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Successful young adults are asked -  
'In your experience, what builds confidence?'

A thesis presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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## Abstract

This study used an ethnographic approach to explore the perceptions, interpretations and meanings young adults gave to the concepts of 'confidence' and 'building confidence'. Giving young adults viewpoints a central positioning reflected the researcher's perception of adolescents as active contributors not only to their own wellbeing, but also to the development of healthier communities and societies as a whole.

The research participants were Year 13 students in their last week of attendance at a co-educational state high school within a provincial New Zealand community. In support of the literature this study found that 'confidence' per se was not a concept explored often, but rather it was an assumed component of broader concepts like self-esteem. The young adults involved in this study shared the belief that confidence existed, involved emotion, was an enabler, and was generally attributed as being a desirable thing to have. As an outcome of their reflections an emergent definition of confidence was proposed, namely that **'confidence is knowing who you are, having pride in who you are (inside and out), and being able to portray who you are to others'**.

The young adults in this research project revealed a multitude of interconnected strategies for building self-confidence, and for supporting the building of confidence in others. As the researcher I was privileged to hear these insights first hand and recognized the potential value in this for schools. This has led to a recommendation that high schools routinely undertake exit interviews with their Year 13 students.

# Dedication

This research study is dedicated to my family, Mike, Ben and Sarah. You have shared this entire journey from beginning to end, with love, patience, and whole hearted support. Thank you.

# Acknowledgements

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I would like to acknowledge and thank the schools involved in this study, the liaison staff, the cultural advisors, and particularly the young adults themselves who participated in this research project. Your insights, considerations, and contributions were most valuable, and made this research journey a most purposeful endeavour.

I would also like to acknowledge and thank Massey University for providing this wonderful mechanism in which I have been able to engage in academic learning, namely extramural studies. I have completed most of my academic studies on a part time basis while juggling work and family commitments. I am cognisant of my grandmothers, Ivy Jensen and Matrona Shevchuk who due to war, the depression, children, domestic chores, and the low to non-existent value placed on educating women in those days, both completed their formal education at around 12 years of age. The Massey University extramural programme has provided me a vehicle through which I have been able to continue my studies. Without this opportunity my educational studies would have highly likely ended many years ago.

Lastly, my heartfelt thanks goes to my research supervisors, Dr Mary Nash and Helen Simmons, both of whom embraced my research journey while providing wise and patient guidance. Thank you.

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# Chapter One

## Introduction

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### Introduction

The word 'confidence' is frequently used in everyday language, and in multiple contexts "yet rarely do we stop and think what it means" (Craig, 2007: p. 2). Rather, the word 'confidence' is used with an assumption that there is a commonly understood shared meaning. However, it could be that confidence is not something that can be defined as though it were an independent reality, since the interpretation of 'confidence' involves an ongoing reflexive process of individualised understanding. Etherington (2005) argues that a person's whole view of reality "or what is (ontology), and ... understanding of what it means to know (epistemology) are intertwined" (p. 71). Reflecting on this, I propose that the shared meaning and understanding of confidence is not ever static, nor is it guaranteed across diverse communities (for example, ethnicities, genders, ages, socio-economic groupings). In actuality, 'confidence' may have multiple (and not always congruent) meanings, with contestable demonstrations of its presence.

If we take 'confidence' to be a word that describes an inner feeling or knowing, it is not easy to find a demonstration of 'confidence' that enables others to compare their meanings and interpretations, particularly if the comparison is across diverse contexts. As an example, a person who volunteers to be a group representative may be interpreted as being 'confident', or equally this behaviour could be interpreted as demonstrating arrogance. 'Giving it a go' at bungy jumping may be hailed by some people as a sign of 'confidence', while others may consider this to be a demonstration of stupidity and exhibitionism. A student putting their hand up to answer a question in class might be considered a demonstration of 'confidence' by the teacher, while some classmates may interpret this more as showing off, or perhaps attention seeking behaviour. Emotions like love, hate, sadness, happiness and anger are frequently expressed (verbally and non-verbally) in a manner that allows others to observe them. Laughter and tears, angry voices, warm smiles, hugs, punch ups and words of endearment are but a few examples.

These emotions also feature in the media via things like love songs, poetry, movies and documentaries which assist us to explore our shared meanings. These verbal and non-verbal expressions are not so clearly identifiable for 'confidence' (for example, what is a confident facial expression?) however this does not mean that 'confidence' is any less a powerful or significant emotion. It has been argued that "confidence is ... central to what we achieve in life" (Centre for confidence and wellbeing, 2009, p. 1). The significance of 'confidence' becomes clearer when we consider its absence. Anyone who has experienced a moment when their self-confidence eluded them has some understanding of how debilitating this can be. It is my belief that most people have had this experience at some time, and that the impact of this experience is generically debilitating for all.

To date much research on young people has focused on the problematic and dysfunctional in the hope of learning how to 'avoid', 'protect from' or perhaps 'fix', the undesirable (Miles, 2000, p.3). This focus on the potential for harm is arguably a lopsided and melodramatic approach to a young person's journey towards adulthood. Disruptive and potentially harmful scenarios undoubtedly do exist, and researching these factors is essential and can be insightful when working towards enhancing well being. However, an equally insightful approach is to focus on those young people who are thriving, and explore the experiences, supports and circumstances that have enabled these young people to achieve success and wellbeing (Roth & Brooks-Gunn, 2003, p.170; Kay, 2008, p. 11; Liebenberg & Ungar, 2009).

This research project is motivated by a genuine curiosity around 'confidence' (and 'building confidence') from the perspective of young adults who are leaving high school with the aura of 'success' attached to them. How was this achieved? Recognizing that life is not a level playing field, and that "youth lifestyles ... do not operate independently of political and social change" (Miles, 2000, p.9) makes this curiosity even more valid. This study comes from a premise around self-confidence being an enabler as young people develop their potential, explore their passions, overcome barriers, focus, and thus increase their likelihood of experiencing 'success'. Along with this is a premise around self-confidence (especially when partnered with life enhancing morals, values, and opportunities) empowering young people to develop positive interpersonal relationships, engage wholesomely in the wider community, develop into affirming parents (thus impacting inter-generationally), and experiencing a positive life

journey (McLaren, 2002, p. 8). It is my belief that confidence not only provides some protection in times of adversity, but also provides a vital key ingredient when pursuing the wellbeing and success of all young people, no matter what their life experiences or current circumstances.

## The Researcher's Position

*"Social scientists do not come to their work value-free, and it is important in the course of research that they make their own perspective clear"*

(Craig, 2003, p. 5).

It has been well argued that research is as much about the researcher as it is about the research. After all, "what we choose to investigate ... is inevitably shaped by our tastes, life experiences and perception of what is, and is not, important" (Matthewman, West-Newman, & Curtis, 2007, p. 8). Researchers impact on all aspects of study, for example Charles Wilbur revealed that "I am committed to certain values that undoubtedly influence the choice of questions asked and the range of variables considered for selection" (as cited in Crocker, 1991: p. 470). When analysing data it is inevitable that the values and beliefs of the person doing the analysing not only impacts on the interpretations made in the findings, but even impacts on which data gets attention, and which data is completely left out (Pawson, 1999; O'Leary, 2005). In this study it has been my decision to explore the topic of confidence, and I have had a major input in all aspects of shaping this research. Thus, in response to Fook's (2002) assertion that "locating our own perspective or subject position in the discourse is ... crucial (this is a stance of reflexivity)" (p. 92), it is essential that I make my positioning transparent.

While the concept of 'confidence' has been included as a component part within broader concepts (like resilience, self-esteem, and self-efficacy), my life experiences and perceptions have more specifically identified 'confidence' of itself to be an essential

and integral ingredient to overall wellbeing. Perhaps 'confidence' of itself has a significant impact within these broader concepts along with having a ripple effect on a multitude of other factors, including income, education, relationships, opportunities, and even personal safety. In my early years I experienced several diverse and significant challenges (in various contexts) which essentially derailed me from mainstream society for many years. These experiences impacted on my self-confidence, and then the lack of self-confidence (of itself) impacted on my ability to re-engage with mainstream society. From this personal journey I have developed considerable knowledge around risk, building resilience, and life as an outsider, and from these experiences (or perhaps in spite of them) have managed to rebuild a healthy confidence base. However, one thing that has remained a curiosity is the building of confidence in its own right, and for its own merit, as distinct from building confidence as a protective factor from risk.

Having introduced the research, and located the positioning of the researcher, Chapter Two identifies the research question and provides some discussion as to the relevance of this research. Following this is a literature review on the key concepts of 'confidence', 'young adult', and 'successful', after which these key terms are operationally defined. Chapter Three introduces the ecological framework in relationship to this research, and discusses seven theoretical approaches that fit within the ecological framework and that have guided this research; namely social cognitive theory, developmental based psychosocial theory, resilience and strengths based theories, human capital theory, social capital theory, and social cohesion theory. Chapter Four discusses the three cultural contexts relevant to this study, being 'youth', 'school' and 'Māori'. Chapter Five outlines the research methodology, research design, and some key ethical considerations. The research findings are shared in Chapter Six, with Chapter Seven providing a discussion of some of the key issues, and ending with a concluding statement.