

**HEAVY METAL YOUTH
IDENTITIES: RESEARCHING
THE MUSICAL
EMPOWERMENT OF
YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND
PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING**

EMERALD STUDIES IN METAL MUSIC AND CULTURE

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HEAVY METAL YOUTH IDENTITIES: RESEARCHING THE MUSICAL EMPOWERMENT OF YOUTH TRANSITIONS AND PSYCHOSOCIAL WELLBEING

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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And don't forget the dog. He has one job. Make everything okay. He excels at his work.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 The Accidental Metal Scholar

Writing a book about heavy metal fans has pretty much blind-sided me in terms of where I thought my research career was heading. If anything, I was on track for writing a book about housing inequality and youth homelessness, which is a very long way from a study of heavy metal youth.

Writing this book also finds me a very long way from ‘dropping out’ out of high school; perhaps more accurately, being ‘pushed out’. I’d been a bright student in primary school; I had many friends; I played a lot of sport; and I always had some kind of entrepreneurial scheme on the go. And, I loved music. I grew up in South Australia as an only child, and would spend hours upon hours entertaining myself with my records and making scrap books of my favourite bands out of music magazines. In the mid-1970s at around age 10, I remember The Sweet and Thin Lizzy having a huge impact on my musical tastes – looking back, it feels as though I turned absolutely riff-crazy overnight because I seem to recall dumping the Bay City Rollers in a heartbeat for Budgie and Black Sabbath (sorry Woody, we just weren’t meant to be). By 1977, Kiss had become a game changer for me and fast became my biggest early musical influence. (I can see the track-listing for *Love Gun* floating through my mind right now, only a drop in the bucket really in terms of *some* of the tensions that feminist metal fans have to make peace with.)

In 1978, something else that was life changing happened. I was about to start high school and my parents received a letter stating that the residential location of our house had been re-zoned and I was now zoned to the brand new ‘super’ school being built to accommodate a huge wave of British migration into the region. My friends were all going to one of two existing high schools (as I’d also expected); however, this proper awful news meant I’d be going off to a huge new school with 1,500 students whom I didn’t know. And, what a wretched experience it was. I’d never seen a Harrington jacket before; I didn’t know what Doc Martens were; and I quietly wondered why on earth you’d roll your pants up in the winter time (to show off your red socks, as it turned out). And, what was this music they were listening to?

Kiss wore black; so, I wore black, simple. Little did I know I was signalling an 'Otherness' at school that was about to get me noticed for all the wrong reasons. Skins (short for skinheads), Rockers and Surfies were the dominant youth cultural groups in those days; and there, I was wearing black, having very few friends and unknowingly aligning with an almost non-existent cohort of Rockers in a school full of Skins. And, even worse, I had the Kiss and Van Halen logos emblazoned across all my belongings – not just metal, but US metal bands, and I was at school with 1,000+ UK immigrants. Therefore, it began: the name-calling, rumour-spreading, physical threats, shoe and bag stealing, lunch-taking and general humiliation. The more it hurt, the more I resisted against everything they stood for: their look, their music and their ways of being. They were bright and social and raucous and flamboyant, singing Madness songs all around the yard like soccer chants – whereas, I didn't speak much and only wore black, and started getting tattoos to commemorate my difference (fittingly, Paul Stanley's rose was my first tattoo).

The mere thought of going to school each day made me physically sick. I'd been such a bright student but I lost all drive to do any school work, preferring to put the headphones on and get lost in the music. I'd go to school in the mornings, get my name checked off and then jump the school fence and get out of there at the first opportunity. But, I couldn't get away with truanting every day; and at times, I contemplated suicide as a way out of my situation. By the second year of high school, at about 14, I started running away from home and staying in the city. My parents would find me and bring me home but then I'd be gone again at the first chance. By 15, I was officially out of school and a huge burden was lifted; but by this stage, I'd developed networks in the city and I enjoyed the underground life 'on the street' so much that I was also officially out of home not long after. Early on, I discovered the Bloor Court jam rooms when I'd needed somewhere to sleep in the city and get out of the winter weather. The old jam rooms have long since been demolished and replaced with a multi-level parking structure that belies the historical significance of the site for local metal pioneers.

I studied music briefly at school; but in 1982 at Bloor Court, I got to *really* play the drums with a band, for the first time, and it was pure bliss – until a better drummer came along and I was relegated to singing, purely because I was good at writing lyrics and we wanted to write and play original songs. I was completely enamoured with the ambiguity and phrasing of writing and singing death metal lyrics, and had every ambition of making my fame and fortune as a death metal vocalist. Then, in 1985, plans changed again, I fell pregnant. The good news was that I qualified for public housing as a teen mother; so, I was lucky to finally have a home of my 'own'. But, the bad news was that motherhood squelched all plans for a musical career at that time.

Another baby followed two years later. Raising two small children as a sole parent put the brakes on my scene participation for a few years, but I continued to write songs and buy records and watch *Rage* and *Headbanger's Ball* on television to help me still feel in touch. To say my mother was extremely helpful is a massive understatement (both mum and dad really); she used to watch the babies *a lot*. By 1989, she was having them stay at her place most weekends just so I could

go to gigs. I re-connected with the scene and had a few more attempts at establishing a musical career, but found myself transitioning into management and promotion and trying to change the culture and expectation of playing 'covers' in the local scene at that time. (In hindsight, I can see this was an early calling to advocacy and effecting social change.)

When the babies started school, I spent my days working in a factory and spent my nights planning gigs and promoting the scene. Sometimes, I'd have to line up for hours at the only telephone box in a street full of state-housed sole mothers just to make calls and book gigs (anyone else remember life before cell phones?), and I'd walk down to the local video-rental store and use their copying machine to make gig flyers with the babies in tow – they loved getting an Icy Pole for compliant behaviour while my mummy photocopied pictures of blood-soaked corpses to make flyers.

The 'original' scene had finally taken hold locally in the early 1990s and it was really going off. Then in 1996, I began managing a band that would end up being another life-changing move. I *really* enjoyed working with this particular band: personally, creatively and professionally; such good friendships and such good times. We were enjoying a wave of success that included playing to capacity crowds at local venues most weekends, alternative festivals, international support slots, three records and interest from international labels. Then, I took a shot at starting my own label. I was getting good press and a lot of interest; so, I scaled down my management activities but remained the best of friends and social allies with this band.

Then, two unthinkable things happened. In September 2002, three of the four band members decided together (and without warning) to replace the drummer. And, less than four months later, he took his own life.

After he died, I was utterly heartbroken because his beautiful heart, mind and talent were lost to the world and his loved ones forever; and because I had not seen the signs or been able to help. One of the first things he said to me after his sacking (which neither of us could really account for) was: 'They've taken my dream away from me' – so, my version of 'helping' was to leap into busy mode and try and 'fix' his pain by forming a new band around him and planning a record to start the process of rebuilding his musical dream. After he died, I blamed myself for being too consumed with forming the new band at the expense of just being still with him during the intense period of grief and loss he was experiencing. I also regretted not showing stronger leadership overall because I lost the friendship of the other band members and their partners throughout the ordeal as well. I didn't handle things with any skill at all, and I let others and myself down in the process. Even my marriage fell apart as a direct result of my grief and (self-described) poor handling of the situation.

I stopped going to gigs; I didn't want to face anyone in the scene; and I just worked in the factory by day and drank more than I should at night. This went on for about 18 months until I absolutely knew things had to change.

Some years earlier, my departed friend was watching me in action at a gig sorting out a whole bunch of different people and issues (like police cars blocking access to load-in bays, equipment and merchandise that had gone missing, over-zealous security personnel, squabbles between sound engineers and so it went on).

I remember him laughing and saying, ‘Dude, you’re like a white Oprah, you should be a social worker’. Sometime after his death, when the fog started lifting, I recalled him saying this and half-seriously thought about pursuing it, but social work was a university gig (and therefore out of my league); so, I started thinking about something more realistic, like a Certificate III in Youth Work at TAFE.¹ I’d been volunteering at a local youth drop-in centre some nights after work to keep myself busy and I thought, ‘Yeah, I can see myself umpiring basketball and breaking up fights for a living’. So, I made the big decision and applied to go to TAFE, only to get a rejection letter stating that my ‘education levels did not suggest I could manage the assessment requirements’ (I remember it verbatim and will never forget). I applied a second time and attached an indignant letter pointing out that my ‘straight A’ record from primary school suggested I *could* manage the assessment requirements. A second rejection letter followed.

I spent the second half of 2004 researching my options and discovered I could sit a Special Tertiary Admissions Test to gain entry to university. I took the test and I smashed it with a *really* high score; so, I enrolled in a Bachelor of Social Work (at age 38) and I tailored every single assessment around researching and writing on youth issues, framing the social work degree as an opportunity to make my own damn youth work qualification (given the TAFE Certificate in Youth Work was well out of reach). My special interests were around youth transitions in high poverty contexts; thus, when I finished with a Grade Point Average of 6.7/7 and was invited to join the Honours programme (reading this TAFE assessors?), I designed and undertook a qualitative study around the effects of housing tenure on school engagement. I smashed that too, achieving a first-class result and being awarded an Australian Postgraduate Award to undertake doctoral studies.

The examiners’ reports on my Honours thesis commended the innovation in my work and applauded my ‘discovery’ of such an important research focus that wasn’t being addressed elsewhere, so it made perfect sense that I would expand the pilot Honours study and undertake doctoral research at the intersection of housing and youth transitions. I had the ideas, the encouragement, the scholarship, the methodology, the research questions, industry support and access to a sample. I was all set to go.

After an early academic supervision session to discuss my ideas, I jumped in my car to leave the university, hit ‘play’ on the sound system and headed for home (I remember *The Blackening* by Machine Head was playing). But then, I remember sitting at the traffic lights, still thinking about youth transitions (fresh from my supervision session), when I fatefully wondered (in daydream mode) how young metalheads might be getting on in the world today – at home, at school, finding work and so on. What could have been a fleeting thought rapidly developed obsessive properties until there was no escaping the call. As much as I didn’t want to be the clichéd ageing metalhead undertaking metal research (and well before I knew anything about the field of metal studies emerging around that time), I was

¹TAFE stands for Technical and Further Education. TAFE institutions in Australia are akin to what international readers might know as a type of community college.

being hounded by research questions that I couldn't ignore. I was fast realising that I was in a privileged position to be able to investigate these questions. In a matter of days, my research focus changed completely and I knew I was going 'home' to do my doctoral research.

I think it's worth mentioning my rather abrupt segue from housing research to metal research upfront because Bennett (2002) has argued that 'insider research', that is, the research conducted by those inhabiting the same cultural space as the researched, can be characteristic of novice researchers who perhaps feel more comfortable and passionate about investigating things they are familiar with (and he goes on to point out some methodological concerns with this that I revisit and address in the final section of this chapter). On face value, I might well fit Bennett's mould of a metalhead undertaking doctoral research in a metal comfort zone; but, it was never on my radar to do so until I realised that there were important questions to ask metal youth that had much bigger implications for the field of youth studies if we were to learn something new about the interplay between subculture² and developmental trajectories.

It all feels a bit weird to be introducing this book with my own personal journey, but others have pointed out to me that it's an important part of the story that I ought to share with readers. I certainly didn't have my own story in mind when I began the research, but I started to learn a lot more about myself (and my motivations in life) from the metal youth I worked with over the course of the study. I was recognising parts of my own story in theirs, good and bad and maybe other metal readers will too.

Positioning My Research Approach

As I mentioned, the first thoughts that brought me to this research were a set of general wonderings about how young metalheads were faring at home, at school, finding work and more. I also stated that my research training and interests were in the field of youth transitions, a term often used interchangeably in the youth literature as social transitions, or simply shortened to transitions:

In simple terms, youth transitions can be understood as the pathways that young people make as they leave school and encounter different labour market, housing and family-related experiences as they progress toward adulthood. (MacDonald & Marsh, 2005, p. 31)

The backbone of transitions studies has long been a focus on school-to-work transitions with obvious implications for economic participation and an ability to live a good life. But, the idea that some sort of linear pathway from school-to-work exists has come under fire for overlooking the more 'round-a-bout' nature

²In academic circles, 'subculture' is what Haenfler (2010, p. 5) calls a 'muddy concept' that has sparked intense scholarly debate around what it actually means, and how useful it remains as a conceptual tool. I am deliberately side-stepping the subculture/post-culture arguments, and using 'subculture' throughout this book as a lay-term to depict any social subgroup that is distinguishable by particular values, beliefs, symbols, styles and practices common to that group.

of contemporary youth transitions. Now, we more commonly see young people transitioning in-and-out of education and work, in-and-out of the family home, in-and-out of optimal health, in-and-out of social and intimate relationships and so on. There is an extensive body of youth studies literature that examines the complex and protracted nature of contemporary transitions, and I get to see first-hand how all of this is playing out when I'm working directly with young people.

What I'm also privy to is an awful lot of self-talk (and self-labelling) from young people about where to 'set the bar' in life in terms of what they think they can achieve, or who they can become. Because of this, I've become interested in looking at youth transitions through a lens of identity self-talk. I'm always keen to know more about how young people form certain beliefs about themselves; how social dynamics, structures and relationships can shape their self-talk; and how the quality (or factual basis) of their self-talk can either help or hinder their decision making at critical transition points in their young lives.

When I first began designing the research informing this book, I was working in high schools located in areas of deeply entrenched socio-economic disadvantage. I was exploring the stories students were telling themselves about 'who they were, and what they could or should do with their lives', and trying to learn more about who or what was shaping their aspirational biographies (or self-talk). So, when I started formulating the 'metal' research questions, it excited me to continue exploring youth aspirations and transitions through a lens of identity formations, but with an additional layer of metal identity self-talk going on.

It is important to re-state my positioning here as a critical social worker because my research background is *not* in cultural studies; it is in applied social research that seeks to make positive social change for young people. So, on one hand, I'm very much concerned about the social and economic structuring of youth transitions; but, I'm also fascinated by ways that youth culture plays out in transitional contexts. Positioning my research, therefore, took some figuring out for me because youth culture and youth transitions have historically been entirely separate fields of youth studies, as MacDonald et al. (2001) point out:

The bifurcation of youth studies can be exemplified by two texts published in the early 1990s. *Careers and Identities* (Banks et al., 1992), was the main volume to emerge from the ESRC's '16 to 19 Initiative' and is firmly in the transitions camp. Redhead's (1993) *Rave Off! Politics and Deviance in Contemporary Youth Culture* was the first in the new wave of youth cultural studies. Despite being published at the same 'moment' and sharing a focus on young people in Britain neither seemed to be in the least interested in the other's topics. Reading these books side by side one might imagine that the cultural and leisure lives of young people, as described by Redhead, were wholly detached from their lives as young workers, trainees, college students or the young unemployed, as described by Banks et al. (and vice versa). (MacDonald et al., 2001, paragraph 2.7)

It seems clear to me that unless we can learn to integrate cultural and transitional perspectives, we will keep missing the ‘bigger picture’ of what contemporary social life is like for different groups of young people. For example, Furlong, Woodman and Wyn (2011) point out that degrees of social change can be exaggerated by cultural perspectives if an interest in the economic sphere of life is not included. They argue that it is essential to remain aware of economic continuities otherwise ‘we risk the diversity of lifestyles blinding us to the substantial predictabilities of social life’ (p. 357). Conversely, the authors caution that underestimating youth culture paints a one-dimensional picture of young lives that lacks awareness of the ways young people ‘interpret, construct and shape their lives within a given set of circumstances’ (Furlong et al., 2011, p. 357).

As a youth worker as well as a parent, I see the lengths that young people go to in order to show us how important their subcultural affiliations are: by the ways they dress, their practices, their hair styling, body modifications and more. So, if subcultural identities are that important (and obviously, they are), it makes complete sense (to me) to try to learn more about how subcultural identities intersect with other aspects of social life. Specifically, I was interested to know why young people might choose the heavy metal subculture in the first place, and what role(s) metal might then play in shaping self-talk and decision making when metal youth find themselves at any number of crossroads in their young lives.

But, from a research stand point, taking on metal is not like taking on other youth cultures because we have some serious social and political baggage to contend with, which I outline next.

1.2 What We ‘Know’ about Metal Youth, and Ways that We ‘Know’ it

It was clear I had burning research questions developing, but first I needed to know what previous studies had to say about young metalheads so that I could widen my understanding and focus my research questions. In this section, I summarise some of the key literature on metal youth, but first I highlight some of the social and political factors (and issues of political timing) that have had a lot to do with shaping the tone and agenda for a lot (if not most) of the studies I critically reviewed.

As Weinstein (2000) points out:

Heavy metal music is a controversial subject that stimulates visceral rather than intellectual reactions in both its partisans and its detractors. Many people hold that heavy metal music, along with drugs and promiscuous sex, proves that some parts of youth culture have gone beyond acceptable limits. To many of its detractors heavy metal embodies a shameless attack on the central values of Western civilization. But to its fans it is the greatest music ever made. (p. 3)

In short, metal has polarised people for much of its history spanning for more than 50 years. The traditions of moral outrage against metal have already been well-documented by others (for two exemplars see Kahn-Harris, 2007;

Weinstein, 2000), but I briefly revisit this here because it sets the context for understanding what we already ‘know’ about metal youth and the ways that we ‘know’ it. Further, tracing the history of biased and stereotypical accounts of metal youth demonstrates why my narrative study capturing the lived experiences of metal youth *in their own words* was long overdue.

The Social Disapproval of Metal: History and Consequences

Anyone associated with metal would be hard pressed not to bring Black Sabbath right upfront in any discussion about the history of metal. And I will too, but not because of the band’s musical legacy and its role in the birth of heavy metal as a musical genre; rather, for singer Ozzy Osbourne’s contributions to shocking mainstream audiences and ‘proving’ that metal people are completely off the rails of acceptable behaviour. In 1981, Osbourne strengthened the growing public disapproval of metal with his infamous stunt of biting a dove’s head off while in a meeting with record executives to promote his solo career. This and other highly publicised events – like the 1990 court appearance of Judas Priest to face accusations that the band’s music encouraged two young men to shoot themselves – were pivotal in setting the scene for a groundswell of negative hype surrounding metal music and culture. (Note: there was no evidence to support the lawsuit against Judas Priest and the case was dismissed.)

In 1985, the Parents Music Resource Center (PMRC) initiated a US Senate hearing into the lyrical content of heavy metal (and rap) music. The PMRC hearing (as it became better known) fanned the flames of growing public unrest around metal; according to Weinstein (2000), the hearing ‘provided a platform for, and bestowed a legitimacy on, the fundamentalist positions against rock, and especially against heavy metal’ (p. 249). Conservative detractors gave their personal opinions on metal (masked as ‘expert’ testimony) that went on to become a matter of public record linking heavy metal lyrics to suicide ideation, violence, perversion, rape, substance misuse and poor mental health – despite any evidence to support this.

Metal was characterised throughout the hearing as ‘outrageous filth’ portraying and glorifying rape, incest, sexual violence, perversion and suicide (Weinstein, 2000, pp. 249–250). Susan Baker, wife of Treasury Secretary James Baker, testified that rock artists actually seemed, *in her opinion*, to encourage teen suicide (Weinstein, 2000, p. 250) [my emphasis]. In fact, suicide became a key focus of the hearings and the PMRC put forward their (mis)interpretation of Ozzy Osbourne’s lyrics in the song *Suicide Solution* as a prime example of how dangerous metal lyrics can be for encouraging suicide. Weinstein (2000) details the actual meaning of the song’s lyrics in-depth in her book *Heavy Metal: The Music and its Culture* (she also unpacks the play on words in the song’s title) and makes a compelling argument that the PMRC got their interpretation very wrong because the song is actually about Ozzy’s fight with alcoholism.

In any case, the hearings were broadcast to the general public and the damage (for metal) was done – the conservative opinions and moral objections given at the hearing became a matter of (unsubstantiated) ‘proof’ that metal was extremely

dangerous, especially for young people. For example, Weinstein (2000, p. 251) points out that the misinterpretation of *Suicide Solution* became 'conventional wisdom in public discourse' after the hearing and has been regularly referred to over the years by moral crusaders. Five years after the hearing, the Catholic Archbishop of New York cited the song as an example of 'heavy metal music spiked with satanic lyrics' that disposed listeners to 'devil worship and demonic possession' (Weinstein, 2000, p. 251). Coupled with the 'expert' testimony given at the senate hearings, this shows the very poor level of argument and evidence that has repeatedly been served up to 'prove' that heavy metal is in a causal relationship with violence and suicide.

But, heavy metal artists were not the only metal associates coming under social, moral and legal scrutiny. In 1992, 22-year-old Cameron Todd Willingham was arrested and charged with murder after the deaths of his three young children in a house fire in Corsicana, Texas. Grann (2009, np) reported that the evidence responsible for ultimately sending Willingham to his death by lethal injection consisted of: the factually incorrect reporting of accelerant usage and fire patterns; the (unsubstantiated) testimony of a fellow inmate who made a deal with prosecutors for a reduced sentence in his own legal matters; and the testimony of Tim Gregory who provided the following statement to support the prosecution's claim that Willingham fits the profile of a sociopath:

At one point, Jackson showed Gregory Exhibit No. 60 – a photograph of an Iron Maiden poster that had hung in Willingham's house – and asked the psychologist to interpret it. "This one is a picture of a skull, with a fist being punched through the skull," Gregory said; the image displayed "violence" and "death." Gregory looked at photographs of other music posters owned by Willingham. "There's a hooded skull, with wings and a hatchet," Gregory continued. "And all of these are in fire, depicting – it reminds me of something like Hell. And there's a picture – a Led Zeppelin picture of a falling angel... I see there's an association many times with cultive-type of activities. A focus on death, dying. Many times individuals that have a lot of this type of art have interest in satanic-type activities. (Grann, 2009, np)

Tim Gregory was a psychologist with a Master's degree in marriage and family practice; *he had no expertise in sociopathic behaviour* and was only giving his *personal interpretation* of an Iron Maiden poster as 'evidence' that Willingham *might* have an interest in 'satanic-type activities'. He had no first-hand knowledge of Willingham, but he *was* a friend of John Jackson, the assistant district attorney in Corsicana and lead prosecutor on the case.

Willingham steadfastly refused to take a plea bargain to avoid the death penalty and protested his innocence up to his execution in 2004.

Willingham was not the only person to spend time on death row based on 'expert' views that sociopathic tendencies are associated with metal preferences.

Damien Echols, Jessie Misskelley Jr. and Jason Baldwin, known collectively as the *West Memphis Three*, were three teenagers tried and convicted in 1994 of murdering three boys in the woods near their rural Arkansas home deep in the heartland of America's Christian 'Bible Belt' region. According to Hickam (2015, p. 9), the teens were 'demonized for their interests in heavy metal music, black clothing, and long hair' which reflected the societal prejudices against metal since the PMRC's campaign to associate metal with Satanism, immorality and violence.

In the weeks following the murders, the media reported that the deaths were part of a 'Satanic ritual performed by occult worshippers' (John, 2013, np). The teens were arrested one month after the murders despite no physical evidence linking them to the crimes (John, 2013, np):

At their subsequent trial, evidence introduced by the prosecution included the fact that Echols wore Metallica T-shirts and read Stephen King novels. Echols had an alibi for the time of the murders – he was at home with his grandmother, mother and sister, not to mention that he had made phone calls to three different people that evening. "That didn't matter to the jury" he says. "The local media had run so many stories about Satanic orgies and human sacrifices that by the time we walked into that courtroom the jury saw the trial as nothing more than a formality. It was over before we even walked in". (John, 2013, np)

The suspects were all found guilty despite the absence of physical evidence, the deliberate omission of evidence pointing to another suspect, and the disruption of a fair trial by media stories circulating about the trio (John, 2013, np). After 18 years and many appeals processes (served on death row by Echols who survived an execution date in 1994), the *West Memphis Three* were finally released in 2011 after they entered 'Alford Pleas', a judicial process that allowed them to assert their innocence, but acknowledge that prosecutors had enough evidence to convict them (John, 2013, np). (Essentially providing for their release while concomitantly protecting the judicial system from wrongful conviction claims.)

These two 'trial by media' events are examples of how the campaign against metal gathered momentum throughout the latter half of the 1980s. And importantly, it shows this was much more than a superficial stereotyping of metal, this *type* of stereotyping was serious and consequential. Willingham lost his life and the *West Memphis Three* lost 18 years of their lives in prison (and would undoubtedly suffer the consequences of this ordeal throughout the rest of their lives).

Interestingly, Geraldo Rivera's documentary *Devil Worship: Exposing Satan's Underground* (1988) pre-dates the above-mentioned trials. Rivera set out to make links between metal, murder and Satanism by highlighting several murders carried out by young people with links to devil-worshipping, who also happened to like heavy-metal music. Causality was implied throughout Rivera's programme, but there was no evidence to prove that metal music had played *any part* in planning or carrying out the murders. Rather than investigating the perpetrators' individual circumstances and the contexts in which they committed the crimes,

Rivera relied on sensational accounts of blood drinking and human sacrifice to fuel the ‘Satanic Panic’ that was sweeping the United States at that time. It would not be difficult to imagine Rivera’s programme having a significant impact on the media reporting (if not the trial itself) of Echols and co, or influencing the testimony given by Gregory in Willingham’s trial.

High-profile cases of mass shootings in the United States have also fuelled social efforts to attribute relationships between metal music and violent crimes. For example, metal was back in the media spotlight following the shootings at Columbine High School in 1999 (even though the shooters were not metalheads) because *all* school ‘outcasts’ came under scrutiny (Griffith, 2010, p. 408), and metalheads were put forward by media commentators as prime examples of ‘outsiders’ and ‘loners’ in school settings.

Moral panics sell newspapers and provide palatable explanations for social ills (Crichter, 2006; Goode & Ben-Yehuda, 2009). Scapegoating is far more convenient than looking at the messy and complex business of life in general: it is especially convenient for reinforcing a climate of risk and fear while deflecting attention away from conditions of social inequality, emotional hardship and patterns of disadvantage that can negatively affect young people’s development and mental health. However, I don’t discount or trivialise that some young people who listen to metal have committed violent crimes (and other types of music of course). My bigger point here is that the media prefer to narrowly report on metal (and other youth culture) preferences, rather than paying due attention to the social and family contexts that give rise to behaviours and circumstances.

As well as the ‘news’ media outlined above, pop culture has also played a role in reinforcing public opinions of metal youth as deviant and undesirable. One example of this was when the teenage character of Anthony Soprano (in prime-time television drama *The Sopranos*) began to disengage from school and disconnect from family life, and generally started getting into trouble. Young Anthony’s downward spiral to becoming a ‘bad kid’ was symbolically gestured to viewers with an all-new wardrobe of heavy metal apparel to replace his ‘good kid’ clothes.

A more ‘humorous’ stereotyping (or lampooning) of metalheads has also been evident in numerous pop-culture products, which include: the characters Beavis and Butthead (television series; feature film; comic books; and music videos spanning 1993–2011), Wayne and Garth (*Wayne’s World* Saturday Night Live sketch 1989–2011; two feature films 1992 and 1993), Bill and Ted (two feature films 1989 and 1991; two television series; spin-off video games and comic books) and Jay and Silent Bob (seven movies; comic books; television series spanning 1994–2013). To highlight just one example of Beavis and Butthead, the title characters are depicted as socially awkward delinquents who rarely attend school and prefer to stay home watching metal videos and wearing metal T-shirts:

They have no apparent adult supervision at home, are dim-witted, under-educated, and barely literate, and they both lack any empathy or moral scruples, even regarding each other. Their most common shared activity is watching music videos, which they tend to judge by deeming them ‘cool,’ or by claiming, ‘This sucks!’. (Wikipedia)

It is interesting to note that this description of Beavis and Butthead contains the themes of low educational attainment, dissatisfaction with schooling and lack of parental engagement and control – and these are also the themes that conspicuously align with conceptual frames often applied to academic studies of metal youth (by non-metal scholars).

We can see that metal is in a complicated relationship with the media, politics and academic research, and we will see clearer patterns of this in the research literatures that I critically examine next.

Previous Studies of Metal Youth

In short, there is no cohesive body of literature that addresses early metal preferences and/or the role(s) metal might play during the youth phase. Instead, there is a rather disjointed body of literature on metal youth strung together on common attempts to ‘prove’ that metal is a problem for positive youth development, or at least symptomatic of poor developmental trajectories (for several examples of many, see Lacourse, Claes, & Villeneuve, 2001; Scheel & Westefeld, 1999; Schwartz & Fouts, 2003; Selfhout, Delsing, ter Bogt, & Meeus, 2008; Stack, Gundlach, & Reeves 1994; ter Bogt, Keijsers, & Meeus, 2013).

My early academic database searches using the keywords of ‘heavy metal’ and ‘youth’ turned up a plethora of articles addressing the ‘problem of metal’ that were generally assembled around mental health issues, suicide ideation, problem behaviours and low educational attainment or poor school commitment. When conducting a similar literature search, Baker and B. Brown (2016) also found a host of narrowly defined psychiatric and psychological frames through which metal fans were typically viewed as ‘somehow vulnerable, or socially and morally compromised’ by researchers and clinicians practising with young people (p. 3).

Research literature that pathologises metal preferences tends to emanate from large-scale quantitative studies that do not explore the social contexts in which metal preferences are formed (the wider problem of assigning pathological labels outside of their human contexts is examined in detail by Guerin, 2017). According to A. R. Brown (2011), academic psychology has a history of responding quickly to socially constructed ‘problems’ that command mainstream attention (and/or get on the media radar). Brown further argues that research funding is more likely to be awarded to researchers investigating such problems and advising solutions, rather than ‘social scientists who seek funding for work that questions the ideological basis of such constructions’ (p. 224). When writing on moral panics and video gaming, Ferguson (2013) similarly argued that ‘it is much more difficult to secure grant funding by arguing that something *isn’t* a pressing social concern’ (p. 68) [original emphasis]. From this, a clear picture starts to emerge around the complex but fruitful relationship between the media, politics, dominant culture and research agendas. It seems fear mongering is a good business model – if you’re in the business of selling papers or attracting research funding.

As I’ve stated (and Baker and B. Brown confirmed above), there is a great deal of literature that investigates metal and youth developmental outcomes from different angles of psychopathology. I will highlight some of these works

at various points throughout this book where my results mount a challenge to their findings, but a key piece of research to discuss upfront here is the study informing Arnett's (1996) book entitled *Metalheads: Heavy Metal Music and Adolescent Alienation*.

Arnett's book is an important reference point for my work because his findings have had a tremendous influence on subsequent studies of metal youth by non-metal scholars. This is quite a problem because not only is his study outdated, but his methodology and research tone (leading to his findings that have been so often cited) are somewhat questionable; particularly, his openly deficit views of metal and young metal fans, and apparent exploitation of public concerns about metal:

In many ways, Arnett's study effectively buys into and exploits a wave of public anxiety in the USA concerning teenagers' interest in heavy metal music, an anxiety fuelled by several high profile court cases during the early 1990s against heavy metal artists whose songs, it was claimed, had been responsible for a series of teenage suicides. (Bennett, 2002, p. 459)

Whereas right-wing groups saw metal as inherently dangerous, Arnett suggested that heavy metal was a symptom of disturbing alienation among US youth. While Arnett's conclusions do not lead him to recommend censorship, his work still represents a view held widely by both left- and right-wing observers – that heavy metal cannot in and of itself be worthwhile. (Kahn-Harris, 2007, p. 27)

Looking deeper into Kahn-Harris' above-mentioned point, Arnett's devaluation of metal is indeed clear at numerous points throughout his book. His dislike of metal is declared in the opening pages of his book (Arnett, 1996, p. ix), which is completely fair enough, but the judgemental and value-laden descriptions of metal youth starts to become a real research concern that endures throughout the book.

For example, male participants who did not fit Arnett's preconceived stereotype of the 'scruffy looking, sneering, apathetic' metalhead (p. ix) were referred to as 'nicely groomed, likable and articulate' (p. 59) and 'handsome and well dressed with short, simply styled hair' (p. 111). Arnett also offered his subjective opinions about women attending metal concerts. His descriptions of young women in the crowd included: being dressed in 'neoprostitute style', being 'laden with makeup' and wearing clothing that was 'downright obscene' (p. 9). He also reported that one girl had a 'blank, addled look on her face' (p. 9); yet, he was not privy to what pre-empted the look on her face and did not know anything about her circumstances that might have led to having a particular look on her face (if he did, he did not report this). Moreover, he did not describe what look *he* considered she *ought* to have on her face for *him* to regard it as 'normal'. To be clear, it is totally fine for a researcher to not like metal, but questions arise for me around ethical data construction when personal, normative and judgemental views play a

strong (and unexamined) role in the research relationship. (Later in this chapter, I discuss my own role in data construction and the mitigation strategies I took to limit bias.)

Further concerns (for data construction) are evident in Arnett's research design; including the following negatively framed summary profile questions:

Participants were asked, "How many times in the past year have you..."

- Driven a car under the influence of alcohol.
- Driven a car over 80 miles per hour.
- Driven a car greater than 20 mph over the speed limit.
- Had sex without contraception.
- Had sex with someone not known well.
- Used marijuana.
- Used cocaine.
- Used illegal drugs other than marijuana or cocaine.
- Damaged or destroyed public or private property.
- Shoplifted.

There was no list of positively framed counter-questions. Further, the face-to-face interviews ended with Question 31: 'What's the most reckless/wild/dangerous thing you've ever done? Describe the episode' (Arnett, 1996, p. 170). Again, no positive counter-question such as: 'What's the most positive/satisfying/beneficial thing you've ever done? Describe the episode'. In his critique of youth-culture-research methodologies, Bennett (2002) also argued that Arnett's deliberate construction of biographical accounts couched in deficit terms effectively produced a 'decidedly forced account of heavy metal's socio-cultural significance' (p. 459).

The final methodological concern to raise is that Arnett (1996) recruited a comparison group of non-metal counterparts in his study and reported the findings as 'statistically significant' (p. 171); however, he did not interview the comparison group. Instead, he refashioned some of the interview questions into a questionnaire containing multiple-choice questions and some open-ended questions providing space for written responses. Also, the metalhead sample was recruited through music stores and included early school leavers; whereas, the non-metalhead comparison group was recruited through local high schools and from Arnett's own college classes that he was teaching. It is highly questionable whether different methods and different sample origins can produce 'statistically significant' comparison results, especially when reporting on school commitment and educational attainment by comparing responses from early school leavers with those of college students.

So, What Do We Know about the Transitions and Aspirations of Metal Youth?

While not expressed in the language of youth transitions or aspirations that I use throughout this book, researchers (including Arnett) *have* investigated metal

preferences and transitional outcomes (to a degree), but have done so through deficit conceptualisations of low educational attainment, poor school commitment and school 'failure'.

Arnett (1996, p. 121) speculated that metalheads fail at school largely because of their 'high sensation needs' and low impulse control. He asserted that their 'high sensation needs' made it difficult to endure the structure and regimentation of schooling; hence, 'they fail at school because they dislike it' (p. 121). He further speculated that metalheads do not learn impulse control and self-restraint at home from parents who encourage free expression, making it even more difficult to cope in the structured school environment (p. 121).

Keith Roe was another early pioneer of investigating metal preferences and educational outcomes. He repeatedly emphasised the importance of school commitment as an explanatory variable in relation to musical preference (1992, 1993, 1995). Roe (1992) concluded that although the (correlative) relationship between school achievement and metal preferences was weak, a high dissatisfaction with schooling was strongly correlated to metal preferences and that heavy metal was liked more by students who were not envisioning to stay at school to complete their education (p. 347). In short, he argued that a taste for heavy metal was 'characteristic of very discontented, low-achieving, mostly male students from working-class backgrounds', and that 'the best predictor variable is students' level of satisfaction at school' (p. 351).

According to Roe (1992), metal youth anticipate bleaker futures than their non-metal counterparts thus limiting their educational aspirations. To understand this better, he suggested that greater attention ought to be paid to their subjectively perceived futures (p. 353). 'Subjectively perceived futures' sounds like aspiration biographies to me; yet, Roe's idea of pursuing this line of enquiry went unnoticed for more than 20 years until I picked this up in my research (albeit through a different channel).

Roe also proposed that some students experiencing damaged self-esteem at school might switch their loyalty from school and parents to alternative peer group activities, and that:

[...] membership of valued peer groups and subcultures then becomes a first line of defence against threats to self-esteem emanating from other institutions and social experiences, and makes possible the construction of an alternative positive identity. (Roe, 1995, p. 622)

While Roe raised the idea of metal as an alternate 'positive' identity, again, others did not pick up his ideas in subsequent youth-specific research. (To be fair, Arnett's results have also been 'used' rather selectively in youth research environments; others have not explored his underplayed statements about positive aspects of listening to metal, or his commentary on the impacts of individualisation on youth development in a changing modernity.)

In their large-scale quantitative study of the determinants and lifestyle correlates of musical preferences among high school students, Tanner, Asbridge, and

Wortley (2008) drew heavily on Roe's work (1983, 1992, 1993, 1995, 1999) to frame their argument that higher levels of academic achievement, educational ambition and cultural capital lead to preferences for 'adult approved socially respectable musical genres', and conversely, that 'academic under-achievement and modest educational plans and lack of cultural capital will result in a preference for musical forms that school, and the adult world, disapproves of and devalues' (p. 123).

They foreshadowed their research by stating that:

Students from more humble backgrounds, students who perform less well in school, who have only modest educational plans, and are low in cultural capital will, we predict, involve themselves in more oppositional and univorous musical genres. Previous research suggests that hard rock, particularly heavy metal, will be their choice. We see no reason why this tradition should not be continuing among the present generation of low achievers and rebels. (Tanner et al., 2008, p. 124)

Drawing again on Roe (1983, 1992, 1994), the authors further argued that students with suppressed educational ambition prefer heavy metal and that musical preferences and occupational expectations were similarly linked:

Adolescents who envisage high status as adults prepare for that outcome by aligning themselves with the cultural traits they believe are most appropriate for their future status destination – a process that happens in reverse for heavy metal fans. (Tanner et al., 2008, p. 119)

There is, of course, a very normative assumption here that all young people are, or ought to be, constructing long-term views of their futures, which overlooks the possibility that some young people might simply be trying to survive school one day at a time for a range of reasons.

The school measures utilised by Tanner et al. (2008) were described as 'educational attainment, experiences, and expectations; self-reported grades, skipping school, suspension from school, and educational stream' (p. 125). It is not clear what the authors meant by 'experiences', but the content of the article suggests that the focus was on educational experiences with curriculum matters – a focus that was unable to capture the significance of relational factors at school that might influence educational attainment, such as bullying, peer networks, and status in the social order among peers.

When the authors did discuss peers, it was in terms of leisure pursuits *within* peer groups, which excluded the interactional experiences of young people who did not belong to a peer group; in other words, the peer-interaction experiences of 'outsiders' or 'loners' in the school setting. In the metal context, this would seem highly important given the routine positioning of metalheads (by themselves or others) as 'outsiders' in school environments (as we will see in Chapter 2).

This is quite significant because Tanner et al. (2008, p. 134) found that musical preferences appeared to be more related to the educational domain than the familial one; yet, their investigation only examined musical preferences in the context of educational attainment rather than exploring school experiences holistically, thus limiting our understanding of relationships within the whole-of-school environment and metal preferences.

Ultimately, the authors did not find support for their prediction that heavy metal fans would be low achievers and concluded that young metal fans were 'competent students, though relatively unenthusiastic ones' (Tanner et al., 2008, p. 138). A pertinent line of enquiry might then have been to investigate students' diminished enthusiasm by exploring the biographical construction of their aspirations, and investigating the fullness of what was going on in their lives that might have brought about a lack of enthusiasm.

In a further twist, Cadwallader's (2007) mixed-methods study of more than 1,000 academically 'gifted' students found that 36% of *high-achieving* respondents ranked heavy metal in their top five preferred musical styles. He cautiously interpreted his results to suggest that:

Perhaps the pressures associated with being gifted and talented can be temporarily dissipated with the aid of the music, which could explain its somewhat surprising popularity within the sample [...] perhaps individuals, particularly gifted ones who may experience more pressure than their peers or perhaps be more aware of the contradictions in the world (as suggested by their appreciation of politically charged heavy metal lyrics), just feel 'metalheady' from time to time and they use the music to fulfil their need to purge this negative affect. (Cadwallader, 2007, p. 11)

Although Cadwallader's study opens some more positive channels for looking at metal preferences and educational attainment, there are several things to note. First, he points out that most of the respondents ranking metal highly used the music infrequently and did not embody metal identities or signal any sort of belonging to the metal subculture (hence, the comment about feeling 'metalheady' from time to time – as it stood, only 6% of respondents ranked metal preferences at number one). Because of this, Cadwallader (2007) emphasised that his results didn't offer 'coherent evidence to suggest that individuals with low self-esteem will align themselves with a youth culture or that they will evaluate this youth culture more highly than other groups in order to alleviate negative affect' (p. 13). However, he did assert that future research would benefit from investigating if and how gifted students might use musical preference to define in-group and out-group, and whether their favouritism for either group is mediated by self-esteem or other domains of self-concept, which could tell us if music preferences contribute to the social identities of gifted students. In conclusion, Cadwallader (2007) argued that his findings were at least able to 'contradict the stereotypes of both the gifted adolescent as a classical music

loving, isolated individual, and the heavy metal fan as a troubled individual that rejects academic life' (p. 13).

The Research 'Problem', and What to Do about it...

To this point, I have outlined the research 'problems' of biased and stereotypical accounts of metal youth; a reluctance (or refusal) to holistically investigate the contexts in which early metal preferences are formed; and a lot of speculation about metal youth being low-achievers and not aspiring to much in life (despite Cadwallader's moves towards challenging this).

Against the backdrop of these mostly negative accounts of metal youth and the pathologising of metal preferences, I need to mention the emergence and growth of the transdisciplinary field of metal studies which, particularly over the last decade, has steadily induced an academic shift towards more sympathetic views of metal and metal fandom; perhaps, due to an influx of heavy metal fans who have progressed to becoming academic researchers themselves, as well as established scholars who have 'come out' as heavy metal fans (Brown, 2011, p. 217). As an academic field, metal studies was consolidated in 2008 when the inaugural *Music Metal and Politics* conference brought metal scholars together from around the globe creating networks and opportunities for international communication and collaboration – prior to this time, there had been 'studies of metal', but not 'metal studies' (Hickam, 2015, p. 9).

Counter to the long-standing deficit approaches to studying metal, metal scholars have been exploring some of the more positive aspects and allure of metal music, identities and community formations (for some examples of this see Foster, 2011; Riches & Spracklen, 2014; Snell & Hodgetts, 2007; Varas-Diaz, Rivera-Segarra, Rivera Medina, Mendoza, & Gonzales-Sepulveda, 2015; Varas-Diaz & Scott, 2016; Wallach, Berger, & Greene, 2011). In describing the shift (by metal scholars) towards more positively framed investigations of metal, Varas-Diaz et al. (2015) state that:

This type of research has begun to challenge the existing literature that seemed to focus almost exclusively on heavy metal music as a risk factor. It has evidenced that the linkages between music consumption and risk are more complex than initially expected (sometimes non-existent) and even highlighted the positive implications of involvement in scenarios where heavy metal music is produced and consumed. (p. 90)

Much of the metal studies literature to date, however, provides information on established metalheads rather than early recruitment into the metal subculture or young people's biographic constructions of *becoming* metal. Young people have undoubtedly participated in many studies of metal fandom, but the foci of the investigations have not been youth-specific (Rowe, 2017b). An exception to this was Larsson's (2013) qualitative study of subjective and inter-subjective constructions of being an 'authentic' metal fan. Larsson (2013, pp. 100–102)

reported that her participants' biographies of authenticity were underscored by a long-term dedication to metal preferences dating back to early teen years (or childhood) that evoked positive constructions of an idealised self. Further, her participants reported the tremendous importance of metal in their young lives (Larsson 2013, p. 100); however, they were not able to provide much detail around *why* it became so important in the context of their everyday lives (beyond general statements such as 'always being able to count on metal no matter how lonely and betrayed your friends have made you feel' (p. 100).

To this end, I set out to build on some of these more positive lines of inquiry by generating, from a youth studies frame, some insights around the processes of early recruitment into the metal subculture, and the everyday contexts in which early metal identities are biographically constructed. We know that metal youth love all things metal, but empirical evidence showing *why* young people sign up for metal in the first place, and *what* they get out of doing so, remains almost non-existent. We also don't know what it's like navigating the journey to adulthood as a young metalhead in today's world.

To address these gaps in what we know about metal youth, I set out to investigate the following questions:

- What aspects of metal music and culture do young people find alluring, and why do they take on the mantle of metaldom?
- What benefits do young people perceive to gain from forming metal identities?
- How are metal youth faring in post-school environments; and what shapes their aspirations, and the pathways they take, at various transition points in their young lives?

In the following (and final) section of this chapter, I will detail my research approach to finding these things out directly from metal youth.

1.3 The Research

Insider Research

Before I detail the research design and methodology that ultimately served to 'answer' my research questions, I revisit the notion of 'insider' research so I can address the 'metal elephant' in the room. I made my own metal identity known in the opening pages of this book but it's important to examine what that means *for this research*, because being a metalhead placed me squarely 'inside' the cultural group I was investigating.

But in some ways, I wasn't strictly an insider because: at the time I wasn't regularly participating in the local scene; I didn't know the participants prior to the research; and they were more than 20 years younger than me (so, they weren't my peers or contemporaries). But, I was still very strongly connected to my metal identity; I was up to date with my metal knowledge and, importantly, I had a deep appreciation and understanding of the music and culture that would ultimately enable me to enter a space of shared meaning with participants.

In general, there are points both in favour and against insiders and outsiders as researchers and the relative merits need to be weighed in particular cases. For example, the standpoint approach often favoured by feminist researchers holds that insider positioning endows the researcher with a more complete and less distorted view of the social world – in other words, ‘you have to be one to know one’ (Heath et al., 2009, p. 40). On the other hand, Carter (2004) argues that it might be useful to deliberately mismatch researchers and participants to avoid taking things for granted and to create space for teasing out ‘meanings and assumptions that may otherwise remain unspoken’ (p. 348).

In his landmark study of the Goth subculture, Hodkinson (2002) made a notable transition from participating as a Goth to researching as a Goth. His critical reflections on the experience have led him to cautiously argue a case for the merits of insider research. On the upside, Hodkinson (2005, p. 136) felt that his transition to insider researcher widened and focused his point of view in positive ways that accorded with his academic background and aspirations, but without compromising his level of involvement in Goth culture. He also described a range of resources that insider status can bring to the research process including – access to participants; being able to draw on subcultural literacies; and shared aspects of physical appearance and cultural knowledge that can serve to build rapport with participants (Hodkinson, 2005).

One of the concerns he flagged, however, was that the kinds of knowledge and understanding produced could be influenced (if not skewed) by the likely existence of multiple insider views. He also cautioned that, in the presence of an insider, participants might feel pressured into giving responses that are consistent with dominant thinking or the collective ideologies of the group in question. But, on the other hand, participants might consciously avoid inaccuracies in the presence of an insider who is ‘clued-up’; whereas, it could be easy to exaggerate, omit or fabricate responses to a relatively ignorant outsider (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 140).

While critically examining insider methodologies, Bennett (2002) argued that insider researchers’ reflections on the benefits of access to cultural groups tell us very little in social scientific terms without also reflecting on ‘the role of the researcher, the relationship between the researcher and the research respondents and the possible impact on the latter on the nature of the research data produced’ (p. 456) [my emphasis].

I was committed to telling the most accurate versions of participants’ stories that I could. If I distorted the fullness of their narratives, I simply would have been another part of the ‘problem’ in the field of researching metal youth. Cognisant of this (and Bennett’s concerns), I reflected deeply (and often) on my role in the research process and the ways that data were co-produced during the interviews. If one were to observe my interviews taking place, they would probably have looked like two metalheads just hanging out together and talking. But, for me, my background wasn’t in metal research. Yes, I had metal conversations with the metal youth. But much of what I asked them, and how I asked it, was really not so different to when I talk to any young people in a research relationship (remembering that I set out to investigate the role of metal in everyday life, and to holistically explore the whole of their lifeworlds and social transitions).

Talk between researchers and the researched is interactively produced and performed as a narrative; hence, 'the investigator becomes an active presence in the text' (Riessman, 2008, p. 105). Because of this, narratives produced between insiders carry the potential for becoming exaggerated performances of subcultural identity. It was clear to me from the moment I met each participant that we were indeed performing metal identities for each other. I'd start my interviewing days with a careful choice of metal shirt – and I suspect participants did the same (the choice of metal shirt is an important identity 'clue' used between metalheads universally). As I entered their bedrooms, lounge rooms and other rehearsal spaces to talk, they had all sorts of metal 'stuff' strategically positioned for my attention – often prompting discussions that 'tested' my metal knowledge as an icebreaker of sorts. With each test that I passed, rapport was established and conversations flowed with ease. In youth-speak, we were on like Donkey Kong.

I thought long and hard about the co-production of identity performances between participants and myself. I don't know if they would have performed their metal identities in the same manner for non-metal researchers, but I do believe that they were giving me rare insights into the construction of their metal truths and realities that, as a metalhead, I was able to understand on their terms.

One example of what my 'metalness' meant for data integrity was when I first met Jake. I got to his front door, it swung open and I reached for his hand in the 'bro shake' position (opposite angle to a regular handshake). He took me inside, we chatted for some time and then he had a confession to make. He had seen the recruiting flyer and was 'annoyed by people poking their nose into metal'; so, he decided to take part in the research with the intention of 'fucking with me' (meaning he was planning to tell me a whole bunch of sensational things that were just not true to throw a spanner in the research):

I thought what's all this crap about [the research], but as soon as you walked in I knew it wasn't anything like that. I can't believe all the stuff I just started telling you about my life man [laughs].
(Jake)

In sum, there were compelling research questions to ask of metal youth; and as a seasoned metalhead, I was well placed to ask them. I also felt I'd get responding that would be more useful than a non-metal researcher attempting the same, and Jake affirmed this.

Framing the Study

Hodkinson (2005, p. 143) suggested that insider researchers are well placed to use a combination of their academic background and experience of the culture in question to make reasonable judgements around which themes and issues might be worthy of exploration. He added that this may not only save time, but may also avoid the imposition of unsuitable conceptual frameworks (Hodkinson, 2005, p. 143).

For me, examples of unsuitable (or at least questionable) conceptual frameworks were evident in the raft of deficit-framed studies of metal youth I raised

earlier. It's a big problem for data construction when deficit orientations don't give metal preferences any conceptual grounding in the broader contexts of young lives – a framing that Bennett (2002) identified as being 'crucially absent from Arnett's reading of heavy metal' (p. 459).

To address this, I designed the study in such a way that it could capture the contexts, processes and outcomes of early metal identity formations, and situate these in the everyday lives of metal youth. Hence, the conceptual framework first considered the social contexts of a changing modernity and the impact of social change on young people's lived experiences, especially ideas regarding the individualisation of youth identities and transitions (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2001; France, 2007; Furlong & Cartmel, 2007) – with a particular interest in how broader social dynamics and structural forces are lived out in local contexts.

Second, exploring the processes underpinning metal identity formations drew on theories of reflexivity in order to examine ways that social interactions might shape the authoring (and re-authoring) of metal identity biographies (Giddens, 1991; Henderson, Holland, McGrellis, Sharpe, & Thomson, 2007; Lawler, 2008). This line of thinking was premised on the idea that how others regard us is a crucial factor for shaping our internal conversations through which we come to understand 'ourselves, our lives, the meaning of our actions and our biographical narratives' (Burkitt, 2012, p. 3). This idea was critical for discovering how the metal youth constructed their sense of self in everyday life; particularly, what they came to 'learn' about themselves through interactions with others, and how this shaped their self-talk. The conceptual pairing of a changing modernity and reflexive identity work were early considerations brought to the research design.

The third framing of outcomes, however, was developed during the research based on things that participants said during early interviews about the strong role that metal played in fostering a range of positive outcomes. I situate these positive outcomes under the umbrella concept of psychosocial wellbeing to notice ways that psychological and social³ processes interact with and influence each other (World Health Organization, 2012). A psychosocial frame helped to capture wellbeing outcomes relating to the emotional aspects of how it felt to listen to metal and embody a metal identity; the relational aspects of early metal identity formations and family and community dynamics; and the broader social, emotional and cognitive aspects of leaving school and stepping out into the world as a young metalhead faced with making decisions about what to do in life, and sorting through what sort of work, study, accommodation and leisure options might be realistically possible.

Wellbeing outcomes were analysed through a lens of positive coping that took in notions of belonging, acceptance, respect, resilience, social relationships, emancipation, justice and security of identity (Bauman, 2004; Côté & Levine,

³To remain mindful of social inequalities that can hinder youth development, it is vitally important to conceptualise the social aspect of psychosocial wellbeing as being made up of micro relationships between people in everyday life *and* macro relationships between individuals and the social structures, systems and institutions that shape their environments.

2002; Honneth, 2007; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009). Bottrell's (2007) concept of 'chosen' identity work as an empowering form of resistance against 'unchosen' marginal identities also featured in this framing, which enabled an understanding of why young people might sign up for something so against the grain of acceptable social standards (at least according to the negative views of metal raised earlier in this chapter).

1.4 Research Design and Methods

The framing of contexts, processes and outcomes moves research with metal youth into new territory. So too does my critical orientation to applied social research with metal youth. I'm not satisfied with simply describing youth cultures and lifestyles; I'm more concerned with identifying social transformation points in young people's lives and generating useful information for policy, practice and parenting environments.

Qualitative research using narrative methods was essential for capturing the complex configurations of participants' identity and aspiration biographies, and the environments in which they were constructed and revised (Riessman & Quinney, 2005). Crucially, the longitudinal aspect of this study allowed for a deep exploration of ways that metal intersected with broader biography work overtime as the young people navigated transitions through education, employment, relationships and music-related careers and travel. Learning about these processes and outcomes (whether good, or not so good) sheds much needed light on how we can best support subcultural youth to achieve strong and empowered pathways to adulthood.

Sample and Recruiting

The sample was purposively assembled around the inclusion criteria of participants who self-identified as having a heavy metal identity. I didn't want to talk to casual listeners; I wanted to talk to 'full-blown' metalheads, and my insider status began to pay early dividends because I knew where and how to find them.

An early advantage was my ability to craft a recruiting flyer that captured the essence of the inclusion criteria in a metal-specific way. The headline on the flyer asked the question 'How metal are you?' – which was partly drawn from the obvious identity question at the heart of the research, and drew on common metal vernacular that routinely describes 'how metal' something is, or isn't. The use of fonts is politically charged in metal culture and says much about the metal positioning of the person using them (on T-shirts, posters, band logos and the like). I laboured over my choice of font for the flyer because I wanted it to be inclusive and not turn people from different subgenres away, and this wasn't easy. 'Metal neutral' is not an easy place to find in the complicated archipelago of contemporary metal subgenres and their diverse design elements (Rowe, 2012). I finally settled on a font (that a young person designed for me) that neither was too 'clean' for the extreme metal ranks, nor too indecipherable (as is customary in extreme metal) to deter the metalcore fans. (Noting that indecipherable fonts

have since been taken up by more contemporary subgenres, and things will likely change again by the time this book is published. This must be very perplexing to non-metal readers, and shows how non-metal researchers could easily make inappropriate assumptions about metal practices that can affect research design.)

Recruiting material was placed in metal nightclubs; at metal gigs; rehearsal rooms; metal sections in retail music stores and music equipment retailers; and metal T-shirt shops. The project was promoted on metal community radio programmes, online metal forums and metal e-zines. The recruiting process was as inclusive as I could possibly make it. I had covered sites of consumption, live performance and rehearsals, and had made provisions for the participants I would come to know as the 'bedroom metallers' (through radio and digital media promotion).

Originally, in excess of 40 participants were sought for the project. I commenced interviewing as soon as participants began responding and I learned from the early interviews that I was going to end up with considerable data to manage, especially with a view to conducting repeat interviews. I thought they'd be up for a chat, but I didn't anticipate that some would want to chat for more than three hours at a time – so, the sample was capped at 28 metal youth, consisting of five females and 23 males aged 18–24 growing up in diverse socio-economic suburban locations across Adelaide, South Australia. The sample largely comprised white-Australian youth (one Aboriginal youth took part) and the age range was set based on the assumption that participants would have left or completed high school and would be in the process of embarking on post-school pathways. As such, it was anticipated that participants would be able to provide rich reflections on their early metal identity formations (Stage 1: *Becoming Metal*) and able to articulate their current realities and their hopes and dreams going forward (Stage 2: *Being Metal*).

While equal gender representation in mixed gender samples is always preferable, this would have been difficult to achieve because there *seems* to be many more male metal fans than females (Hutcherson & Haenfler, 2010; Weinstein, 2000) [my emphasis]. The final sample composition was therefore roughly gender proportional to metalhead composition in everyday life – if the gendered make-up of crowds at metal gigs is an indication of metal fandom, then yes, participation is still heavily male dominated – even though many women around the world are passionate and dedicated metalheads, and we can't really know how many are out there participating in other ways. The fact that the sample comprised 27/28 White-Australian youth should also not be taken as a true reflection of the cultural and ethnic diversity of metal fans in Australia because, as Dawes (2015) points out, there are numerous reasons why marginalised groups may not visibly participate in local metal activities (including this research in that category). Research focusing only on female (or non-binary) metal youth and/or culturally and ethnically diverse youth would be extremely valuable and is sorely needed, but this was better left for a future purposive study. (Note: I would also be extremely interested in research focusing on metal youth living with disability to learn more about their participation methods and the role of metal in their daily lives, among other youth population groups.)

Ethics

No approaches were made directly to young people. The onus was on participants to self-select and contact me for an information sheet and consent form, which outlined the purpose of the project; requirements of participation; and statements about informed consent, confidentiality and voluntary participation. Information packs also contained relevant approvals from the University of South Australia's Human Research Ethics Committee, statements detailing participant rights to withdraw from the study at any time and a statement letting participants know that appropriate referrals would be made for anyone experiencing any distress that could result from taking part in the interviews. The data were de-identified and participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms throughout this book.

Data Collection

Data collection consisted of in-depth face-to-face interviews; repeat interviews with the same participants; ethnographic field observations in Australia and the United States; sets of field notes taken when going to watch participants play live, as well as from seeing them out at concerts and festivals; and general communications like telephone calls, texts and emails.

Field Observations, Field Notes and General Communication

The types of field observations I initially went looking for (including subgenre styles and practices, gender and age ranges, and moshing styles) have not ultimately featured in the research findings; however, the exercise was still beneficial because my attendance at gigs was a key factor in the relationship building process.

Participants would approach me at gigs and festivals and talk at length on all sorts of topics. Even though I anticipated that this cohort would be forthcoming, my original assumptions fell short of exactly how passionate, generous and candid their approach to the research would be. Participants who didn't attend gigs (for various reasons) still maintained contact with me by phone, email or (most commonly) text messaging. These general communications were often initiated by participants wanting to give me their thoughts on new records or tours (or ask mine) with conversations often moving on cover issues more central to the research, and recorded with their permission.

Although general field observations have not ultimately served the broad aims of the research, one unanticipated set of field observations did end up featuring prominently in the findings. The opportunities I had to see participants play music themselves – whether at organised gigs, or at home in their bedrooms – allowed me to witness their talents and check their aspiration narratives very concretely. I didn't plan on this, but if you put a bunch of metalheads together, the riffs will come, ready or not! These musical interactions, and the conversations that wrapped around them, ultimately became an important means of understanding participants' truths and realities.

Interviews

During Stage 1 of data collection, 28 face-to-face in-depth interviews were conducted over a six-month period. The Stage 1 interview guide was designed to elicit contextual information for each participant including metal history (first metal memories), metal preferences (subgenre alignment), social and domestic circumstances (past and present), school experiences, post-school transitions and future aspirations (to set up Stage 2 data collection). The interview guide was also designed to help answer research questions about what they found so alluring about metal, and what they perceived to gain from forming a metal identity. Stage 1 interviews were, on average, around two hours in duration (some went longer than three hours) and held in a variety of places including participants' homes, rehearsal spaces, recording studios and public places.

Stage 2 of data collection consisted of follow-up communications with 25 of the original participants over a four-year period in order to track, over time, how they were navigating (and re-routing) various pathways through education, employment, musical careers and other transition points. No separate interview guide was crafted for repeat interviews; this was more a case of checking in to see how their plans and aspirations were unfolding and explore what might be helping or hindering their progress. The follow-up interviews and communications over time helped to answer my questions about how young metalheads might be faring in post-school transitional contexts, and what factors might shape their aspiration biographies along the way.

Data Management and Analysis

I personally transcribed all interview data and field notes verbatim. I felt this was vital given that I had an understanding of the different emphases that they placed on particular pieces of text. For example, I knew when they were being sarcastic and I recalled what faces they were making during certain sounds on the audio recordings. It was logical that I should transcribe the interviews – irrespective of how leviathan some of them were – and from there I was able to take portions of text from the transcriptions to construct the narratives into manageable pieces of text to analyse. It was also clear that an outsider attempting to transcribe the interviews might miss a lot of the metal terms and phrases altogether.

The data were coded using Riessman's (2008) matrix of narrative analysis, specifically her framework for thematically analysing the content of what was said, rather than how, to whom or for what purposes. In this narrative study, thematically coding what was said was crucial for answering the research questions. First-level coding of Stage 1 data identified participants' first metal memories and the early subtleties of metal preferences forming (which for most occurred during high school, but for one was in primary school). Because of the concurrent timing of schooling and early metal preferences, second-level coding mapped out social experiences at high school as well as the role that metal played during this time, including reflections on listening to metal and also the early embodiment of a metal identity. Third-level coding of the Stage 1 data revealed interesting nuances

in participants' experiences of social rejection (or feeling vulnerable to rejection) by dominant peer groups at school. Stage 2 data were systematically coded to highlight the changes to (or maintenance of) aspirations and pathways, and further coded to map the factors or relationships that had any influence on their decision making, or directions they were taking. Remembering that the study was doctoral research, thematic coding and narrative texts were frequently checked and debated in the supervisory relationship.

Earlier in this chapter, I critically scrutinised the methodological and conceptual choices of other researchers; so, I wanted to give equal time to being clear and transparent about my research design to help the reader form their own judgements about what the different approaches can tell us about metal youth, or not. With all of this now outlined, it's time to move on and hear what the metal youth had to say.

From here, the book is presented in two parts:

Part 1, *Becoming Metal*, traces early metal identity formations during high school years and looks at what life was like for the young people during that time, while closely examining the role that metal played in their everyday lives.

Part 2, *Being Metal*, tracks what happened after the metal youth left or completed schooling, keeping a watchful eye on the role that metal played in their daily lives as they started making (and revising) decisions about what they hoped to do with their futures.