and certain individual needs may not be met.

  The individual essentially becomes out of balance as a result (Sharf, 2004:245). Joyce and Sills (2001:112) refer to these boundary manipulations as 'contact modifications' or "creative adjustments that may or may not be appropriate". The way an adolescent makes contact, and the suitability thereof, will vary according to the field conditions in which it occurs (cf. Joyce & Sills, 2001:112-113). In the light of the previous statements, individual contact boundary modifications in both adolescent and parents are considered to be significant for the purposes of this study.

- Types of contact boundary modifications

As indicated by Sharf (2004:245), a variety of contact boundary disturbances can occur if contact with self and others is resisted, thereby affecting interaction. These contact boundary disturbances will subsequently be discussed and explained in relation to family contact styles. McConville (in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185) has referred to "prototypical family resistances" or contact boundary disturbances which families adopt as a style.

Deflection

Joyce and Sills (2001:116) and Yontef (1993b:137-138) concur that deflection is the avoidance of an internal or an external stimulus in order to prevent full awareness. For Clarkson (2004:60), an individual who habitually deflects is not utilising energy efficiently in order to obtain feedback from self, others or the field in general.

McConville (in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185) indicates that deflecting families dilute contact through humour, politeness and excessive talking, whilst the desensitised family appears dead, hopeless and withdrawn.

Introjection

Introjection, according to Joyce and Sills (2001:125), occurs if elements from the external world are incorporated into the self without awareness or choice. Introjects may take the form of ideas, attitudes, beliefs or behaviour. Latner (1973:115) makes it clear that incorporating these into the self without any form of discriminating or assimilating hampers the adolescent's ability to self-regulate.

Furthermore, introjection may result in the creation of an "as-if" personality; a rigid, inauthentic self that develops when values and behaviours are absorbed without questioning (Latner, 1975:73,115). Joyce and Sills (2001:131) submit that introjects often inhibit the closure of a Gestalt.

According to McConville (in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185), introjecting parents expect their adolescents to hold the same world-views that they themselves hold. As a result, individual thought and opinion in the adolescent is stifled and feelings of alienation and confusion are experienced whenever the adolescent comes close to establishing an independent 'self'. In these families, adolescents often feel that their only hope for independence is by 'escaping' from the family.

Projection

According to Yontef (1993b:137-138), individuals manipulate contact by projecting, when they attribute responsibility to people and things in their field other than themselves. Sharf (2004:245) and Latner (1975:114) concur that projecting thus amounts to a dismissal or rejection of personal experiences or aspects of oneself.

Schoeman (1996:64) however points out that a projection may be considered a healthy mechanism when it allows an individual to temporarily avoid something in order to protect himself from trauma. In a similar vein, Zinker (1997:260) points out that whilst projections may be pathological there are those that serve a positive, creative function, such as art. Projecting families tend to blame each other, identifying the existence of problems but being unable to identify the source (McConville in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185).

Confluence

As indicated by Latner (2000:36), confluence takes place when the distinction between self and other becomes so blurred that the boundary is lost. It becomes, in Yontef's (1993a:205) words, "a surrender to sameness", where the sense of self is lost in interaction with the other. As a result, no contact occurs because no difference is experienced between 'I' and the 'other' (Latner, 2000:27-28).

People who feel a strong need for acceptance often experience this, relinquishing their feelings and opinions in order to gain this sought-after acceptance. Healthy

confluence is similar to empathy, whilst unhealthy confluence may isolate individuals from others (Yontef, 1993b). Clarkson's (2004:65) understanding of confluence is that it occurs in circumstances where organism and environment are no longer differentiated from each other.

McConville (in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185) describes confluent families as those that place the emphasis on feelings rather than on behaviour. Conflict in these families is consequently experienced as failure, given that niceness, politeness and agreement are primary. Discipline is usually lacking in authority and takes the form of pleas and bargains.

Retroflection

Retroflection is understood by Joyce and Sills (2001:114) to occur when an individual directs certain behaviour at the self rather than impose that action on someone else in their field. The self is thus treated as one would like to treat others. This results in a split due to aspects of the self being resisted or rejected.

Yontef (1993a:205) makes it clear that retroflection can lead to isolation. Clarkson (2004:63) interprets retroflection as a modification of contact that occurs when an individual's thoughts and emotions are not validated in their families of origin or when punishment results from the expression of natural impulses.

Retroflecting families, as described by McConville (in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185), are often reserved and introverted in style, and are, as such, limited in their ability to reach out when necessary. Conflicts tend to be kept within the family and are turned inward.

Desensitisation

Desensitisation, according to Clarkson (2004:60), occurs when an individual avoids awareness of himself or his field; and it is characterised by sensations and

emotions that are diluted, disregarded or neglected. McConville (in Toman & Bauer, 2005:185) indicates that in desensitised families, adolescents may engage in risky behaviours in order to approximate feeling more alive and separate from their family.

As indicated by the various family contact styles outlined above and the consequences thereof, healthy contact within the family may be considered significant in ensuring the adolescent's optimal functioning (cf. Parlett, 2005:42). Laura Perls (in Yontef, 1993b) described contact with one's boundaries as an "awareness continuum"; a dynamic process of continuous shifting between foreground and background.

The concept of contact is therefore closely connected with that of awareness. A more detailed discussion of awareness follows.

2.3.2.4 Awareness

Awareness is one of the cornerstones of Gestalt theory. Effective awareness, according to Yontef (1993a:149, 179), arises from, and is energised by, the need of the individual in any given context, and as such is always in the here and now. Awareness is the process of being in contact with what is figural at the time and occurs "in the presence of full sensorimotor, emotional, cognitive and energetic support" (Yontef, 1993a:179). Perls, Hefferline and Goodman (in Yontef, 1993a:249) claimed that "Insightful awareness is always a new Gestalt and is in itself curative".

In a discussion on awareness, Sharf (2004:247) refers to the Gestalt concept of unfinished business or a situation where needs have not been fulfilled, either due to a lack of internal or external support, or a combination of both. Joyce and Sills (2001:130) define unfinished business as "situations in the past, especially traumatic or difficult ones, which have not achieved satisfactory resolution or closure for the client".

Unfinished business is also referred to as an incomplete gestalt (cf. Sharf, 2004:247; Yontef, 2005: 93).

Further to Frazao's perspective on mental health (refer to 2.3.2.2), Perls *et al.* (1951:viii) and Wheeler (2000:378) concur that mental health depends on the completion of Gestalt formations. When a need arises, Joyce and Sills (2001:131) stipulate that a healthy organism should mobilise energy to make contact possible in order to meet the need and allow the Gestalt to reach closure.

Smith (1990:11) and Wheeler (2000:217) agree that if the individual lacks the resources and support to achieve this, the Gestalt remains incomplete or unfinished and will repeatedly seek out opportunities for closure. An accretion of unfinished business will, in Philippson's (1998a) opinion, impact negatively on contact making. Schoeman (1996:68) indicates that unfinished business will result in disequilibrium for the individual.

Habitual interruptions of contact, as discussed by Lobb (2005:33), will result in the accumulation of uncompleted situations and resultant diminished spontaneity. Unfinished business and its effect on spontaneity have implications for the individual's sense of self. Polster (1974:37) however points out that being unencumbered by unfinished business allows an individual the freedom to engage spontaneously with whatever interests him.

As discussed by Mortola (2001:46), awareness becomes a tool which can be used to enhance the adolescent's innate quest for health. McConville (in Ferguson & O'Neill, 2001:77) has moreover described the stages of human development in terms of "a preferred focus of attention". In early adolescence, the self is experienced through focusing on external awareness. At middle adolescence, the self is experienced through the focus shifting into inward awareness. By late adolescence, the individual should be able to integrate both styles of awareness.

A Gestalt understanding of the concept of self will be discussed below.

2.3.2.5 Sense of self

Perls (in Philippson, 1995, 1997) believed that "the 'self' cannot be understood other than through the field, just as day cannot be understood other than by contrast with night. In Gestalt terms, the self is understood to be co-created with others rather than originating within the organism. Selfhood occurs during "the process of contact and withdrawal from contact, in which the self is withdrawn to the contact boundary with the environment, and after the fulness of the encounter, withdraws" (Lobb, 2005:31).

Yontef and Jacobs (2005:312) view this process essentially as creative adjustment. From a Gestalt perspective, this development of intersubjectivity is the course of development itself (Wheeler, 2002:47).

The self may be considered to be creative adjustment that occurs as the adolescent influences his family and his family influences him (cf. Wheeler, 2002:46). Once co-created, the self according to Phillipson (1995, 1997) exists as a polarity of the other and becomes a power in its own right. Elements of the adolescent's field will either be identified with and incorporated into the self or alienated to become the 'other' (cf. Phillipson, 1997).

Toman and Bauer (2005:182) point out that the adolescent 'self' needs to function differently according to the context in which he finds himself. The researcher therefore considers an understanding of how the adolescent self functions in the context of family to be of central importance. In Gestalt terms, relationship is inseparable from selfhood and so the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family is understood to contribute significantly to his experience of self.

From a Gestalt perspective, dialogical contact results in greater awareness (Yontef, 2005:83). Dialogue and awareness are two cornerstones of the Gestalt approach and as such, dialogue will be explored in greater detail below.

2.3.2.6 Dialogue

Dialogue takes place when two or more individuals communicate their phenomenological perspectives to each other (Yontef, 1993a:39,126). Jacobs (1995:56, 60) and Hycner (1995:10) shared the view that genuine dialogue is never a forced phenomenon but rather a mutual occurrence that ebbs and flows, enriching the individuals involved. A dialogical relationship is encapsulated in the words of Hycner (1995:4):

> "…the overall relational context in which the uniqueness of each person is valued and direct, mutual and open relations between persons are emphasised, and the fulness and presence of the human spirit is honoured and embraced. It is more of a heartfelt approach than a theory".

Four characteristics of true dialogical interaction are identified within the Gestalt perspective. These four characteristics will now be discussed:

- Inclusion

  Yontef (1993a:35-37,127,218) and Jacobs (1995:68) explained that inclusion requires understanding the experience of another individual, whilst retaining one's own identity. Joyce and Sills (2001:46) regard inclusion to be an extension of empathy.

- Presence

  Authors, such as Yontef (1993a:34-35,127, 219) and Joyce and Sills (2001:44), agree that presence requires an individual to be honest, authentic, fully committed to and engaged in any given encounter in the here and now. Jacobs (1995:64)

stresses that presence precludes having any form of agenda or intention to influence the other.

- Commitment to dialogue:
  Brownell (2003b) describes this characteristic as an attitude of patient and enduring value in the dialogical process. Contact between individuals cannot be forced but should emerge spontaneously from the interaction.

- Dialogue is lived
  Contact should, in Yontef's (1993a:127-128, 233) opinion, be an organic process which may take the form of dance, song, movement or words. This characteristic suggests that something unique and spontaneous should emerge from the encounter. A dialogical approach lays the foundation from which an I-Thou relationship may develop. I-Thou relating is an important Gestalt concept as explained below.

2.3.2.7 The two modes of Dialogue: I-It and I-Thou

The Gestalt concept of I-Thou derives from the work of Martin Buber (in Polster, 1974:98), who described this mode of relating in the following way:

> "Only the being whose otherness, accepted by my being, lives and faces me in the whole compression of existence, brings the radiance of eternity to me. Only when two say to one another with all that they are, "It is *Thou*", is the indwelling of the Present Being between them".

In the light of the above description, I-Thou dialogue (Jacobs, 1995:63) is understood to be characterised by selflessness and a deep appreciation of the other. Furthermore, in I-Thou encounters, there is a deep respect for the 'Thou' as well as a sense of valuing the uniqueness and wholeness of the 'Thou'. As such, an I-Thou relationship is horizontal and the direct experience of both individuals is considered equally important (Yontef,

1993a:208-209). An I-Thou encounter precludes any form of goal attainment; instead there is an acceptance of what is, without judgements or any demands for change. As noted by Jacobs (1995:63), awareness and the I-Thou relation are integrally related.

Hycner (1995:7) identifies I-Thou and I-It as two polar approaches to dialogue which are always relational and reciprocal. Buber (in Crocker, 2005:72) used the metaphor of "The It [as] the eternal chrysalis, the Thou [as] the eternal butterfly". Through this metaphor, Buber illustrated that both modes of relating are necessary due to the creative tension that results from this interplay. Hycner (1995:8) maintained that this creative tension contributes to healthy living and leads to the required integration of the two dialogical modes.

Hycner (1995:9) elaborated on this argument by stating that relating in an I-It mode is essential, adding the caveat that a preponderance of this mode is at best problematic and at its worst, tragic. Yontef (1993a:208) similarly noted that whilst I-It relating is necessary, it may be considered disrespectful given that it objectifies the other by having a goal in mind and relying on interpretation and analysis.

According to Hycner (1995:9), I-Thou relating is a more respectful and therefore, more desirable mode of dialogue. Hycner (1995:10) further differentiates between specific I-Thou moments and an I-Thou approach to dialogue. An I-Thou encounter is a transient occurrence, whilst an I-Thou approach is an enduring, continuous mode which should rhythmically alternate with an I-It mode when necessary. With regard to I-Thou moments, Jacobs (1995:57) observes that there is a relaxing of the individual's boundaries which may be experienced as intense in affect. An I-Thou approach is ultimately one of connection, whilst I-It is one of separation (Hycner, 1995:9).

In his work with adolescents, Blend (2007:20) notes that an I-Thou dialogical approach is associated with unconditional acceptance, and as such has a significant positive effect on the adolescent's sense of self. Jacobs (1995:63) postulates that a non-judgemental I-Thou

approach supports the awareness of 'what is' and leads to change. The result is a deepening awareness for all individuals engaged in the dialogue.

Dialogical relationships are therefore enriching experiences which optimise awareness and the capacity for change (Jacobs, 1995:63). Blend (2007:20) elaborates when maintaining that an I-Thou approach to adolescents conveys a deep appreciation of the adolescent; and the absence of any agenda to influence or change them has a profound effect on them.

The developmental phase of adolescence will be addressed in the final section of this chapter.

2.4 ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

The following section examines the course of adolescent development, as it is understood from a Gestalt perspective. McConville's Gestalt model of adolescent development and the unique tasks associated therewith will be explored.

2.4.1 The duration and delineation of adolescence

As indicated in 1.10.2, the term adolescence derives from the Latin verb, adolescere, meaning to 'grow to adulthood', and as such refers to a developmental stage that takes place between childhood and adulthood (cf. Gouws, Kruger & Burger, 2000:2). Developmental theorists differ as to the precise duration of adolescence. Moshman (1999:5-6) suggests that because adolescence coincides with puberty, it is a distinct phase and should be considered to be the first phase of adulthood.

Some developmental experts divide this developmental period into two sub-periods: early adolescence and late adolescence (Newman & Newman, 2006:302). As was discussed in 1.10.2, other experts (cf**.** Radzik *et al.,* 2002:53; Rew, 2005:4) divide this developmental stage more specifically into three distinct phases namely:

- Early adolescence: approximately 10-13/14 years old
- Middle adolescence: approximately 14-17 years old
- Late adolescence: approximately 18-21 years old

This study comprises adolescents from middle and late adolescence between the ages of fifteen to eighteen years.

2.4.2 Development from a Gestalt perspective

Yontef (in Parlett, 2005:56) offers a Gestalt definition of development in general as "a function of biological maturation, environmental influences, interaction of the individual and the environment, and creative adjustment by the unique individual". Adolescence, still from a Gestalt perspective, is more specifically defined by McConville (2001a:15) and Parlett (2005:56) as a state of creative adjustment that tends to result in disequilibrium.

Heaven (2001:xiii) asserts that each generation of adolescents faces different challenges that leave them vulnerable to disequilibrium. According to Mortola (2001:46, 55), a Gestalt developmental model "acknowledges the role of disequilibrium in the larger process of organismic self-regulation". Heaven (2001:xiii) elaborates further on this view by stating that adolescence has become a more-enduring phase as adolescents pursue tertiary education, thus necessitating financial dependence on parents for a number of years after completion of schooling.

In addition, adolescents of this generation are developing in a context of dwindling family and social networks and easy access to potential dangers such as drugs, alcohol, vehicles, the internet and weapons (Heaven, 2001:xiii). In the light of the well-documented positive effects of experiencing a sense of belonging, it follows that belonging may be considered a healthy and necessary component of human development and it is particularly significant for the adolescent.

Wheeler (2002:77) regards the dynamic relation of the developing self to the whole-field context as a field definition of identity. According to Ferguson and O'Neill (2001:100), the self is seen as the integrator of the field. McConville's model of adolescence, reviewed below, takes into account the interaction between the evolving context within which the adolescent develops and the changes within the adolescent himself.

2.4.3 McConville's model of adolescent development

McConville (2001a:28) states that developmental theorists differ in their understanding of what it is that develops throughout the life span, or even on what the unit of analysis should be. He derived his definition and model of adolescent development from Kurt Lewin's field-theory developmental model for adolescence. Lewin (in McConville, 2001a:30-31) claimed that the proper unit of analysis in developmental theory is an individual's "life space", comprising the physiological, psychological and social dimensions of an interrelated field.

A central principle of this model is that child development takes place within a dynamic, ever-changing relational field (McConville, 2001a:30).

McConville's (2001a:38) subsequent definition of adolescence is that of a process of "unfolding" the individual's whole field. The adolescent's field, according to Toman and Bauer (2005:182), comprises his inner world and his outer world. The adolescent's family is a part of his outer world.

Mortola's (2001:47) observation that disequilibrium is a normal feature of adolescent development typifies the Gestalt, non-analytical stance that the adolescent is capable of utilising inner resources when striving for equilibrium. When considering disequilibrium as a characteristic of adolescent development, Radzik *et al.* (2002.52) point out that adolescents vary significantly in their biological and emotional growth and in their unique response to life's challenges.

With regard to the preceding challenges, adolescents, in this study, are viewed as striving to self-regulate and maintain equilibrium within their families.

2.4.3.1 The tasks of adolescence, according to McConville

Although the term adolescence is described and defined in literature in various ways, each theorist examines the unique tasks facing the adolescent. These tasks (cf. Newman & Newman in Heaven, 2001:6) include achieving autonomy from parents, attaining a personal autonomy, developing a sexual role identity, integrating a new body image, achieving increased morality and making career choices.

Blend (2007:20) observes that, in essence, the developmental function of adolescence is to initiate differentiation and personal autonomy from the family. Moshman (1999:69) proposes that, if healthy childhood development has taken place, adolescence should begin with a sense of the self as an "autonomous, active and competent agent in a relatively secure world".

McConville's (2001a:39) model of adolescent development identifies 'disembedding' as the overarching task of this phase. An individual is expected to be embedded from birth until approximately eleven years of age (cf. Wheeler, 2002:54-55). The embedded self is understood as being "immersed in a context-family, society, culture, with permeable boundaries and relatively confluent, introjecting boundary processes" (McConville, 2001a:39).

The process of embedding allows a child to be moulded by his family and culture. Disembedding is the opposite of this process and necessitates the adolescent's separation from the context of his family (McConville, 2001a:39). McConville (2001a:38) describes disembedding as an "unfolding" process that occurs between the ages of twelve to eighteen years. Blend's (2007:21) interpretation of disembedding is that it is a process initiated when the child-self becomes aware of an inner world separate from his outer

existence. Disembedding is accomplished through the interrelated and simultaneously occurring processes of extension, differentiating and organising (cf. Blaney & Smythe, 2001:202; Wheeler, 2002:55).

These aspects will subsequently be discussed under the following headings, namely: extension, differentiation and organisation of the life space.

- *Extension of the life space*

McConville (2001a:31) explains how an individual's life space broadens over the course of development through endless opportunities for learning new behaviours. The individual's field will either support or reject these emerging behaviours. Extending the life space during middle adolescence is characterised by an interior focus that is the advent of an emotional inner space of thought, reflections, fantasies, dreams, goals, plans and possibilities.

McConville (2001b:291,293) elaborates on the thought that interiority provides a time and place for self-assessment, including self-criticism, self-affirmation and reflection on experience. Interiority further amounts to "an identity, a supportable crystallisation of an experience of authentic selfhood" (McConville, 2001b:293).

Toman and Bauer (2005:182) discuss how adolescents turn inward to find their own voice and develop their own 'self' as part of the disembedding process. As discussed by Blend (2007:21), the boundary between the adolescent's field and his more autonomous private self-world becomes clearer and he becomes increasingly more realistic and objective in assessing the world around him.

Polarisation, according to McConville (2001a:32), develops between the familiar ways of childhood and the reality of the expectations and possibilities of becoming an adult. The older adolescent begins to contemplate the reality of the seemingly infinite future that awaits him.

- *Differentiation of the life space*

The creation of a new kind of boundary between family and a more autonomous private self-world marks the beginning of the process of differentiating the life space (Wheeler, 2002:55). The adolescent begins to expand and develop more meaningful and reciprocal interpersonal relationships with friends and romantic partners. For Toman and Bauer (2005:182), the influence of the peer group becomes figural during adolescence, while adults become more background in nature.

As outlined in McConville's model (2001a:32), the adolescent's behaviour shows greater differentiation with every year he approaches adulthood. Emotional behaviour consequently becomes more complex and social skills become more sophisticated. McConville (2001a:33) indicates that the adolescent's interests begin to crystallise at the same time and his sense of self becomes more diverse leading to the creation of sub-parts or self-gestalts.

Self-gestalts, in turn, lend themselves to the emergence of polarities in the adolescent's experience. The adolescent may, for example, experience himself as simultaneously child-like and grown-up. Resolving the tension between the child and the adolescent self-gestalt is considered to be a successful resolution of this crisis, resulting in an integrated self.

As the self-gestalts become progressively organised, fairly extreme compartmentalisation results, even to the point of mild dissociation (McConville, 2001a:35). Although compartmentalising may result in angry, rebellious or withdrawing behaviour, the adolescent does not do this in an attempt to reject his family: these behaviours are phenomenological expressions of the differentiation of their life space.

Adolescents may begin to interact with entirely different contact styles in different contexts. Toman and Bauer (2005:191) concur with this stance, explaining that adolescents present with "different selves" depending on the context or field in which

they find themselves. Toman and Bauer (2005:182) also acknowledge that these changes are often not tolerated by their family who may wish to maintain the equilibrium which they experienced at an earlier stage of development. The life space of the pre-adolescent child, as outlined by McConville (2001a:36), is largely characterised by unity of experience. However, as the life space diversifies, dissonance, dis-connection and conflict emerge, causing fluctuations in the degree of unity in the adolescent self.

McConville (2001b:293) describes how peers become more figural during this differentiating of the life space, setting the adolescent apart from his family. As a result, the adolescent does not share his personal inner world as fully with his parents. An important function of disembedding from the family is pulling out and taking ownership of those parts of self that are not supported by parents.

During late adolescence, the experience of self, as indicated by Blend (2007:21) is consolidated, as the adolescent becomes less defended and is able to migrate into his field which should now be perceived as "a source of mastery and pleasure".

- *Organisation of the life space*

Toman and Bauer (2005:183) point out that organisation refers to "transformation of the boundary processes that organise and integrate the field". This organisation is the necessary integration of aspects of the field in order to form an organised whole. As a child, the principle of simple interdependence operates which is characterised by a fluid connection between all areas of the life space.

In adolescence, however, McConville (2001a:38) considers the organisation of the life space to become more differentiated due to a greater awareness of individual difference and independence. As such, the adolescent achieves the best possible organisation that the field is capable of attaining in a particular context. McConville (2001a:41) elucidates that "the self emerges progressively through adolescent development as a higher-order gestalt that integrates increasingly diverse aspects of

self and promotes an ever-growing sense of ownership of experience". In Toman and Bauer's (2005:182) opinion, the adolescent attempts to maintain an enduring sense of "me", whilst interacting with "not me" in a variety of fields.

In the light of the above discussion, adolescence may be seen as a progressive movement from embeddedness within the family, through the disembedding process of differentiation, to a re-organised integration of the field (Cf. McConville, 2001a:38).

2.5 SUMMARY

Chapter Two consisted of a conceptual framework. The researcher focused on existing literature relevant to belonging, adolescence and the Gestalt theory. Two of the most relevant theories of belonging were discussed and a Gestalt developmental approach was presented. The following chapter will present the empirical findings of this study.

CHAPTER THREE
EMPIRICAL FINDINGS AND LITERATURE CONTROL

3.1 INTRODUCTION

Chapter Two provided a conceptual framework which explored basic concepts relevant to this study. This third chapter will begin with a brief review of the aims of the study and the research methodology selected in order to achieve those aims. The focus of the chapter will be on the empirical data obtained from interviews with the participants and a discussion of the data will be brought into context through a literature control.

The Gestalt phenomenological approach that underpins this study posits that individuals are the experts on their own experience (cf. Sharf, 2004).

The research approach for this study was specifically selected in order to acknowledge the adolescent as the expert in his unique experience of belonging in his family. As such, the data generated by the participants in this study is considered to be valuable. The research approach was likewise selected in order to acquire more insight into the adolescent's phenomenological experience of belonging and to understand this experience from a Gestalt perspective.

3.2 AIM AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The aim of this study was to explore and describe the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family and to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept. A qualitative research design was selected as being the most flexible in terms of obtaining rich data. Non-probability, purposive sampling was used in this study (cf. Strydom, 2005b:201-202).

An instrumental case study (cf. Fouché, 2005b:272) was selected, comprising eleven adolescents. Based on Maxwell's (2005:112) and Greeff's (2005:297) recommendations

for obtaining detailed data, one-to-one semi-structured interviews were conducted in order to elicit the adolescent's experience of belonging in his family. Semi-structured interviews, as specified by Smith (2003:56), Coolican (2004:153) and Greeff (2005:297), involve the use of a number of predetermined questions in an interview schedule which guides the interview process.

Maxwell (2005:112) recommends using different sources of data; therefore data collection in this study includes the literature study, the data obtained from semi-structured interviews and the researcher's observations, as recorded in field notes and memos. Relevant particulars of the eleven participants, namely their respective ages and grades, are outlined in Addendum D. A discussion of the empirical findings is presented below.

3.3 EMPIRICAL DATA

The qualitative data presented below focuses on the main ideas that emerged from all eleven participants. Participants experienced belonging in their families in differing degrees. During the process of data analysis, the data was analysed through the repeated reading of transcripts obtained during the interviewing process; and recurring themes were subsequently identified.

Central Gestalt concepts, as identified according to the theoretical considerations and paradigm in Chapter Two, were used to develop themes, sub-themes and categories. These themes, sub-themes and categories provided the basis of the semi-structured interview schedule (See Addendum C). The themes, sub-themes and categories are presented in the following section of this chapter through the participant's direct quotations which detail their experiences and perceptions, and also provide the reader with a sense of their phenomenology (refer to Table 3.1).

TABLE 3.1: EMPIRICAL FINDINGS: THEMES, SUB-THEMES AND CATEGORIES

THEMES	SUB-THEMES	CATEGORIES
THEME ONE: DIALOGUE	Sub-theme One: • *Contact* Sub-theme Two: • *Characteristics of dialogue*	• *Contact boundary disturbances* • *Inclusion* • *Presence* • *Commitment to dialogue* • *Dialogue is lived* • *I-It and the experience of shame* • *I-Thou and the experience of support*
THEME TWO: AWARENESS AND ITS HOLISTIC EFFECT ON SENSE OF SELF	Sub-theme One: • *Cognitive aspect of the Self* Sub-theme Two: • *Emotional aspect of Self* Sub-theme three: • *Physical Aspect of Self* Sub-theme four: • *Social Aspect of Self* Sub-theme five: • *Spiritual Aspect of Self*	

3.3.1 Theme one: Dialogue

Yontef (1993b) describes dialogue in its Gestalt sense as experiencing the other person as he or she really is and simultaneously showing the true self. As such, dialogue is seen to embody authenticity and responsibility. As referred to in 2.3.2.6, Hycner (1995:4) considers a dialogical approach to be one that "best addresses the human spirit".

Contact, which emerges when a distinction is made in the field between 'me' and 'not me', is the basic process that must occur before dialogue may proceed.

3.3.1.1 Sub-theme one: Contact

Yontef (1993a:203) describes contact as the basic process of relationship which entails an appreciation of the differences between self and the other. Any discussion on contact is inseparable from a discussion of boundaries. Effective boundaries allow for fluid alternating between separating and connecting with others in the environment (refer to 2.3.2.3). Polster and Polster (in Hycner, 1995:6) state that one of the most fundamental tensions underlying all human contact is the tension between individual connectedness and individual uniqueness.

In this regard, Polster and Polster (1973:98-99) expound:

> "Since our umbilicalectomy each of us has become separate beings, seeking union with that which is other than ourselves. Never again can we return to the original symbiotic paradise; our sense of union depends paradoxically on a heightened sense of separateness and it is this paradox which we constantly seek to resolve. The function which synthesises the need for union and for separation is contact".

Boundaries may be manipulated in a variety of ways through the phenomenon of contact boundary disturbances (refer to 2.3.2.3). When separating and connecting occur with

awareness (Yontef, 1993b), this is a healthy, rhythmical phenomenon. When contact is manipulated without awareness, contact may not be as healthy. During the course of the interviews, the participants variously described contact boundary modifications between themselves and their parents.

Category one: Contact boundary disturbances

Yontef (1993a:203) states that an individual is differentiated from his field by boundaries which are processes of separating and connecting between 'Self' and the 'Other'. In Schoeman's (1996:68) opinion, contact boundary disturbances are a sign that the individual is out of balance and is experiencing disequilibrium. It follows, therefore, as indicated by Parlett (2005:42) and Sharf (2004:246), that healthy contact is characterised by a minimum of contact boundary disturbances.

This category describes how participants experienced their parents' interaction with them, specifically focusing on things their parents do or say and how these affect their experience of belonging. The interviews yielded numerous examples of contact boundary disturbances between parents and participants, some of which took place with awareness, whilst others were largely outside of any awareness.

- Confluence

Participants E, G and I have fathers who live far away due to divorce and relocation. In all three cases, the participants see very little of their fathers, although they do make contact via various communication options. These participants perceive their relationship with their fathers to be almost perfect. As participant G says:

> "My dad and I have a fantastic relationship. I see him about once a year but we phone each other all the time and we talk to each other on Facebook. I can talk to him about anything. I kind of see my dad as a role model".

If confluence is a "surrender to sameness" due to the individual's need for acceptance (cf. Yontef, 1993a:205), then these participants may, without being aware of it, be in a

confluent relationship with their fathers for these reasons. The researcher suggests that these long-distance relationships may mean that contact is more intentional when it occurs, but it is improbable that these relationships would function as harmoniously on a continual basis if the interaction took place under 'normal', everyday circumstances.

Sharf (2004:245) cautions that whilst confluence is the perception of closeness or similarity, this is often pure perception where the similarity could in fact be attributed to lower levels of awareness. Latner (2000:37) similarly stated that when confluence occurs without awareness, individuals may not be able to distinguish their own thoughts, attitudes and feelings from those of others.

The participants' need for good relationships with their fathers under difficult circumstances may result in this "surrender to sameness" in order to meet that need and to self-regulate (cf. Yontef, 1993a:205). These examples of confluent contact making may be healthy for the participant in the short-term, but may, in the researcher's opinion, present problems at a later stage when emotions that may have been deflected need to be expressed.

Confluence can, however, also occur with greater awareness. Certain participants described enhanced contact with siblings and/or parents who are similar to them in some way. Having a shared passion, interests or even similar attributes with a parent or sibling would appear to facilitate awareness of each other's inner and outer worlds, subsequently enhancing contact.

Participant I explained it in the following way:

> "I decided to live with my Mom so that I was with my brother. My brother and I are very alike. We … look alike, I don't know …we're very similar in a lot of ways … It's like we have a connection".

By contrast, participant C found it arduous to make contact with his brother given the lack of any similarity between them, and he mentioned that:

> "I don't get on with my younger brother ... there's mostly silence between us. We connect at times, but I must be honest ... when we do, it feels like hard work for me. We don't share any interests ... we're very different".

Participant C, however, enjoys a good relationship with his parents, in which music is, to a great extent, the "sameness" they share. With regard to this contact-making through music, participant C shared the following: "Music has been our lives … ever since I was a toddler. It's a passion my parents and I share".

From the empirical data it seems as if confluence is a healthy form of contact modification when it takes the form of a plethora of nurturing behaviours from mothers. All participants, with the exception of participant F, described a range of domestic-type acts, such as cleaning and cooking, which make them feel loved and cared for. Fathers, on the other hand, were generally mentioned with regard to activity-related contexts, such as exercising together (cf. Gerali, 2006:239).

Another participant who described the boundary modification of 'confluence' was participant E, who recalled that he and his sister had been obliged to share a room when they relocated to Knysna. This confluence seems to have occurred with awareness, given their shared need for friendship at the time.

The relocation meant that established friends were left behind and both brother and sister experienced loneliness as a result. As this participant explained, he and his sibling "sort of had to become friends"; and he now believes that they are much closer as a result. According to him, his sister tries to stand up for him with his step-father and in this regard, he says, "I trust her … I can tell her about my problems. She keeps things confidential when I tell her. She tells me she loves me".

Sharf (2004:245) describes confluence as the perception that others share the same feelings and thoughts as self. In this instance, the shared experience of loneliness following divorce and relocation allowed healthier contact to take place between participant E and his sister.

Rice (2008:238) and Berk (2009:583) both observe that siblings often provide companionship, friendship and meet each other's needs for affection and meaningful relationships. The researcher found many such instances during the interviews, as well as instances where these sibling relationships had improved as the siblings matured. Younger brothers were fairly consistently referred to as being "less irritating", once they were older.

Rice (1993:112) stated that relationships during early adolescence are often characterised by conflict, but that siblings tend to accept each other better and behave more calmly towards each other as they mature during adolescence. The researcher suggests that this may be due to confluence in their contact making, as the age differences become less significant and similarities develop, such as the more commonly held thoughts and feelings of adolescence.

Rice (2008:239) adds that older siblings often play the role of surrogate parents and are required to fulfil certain roles, such as caretaking, teaching, confidante and playmate. This seems to have been the case with participant A, who was co-raised by his siblings following the death of his mother when he was very young. He remains close to these siblings and appears to have a genuine respect for them.

- Projection

Projection by parents, particularly mothers, is represented by participant E when he mentions that: "My mom moans a lot, she is very moody … especially when she comes home from work". He added that, "She over-reacts … my mom worries too much about what other people will think". According to Schoeman (1996:64), when individuals

attribute responsibility to others or disown aspects of themselves or their experiences, they are projecting.

The researcher suggests that the unpredictability of the mothers' moods and the apparent lack of any good reason for them may be attributed to projection by the mothers. The data shows that the unpredictability of their moods impacts negatively on emotional safety in the relationship, leaving participants feeling uncertain and even resentful. In this regard participant G mentioned that:

> "My mom can be moody and you never know what mood she'll be in … it's frustrating … it makes me cross. Also, my Mom kind of 'freaks out' when I tell her about things, so I avoid talking to her … she gets too emotional about everything".

These participants feel frustrated, hurt and confused by the unpredictability and inconsistency of their mothers' moods.

- Introjection

Introjections, according to Joyce and Sills (2001:125), occur when potentially damaging messages from the environment are assimilated by an individual. With regard to the study 'potentially damaging messages from the environment' often seems to take the form of criticism and judgment by parents. According to participant F, his mother constantly criticises him and the following quote suggests that the criticism directed at him by his mother now comes in the form of 'introjected messages'. Participant F explains:

> "My Mom tells me I'm useless and lazy. There's never any praise …but there's plenty of criticism. My mother is very hard … she's extreme … there's no softness or gentleness there. They don't think I'm anything much if I'm not achieving something. No matter how hard I try … it's never good enough for them. I was always trying to better myself as a child. I always pushed myself to do better … it's never good enough for me. I always have to try harder".

Various authors (cf. Yontef, 1993a:210; Latner, 2000:38; Clarkson, 2004:22) posit that an individual should be able to reject what is not nourishing to the self and assimilate that which is nourishing. Participant F has apparently been unable to achieve this, given his claim that nothing he ever achieves is good in his eyes. He has apparently internalised the message his parents, particularly his mother, have repeatedly sent him, namely that he is not good enough.

Yontef (1993b) is of the opinion that introjections are only truly pathological when the individual is unaware of them. Although participant F, throughout the research interview, seemed to be aware that his experience of parenting has been inadequate, he lacks awareness of the contact boundary disturbances that typify the way he makes contact. These disturbances have arisen as a result of negative messages from his parents that he has introjected.

The introjection that he is "useless" has resulted in a deep lack of self-worth, which seems to fuel his exhaustive and often self-injurious attempts to excel at everything he undertakes. Yontef (1993b) indicated that, whilst polarities are natural opposites in the field, if they cannot be integrated in a balanced way, less functional dichotomies will result.

The researcher is of the opinion that participant F's mother appears to function in a dichotomy, given his description of her as "extreme".

Many of the other participants dwelt on the criticism they had received from their parents. Criticism, for several participants, often involves referring to their past mistakes or misdemeanours. Joyce and Sills (2001:130) note that unfinished business may be the cause of an individual moving away from the present into the past. Sharf (2004:247) adds that a shift in focus to the past will prevent the full experience and complete awareness of the present.

The researcher suggests that criticism of past misdemeanours may stem from unfinished business on the part of the parents. Participant D complained: “My step-dad’s always criticising … he moans about stupid stuff. He always brings up old history” Participant D shared the same frustration, “My step-dad’s always criticising me for something. He’s always bringing up something from the past”,

Criticism of academic application and performance seemed to be particularly distressing to many of the participants. Rice and Dolgin (2008:236) note that school performance is a common form of conflict between adolescents and their parents. In this regard participant H shared the feeling that he wants his parents to be proud of him, especially when he has tried his best. He mentioned that: “I get angry and upset when I have done my best and they criticise me”.

Gouws *et al.* (2000:146) are of the opinion that middle-class parents tend to put pressure on their children to get good marks. Even in highly functioning families, such as those of participants C, H and K, contact is often negatively affected by this parental perception regarding academic effort and performance.

When his parents express disappointment in him, participant H tends to withdraw. As referred to in 2.3.3.1, McConville (2001b:293) identifies an increase in interiority during adolescence, which provides opportunities for reflection, self-assessment, self-criticism and self-affirmation. It is likely that participant H’s sporadic withdrawal grants him the time and place for this interiority which ultimately leads to “the crystallisation of authentic selfhood” (cf. McConville, 2001b:293).

Furthermore, McConville (2001b:293) stresses that withdrawal during adolescence is not necessarily a rejection of the family, but rather the result of a process of compartmentalisation as self-gestalts become organised (refer to 2.3.3.1). For participant H, the experience of being chastised, much as a child would be, may be at odds with his self-gestalt, in which he sees himself as being ‘grown-up’. In order to differentiate his life space, he must resolve these apparently paradoxical self-gestalts. The more the

adolescent's life space differentiates, the more complex, diversified and contradictory his experience becomes. This will cause ongoing fluctuations in the unity of the adolescent self (cf. McConville, 2001b:293).

For several participants, criticism takes the more implicit form of comparisons between the participants and their siblings and/or step-siblings. In this regard participant B shares that "[My step-father's] children are his favourites ... he's unfair. He compares us with his own children".

Participant G complains, "[My mother] lets my little brother get away with too much"; and participant E states, "My sister is their favourite ... she can never do anything wrong in their eyes". Participants unanimously consider comparisons as being unfair and hurtful. Rice and Dolgin (2008:261-262) indicate that adolescents are distressed by comparisons with their siblings or step-siblings.

The researcher suggests, in the light of the data, that comparisons with step-siblings made by step-parents are particularly distressing to adolescents. According to Rice and Dolgin (2008:261-262), step-parents have unique challenges to contend with in this regard. They often have unrealistic expectations of themselves and their step-children; they may enter into their newly combined families with a degree of guilt, regret and unresolved emotional issues from their previous marriages and divorces; and they may struggle with undefined roles.

Participant C may be considered an example of successful filtering at the contact boundary. His apparent ability to reject what is unacceptable is reflected in the statement: "My parents are so good. They have really high expectations of me. But … they need to understand that I want to be like other kids of my age … I need to be normal. I feel like they want me to be perfect".

He shared with the researcher how much he respects what his parents represent; nevertheless it is clear that he contemplates his parents' input thoroughly before any assimilation takes place. This allows participant C to maintain equilibrium by using only

what is nourishing from his environment and rejecting what is not useful to him (cf. Clarkson, 2004:22). Considering the tasks of adolescence, as described by certain theorists (refer to 2.3.3.1), attaining a personal autonomy is acknowledged to be one of the central tasks facing adolescents. Participant C's respect for his parents is apparent but the need to assert his autonomy sometimes is likewise important.

- Retroflection

The data demonstrates that participant F's contact is significantly characterised by the contact boundary disturbance of retroflection. As mentioned previously, this participant verbalised the truth that his childhood was sad and isolated - as a result of his parents apparent inability to meet his need for love and nurturing. He, however, seems to lack awareness of how this unhealthy contact has affected the way he currently makes contact with both his 'self' and with others in his field.

With regard to the 'self', Zinker (1990:44-45), Joyce and Sills (2001:114) and Sharf (2004:245) all explain that retroflection begins with a disruption of the energetic flow in contact; this is followed by the turning inward of the energy towards the self. This results in bodily tension, psychosomatic illnesses, depression and/or self-harm.

The following quote by participant F reveals the apparent development of this contact boundary disturbance as a result of his unmet needs:

> "Even when we were growing up … [my parents] were always working. They were never there. And when they were there … even sitting watching TV, we had to be quiet. They never wanted to listen to me. I was always on my own and lonely as a child. I sometimes felt invisible. I used to use my imagination all the time … I was always reading as a child. I remember how we used to have a char once a week … it was always such a huge thrill to see her because then we had someone to talk to. I learnt at a young age to just take everything and squash it down. I belong to myself. I am very self-reliant. It makes me weak to need my family. I push myself so hard … when I am skate-boarding especially … but

> also when I am doing anything physical. I'm sometimes drenched in sweat … but I just can't stop. I have to get it right, I have to improve … I push myself to the limit. I've injured myself so many times … like once my hip was wrecked from my skate-boarding. But, even when I'm hurt … it never seems to mean anything to anyone."

The researcher suggests that, in the light of the intensity of his physical activities, particularly skateboarding, these pursuits may be indicative of retroflection. Lampert (2003:151) observes that a frenetic life style may be regarded as a possible indication of depression. Lampert does not elaborate on the term "frenetic", but the researcher tentatively suggests that it may include extreme physical pursuits, particularly when undertaken in a relentless pursuit of perfection.

Lampert (2003:151) adds that when adolescents present as sad, dejected or frenetic in some way, the common underlying emotional experience may be one of helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness. Referring to a case study, Polster (1974:219) recalls this individual as someone who "…could not tolerate an accumulation of sensation and kept ahead of himself by prematurely discharging sensation and preventing its build-up either through action or through making plans for action".

This description aligns with the process of retroflection and seems to parallel participant F's apparent attempts to avoid emotional pain through excessive action.

Although participant F expressed sadness and anger towards his parents during the interview, he has apparently been unable to directly communicate these emotions to them. Yontef (1996:359) explains how, when a child's needs are rejected, the child perceives him or herself to be a "…needy, weak self…" The child subsequently retroflects, or turns inward against the self. All the anger is directed at the rejecting parent/s, "as if the pain and anguish of deprivation and unrequited love were because of the need, rather than the field responses" (Yontef, 1996:359). In the light of this statement participant F's

need for nurturing from his parents had been largely denied him, and he appears to have subsequently disowned these needs.

Yontef (1993b) notes that the field is naturally composed of polar opposites that complement or clarify one another. However, if these polarities are not genuinely integrated, splits may arise within the self. During the interview, participant F used the word “extreme” to describe his mother’s harshness; the word “weak” to describe his need for love, and “weak” to also describe his father.

The researcher is subsequently of the opinion that such a split may have occurred in his self due to an inability to integrate the polar opposites of ‘weak’ and ‘strong/extreme’. Participant F not only rejected his own needs as being weak, but also seemed to reject his father whom he simultaneously described as “....relatively softer [than my mother] and less extreme” and somewhat scornfully as “a weak man”.

Toman and Bauer (2005:185) indicate that retroflecting families (refer to 2.3.2.3) are emotionally dead in varying degrees, hopeless and withdrawn. This type of family seems to be well represented in participant F’s case, as his memories are of parents who were always tired and uncommunicative and apparently emotionally in absentia. Moreover, the message of laziness and uselessness that participant F seems to have introjected means that he was “never good enough” to elicit the love of his parents (cf. Yontef, 1996:361).

Participant F told the researcher, unequivocally, that he experiences no sense of belonging in his family. As indicated previously in 2.3.2.3, adolescents from desensitised families, such as participant F’s, may engage in risky behaviours in order to feel more alive and separate from their family.

Participant E is the other participant who experiences a minimal sense of belonging in his family. Referring to the family unit with whom he lives, namely his mother and step-father, he expressed the sentiment that “When my parents are nice to me … it makes me feel as if I’m one of their children”. Whilst participant E is not an example of

retroflection per se, the researcher considers his experience of contact within his family to parallel participant F's in certain ways, albeit not to the same extent.

Yontef (1993b) identifies an "as-if" personality, where splits in the self have resulted due to parts of the self being rejected or disowned. The researcher is of the opinion that the above statement by participant E suggests that the unhealthy contact between himself and his parents culminates in the experience of not feeling like their child: only occasionally does he feel "as if" he is one their children.

The researcher suggests that for participant E, the experience of belonging in his family has an almost imaginary quality and may be indicative of a split within the self. It would seem, in the case of both participants E and F, that contact boundary disturbances and unhealthy contact between parent and participant has had potentially disastrous effects on these adolescents. Participant F would seem to be the most extreme example of this, particularly with regard to the deleterious effects of retroflection and introjection.

Participant C presented the researcher with another example of this contact boundary disturbance. In his case, it was, however, a temporary phenomenon following a family relocation at the age of fourteen. According to him, the losses inherent in this situation resulted in a grieving process. At the time, despite healthy contact with his parents, he was unable to share his experience with them which initiated a period of self-harming.

Participant C therefore retroflected his pain as a means of coping with overwhelming emotions that were preventing him from self-regulating (refer to 3.3.1.1). A Gestalt understanding of adolescence does acknowledge the role disequilibrium plays in the overarching process of self-regulation (refer to 2.3.2), and participant C eventually managed to self-regulate in healthier ways. This temporary disequilibrium manifested through retroflection seems to have left him unscathed and he appears to the researcher to have developed into a mature, stable 'late' adolescent who verbalises his thoughts and emotions with ease. Participant C is thus an example of the individual's proclivity to utilise inner resources to achieve self-regulation.

Radzik *et al.* (2002) do, however, emphasise that adolescents vary significantly in their unique responses to stressors. In the light of this observation, participant C may have emerged from this episode unscathed due to the fact that his family was extremely close prior to the relocation and the data shows that he has experienced a strong sense of belonging in his family from infancy. Participant F's response to stressors is different given that this experience of belonging has been absent from an early age; hence his inability to self-regulate as effectively as participant C.

- Deflection

It is apparent that, even as a child, participant F deflected from his loneliness by reading and engaging in fantasy. Yontef (2005:310) lists introspection, self-sufficiency and talking to oneself as examples of isolating procedures. The data strongly suggests that participant F's experience of connecting was repetitively blocked by his parents as he was growing up; and he was subsequently left in a state of isolation (cf. Yontef & Jacobs, 2005:310). Participant F consequently describes himself as "very self-reliant" and belonging only to himself, ostensibly denying any need for contact.

From a Gestalt perspective, contact between adolescents and their parents may be healthy or unhealthy, and the manner in which the adolescent makes contact with his field will depend on his parents making contact with him. Once contact has been established, dialogue may occur. This entails two people sharing their phenomenological perspectives with each other. The data obtained relating to dialogue follows.

3.3.1.2 Sub-theme two: Characteristics of dialogue

This theme deals with the characteristics of a dialogical encounter, as explored through the interview schedule. These characteristics, which are identified as separate categories, are: inclusion, presence, commitment to dialogue, and dialogue that is lived. These identified categories were explored through the participant's experience of their interaction with their parents and the effect this interaction has had on their sense of belonging in their family.

According to Yontef (1993a:34) a person in dialogue, is one who "fully knows and confirms that the other is a separate and equally special consciousness".

Category one: Inclusion

Yontef (1993a:127,218) explains that inclusion is where individuals see themselves as "being met" and where they are "made present by other people". Inclusion thus confirms the existence of the other as an independent, separate, worthwhile being with an independent soul.

Rice and Dolgin (2008:224) identify a variety of parental behaviours, such as listening, expressing love for the adolescent, accepting, trusting, showing approval, expressing humour and generally being happy, that are indicative of connection between parent and adolescent. This connection subsequently provides a sense of security that is generalised into the outside world (Rice & Dolgin, 2008:224).

The data shows that participants experience inclusion in various forms, many of which are similar to those put forth by the afore-mentioned authors. The participants' experience of being met and made present include experiencing parental perceptiveness of and sensitivity to their moods, expressions of empathy and understanding with regard to their emotions and experiences, being asked for their opinions, being praised, parental emphasis on the positive, being included in adult discussions and decision-making, parental availability to listen and offer advice when this is asked for, and generally being loved.

Participants also felt met and received by their parents when their parents express interest in their schoolwork and friendships. The participants' experience is that parental involvement confirms their existence as worthy individuals whose lives are valuable and worthwhile. From the data it appears that it is fairly common for one parent to support

the adolescent in one area, whilst the other parent is involved with a different part of the participant's field.

This is the case, for example, with participant H's parents when he mentions that: "My dad is always interested in my schoolwork. My mom is the one who knows more about my friends." Inclusion, in many respects, appears to involve parental awareness of the adolescent's needs and a respect for those needs. The perception that their parents enjoy their company is validating to these adolescents. It seems appropriate to refer to participant F in this regard, who has not experienced inclusion from his parents. The lack of being met and 'received' by his parents accounts for his observation that "I sometimes feel invisible".

Toman and Bauer (2005:192) refer to McConville's assertion that all adolescents want to know that they are likeable, that they will be taken seriously and that they will have something to offer when they enter the adult world. In keeping with this statement, participants D and J emphasised how affirming they find it to know that their parents enjoyed being with them. In participant D's words: "My dad makes time for us … like, he'll come home from work at lunchtime to visit us…".

In a similar vein, participant J adds: "I remember when I was younger, my parents used to sometimes come home early to play with me. That … made me feel loved because I knew that they enjoyed spending time with me". When parents make time to simply 'be' with the participants, it is perceived by them as significant and validating. Yontef (2003:359) encapsulates the sentiments expressed by participants D and J when he observes that a youngster may look into his parents' eyes and will find a look that "… tells him he is either a joy or a gift to his parents – or not".

Inclusion, in Yontef's (1993a:35-37,127,218) opinion, is the highest form of confirmation which results in the affirmation of an individual's potential for growth as well as "…confirming what you were called to become". Participant K experiences inclusion

when he shares that “My mother tells me I have a destiny. That, yes; it makes me feel good; ... it makes me think about that”.

Inclusion in this case seems to provide participant K with a greater awareness of the possibilities for his life. Yontef (1993a:205) furthermore understands inclusion to be “acceptance plus” which allows the individual to “to invest in and explore what one is, to endure the reality of one’s way of being in the world”.

It is the researcher’s opinion that inclusion essentially allows the individual to determine the significance of his life (cf. Yontef, 1993a:205). For participant B, who is homosexual, this is particularly true when he explains that:

> “When I am with my mom I feel like all the different parts of myself come together; there are no masks. My mom accepts who I am, my sexuality….she doesn’t try to change me. I feel safe, accepted, comfortable…regardless of my mood. Her love is unconditional love and her acceptance makes me feel I’m worth something....no achievement is necessary”.

Participant B told the researcher that he experiences his most profound sense of belonging when he experiences this complete acceptance. Beisser (1970) and Yontef (1993a:205) maintain that this unconditional acceptance centres the individual and facilitates his growth through awareness and choice. In the light of this view parents who practise inclusion ultimately offer their adolescents unconditional acceptance; and this lays the foundation for the adolescent’s future growth.

Yontef (1993a:39,126) emphasises that it is intentionality on both sides of the contact boundary to share meaning that ensures that dialogue will occur. Participant E describes the frustration he experiences in his relationship with his mother due to an absence of inclusion in their encounters:

> "Like when I talk to my mom, I wish she would listen to me. I have to follow her around the house while she's doing things … and that's when I just don't bother because I know she's not really listening. She needs to sit down and stop doing things and listen to me properly".

Participant C experiences inclusion within his family but also describes an equivalent state of complete authenticity, freedom and self-acceptance when he is immersed in his music:

> "When I'm playing my music, it's like I can see the big picture. Nothing can harm me or touch me. There are no masks ... that's when I'm the real me. I feel like I'm the best person I can be when I'm playing my music. It's the ultimate self-expression."

A similar experience of belonging was presented by participant G, who, although not a musician, spends a significant amount of time compiling music. Unlike participant C, he experiences a fairly minimal sense of belonging in his family and stated: "I feel like I belong when I'm listening to my CDs, compiling CDs. That's the best ... that's, I suppose, my passion. When I'm in the zone, listening to my music...".

Geldard and Geldard (2004:41) warn of the possible negative influence of some music on adolescents, pointing out that the lyrics "hook into" the adolescent's current emotional frustrations and experiences. However, for both of these participants, music appears to be an extremely positive and beneficial experience, one which facilitates self-awareness and self-regulation.

Category two: Presence

The dialogical characteristic of presence, as indicated by Yontef (1993a:34-35,127, 219), refers to an intentional interaction between two people who share emotional and experiential meaning with each other. As described by the participants, presence occurs

in their interactions with their families, in a variety of ways, including regular expressions of love and the experiences of safety and trust - in order to share emotions and experience.

Participant B, who is close to his mother, observed that she is the only person who would ever see him cry. Honesty and forgiveness were cited by participant B as significant in promoting trust and safety in their relationship. With regard to this he mentioned that: "My mom is very honest…she has never lied to me and I can always trust her. She always forgives me …"

Referring to forgiveness in his relationship with his father, participant A similarly explained: "If I do make mistakes … he always forgives me … There are no grudges held". Several other participants confirmed the importance of trust and forgiveness in facilitating the sharing of meaning in their relationships with their parents. By contrast, participant F says of his mother, "She's very unforgiving … very hard". Referring to his father, he recalls: "My father often let me down growing up". A possible loss of trust in his parents may be part of the reason why he now claims to be "self-reliant" and to belong only to himself.

Various participants also referred to instances of parental contact that are characterised by an apparent lack of trust. Participant J, whose parents found out about his marijuana use, found that it affected his parents' trust in him and impeded contact with them. Participant H stated that: "My mom asks too many questions; she always wants to know more; she worries too much"; and this leaves him with the impression that she does not trust him.

Geldard and Geldard (2004:12) make the point that parents often worry and become distressed by behaviours which are normal for most adolescents. Participant E added that: "[My mom] is always phoning me to check up on where I am and what I'm doing". Toman and Bauer (2005:182) state that mothers may not tolerate developmental shifts in their adolescent, particularly their quest for autonomy.

For several participants their mothers' over-anxious, over-involved, intrusive and over-protective contact seems to have negatively affected their relationship. These incidents are testament to Gerali's (2006:246) observation that: "A guy's relationship with his mom is a deep heart relationship that goes through a series of trials. He needs the connectedness, but at times he despises it". Gerali (2006:247) also notes that fathers are usually better at recognising autonomy in their sons.

Several participants reflected on the importance of experiencing the mere physical presence of a parent, even when no verbal or even apparent non-verbal communication occurs. Jacobs (1995:65) observed that dialogue may include silence, as long as it is a genuine response to the other and not an attempt to withhold dialogue or to self-protect. Participant A's experience in this regard is that: "Even when he isn't talking, just having my dad near me feels good". Participant B echoed this sentiment: "It feels good just to have my mom nearby….even just her physical presence…even if we are not talking, just being quiet. It feels comfortable, safe and nice".

Hycner (1995:7) elaborated on this sentiment by noting that words may be a prelude to an I-Thou encounter but they do not necessarily define it. Hycner (1995:7) added that a "real speaking" can occur in silence that enriches both individuals in the encounter. The thoughts expressed above by participants A and B seem to reflect what Jacobs (1995:7) described as a "grace" that sometimes occurs, even when the interaction is non-verbal.

Category three: Commitment to dialogue

Commitment to dialogue, in Yontef's (1993a:127,220) view, is a "surrender" to contact. As such, dialogue cannot be aimed at, enforced, controlled or manipulated. Dialogue should rather emerge from the daily, patient commitment to the relationship (Brownell, 2003b). When it emerges under these conditions, dialogue is often marked by feelings of comfort and safety. Participant K experiences commitment to dialogue in his family and describes the experience in the following way: "My parents are always there to listen to

me, to love me, to talk to me, to help me, to look after me. My Mom and Dad tell me they love me often".

Participant K experiences a strong sense of belonging in his family. Participant C's parents also seem to be committed to an enduring dialogical approach to their children. He shares the following with the researcher: "My parents want to understand me, my life, my experience of everything".

Another reference to this dialogical approach came from participant A, who experiences a strong sense of belonging with his father. His perspective in this regard was: "My father's body language is always calm … relaxed. I feel safe with him. He is never sarcastic. I always know he means what he says". Participant H also experiences a strong sense of belonging in his family and told the researcher: "My mom speaks gently …she tells me she loves me often. That makes me feel safe I suppose".

This characteristic of dialogue, as discussed above, is similar to the two criteria for belonging identified by Baumeister and Leary (refer to 2.2.2.3), namely frequent, affectively pleasing interaction and persistent caring.

Category four: Dialogue is lived

Dialogue is lived, according to Yontef (1993a:127-128,233), when excitement and immediacy are experienced in a dialogical encounter. This characteristic of dialogue is apparent when expression occurs in an energetic, organic way**.** According to Sharf (2004:244), there are five ways or layers of making contact, namely: phony, phobic, impasse, implosive and explosive. The phony layer entails making contact in unauthentic or stereotypical ways, the phobic layer ensures that psychological pain is avoided and the impasse layer involves a fear of movement or change which results in contact becoming "stuck" (Sharf, 2004:244). The fourth layer is implosive and in this instance, contact is made with the beginnings of awareness. However, it is the fifth layer which is significant with regard to this particular characteristic. The explosive layer is associated with

energetic expression, spontaneity and joy and Perls (in Sharf, 2004:244) indicates that experiencing this layer is necessary for mental health and in order to feel fully alive. All the participants, with the exception of participants E, F and G, described how experiencing a sense of belonging in their family results in higher energy levels, the desire to be spontaneous, to clown around, to laugh and to have fun. Participant A, for example, stated: "When I really feel like I belong in my family I get a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. I smile, laugh, I have more energy, I clown around".

As discussed above, in the case of participants C and G, the experience of belonging also occurs in the context of music: an experience that they associate with joy and spontaneity. For other participants, the experience of belonging is equated with similar experiences of increased energy levels. For several participants, physical performance on the sports field is perceived to improve when they are in the presence of the parents with whom they experience a strong sense of belonging.

Participant D was one such participant who mentioned that: "I play rugby for my mom. I play better rugby when I know my mom's there watching me". Participant J expressed the same sentiment: "I play better rugby when I know my dad's at the side of the field".

Category five: I-It relating and the experience of shame

Hycner (1995:8) distinguishes between two modes of dialogue, namely "I-It" relating and "I-Thou" relating, where "I-it" is an attitude of natural separation and "I-Thou" is an attitude of natural connection (Refer to 2.3.2.7). It is the researcher's opinion that, whilst Gestalt literature does not identify these modes as characteristics of dialogue per se, a discussion in this regard is highly pertinent to this study.

In the light of Hycner's statement above, and the data yielded by the interviews, the researcher considers I-It relating to be closely associated with the participants' experience of shame within their families. Shame is defined by Yontef (1996:353) as "the experience of negative evaluative and emotional reactions to one's own being". The creative tension

that arises between I-It and I-Thou and the integration of the two modes is the hallmark of healthy living (Hycner, 1995:8).

An I-It mode of relating is "thoroughly purposeful", having a goal in mind which necessitates objectifying the other, rather than seeing him/her as a person (cf. Yontef, 1993a:208). I-It encounters are essentially technical in nature, involving elements of arguing, controlling, calculating and manipulating. The parents of participants E and F seem to adopt this dialogical mode in most interactions with their sons.

Given that I-It relating, according to Yontef (1993a:208), involves components of objectifying, comparing, analysing, dissecting and criticising, there is the risk that a preponderance of this mode may impact negatively on contact. As a result of the criticism and arguing that characterises participants E and F's relationships with their parents, the uniquely human and personal aspect of the other is prevented from making a connection (cf. Yontef, 1993a:208). It further appears that there is a distant relationship between these parents and their sons as a result of a predominantly I-It mode of relating (cf. Yontef, 1993a:34). Shame would thus seem to be closely linked to the experience of an I-It mode of dialogue.

Yontef (1993b) also draws attention to the need for a rhythmical alternating between I-It and I-Thou modes, but adds the caveat that I-It relating should always be in the service of I-Thou. Incidents of objectifying the adolescent, as in implementing consequences for inappropriate behaviour, should therefore only occur out of respect and love for their wellbeing, rather than from any contact boundary disturbance or need to control and manipulate.

The researcher considers Yontef's caveat (1993b) to be of central significance when applied to an analysis of the data. Whilst I-It relating is necessary, the participants' responses consistently point to the fact that a predominance of I-Thou relating is conducive to the development of a sense of belonging. The researcher's opinion is borne out by Yontef (1995:91), who understands shame and guilt to be part of normal

development when they are matched to the context and are not exaggerated, too severe or are global indictments of the individual.

In this way the standards taught by parents may be assimilated rather than becoming introjects or constituting a fear of punishment. Yontef (2005:91) explains that shame often has the meaning of the person not being acceptable, lovable and/or worthwhile as a person and this guilt consequently often significantly limits his behaviour.

Joyce and Sills (2001:91) interpret support and shame as polar opposites, both of which regulate contact by allowing an individual to move towards what is needed or away from what is rejected. Neither of these modes should therefore be evaluated as 'good' or 'bad' without taking into consideration the context in which they occur (Joyce & Sills, 2001:91).

Participant E also told the researcher: "… [My mother] doesn't say please and thank you to me. She doesn't speak to me as if I'm anyone special. Her language can be bad sometimes… She will call me a bastard or maybe an idiot sometimes". The researcher contrasts this with participant B's description of his mother: "The way she speaks to me makes me feel loved".

It seems apparent from the data and the literature, that participants E and F feel shameful due to their implicit belief that their parents do not see them as worthy individuals. Albeit to different degrees, they are shameful of their inherent need to be loved and accepted for who they are due to their parents' rejection of these needs.

Shame, according to Parlett (2005:57), may be described variously as feeling "bad", "weak", "worthless", "acutely embarrassed". Various authors (cf. Yontef, 1996:356; Wheeler & Jones, 2003:83) highlight the fact that shame comes in many guises, including criticism, name-calling, exclusion, embarrassment, humiliation, disgrace, self-consciousness, discouragement and attributions such as weak, incompetent, inadequate, silly, dumb, awkward, stupid and inadequate.

In Blend's (2007:21) opinion, individuals may dismiss their own needs to keep guilt and shame at bay. MacKewn (in Joyce & Sills, 2001:92) identifies 'shame-binds' that originate in an individual's earliest relationships. Joyce and Sills elaborate:

> "When the young child energetically expressed a need or reached out excitedly to the environment, his caretakers responded dismissively, scornfully or even aggressively. The rejection, the falling inward of energy, was experienced as a feeling of shame. If this kind of occurrence happened regularly the feeling of shame could become inextricably linked with the original felt need."

Yontef (1996:353) describes situational shame as a reaction to specific experiences, behaviour, thoughts and feelings. At its most extreme, shame may be existential in nature; such existential shame is shame which affects the person's "being or essence" (Yontef, 1995:91). Yontef (2003:359) elaborates on the potentially devastating effects of existential shame:

> In the shaming environment, shame comes in like mother's milk, automatically and naturally. It seeps in by osmosis as the sounds in the room, the look on a parent's face, the sound of the parent's voice, the rhythm of parental movements, how he or she is touched or not touched… The youngster looks at his parents' eyes and sees a look that tells him he is either a joy or a gift to his parents – or not. Although shame induction can be very intense and brutal, it can be as subtle as a slight parental coldness, hollowness, or look of disgust.

Yontef (1996:364) further holds the view that all individuals need love and approval, but when shame is experienced a self-protective façade of self-sufficiency is erected. Wheeler's (1996:9) perspective on shame is that it is "the experience that what is me is not acceptable, that this is not my world". It is apparent from the data that the two participants namely participants F and E, who are subject to shaming by their parents on a regular basis experience the least sense of belonging in their families.

Participant F's lack of belonging is generalised to his entire field. He has questioned where he belongs in the world and has drawn the conclusion that: "I belong to myself. I am very self-reliant". Participant F's experience is juxtaposed with that of participant K, who experiences a strong sense of belonging in his family and asserts that, in addition to his family, "I sort of belong to the world". In this latter example, participant K's solid sense of belonging in his family has imbued him with trust and a sense of safety which seems to be generalised, not just to his immediate field but in a global sense also.

Category six: I-Thou and the experience of support

I-Thou relating, according to Hycner (1995:7), amounts to connection in the dialogical encounter. In the light of Hycner's statement and the data yielded by the interviews, the researcher considers I-Thou relating to be closely associated with the experience of support. Yontef (1993b) states that support is anything that makes contact or withdrawal possible. Resnick and Estrup (2000:133) define self-support as identifying and owning one's experience in the here and now, which includes one's history, skills, interests, previously acquired knowledge and skills.

According to Toman and Bauer (2005:193) and Buber (in Perls, 1951:46), the experience of being liked, treated with respect and having one's value and potential confirmed as a unique being, is optimally supportive. Jacobs (1995:57) in fact describes these I-Thou moments as explosive. Yontef's (1993a:221) view is similar to that Jacobs in that he asserts, when two people show and express their true selves to each other in an attitude of I-and-Thou mutuality, a free flow of affective energy sometimes flows between them.

Yontef (1993b) claims that I-Thou moments and I-Thou relating can only occur when there is a dialogical approach to parenting. It is only in the I-Thou relationship that the uniqueness of each person develops and the self is confirmed (Yontef, 1993a:221). Participants described various acts of kindness, selflessness and thoughtfulness which they felt had a significant effect in their experience of being loved and valued and feeling

that they belong in their families. These I-Thou moments include seemingly insignificant acts, such as purchasing chocolate or air-time for the participants. Participant E, for example, feels validated by the various small gestures his father makes: "When we are with my dad, he does small things for us… he sometimes buys us small things". The researcher interprets these 'gifts' as significant to the participants, not because of material gain but because of the thoughtfulness and sacrifice underlying them. The researcher's interpretation seems to be congruent with Yontef's (1996:384) description of support as "the reception of the self in the field". It is significant that F, who experiences no sense of belonging in his family, could remember only one incident of a possible I-Thou encounter from his past: "I remember once, as a child, we played a board game together as a family. I remember that being … really nice".

For example, contemporary adolescents are always in need of their cell-phones, which require a constant supply of airtime. Rice and Dolgin (2008:310) state that staying connected to their peers via this form of communication is important to them. Another example is the adolescent's need to socialise with peers. For obvious reasons, adolescents are typically dependent on their parents for transport in this regard, and as such they perceive their parent's willingness, possible sacrifice and ability to transport them, as being significant.

Lee (2003:8) posits that support from the field leads to fulfilment of goals and needs and results in a fit between inner and outer worlds. This, in turn, leads to growth and satisfaction. The experience of shame, in Wheeler's (2003:48) view, is conversely a lack of fit between an individual and his world. Participant A confirmed this view by defining his experience of belonging in his family as such: "It's difficult to explain, but it's like you and your family just sort of … fit".

When the participants receive support from their families, the data suggests that it confirms "it is my world after all, there is a place for me in it …" (cf. Wheeler, 2003:48). This statement is illustrated in the case of participant K, who experiences such a strong sense of belonging in his family that he feels as if he belongs in the world and to the

world. The participants in this study who experience a strong sense of belonging in their family receive optimal support from their parents.

3.3.2 Theme Two: Awareness of belonging and its holistic influence on the sense of self

This theme deals with the Gestalt concept of awareness (refer to 2.3.2.4), as explored through the interview schedule. Awareness, according to Yontef (1993a:179, 249), (and as referred to in 2.3.2.4), is defined as "the process of being in vigilant contact with the most important event in the individual/environment field, with full sensorimotor, emotional, cognitive and energetic support".

Mortola (2001:46) and Joyce and Sills (2001:27) are of the opinion that awareness is a tool that can be used to enhance healthy living. Latner (2000:19) is of the view that "Gestalt is concerned with wholeness … as a defining quality of healthy living, with the unity of mind, body and spirit … the oneness of ourselves and the environment".

In this section of data collection participants were asked to describe how they experience belonging on a cognitive, emotional, physical, social, and spiritual level. Participants were also asked whether they had ever thought about the concept of belonging prior to the interview.

3.3.2.1 Sub-theme one: Cognitive aspect of the self

Only three participants had thought about their experience of belonging prior to the interview. Participant F had consciously thought about his experience of belonging prior to the interview: "I've often thought about where I belong in the world … because things have been so bad with my parents".

Two other participants had also been aware of this concept in their experience. Participant D explained: "I have thought about belonging before … because I had to …

when my folks divorced and I had to choose where to live". Participant I had thought about belonging for the same reasons following his parents' divorce.

Yontef (1993a:179,249) notes that new, meaningful Gestalts result from awareness and this seems to have been the case for the other participants who unanimously told the researcher that they had enjoyed thinking about their experience of belonging for the first time, expressing excitement about this newly acquired awareness. The researcher suggests that this awareness, and specifically the awareness that they do experience a sense of belonging in their families, seemed to be tantamount to an explosive moment for them.

Mortola (2001:46) states that an individual needs to be aware of himself, his field and the interaction between them. In the light of this, participants were specifically asked whether they had contributed in any way to creating a sense of belonging in their families. Once again, this new awareness seemed to excite and please most of the participants who had never considered that they might contribute to the experience of belonging in their families.

Several participants also described how, after contemplation of their experience of belonging in their families, realised how that experience had encouraged them to make better choices, work harder and make attempts to maximise their potential.

3.3.2.2 Sub-theme two: Emotional aspect of the self

Experiencing a sense of belonging manifests in positive emotional affect, regardless of the context in which it is experienced. The deep sense of belonging participants C and G experience when engaged in music seems to facilitate greater awareness of their emotions**.** They consequently describe how they have an improved ability to self-regulate. Participant G elaborates: "I feel like I belong when I'm listening to my CDs, compiling CDs ... that's the best ... that's, I suppose, my passion. When I'm in the zone, listening to my music, I feel sort of happy and a bit sad at the same

time". Participant C's perspective in this regard is: "When I'm playing my music, it's like I can see the big picture… that's when I'm the real me ... I feel like I'm the best person I can be … it's the ultimate self-expression".

Music provides G with great joy but seems to simultaneously make him aware of the transitory nature of emotions. Rice and Dolgin (2008:313,314) observe that music facilitates the expression of emotions, enhances social skills and relaxes and improves moods. Music is an intensely emotional experience for participants C and G and for both individuals it seems to facilitate the experience and expression of emotions, heighten contact with self, raise awareness of self and facilitate self-regulation.

Other participants unanimously voiced how belonging in their family makes them feel happy and joyful.

3.3.2.3 Sub-theme three: Physical aspect of the self

The experience of a sense of belonging in one's family manifests in physical expressions of joy, fun, laughter, physical wellbeing, improved performance and enhanced energy levels. As mentioned earlier (refer to 3.3.1.2), participant A's experience is: "When I really feel like I belong in my family I get a warm, fuzzy feeling inside. I smile, laugh … I have more energy … I clown around", whilst participant B found that, "When I really feel like I belong in my family I get energetic; I act crazy; I laugh together with mom".

Many of the participants found they had increased energy levels when they experienced a deep sense of belonging. As participant K explained: "When I really feel like I belong in my family it makes me want to do more…it makes me more energetic". These changes in body processes may be instances wherein I-Thou relating culminates in a free flow of affective energy between individuals and the moment is experienced as explosive (cf. Yontef 1993a:221; Jacobs, 1995:57). This would seem to account for the almost unanimous experience of increased energy when experiencing belonging. This applies to participants, regardless of whether the sense of belonging is experienced on the sports

field or in the family. Most of the participants felt a sense of spontaneity when experiencing belonging which led to a desire to laugh, make loved ones laugh and to have fun.

3.3.2.4 Sub-theme four: Social aspect of the self

Yontef (1993b) explains that awareness is relational and is the experience of what occurs at the boundary between self and the field. Enhanced communication and general social skills were cited as positive ramifications of belonging in their families. This was true for many participants, all of whom felt that belonging in their families made them better friends, and as such, they too felt that they contributed in a positive way to their field.

Participant A for instance stated that: “I think feeling like I belong in my family means ... I can express myself better ... I think it makes me a better listener. I can see others’ points of view ... I can … what do you call it? ... Have empathy with people”. Participant K explained that: “Belonging in your family makes you a better friend ... it means you can lift your friends up when they are feeling down”.

Other responses from participants pointed to their belief that experiencing a sense of belonging in their families resulted in greater emotional intelligence, such as empathy and the ability to express their emotions, enhanced communication skills, including a greater ability to listen and overall enhanced social skills.

Two participants experience a sense of belonging when immersed in music. Other participants experience belonging with peers on the sportsfield, and through the technology of MXIT. For those participants who experience little or no sense of belonging in their family, any one of these contexts may satisfy their need to belong, thereby facilitating self-regulation.

In terms of belonging in the context of sport, engaging with team members on the rugby field after conflict-riddled interactions with their parents seems to facilitate self-

regulation in participants D and E. Belonging, in the context of sport, emerges from the shared passion for the sport and the common goal of winning. Participant D described this confluence between fellow sportsmen as a "brotherhood" or a camaraderie which lends itself to the experience of belonging. As described by several participants who experience belonging on the sportsfield, the camaraderie heightens contact with each other and with self.

According to Polster (1974:131), contact is a contemporary phenomenon, with "each age carving out its own style". Polster elaborates that progress "sweeps people into styles of behaviour which are partly the consequences of the new technologies". MXIT appears to play a social role for these participants. For participants H and K, MXIT appears to help them cope with shyness, self-consciousness and uncertainty.

Participant H said, "I also sometimes feel I belong on MXIT. It's easier to say what I want to girls. I will still be shy with them in person but it helps". MXIT enables them to practise social skills, particularly with members of the opposite sex and it facilitates the expression of emotions. Participant K felt that he was able to communicate at a more emotional level with male friends and was able to empathise more and show concern for their wellbeing whilst on MXIT. In this regard he mentioned: "Sometimes you can feel like you belong on MXIT. Sometimes you can, like, tell a male friend that what they're doing is not cool or stuff like that".

As mentioned previously (in 2.4.3.1) McConville (2001a:33) states that during a certain stage of adolescence, individuals differentiate their life space by developing more meaningful, intimate relationships with peers. This is part of the unfolding of their life space, as McConville refers to it, or the process of disembedding. Several participants found that their parents are unable to meet all their needs. Peers become more figural at times and romantic partners start to fulfil some of these needs, thereby facilitating self-regulation.

Wheeler (2000:347) refers to the adolescent's need to find an "intimate witness", someone who experiences them at a deep level of connection and affirms them. Participant C, for instance, mentioned that he is unable to share everything with his parents. Despite experiencing healthy contact with his parents, he feels unable to share his spiritual conflicts with them, whilst he is comfortable to do so with his girlfriend. Even participants who experience a strong sense of belonging in their families acknowledged that they cannot comfortably discuss everything with their parents.

Participant F's lack of any experience of belonging in his family permeates his field. His social interaction is characterised by a lack of trust which verges on paranoia:

> "I don't really have friends or talk about 'friends'. I call them 'symbiotic acquaintances'. I won't give other people more than they deserve. People always disappoint you ... they always let you down. I look at everyone around me and I think 'what is it all about, why does everyone look so unhappy', it's all so meaningless for everyone".

His perception that everyone in his field is unhappy seems to be a projection of his own anger, unhappiness and sense of disillusion with the world (cf. Schoeman, 1996:64; Sharf, 2004:245; Yontef & Jacobs, 2005:312).

3.3.2.5 Sub-theme five: Spiritual aspect of the self

Hycner (1995:4) believes that "[a] dialogical approach best addresses the human spirit", and that the "fulness and presence of the human spirit is honoured and embraced" in a dialogical relationship. A definition of spirituality provided by Wilber (in Williams, 2006) is that it is the highest level of development and involves peak experiences. Participants variously describe 'peak' experiences when they are aware of a sense of belonging in their family.

Participant A's mother passed away when he was very young and he does not have a good relationship with his step-mother. He is, however, very close to his father and it is in this relationship that he experiences his strongest sense of belonging: "When I really feel I belong in my family I feel happy ... enlightenment I suppose you would call it. It lights up your soul when you feel that way". Two participants used the word "soul" in describing the effect belonging in their family has on them spiritually.

The mother of participant K attributes a spiritual interpretation to her son's existence, namely that he has a destiny. This imbues participant K with a sense of purpose. Furthermore, her perspective affirms his existence which he experiences as supportive. The researcher suggests that this results in the fit that Lee (2003:8) refers to between the outer world and the inner world (cf. Wheeler, 2000:210). Wheeler (1996:48) refers to this sense of fit in a religious/spiritual perspective as "the state of deep union or grace".

Joyce and Sills (2001:27) describe awareness as a continuum with sleep at one end and peak experiences at the other. They perceive peak experiences therefore to be the experience of optimal awareness where "you feel fully alive, exquisitely aware of being in the moment with a sense of connection, spontaneity and freedom".

Ingersoll (2005:144) draws on a study by Prosnick which confirmed that many people experience a process that extends beyond contact into the spiritual realm. In this regard, participant C confided that, when he plays music, "… it sort of all comes together ... it's difficult to explain". Although participant C described the effect music has on him in a predominantly eloquent manner, there appeared to be some additional quintessential element which he was unable to verbalise. His experience of belonging through music appears to have a spiritual quality to it, as it encapsulates feelings of freedom, authenticity and effortless self-expression. Participant G experiences a similarly intense response to music. He states that music is his identity and that he goes into "the zone'' when immersed in music. His description of the zone suggested an apparent state of mind epitomised by hope, awareness of possibilities and the inherent potential in situations.

For several other participants, experiencing a sense of belonging is associated with feelings of hope and an enhanced awareness of the possibilities inherent in life. Participants E and F, who respectively experience little and no sense of belonging in their families, had a different perspective. The somewhat mysterious state of grace experienced by other participants, as discussed above, was noticeably absent and in its place was the need for spiritual strength, intervention and succour.

Participant E confided: "I feel closer to God when things are bad at home ... I pray ... That's when I need God the most". And participant F disclosed the somewhat contradictory statements, "I belong to myself. I also need God's strength and help". Geldard and Geldard (2004:15) point out that adolescent spirituality "is often demonstrated in a more fundamental way through the adolescent's search for meaning in life's daily experiences".

In the light of this statement and the participants' responses, the researcher is of the opinion that participants, on a daily basis, either find or do not find spiritual meaning in their experience of belonging in their family.

In the light of Baumeister and Leary's (1995:497) definition of belonging as frequent, affectively pleasant interactions in the context of stable and enduring relationships where affective concern exists for each other's welfare, and in conjunction with the data presented in this chapter, the researcher refers again to Wheeler's (1996:48) description of "fit" from a religious/spiritual perspective as "the state of deep union or grace".

The researcher suggests that belonging is strongly connected to spiritual experience. Although this study pertains to belonging in the context of the family, it is obvious that belonging may be experienced in a variety of contexts. However, the researcher contends that belonging in the family determines the degree of 'fit' an individual will experience between his inner and outer worlds over his lifetime.

The family may be considered to be the birth-place of a sense of belonging, and it is the experience of belonging in the family that is optimally supportive. The researcher's opinion is that experiencing belonging in the family is the ideal place to experience it from the earliest age. The experience of belonging bequeaths to the individual the knowledge that there is a place for him in his family.

The researcher suggests that this knowledge of having a place in the family may then be generalised to the wider, global context, where the individual believes that there is a place for him in the world.

3.4 SUMMARY

Chapter Three provided a brief overview of the research methodology employed in this study. The empirical data that resulted from the study was presented along with a discussion of the relevant literature. The final chapter of this study will examine the conclusions, recommendations and limitations of this study, as well as the unique contribution made by this study.

CHAPTER FOUR
CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This study was guided by the research aim indicated in Chapter One, namely to explore and describe the male adolescent's subjective experience of belonging in his family and, after analysing the data, to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept. The aim of this final chapter is to determine whether the aim and objectives outlined in Chapter One have been met and whether the research question that was formulated for the study has been answered.

This chapter will, in addition, draw conclusions and make recommendations in terms of the different themes, sub-themes and categories that were identified and discussed in Chapter Three. Recommendations will also be made for possible future research within the context of adolescents and their sense of belonging. Some of these recommendations are of a more general nature, whilst others are of a specifically Gestalt nature.

4.2 THE AIM OF THE STUDY

The aim of the study was:

- To explore and describe the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family and to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept.

The aim of the study was met. The researcher was able, from the knowledge base created through the conceptual framework, to formulate questions that were used in a semi-structured interview schedule (see Addendum C) with eleven participants. The questions were formulated in such a way as to explore the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family and to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept.

The data that emerged from this process was analysed and the literature control made it possible for a comparison to be carried out between the findings and the existing theory on the subject.

4.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

In order to achieve the above aim the following objectives, as discussed in 1.3, were formulated:

4.3.1 Objective One

- To conduct a literature study in order to establish a conceptual framework on belonging, the Gestalt phenomenological paradigm and adolescent development.

Chapter Two presented a conceptual framework in order to meet this objective. This framework included a discussion of Bowlby's theory of attachment which focused on the importance of belonging in the earliest stage of life, as well as a belongingness hypothesis, as presented by Baumeister and Leary, which confirmed the innate need to belong, the positive benefits associated with the satisfaction thereof, and the criteria necessary for its satisfaction.

The researcher's aim was to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of this concept. Salient Gestalt concepts were included in the framework. It is the researcher's opinion that the concept of belonging is embraced by several Gestalt concepts. As this study aimed for a Gestalt understanding of belonging for the male adolescent in his family, a Gestalt explanation and description of the phase of adolescence was presented in the conceptual framework.

The first objective of this study was met and thus provided a basic understanding of the concepts in this study. This knowledge base was a pre-requisite for the following objective of conducting an empirical study.

4.3.2 Objectives two and three:

- To gather empirical data by means of conducting semi-structured interviews with adolescents while exploring their experience of belonging within their families.
- To analyse this data by means of a framework applicable for the analysis of qualitative data, and to describe and verify these findings in the light of the existing literature.

The second objective of this study was reached following the completion of semi-structured interviews with the selected sample of eleven male adolescents. Qualitative data was obtained through the use of a semi-structured interview schedule which served the purpose of initiating communication, encouraging the disclosure of the participants' phenomenological perspectives on belonging and to guide this discussion in terms of relevance for the study.

Each interview was voice-recorded, and the collected data was safely stored in coded form for anonymity. Once the interviews had been conducted, the third objective was addressed through repeated analyses of the participants' responses, the researcher's observations and field notes.

During this process the volume of information was reduced to salient elements where the researcher subsequently searched for recurring, significant patterns. Patterns were then sorted into themes from which sub-themes and categories were identified that were presented and discussed in Chapter Three in conjunction with a verified literature control. This process ensured that the third objective was fully met.

4.3.3 Objective Four

- To firstly, come to conclusions and make recommendations to parents with regard to male adolescents' sense of belonging within their family and secondly, to arrive at a Gestalt understanding of the concept of belonging.

This final objective will be discussed in the course of this chapter, as conclusions are reached based on the data analysis and the literature control. The researcher will present the themes identified from the empirical study and the conclusions that have arisen from these themes.

These conclusions will serve as the impetus for the recommendations that will follow.

4.4 RESEARCH QUESTION

The study was conducted within a qualitative research design, and consequently the following research question was formulated:

> What is the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family and how can this experience be understood from a Gestalt perspective?

The researcher is of the opinion that the research question has been answered, in that a) the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family was thoroughly explored and described (refer to Chapter Three), and b) through the use of the conceptual framework (refer to Chapter Two) and a literature control (refer to Chapter Three), the researcher was able to come to a Gestalt understanding of the male adolescent's sense of belonging.

4.5 SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS OF THE STUDY

It was concluded, in the light of the objectives outlined above, that the research aim was attained. The results of the empirical study can be summarised in the following conclusions that have emerged from the two central themes.

4.5.1 Theme one: Dialogue

During the researcher's exploration in making contact, certain participants were of the opinion that healthy contact-making occurred between them and their parents, whilst others had experienced unhealthy contact-making in this relationship. The data shows that where healthy contact-making occurs, it is characterised by a minimum of contact boundary disturbances on the part of both the participants and their parents.

Participant responses revealed that unhealthy contact-making is conversely characterised by the existence of contact boundaries in both the participants and their parents. In the case of one participant who experienced no sense of belonging in his family, multiple contact boundary disturbances were obvious to the researcher.

It would seem then that the unhealthier the contact is, the greater the number of contact boundary disturbances that are likely to exist in both parents' and participant's contact-making. Judging from participants' responses it would seem that when these contact boundary disturbances occur with awareness, they do not impact negatively on healthy contact-making. The researcher found, for example, that perceived similarity in relationships amounts to the experience of confluence. This subsequently seems to facilitate contact.

According to the data, contact boundary disturbances result when certain parental behaviours take place, namely criticism, nagging and drawing comparisons between siblings/step-siblings. The empirical data also revealed that a cluster of specifically maternal behaviours hamper healthy contact-making. These behaviours include nagging, emotional inconsistency, over-protectiveness, intrusiveness, anxiety and over-reacting.

The data repeatedly demonstrated that unhealthy contact is characteristic of the families in which participants experience little or no sense of belonging. Conversely, the data consistently confirmed that healthy contact is characteristic of the families in which participants experience a healthy sense of belonging.

The researcher is thus of the opinion that healthy contact-making between the parents and the participants, as characterised by a minimum of contact boundary disturbances, is a prerequisite for experiencing a sense of belonging.

Relationships between the participants and the parents were also explored with regard to specific characteristics that epitomise dialogical relating, as identified in the Gestalt literature (refer to 2.3.2.3). The researcher found that participants who reported healthy contact in their families also enjoyed dialogical relationships with their families. The characteristic of inclusion, as demonstrated by the empirical findings, is particularly significant in that it confirms the adolescent's existence as being valuable and worthwhile.

Participants identified a variety of parental behaviours that result in the experience of inclusion. These behaviours include being listened to, receiving approval and praise, feeling accepted, perceptiveness of and sensitivity to their moods and needs, expressions of empathy and understanding regarding these needs, being asked for their opinions, being included in decision-making and discussions, as well as being involved and showing interest in the adolescent's life.

Two participants did not experience inclusion in the relationships with their parents and ultimately perceived themselves to be disappointments to their parents as a result. One of these participants experienced no sense of belonging in his family, whilst the other experienced a minimal sense of belonging. On the other hand, several participants experienced affirmation when they perceived their parents as enjoying or 'finding joy' in their company.

The empirical data thus demonstrates that for most of the participants, the experience of inclusion confirms their existence as being valuable, worthy, interesting and likeable individuals. The researcher's opinion is that the experience of complete and unconditional acceptance allows the adolescent to determine his unique significance in his family.

The researcher is furthermore of the opinion that the experience of unconditional acceptance results in a *Gestalt* (refer to 2.3.2.1) within the adolescent that he is a significant and worthwhile individual. This G*estalt* subsequently facilitates and enhances contact-making with his entire field.

Dialogical relationships with 'others' outside of his family become possible because he believes he has something to offer the field that is of value. The researcher considers this to be one of the most significant characteristics of dialogical relationships in the light of the fact that participants' experiences of unconditional acceptance in the family were inextricably linked with their experience of belonging, seeming at times to be almost synonymous.

The data has demonstrated that inclusion and the concomitant unconditional acceptance of the adolescent's 'essence' will quite naturally result in the experience of belonging.

The majority of the participants report that the dialogical characteristic of presence, as manifested through the sharing of emotional and experiential meaning with their parents, satisfies their need for safety and trust in the relationship. The value of commitment to dialogue lies in the comfort and safety it creates in these relationships.

Certain participants described how their parents' commitment to a dialogical approach with their children began at the earliest age. One of the participants who experienced no sense of belonging in his family had not experienced a dialogical relationship with his parents since the earliest age. With the exception of three individuals, participants unanimously equated dialogical relating in their families with increased spontaneity, enhanced energy levels, fun, humour, joy, and a general sense of wellbeing.

The data points to the fact that a dialogical approach to parenting is significant for the adolescent's overall wellbeing and that this approach must occur from the earliest age. From this data, the researcher has concluded that the adolescent's experience of dialogical relating to his parents creates the experience of belonging.

In addition to the four characteristics of dialogue outlined in Gestalt theory, the researcher explored the polar modes of dialogue in the families' contact-making, namely I-It and I-Thou (refer to 2.3.2.7). The empirical data demonstrated that participants who had experienced a preponderance of I-It relating, experienced this as shameful and demeaning.

The researcher explored these interactions and established that when I-It involves appropriate chastisement, advice, guidance or the imposing of limitations, it is not detrimental to the relationship. The data repeatedly showed that where I-It interaction occurs, in the service of Thou, and therefore out of love and concern for the adolescent's holistic wellbeing, and where applied with respect, it was not detrimental to the relationship between the adolescent and his parents.

Data obtained from one participant illustrated the potentially devastating effect of a predominantly I-It approach to parenting, particularly when employed to compare, criticise, humiliate, isolate, argue and/or control. The afore-mentioned participant has experienced this mode of dialogue from his parents since early childhood.

The dearth of any sense of belonging in his family and the subsequent shameful relinquishing of his need to belong has affected how he makes contact with his entire field. His subsequent façade of self-sufficiency is, in effect, an extreme experience of isolation.

Another indication of the adverse effect of the predominantly I-It approach his parents adopted, is that he has since then developed 'splits' within himself (refer to 3.3.1.1). One other participant experienced similarly excessive criticism and humiliation, albeit to a lesser extent, and claimed that he had experienced very little sense of belonging in his family.

The findings show that both of these participants had experienced a sense of shame as a result of their parents' mode of relating. The researcher concluded that a predominantly I-It approach to parenting is associated with the experience of shame, and moreover that an excessive I-It mode of relating by parents precludes the experience of belonging.

According to the empirical data, participants experience I-Thou moments in various ways, all of which are meaningful to them given the intrinsic selflessness, thoughtfulness and respect that underlie them. A dialogical approach by their parents which encompasses I-Thou moments, demonstrates to the participants that their parents recognise their needs. The data revealed that where relationships are characterised by a predominance of I-Thou relating (refer to 3.3.1.2), the participants experienced the relationship as optimally supportive.

Certain participants suggested that, as a result of feeling significant and therefore supported in their family, they were encouraged to strive to achieve their potential. The experience of optimal support that derives from a dialogical relationship therefore encourages self-growth in the adolescent.

The data thus demonstrated that optimal support through dialogue enhances inner support. The researcher came to the conclusion that the majority of participants feel worthy and valuable as a result of a dialogical approach to parenting which is characterised by I-Thou encounters.

The empirical data led the researcher to submit that participants who enjoy these relationships in their families also experience a healthy sense of belonging in their families. A dialogical approach to parenting is therefore considered to be optimally supportive to the adolescent and crucial for the development of a sense of belonging in the adolescent.

4.5.2 Theme two: Awareness of belonging and its holistic influence on sense of self

The researcher explored whether the participants had an awareness of belonging in their families prior to the interview. Four participants claimed to have been aware of belonging in their families for certain reasons: Two of them were compelled to choose the parent with whom they would live following divorces; one of them pondered his experience of belonging following the losses that accompanied his family's relocation; and another, as the result of an isolated childhood and adolescence.

The remainder of the participants had never thought about this concept before and viewed their newly acquired awareness in a positive light, finding the experience to be enjoyable, thought-provoking and interesting.

The researcher observed that most of the participants found it particularly rewarding to think that they could contribute to a sense of belonging in the family. Several participants described how they had experienced belonging in other contexts, such as sports, through music and/or with their peers.

The researcher found two participants to be of particular interest in this regard, given the extent to which they had experienced a sense of belonging through music. Whilst this was not the focus of this study, the researcher was struck by the intensity of their experience. For both participants, immersion in music, leads to a sense of complete authenticity, self-acceptance, self-expression and completeness which they experienced as belonging. For the majority of the participants, however, their most profound experience of belonging was in their family.

The adolescent's awareness of belonging was explored from the cognitive, emotional, physical, social and spiritual perspectives (refer to 3.3.2). The effect of this awareness on their sense of self was simultaneously investigated. The experience of belonging in the family, as indicated by the data, for the majority of participants, enhanced their energy levels and a desire to be spontaneous and have fun. These specific changes in body

process apply equally to participants who experienced belonging in contexts other than family.

This applies even in the few cases where belonging is not experienced at home, but in other contexts. Belonging in any context is therefore experienced in a positive sense. Several of the participants claimed that the experience of belonging in their family manifested socially in the amelioration of their communication skills, greater empathy for others and an enhanced capacity to be a good friend.

The findings of the study point to a general consensus amongst participants that experiencing a sense of belonging in the family confirms that they are valuable in essence. Certain participants claimed that although they experienced a sense of belonging with their peers, their greatest experience of belonging occurred in their families. It was of interest to the researcher that three participants, all of whom experience a strong sense of belonging in their families, also experienced a degree of belonging through the contemporary communications technology of MXIT.

The data revealed that the one participant who had experienced no sense of belonging in his family experienced his social field as hostile and rejecting, resulting in a self-imposed isolation. An examination of the data and the literature in this regard has led the researcher to the conclusion that the extent to which an individual experiences belonging in his family will determine his capacity to experience belonging in the rest of his field.

It emerged from the empirical data that all the participants, with the exception of two, associate belonging with peak experiences. The researcher considers it salient that the experience of belonging was variously described in spiritual terms and seems to culminate in a sense of hope and awareness of both potential and possibilities.

Any references by participants to the experience of belonging in contexts other than family were devoid of this spiritual association. The researcher did note one exception,

however, where spiritual/philosophical nuances pervaded the descriptions two participants gave regarding their experience of belonging through music.

The researcher is subsequently of the opinion that, once the foundation of healthy contact- making has been laid in the family, it becomes possible for a dialogical approach to parenting to emerge which can lead to the experience of belonging in the adolescent. Belonging is subsequently experienced holistically by the adolescent and is notably associated with peak moments of a spiritual nature.

The researcher therefore posits that belonging is a not a phenomenon per se but rather a process. The culmination of this process is illustrated by the simple analogy of a jigsaw puzzle. The researcher compares belonging to such a puzzle, which, in its assembled form is a complete, meaningful gestalt but which lacks significance and purpose when dismantled.

In a similar vein, belonging is ultimately the 'fit' between the participant's inner world and his outer world of family (refer to 3.3.2.5). Much like pieces of a jigsaw, the significance of the adolescent's existence is confirmed when he experiences a 'fit' in his family. This will be experienced as a sense of belonging.

The researcher does not suggest that an individual's life necessarily lacks significance without a family or without this experience. However, it is the researcher's opinion that having one's significance confirmed - specifically by one's family - is what makes belonging in this context such a meaningful Gestalt, and one that is associated with a plethora of benefits (refer to 1.2). This culminates in peak experiences (refer to 3.3.2.5), often of a spiritual nature.

The researcher does not dispute that belonging may be experienced profoundly in other contexts over a lifetime, but contends that belonging in the family is the ideal birthplace for belonging. The experience of belonging in the family, much like attachment (refer to 2.2.1.2) provides a template for belonging across the individual's entire lifetime.

4.6 A GESTALT UNDERSTANDING OF BELONGING

The researcher submits that belonging is a process and that the concept of belonging is embraced by several Gestalt concepts. The researcher offers the following Gestalt understanding of the adolescent's experience of belonging within his family:

Healthy contact, as characterised by a minimum of contact boundary disturbances, provides the foundation necessary for the development of a dialogical approach to parenting. The awareness of unconditional acceptance that results from this approach is experienced by the adolescent as optimally supportive, in that it validates his existence and affirms his essence as a significant, valuable being.

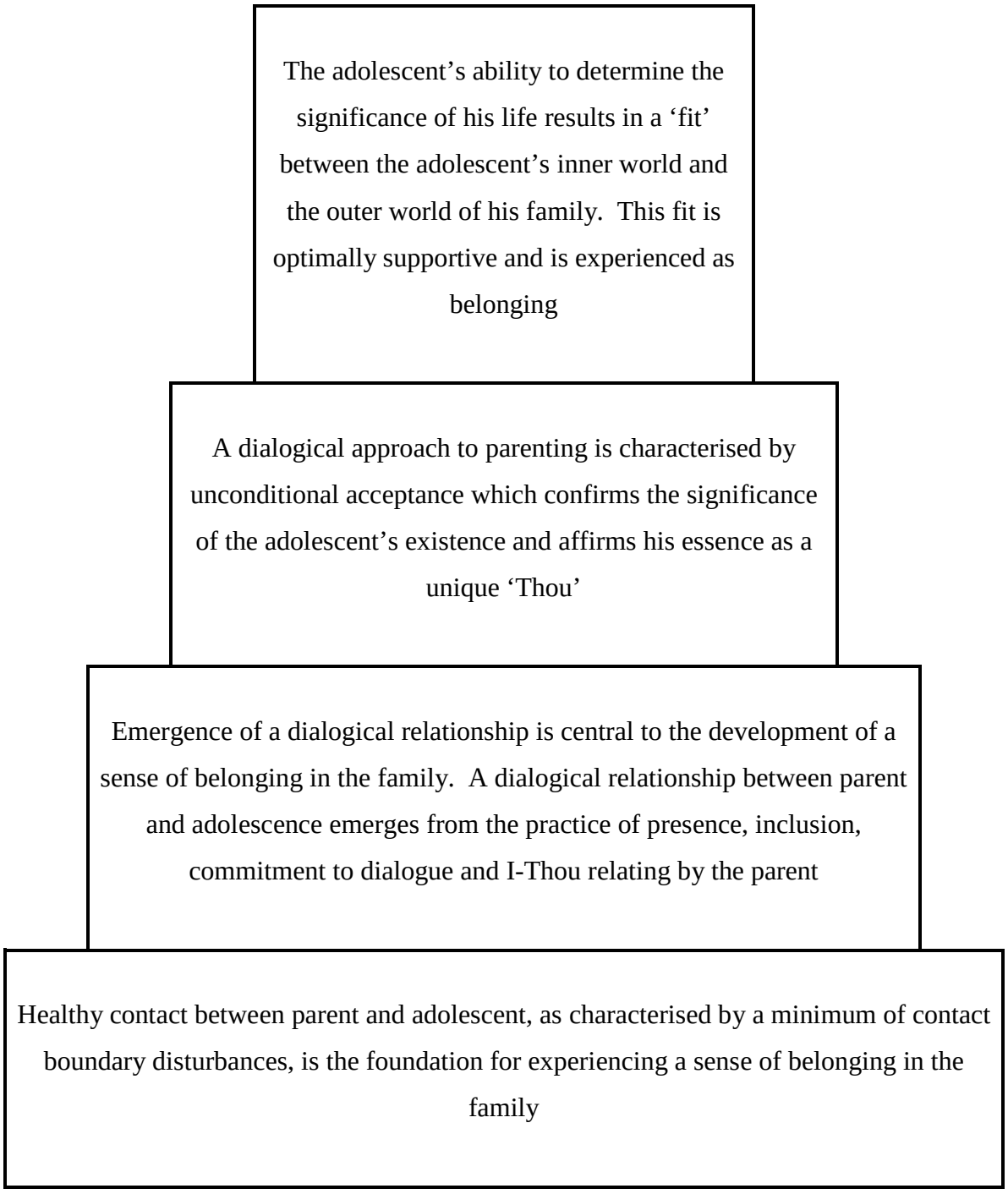
The subsequent result is a 'fit' between his inner world and the outer world of his family. This is experienced as a sense of belonging. Belonging as a process is illustrated in the following diagram (see Diagram 4.1).

4.7 RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

Based on the findings of this study and in the light of the above conclusions, the following recommendations and areas for future research are outlined.

Chapter One discussed the susceptibility of male adolescents to various risks. Resnick, Harris and Blum (1993) stated that interventions for youths at risk must examine the ways in which opportunities for a sense of belonging may be fostered (refer to 1.2).

DIAGRAM 4.1: BELONGING IS A PROCESS



In the light of this previous statement, the researcher recommends the development of various workshops and programmes which may guide and assist parents of adolescents and Gestalt therapists in raising awareness of this concept and in facilitating its development.

- The development of programmes aimed at parents to raise awareness of the concept of belonging and to inform and assist parents regarding the process of facilitating its development. These programmes may be separately aimed at fostering the process of belonging in adolescents with the various concomitant and unique challenges. It should also be aimed at parents with young children to facilitate their development from the earliest age. Such programmes would focus on the concept of contact and the development of a dialogical approach to parenting.

  Workshops and programmes of a similar nature could more specifically be aimed at mothers of adolescents in order to assist and inform mothers regarding the making of contact with their sons so as to ensure more effective ways of reconciling the adolescent's simultaneous need for connection and autonomy. These programmes or workshops could include raising the awareness of confluence. This may be used to encourage and develop similarities between members of the family, thereby enhancing relationships and fostering a greater sense of belonging.

  The researcher suggests that the earlier parents try to develop some degree of confluence through shared interests in their children, the more it will promote harmony between siblings. In addition, efforts to identify or develop some common points of interest in blended families (cf. Rice & Dolgin, 2008:259) may assist parents in dealing with the challenges that arise in contact-making between step-parents and step-children, as well as between step-siblings.

In addition to the development of programmes and workshops outlined above, the researcher identifies the following broader areas for future research:

- Exploring different cultures and gender regarding the experience of belonging in the family.

- Given the contemporary nature of contact-making (cf. 3.3.2.4), the researcher notes that various forms of communication technology apparently offer opportunities for the experience of belonging. One of the more recent mediums is the phenomenon of MXIT. The researcher suggests that further research into the adolescent's experience of belonging through the electronic media could well prove to be relevant.

- Research into the psychology of 'extreme sports', which have become a feature of contemporary society, in order to explore the possible element of self-harming behaviour in these pursuits. Chapter One (refer to 1.2) highlighted the vulnerability of young males to a variety of risky behaviours and the inherent susceptibility of young males to engage in extreme risk-taking.

  The researcher observes that it is generally young males who tend to be interested in extreme sports. The literature has also shown that a) frenetic life styles may be associated with feelings of helplessness, hopelessness and worthlessness; and b) that retroflection involves energy being turned inward in a self-injurious manner when affect becomes intolerable (refer to 3.3.1.1).

  It is the researcher's opinion therefore, that extreme sports and various other 'extreme' pursuits may at times be attempts to deal with overwhelmingly painful affect through retroflection, and as such may amount to self-harming behaviour (refer to 3.3.1.1).

  The researcher suggests that further research into this area would be beneficial.

4.8 FINAL REMARK

The researcher posits that the uniqueness of this study lies in the rich data obtained from the male adolescent regarding his phenomenological experience of belonging in his family. Programmes and workshops that might arise as a result of this research would offer a unique Gestalt perspective regarding the approach to parenting. Chapter One referred to the benefits of experiencing a sense of belonging in the family.

The data has demonstrated that this experience is indeed experienced positively in a holistic sense. The researcher contends, furthermore, that the experience of belonging allows adolescents to thrive, and that, as such, any study that undertakes to foster this development may be of significant value.

The unique contribution of this study lies specifically in the Gestalt understanding of belonging that has resulted from it. As such, the researcher suggests that it may be of value to Gestalt therapists who wish to use it as a tool to enhance their adolescent clients' holistic wellbeing, or who may simply wish to incorporate an understanding of this concept into their repertoire of Gestalt terminology.

The researcher submits that, despite its Gestalt perspective, this study may be of value to play therapists, psychologists and counsellors, irrespective of the paradigm within which they work, given its potential usefulness in fostering a sense of belonging in adolescents.

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ADDENDUM A: INFORMATION SHEET

An investigation into the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family

I am currently completing my Masters degree in Play Therapy. For the purposes of this degree, I am required to undertake a thesis. The motivation for choosing the above-mentioned topic is that of acquiring a better understanding of the male adolescent's subjective experience of belonging. This study will focus on male adolescents within the context of their families. Participants are required to be between the ages of 16 and 18 years and to be competent and comfortable with the interview medium of English.

It is hoped that the data obtained as a result of this study will contribute to the existing knowledge base regarding the concept of belonging. The beneficial effects of experiencing a strong sense of belonging are well established. This study may facilitate a better understanding of the adolescent's needs in this regard.

The required interview will be an hour in duration but may exceed this time by a few minutes, depending on responses from participants. The interviews will necessitate the use of a tape recorder. The interviews will be conducted with the dignity and privacy of the participants in mind. All questions and responses will be handled sensitively and confidentially. Each participant will be assigned a code ensuring that his name is known only to the researcher. At no stage will the participants' names be used in the study.

I do not believe that these interviews will result in any physical or emotional harm. If a participant should feel the need to discuss the issue further or to deal with emotions that may arise from the interview, I will make myself available as a Counsellor and Intern Play Therapist to assist with this process. Each participant has the right to withdraw from the process at any stage if he feels it necessary to do so. Once the study is completed, each participant has the right to request feedback from myself, and a copy of the final research document may be made available.

A consent form is attached which will need to be signed by a parent or guardian before the interview may take place. Once I have received the consent form, I will contact each individual to schedule a time and place for the interview which is convenient to them. The interviews will not impinge on their school time and extra-mural commitments. In addition, each parent will be contacted in order to ascertain if there are any questions or need for clarification before the interview proceeds. Your co-operation and contribution to this scientific endeavour is much appreciated. Please feel free to contact me if you have any concerns or queries in the meantime.

Sincerely

Debbie Easton

ADDENDUM B: ETHICAL AND CONFIDENTIALITY CONTRACT

An investigation into the male adolescent's experience of belonging in his family

I, Debbie Easton, undertake the following in terms of participant interviews pertaining to the above-mentioned thesis:

1. To ensure that participants are thoroughly and accurately informed as to the nature of the research, prior to the commencement of interviews.
2. To ensure that participants take part in the research voluntarily and with permission from a parent or guardian.
3. To ensure that participants take part in the research voluntarily and that they have the option of suspending their involvement at any time if they choose to do so.
4. To protect the participants from physical, emotional or mental discomfort.
5. To provide therapeutic assistance after the interviewing has taken place should the participant deem it necessary.
6. To treat all information obtained during the interviews with respect and absolute confidentiality.
7. To store all data in a safe and secure environment.
8. To refrain from offering any financial or similar incentive to participants.

_____ _____

Signature of parent/guardian **Date**

_____ _

Signature of participant **Date**

_____ _____

Researcher: Debbie Easton **Date**

ADDENDUM C: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW SCHEDULE

1. WHAT IS YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF BELONGING?

    - Explore their subjective definition

2. WHAT IS YOUR FAMILY'S COMPOSITION?

3. WHERE AND WITH WHOM DO YOU EXPERIENCE THE GREATEST SENSE OF BELONGING?

4. WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF BELONGING IN YOUR FAMILY?

Explore:

- Specific verbal
- Non-verbal – thoughts and behaviours
- How is caring demonstrated and experienced and who does this?
- Do you play a role in creating a sense of belonging in your family?
- Look at history – childhood specifics

5. HOW DOES BELONGING AFFECT YOUR SENSE OF SELF (WHO YOU ARE)?

Include:

- *Physical*
- *Emotions*
- *Social*
- *Spiritual/existential/hopes*
- *Self-worth*

6. IF YOU HAD A MAGIC WAND, WOULD YOU CHANGE ANYTHING IN YOUR FAMILY IN TERMS OF BELONGING/HOW WOULD YOU LIKE IT TO BE?

- Explore their need/s

7. WERE YOU AWARE OF EXPERIENCING A SENSE OF BELONGING IN YOUR FAMILY BEFORE THIS INTERVIEW?

9. IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE ABOUT BELONGING THAT YOU WOULD LIKE TO ADD?

ADDENDUM D: PARTICIPANT DETAILS

Participant	Age	Tertiary Level
A	**17**	**Grade 12**
B	**19**	**Grade 12**
C	**18**	**Grade 12**
D	**18**	**Grade 11**
E	**17**	**Grade 11**
F	**17**	**Grade 11**
G	**17**	**Grade 11**
H	**16**	**Grade 10**
I	**16**	**Grade 10**
J	**16**	**Grade 10**
K	**15**	**Grade 10**