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What Am I Worth?
Lifespan Structures and Older Aotearoa New Zealand Men's Stories of Self-Worth

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Abstract

International and Aotearoa New Zealand-based data on men's mental health tend to present low rates of depression and high rates of externalising behaviours, such as substance use, suicide, and antisocial behaviours. Researchers consider that men's experiences of depression are overlooked and question the influence of dominating sociocultural standards pertaining to social roles and identities. International diagnostic manuals of mental distress stipulate 'feelings of worthlessness' as a symptom of depressive disorders, yet the academic literature and clinical formulation of self-worth are piecemeal. What is presently known is that self-worth is recognised as a subdimension of the term self-concept, interrelated with other self-concepts (including self-esteem and self-efficacy), and characterised by cultural scripts of morality and feelings of (in)adequacy. Six older men born between 1944 and 1960 in Aotearoa New Zealand with lived experiences of depression participated in two 90-minute semi-structured interviews. Interviews discussed the conceptualisation of self-worth across the lifetime, learning about experiences of worthiness and worthlessness from childhood to present. Master narrative methodology was used to analyse personal narratives of worth. Academically, the theoretical background and findings provide a skeletal framework on self-worth as a psychological concept, and a critical reflection on worthlessness as a symptom of depression in Aotearoa New Zealand men. Clinically, the findings may be useful for health practitioners to consider when working with clients who identify as men or when expressing worthlessness.

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Chapter 1: History and framework of self-worth

Thesis overview

This focus of this thesis is to explore “feelings of worthlessness” as one of the symptoms of depression in international diagnostic manuals (psychiatric nomenclatures) and theories of self-worth (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). The framework of self-worth is argued as encompassing self-concept mechanisms within relational, autonomous, and moral dimensions, punctuated with cognitions, behaviour, and emotion, and co-constructed and organised into social narratives. This thesis also takes a varied and integrated approach to understanding the ‘self’ and ‘human value’ from an intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural perspective. Chapter 1 presents an overview of depression in men, the history and framework of self-worth, the thesis structure, and reflexive research aims. Chapter 2 contains a theoretical background of self-worth, which is organised into life stages. Chapter 3 and 4 describe the critical realist ontology, master narrative methodology, reflexivity, and qualitative methods, which justify the research inquiries. Chapter 5 contains the data analysis, which are also structured into the five life stages, preceded with a brief introduction of each participant, and followed by self-worth summaries and personalised messages. The discussion and conclusion in Chapter 6 will expand upon how the data and literature contribute to the topic of self-worth, clinical implications for worthlessness, and limitations and future directions.

Aotearoa New Zealand men and depression

In recent years, Aotearoa New Zealand has been actively challenging men to communicate their experiences of mental health. Advocates of men’s mental health, such as Sir John Kirwan (former All Black rugby player) and thousands of community members are publicly acknowledging their personal experiences of mental distress while encouraging men to share their own (Foon, 2024; Gallagher et al., 2022; Larson, 2024; The Fono, 2023). As evidence on depression in men grows, there is more nuance that needs investigation. International healthcare guidelines have called on health practitioners to account for the sociocultural contexts that impact men’s wellbeing and help seeking behaviours (American Psychological Association, 2018; Australian Government Department of Health, 2019; Department of Health, 2024). With greater insight into the sociocultural contexts of people seeking healthcare, research and intervention options can be better tailored to their needs and preferences (American Psychological Association, 2018). This thesis attempts to capture the

caveats and commendations that may be overlooked in men's experiences of mental distress, focusing on depression and self-worth.

The New Zealand Health Survey in 2020/2021, administered by the Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, estimated that the national rate of depression is 17%; 12.5% of men and 21.4% of women (Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021). By ethnicity, depression affected 13% of Māori men, 4.6% of Pacific men, 4.5% of Asian men, and 15.3% of European/other (Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021). The age group of men with the highest rates of depression were 55 to 64 years (16.5%; Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021). By neighbourhood deprivation, those living in the most deprived neighbourhoods (quintile 5) were affected by depression at 1.58 times the rate of those living in the least deprived neighbourhoods (quintile 1) (Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021). Depression affected 28.3% men who were classified as 'disabled' (Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021). In the year ending June 2020, Statistics NZ conducted the Household Economics Survey and found that LGBTQIA+ were affected by depression three times the rate than those who were non-LGBTQIA+ (Statistics NZ, 2020). Internationally, population groups who are underserved tend to show elevated rates of depression and suicide, including indigenous and non-white ethnic groups (Haregu et al., 2022; Hop Wo et al., 2020); those who live with chronic health conditions (Machado et al., 2018); and people with diverse genders, sexual orientations, and characteristics (Wandrekar & Nigudkar, 2020; Wittgens et al., 2021).

Both national and international data have typically reported lower rates of depression among men, yet many researchers have questioned this finding, due to variations in how men experience and report depressive symptoms (Brody et al., 2018; Cochran & Rabinowitz, 2003; Gough & Novikova, 2020; Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021). One significant enquiry about men's depression is that despite the universally low rates of diagnosis, men have universally high rates of completed suicide (Gallagher et al., 2022; Gough & Novikova, 2020; Østergaard et al., 2023). New Zealand is no exception, with a confirmed rate of 16.8 per 100,000 in men compared to 6 per 100,000 in women for the year 2020 (Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand, 2024). By ethnicity, Māori men had the highest rate of 25.6 per 100,000, Pacific men at 7.8 per 100,000, Asian men at 9.7 per 100,000 and 'Other' men (including Pākehā, European, Middle Eastern, Latin American, and African) at 18.0 per 100,000 (Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand, 2025). Researchers have also understood the most common forms of mental distress to be associated with suicidality include depression, bipolar disorder, substance use disorder, posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety disorders, eating disorders, and personality disorders (Andersson et al., 2022; Beautrais et al., 2006; Suicide Mortality Review Committee,

2019). Thus, this thesis explores the lived experiences of men with depression with consideration for the Aotearoa New Zealand context and cultural norms. This thesis also critically analyses the clinical and academic conceptions of depression and self-worth, identifying a range of possible theories that may help explain how feelings of worthlessness are developed. Although the thesis centres on the experience of men, self-worth as a theoretical human condition is actively considered throughout the theorising and writing of this thesis with respect to epistemic injustice and how self-worth may affect or be understood differently across different population groups.

Depression and ‘worthlessness’

The fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) and the eleventh edition of the International Statistical Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems (ICD-11), conceptualise depressive disorders as disorders of mood (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). Major depressive disorder, the most common depressive disorder, is determined by two core symptoms: a persistent depressed mood (such as emptiness, sadness, irritability) and/or a marked loss of interest or pleasure (anhedonia, American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). Other symptoms may include a change in weight (gained or lost), change in sleep (insomnia or hypersomnia), change in energy (agitation or lethargy), fatigue, diminished concentration, suicidality, worthlessness and guilt and hopelessness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). Criteria are met when a person’s symptoms interfere with their ability to perform daily tasks, maintain relationships, work and study, or other responsibilities; the changes are markedly different from prior normative functioning to the extent that they are recognised by the person themselves and others; and the symptoms are not attributable to the physiological effects of a substance, including medication, or better explained by an alternate medical condition or form of mental distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). See Appendix 1 for the diagnostic criteria of major depressive disorder as per the DSM-5.

International psychiatric nomenclatures (namely, the current editions of the DSM and ICD) typically broaden how symptoms of mental distress are clinically significant, how symptoms present in different contexts, and how symptoms may be differentiated from other diagnoses (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). For example, in major depressive disorder, “feelings of worthlessness and excessive or inappropriate guilt (which may be delusional) nearly every day (not merely self-reproach or

guilt about being sick)” is diagnosed when the feelings are present *and* persist outside of a depressive episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p.125; World Health Organisation, 2019; Zahn et al., 2015a). In other words, the criterion is not met if feelings of worthlessness are isolated to the impact of other symptoms during a depressive episode (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2024; Zahn et al., 2015). The diagnostic criterion, “feelings of worthlessness *or* [emphasis added] excessive or inappropriate guilt ...”, suggests that worthlessness and guilt are not mutually inclusive symptoms (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). Still, the international nomenclatures provide descriptions of worthlessness and guilt as being jointly associated with “cultural scripts of morality” and feelings of inadequacy (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; World Health Organisation, 2024). Taken together, worthlessness could be interpreted as a negative generalisation about one’s sense of acceptableness or adequacy, measured against culturally bound standards, norms, and principles of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. The criterion of worthlessness and feelings of guilt are compounded and, therefore, the association is unclear.

As a lived experience, Ari and Mari (2021) identified that worthlessness feels like poor self-esteem, inferiority, experiencing one’s life as a mistake, experiencing oneself as an arbitrary creation, guilt for having made wrong choices, and shame for being defective. Zahn et al. (2015) found that worthlessness is more commonly associated with self-disgust/contempt, guilt and shame. In relation to other symptoms of depression, worthlessness has been closely linked to depressed mood, hopelessness, suicidality, and lack of motivation (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; Harrison et al., 2022; Zahn et al., 2015). Together, these descriptions suggest that worthlessness relates to self-disdain and a felt lack of purpose or meaning; that worthlessness is closely associated with other depressive symptoms; and that worthlessness is enduring, affective, and cognitive (Wakefield & Schmitz, 2016; Zahn et al., 2015). The clinical implications of worthlessness are important to research in greater depth, as its chronic expression (i.e. presenting between depressive episodes) could increase the baseline risk of recurring depressive episodes.

History of ‘worthlessness’

Clinical researchers and psychoanalysts have repeatedly observed a pattern of self-reproach, feelings of inadequacy, and self-depreciation in people who experience depression (American Psychiatric Association, 1952; American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Wakefield & Schmitz, 2016). ‘Self-depreciation’ was first recorded as part of a ‘depressive reaction’ under

‘psychoneurotic disorders’ in the first edition of the DSM in 1952 (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). During this time, depression was not recognised as its own diagnosis, but a set of melancholic expressions featuring in other forms of mental distress, including anxiety and schizophrenia (American Psychiatric Association, 1952). The third edition of the DSM in 1980, first recorded the term ‘worthlessness’ for a major depressive episode and depressive delusions as per ‘organic affective syndrome’ (Wakefield & Schmitz, 2016; American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Worthlessness was described as ranging from “...feelings of inadequacy to completely unrealistic negative evaluations of one’s worth”, and that a person may search their environment for cues that confirm their beliefs about personal failures even if minor or trivial (American Psychiatric Association, 1980, p. 211).

The term, ‘inadequate’ is defined as something not being good enough, considered too small in quantity, and feeling unable to manage a situation (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-a). ‘Feelings of inadequacy’ has been referenced in other forms of mental distress in the DSM manuals, including cyclothymic disorder, dysthymic disorder, depressive psychotic features, personality disorders (including avoidant, schizotypal, paranoid, and dependent), as well as the relative proximity one has in their expectations of gender identity roles (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; American Psychiatric Association, 1980). The word ‘inadequate’ has also been referenced in the DSM-5 and DSM-III in relation to descriptions of environments, provision of care, social stimulation, schooling, volition, sexual stimulation, expression of affect, personality, assertiveness, eye contact, nutritional intake, and sleep (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; American Psychiatric Association, 1980). Inadequacy indicates that something may be insufficient or not good enough, and that there are standards or thresholds that determine adequacy, sufficiency, and determinants of what is enough. This could also mean that intrapersonal characteristics may exacerbate and perpetuate feelings of worthlessness to a degree that is distressing and unrealistic, and that there are sociocultural measures of adequacy indicating thresholds of psychological functioning that are pathologically distinct from normal.

There are no further descriptions about how worthlessness may present or feel, or about how a person comes to believe they are worthless in international nomenclatures (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2024). Nor are there descriptions in the manuals as to why ‘guilt’ and ‘worthlessness’ are aggregated, or when they are connected or not (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2024). Consequently, the piecemeal descriptions about worthlessness could make the symptom

clinically challenging to conceptualise, observe, assess, and treat without prior knowledge of its context, structure, and mechanisms.

Conceptualising self-worth and worthlessness

Self-worth in clinical and psychological research has often been referenced interchangeably with self-esteem and other self-concepts, like self-efficacy (Crocker et al., 2004; Itzick et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2004; Miller Smedema et al., 2010; Stapleton et al., 2017; Wong et al., 2011; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2015). This has resulted in researchers defining self-worth as “momentary feeling of self-esteem” and self-esteem defined as “the value a person assigns to themselves” (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024, p. 329). Likewise, the ICD-11 has defined low self-esteem as “...a low appraisal of the individual’s self-worth” (World Health Organization, 2024, p. 700). While the overlap between self-worth and self-esteem may be significant, the language does not signal how the terms relate to one another explicitly nor how they are distinct. Weber et al. (2023) referred to this practice as a ‘jangle problem’, where two different names are given to the same entity, leading to a confused and inefficient conceptualisation of a psychological phenomenon.

This jangle problem has clinical implications in measuring self-worth (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024). For example, a meta-analysis of 206 psychometrics for depression found that self-worth was the second most assessed item, after low mood and before anhedonia; the two core symptoms of depression (Santor et al., 2006). For example, worthlessness has been referenced in clinical measures of depression, including the Beck Depression Inventories (first and second editions), Depression, Anxiety, and Stress Scales, and the Hamilton Depression Rating Scale (Beck et al., 1996; Beck et al., 1961; Hamilton, 1960; Watson et al., 1995). Worthlessness has also been referenced in the Kessler-10 distress scale, which is a validated 10-item measure of nonspecific mental distress used in public health settings, including the NZ Health Surveys (Kessler et al., 2003; Te Hiringa Mahara - Mental Health and Wellbeing Commission, 2025). Santor et al. (2006) suggested that if self-worth is so readily assessed in psychometric instruments, health practitioners and psychological researchers would benefit from understanding the structure and mechanisms of self-worth, and how self-worth is expressed through human thought and behaviour.

There are some psychometric scales that reference mechanisms of self-worth more explicitly. The Self-Worth Protection Scale is used to consider how people may protect and enhance their self-worth (Thompson & Dinnel, 2003). However, the Self-Worth Protection Scale does not account for the potential mechanisms that, instead of protecting and enhancing

self-worth, protects and maintains a stable and consistent sense of self that is believed to be worthless (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Thompson & Dinnel, 2003). This is relevant to the DSM's clinical interpretation that people may search their environment for evidence that they are worthless (American Psychiatric Association, 1980).

The Contingencies of Self-Worth Scale is another psychometric instrument designed to qualify the most important domains when defining one's worth (Crocker et al., 2003). However, the items refer to self-esteem, and the scale has been normed to American college students, thus, may not be an appropriate measure for other sociocultural groups such as Aotearoa New Zealand men (Crocker et al., 2003). One of the more common scales used in research is Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale, which includes one explicit item on self-worth (Crocker et al., 2003; Gnambs et al., 2018; Rosenberg, 1965). Although Rosenberg's Self-Esteem Scale faces the same jangle problem, the scale does contain items that suggest a theoretical structure to self-worth, including self-concept, morality, autonomy, and narratives of human value (Gnambs et al., 2018; Rosenberg, 1965).

Without more knowledge for the lived experience of self-worth, without a nuanced language to describe worthiness and worthlessness, the validity of scales claiming to measure self-worth are not necessarily sufficient. Batchelder and Hagan (2023) noted this jangle problem in research on self-worth and self-esteem, and they too sought to highlight the distinction. Their definition of self-worth was "felt perceptions of one's mattering and deservingness of equity and psychological, social and material resources" (Batchelder & Hagan, 2023, p. 62). In this thesis, self-esteem was conceptualised as a broad evaluation of positive or negative attributes about oneself (Batchelder & Hagen, 2023; Crocker, 1999; Salehinejad et al., 2020). However, the definition of self-worth in this thesis is differentiated from the definition used by Batchelder and Hagan (2023) due to the timing of the article's publication and design of this thesis.

The ability to frame one's experience of mental distress through a lens of self-worth may be hard to define, reinforcing the importance of the clinical interview to understand the client's experience and perspective of self-worth and their contingencies of worth. The lack of clear and consistent research on self-worth is disconcerting, especially given academic and clinical principles of conceptual clarity, construct validity, and evidence-based practice (Markus, 2025; Newstead et al., 2026). However, given the operationalisation of worthlessness in clinical and research settings, it is important that there is information available to understand some of how worthlessness presents and functions. Without a thorough description of the lived

experiences and theoretical structure of self-worth, clinical assessment and treatment are likely implicated.

Self-worth: a working definition

The definition of self-worth for this thesis is constructed from the participants' definitions and conceptualisations, and the theoretical background. As conceived by the participants, worth is synonymous with value (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b). Worth and value indicate a level of importance or usefulness; something that has greater worth/value is more important in a given moment (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b; Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-c). Worth is also subjective and depends on the "human and moral factors brought to bear upon that ideal" (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b, *inherent worth*). As a verb, to value something is to appraise or negotiate a level of importance (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-c). As a noun, the value is the set standard although, like self-concepts, value is both fixed and dynamic (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-c; Oyserman, 2001).

In this thesis, self-worth is defined as "the extent to which individuals feel they adequately fulfil sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal perceptions of human value". Worthiness represents the belief that a person perceives themselves to have value and feels as though they are enough to meet an appraised standard; and worthlessness represents the belief that a person perceives themselves as having little or no value and feels as though they are not enough in meeting an appraised standard. Contingencies of worth represent the domains that signify what is and is not important for one's worth (Crocker et al., 2002). Conditions of worth represent the standards and expectations required to fulfil the contingency of worth (Patterson & Joseph, 2013).

Thesis structure

This thesis uses a critical realist ontology, which proposes that there is an objective reality layered with social constructions (Johnson, 2023; Walsh & Evans, 2014). The objective reality is that humans experience worthlessness, which is layered according to social constructions of human value (Johnson, 2023; Walsh & Evans, 2014). Although feeling worthless may be a subjective experience, worthlessness exists as a human experience that is also operationally used in the diagnosis of depression and, thereby, objective. The theoretical background and data analysis of self-worth has been organised into five life stages: childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and older adulthood. This structure is used to expand upon how self-worth as a human experience may be developed, modulated, and

expressed across age periods. The methodology was narrative inquiry, which helped build on the layering of narratives across a lifetime. Given this thesis interviewed older men, their narratives of self-worth as children offer insight into the narratives of human value from the 1940s onwards, although narratives of human value preceded their birth.

This thesis also contains a proposed framework of self-worth that was identified in the participants' data. Although this thesis could be structured in multiple ways, three dimensions are strongly emphasised: relationships, autonomy, and morality. Furthermore, two key structures that contribute to the mechanisms of self-worth (such as appraisals) include self-concepts and narratives. In this thesis, sections on self-concepts are referred to 'the development of the self' and narratives are referred to as 'sense making'. Self-concepts and narratives were separated from the main framework of self-worth to explore how the structure of a 'self' is understood according to psychological processes and stories. The next subheadings explain how self-concepts, relationships, autonomy, morality, and narratives contribute to self-worth.

The development of the self: self-concepts and self-worth

In psychological research, self-concept is defined as the way we understand ourselves and who we are in terms of personal and social identities; "who am I?" (Hay & Ashman 2003; Oyserman, 2001, p. 499). Self-concepts embody experiences, memories, schemas and narratives, which are all in constant motion (Oyserman, 2001; Reed-Fitzke, 2020). Self-concepts also embody traits and values specific to the self (Reed-Fitzke, 2020). Self-concepts are conscious and subconscious, activated/triggered depending on the context, and recognised through salient details or invitation to recall (Oyserman, 2001). Self-concepts are believed to be both stable (representing a part of our personality constructs and fixed to our innate temperament) and fluctuating (malleable in response to motivations of actualisation and changes in one's environment) (Crocker et al., 2002; Ismail & Tekke, 2015; James, 1890; Oyserman, 2001). Self-concept is also a multidimensional term, which include self-worth, -esteem, and -efficacy (Reed-Fitzke, 2020; Oyserman, 2001). Each of these selves help humans understand parts of who they are in any given context, acting as a theory and compass of the self (Oyserman, 2001).

According to some schools of thought, the self is parted into the subjective/implicit self (I) and the objective/explicit self (me) (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; Brown, 2000; James 1890; McAdams et al., 2021; Rochat, 2010). According to James (1890), the implicit self, is the self that is in motion, responding, reacting, appraising, and judging an explicit self that is stable and

objective. The explicit self comprises a material self (defined by possessions, body, and physical environment); a social self (defined by how we are perceived by others, and changing depending on the audience); and a spiritual self (defined by the inner being that comprises of personality traits, values, and concepts of identity) (James 1890; Galin, 2003). Accordingly, the subjective/implicit self is defined as the person who observes and judges the self, and the self being observed is the objective/explicit self (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; Brown, 2000). To say, “I know myself”, *I* is the person who observes and makes subjective observations, and *myself* is the person being objectified and existing physically. In this example, the self is simultaneously dynamic and fixed, subjective and objective, and dependent on the context, environment, and lens.

When conceiving theories of an individual self, Grossen and Orvig (2011) encouraged a balance between acknowledging the sociocultural and interpersonal dynamics that shape one’s personal identity and a person’s unique characteristics. They positioned this argument as a way of avoiding both social reductionism by perceiving social groups as homogeneous while also not stepping into solipsism (excessive individualism) (Grossen & Orvig, 2011). For example, the ‘self’ has been understood as the individual-self and the interdependent-self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). These two construals of a self were reportedly researched in response to the individualist-collectivist spectrum garnering limited insight into the complex realities of how people relate to one another; are motivated by one another; see themselves as intimately connected with one another; and how people understand the ‘self’ across different cultures (Miller, 2002; Markus & Kitayama, 1991).

The theoretical background of sections ‘the development of the self’ largely comprises of psychological (cognitive, evaluative, and social) mechanisms that give humans the ability to perceive the self, perceive others, and perceive others’ perceptions of the self. Researchers have described that self-worth requires self-appraisal or self-evaluation that positions oneself in proximity to domains a person has deemed important (Crocker et al., 2002). Some contingencies of worth have included appearance, others’ approval, academic success, virtue, competition, family support, power, self-reliance, and God’s love (Crocker et al., 2002; Lindberg et al., 2021). However, these contingencies were studied with American young adult cohorts, thus, what contingencies of worth represent for people living in Aotearoa New Zealand is unclear (Crocker et al., 2003). So, the relative importance of God’s love in secular society, for example, may not be as highly valued.

In establishing one’s self-worth, people are believed to rate each contingency of worth with varying degrees of importance and containing variable qualities (Crocker et al., 2003).

For example, the importance of spirituality may not be rated as highly as others, or the qualities of one's competency will not necessarily be the same as others. Gauging one's position in relation to those contingencies are determined by the individual's self-appraisal and others' feedback (Crocker et al., 2003; Crocker et al., 2004). Moreover, gauging one's position in relation to those contingencies will depend on 'conditions of worth', which are the measures and requirements for that contingency (Ismail & Tekke, 2015).

This thesis uses different theoretical conceptions of the 'self' and its mechanisms to understand how individuals evaluate themselves. Across the life stages in the theoretical background, some examples of contingencies of worth have been guided by Crocker and colleagues' research while recognising that the sociocultural context of this thesis is situated within an Aotearoa New Zealand (Crocker et al., 2002; Crocker et al., 2003). As such, the theoretical background considers how certain domains may be transformed into contingencies of worth, and whether some contingencies of worth may be better explained as conditions.

The framework of self-worth: relationships, autonomy, and morality

This thesis frames self-worth into three dimensions: relationships, autonomy, and morality. This decision was based on themes identified in the participants' stories, and the ICD 11's and DSM-III's brief descriptions associated with feelings of worthlessness (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). Notably, the content (theories and structures) for each section (relationships, autonomy, and morality) regularly cross over each other: content in the relationship sections impact autonomy and morality, content in the autonomy sections impact relationships and morality, and the content in the morality sections impact relationships and autonomy.

Relationships ground a significant dimension of self-worth due to the social nature of humanity, the significance of belonging and acceptance in psychological wellbeing, and self-concept mechanisms that require evaluations and comparisons to other people in order to understand the self (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). Further, Rogers' person-centred theory and conditions of worth are key concepts that underpin the dimension of relationships, especially as they pertain to social expectations accompanied with acceptance and rejection (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). Rogers' conditions of worth particularly support the notion that perceptions of human value are interpersonally negotiated (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). For example, he referred to 'unconditional positive regard' as being accepted, valued, and cared for without conditions of worth, and 'conditional positive regard' as being accepted, valued,

and cared for depending on meeting the conditions of worth (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Patterson & Joseph, 2013). Interpersonal dynamics shape what a person believes about their own worth, as their compliance with others' standards and conditions may determine their belonging.

Referenced theories and structures in the relationship sections address how learning about human value can occur through observation and social comparison; within and between groups of people; and influenced by dominance and power. To reinforce the social construction of human value, and the interconnectedness between each section (relationships, autonomy, and morality), appraisals of self-worth are also argued as negotiating three relational perspectives: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural. These perspectives are discussed throughout each section to reinforce how human value is structured socially, looking beyond the notion that feelings of worthlessness are the result of an intrapersonal dysfunction.

For the domain of autonomy, much of the theoretical background references self-determination theory, and the constraints and permissions associated with roles and responsibilities held across different life stages. Self-determination theory proposes that humans are motivated to act in relation to three basic psychological needs: a sense of autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Self-determination theory was inspired by discrepant theories of whether human agency is influenced by an innate need for psychological growth and a unified self, personality and self-schemata, or whether their actions are a consequence of operant conditioning and contingencies (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Self-determination theory attempts to weave together theories of human agency while paying attention to social environments as contextualising the sense of congruence and incongruence needed to live, thrive, and feel psychologically well.

As per the three basic psychological needs, the sense of relatedness describes the need to belong, care and be cared for, and the integration of a homonomous self (an interdependent identity) (Ryan & Deci, 2004). The sense of autonomy relates to one's innate values and interests, expressions of the self, and actions as being influenced internally and externally, emphasising the interconnection between independence and dependence as more entwined than antagonistic (Ryan & Deci, 2004). The sense of competency relates to feeling purposeful, masterful, and effective in one's skills, which allows for the experience of seeking out challenges to maintain and enhances one's capacity and confidence while acting (Ryan & Deci, 2004). The possible relevance that self-determination theory has to self-worth is that if a person makes a choice in line with what they innately believe to be worthwhile (the sense of autonomy), and the consequence of their decision does not result according to their expectations, their perceived efficacy (sense of competence) and belonging (sense of

relatedness) may establish a ground for feelings of worthlessness. In this way, autonomy relates heavily to relationships and morality, as one's choices can be guided and motivated by the want and need for human connection, which may be contingent upon shared discourses of standards and expectations of competence or acceptability.

Morality is an explicit reference to the ICD-11's association of worthlessness and cultural scripts of morality (World Health Organisation, 2024). Researchers are reported to have ongoing debates regarding the distinction between ethics and morality (Syed et al., 2020). For some researchers, ethical principles underpin the constituents of a 'good life', thus, endorsing culturally-defined norms of socially desirable cognitions and behaviours (Syed et al., 2020). Morality, on the other hand, is believed to be a subset of ethics that relate to principles of fairness, justice, beneficence and care (Syed et al., 2020). Cultural scripts of morality implicate self-worth as the scripts indicate ideological attributions of human value and practices of valuing humans. The perception of one's own morality (such as virtuous traits) are argued as not solely due to intrapersonal reasoning, but are influenced by interpersonal dynamics that build, reinforce, and deconstruct sociocultural ethical frameworks (Haste & Abrahams, 2008).

This thesis discusses morality primarily in terms of moral standards and moral emotions. Moral standards are viewed from the position of sociocultural moral discourses. Shweder et al. (1997) described moral discourses as embedded into ethical frameworks of community, autonomy, and divinity. Ethics of community relate to one's proximity, connection, and duty to others through a society and community comprised of an identity, history and reputation (Shweder et al., 1997). Ethics of autonomy relate to one's choice to live according to personal preferences, regulated by concepts of dignity, rights and justice (Shweder et al., 1997). Ethics of divinity relate to beliefs of a natural order, and themes of sacredness and sinfulness intended to guide and protect one's soul and spirit from degradation (Shweder et al., 1997). Moral standards described in this thesis attempt to capture the intersections of ethical frameworks and potential moral dilemmas that arise and affect self-worth. Moral emotions are intrapersonal experiences responding to sociocultural moral discourses, eliciting affective reactions of 'right' and 'wrong' (Tangney et al., 2007). More specifically, this thesis focuses on guilt, shame, and pride, although other moral emotions exist (such as embarrassment, empathy, and resentment) and there are alternative terms that contain different functional perspectives (such as self-conscious emotions and self-blaming emotions) (Duan et al., 2021; Kim et al., 2011).

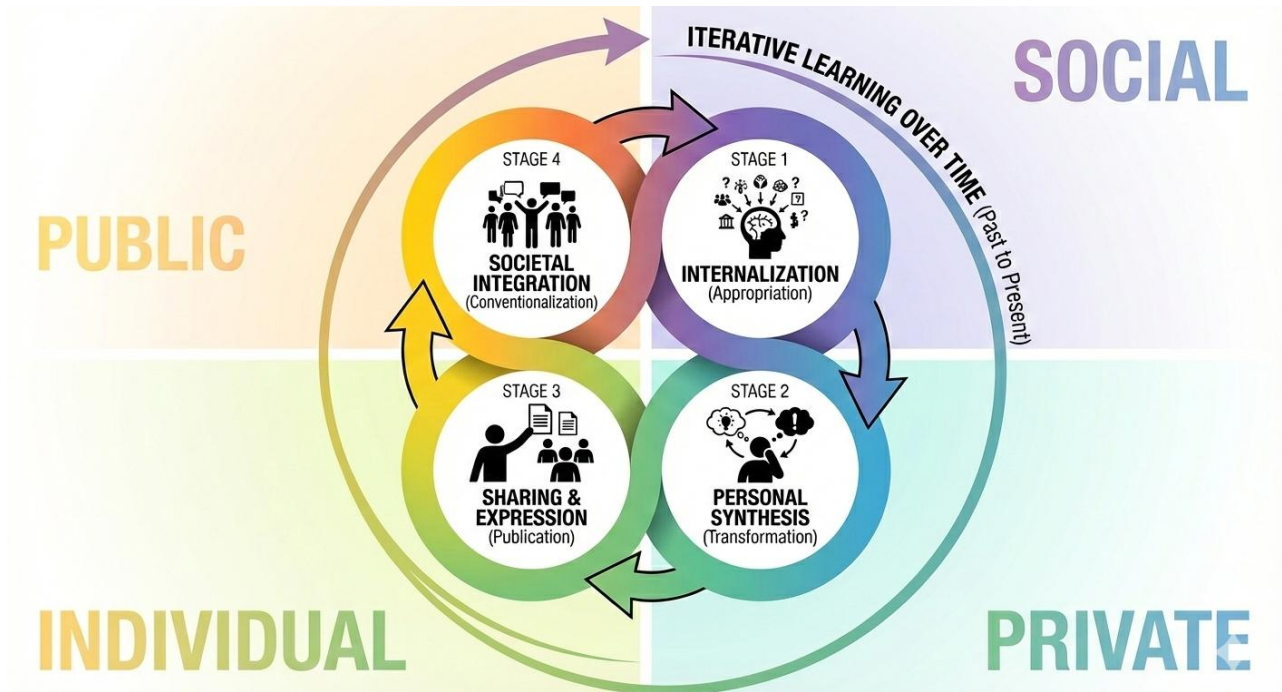
Sense making: experiences, schemas, and narratives

The sense-making sections of this thesis largely pertain to how experiences are embodied, interpreted, and organised into coherent narratives for ongoing guidance and navigation of life. A key model that has guided content in the sense-making sections relate to sociocultural theory, where experiences, lessons, and narratives begin by observing and responding to one's environment and cultures, and vice versa (Vygotsky, 1978).

Vygotsky (1978) proposed that developmental skills are initially shaped interpersonally, as per socioculturally defined priorities (Vygotsky, 1978; Fivush et al., 2006). Figure 1 presents the Vygotsky Space, a model to explain the process of human development and experience (McVee et al., 2005). The Vygotsky Space demonstrates how knowledge is constructed through social and individual practices of observation, practice, and internalisation over time (McVee et al., 2005). Stage 1 demonstrates a process of social interaction, where individuals appropriate the beliefs of others'; Stage 2, the internalisation of appropriated beliefs; Stage 3, the publication of appropriated beliefs to others; and Stage 4, conventionalisation, or the full embodiment of appropriated beliefs as apart of oneself and others (McVee et al., 2005). The quadrants are applicable to other forms of development, including how knowledge of different schools of thought are constructed, including science, music, and history (McVee et al., 2005). Three main ideas of the Vygotsky Space emphasised for this thesis is (1) that knowledge is sociocultural, interpersonal, and intrapersonal (2) that consolidating knowledge involves learning and embodying patterns about the self, others, and the world, and (3) that this process compounds and occurs continuously (McVee et al., 2005).

Figure 1.

The Vygotsky Space (adapted from McVee et al., 2005).



To complement sociocultural theory and Vygotsky's model, the sections on sense making discuss autobiographical narratives. Autobiographical narratives are stories about one's life and experiences, organised with meaning and purpose (Bohanek et al., 2008; Fivush et al., 2011). Narratives can offer a review and understanding of what has happened, guide the interpretation of past and present circumstances, and inform future expectations. A coherent autobiographical narrative is a narrative of one's own life that makes sense to the self and makes sense to a listener (Reese et al., 2011). The shape of autobiographical narratives, however, are also co-constructed and challenged through interpersonal relationships and dominant sociocultural narratives (master narratives).

Autobiographical narratives are deeply intertwined with master narratives and cultural philosophies about 'the self'. For example, one theory of the self is the dialogical self, which posits that the self is made up of dialogues and beliefs that echo the voices of communities and non-human beings (Renshaw, 2019; Rua et al., 2017). Renshaw (2019) argued that the theory of the dialogical self does not sufficiently incorporate histories of power and social structures as active components in social groups, and that communication in groups with powerful people can have (and has had) oppressive effects on knowledge structures of identity. Renshaw (2019)

refers to spatial and hemispherical knowledge as per Northern Theory and Southern Theory, stating that the Western (Global North) assumptions about a universal and objective world has taken precedence over Global Southern knowledge that integrates Indigenous perspectives and colonial histories. Renshaw (2019) used these theories to emphasise how Indigenous identities are intimately connected to specific places and beings of the non-human-world, which are not readily fore fronted in theories of a dialogical self. Renshaw (2019) advised that for research on the 'self' to have methodological rigour, researchers must incorporate indigenous perspectives of identity and conceptions of the 'self'.

The relevance of the dialogical self and Northern and Southern theories directly implicate how narratives and concepts of the 'self' embody sociocultural philosophies. For example, in comparison to a Western structure of narratives that comprise of a beginning, middle, and end, Chinese narratives emphasise a more holistic and episodic structure (Li et al., 2018). In Buddhist philosophy, the 'self' is a dynamic web of interdependent misperceptions of perceptions, senses, and ideas (Galin, 2003). In the attempt to hold onto a fixed 'self' in a world that constantly changes, perceiving the self as enduring precipitates the cause of one's suffering (Galin, 2003). Whereas according to Yang (2006), the Chinese 'self' is likened to a cobweb, where the self is linked to all beings and environments surrounding them; any action a person does (including non-action) affects others; those who are more closely tied have obligations to one another; and each section of a cobweb perpetually extends and connects others' through new sections of cobwebs (Li et al., 2018; Rua et al., 2017; Yang, 2006). Thus, the 'self' is interconnected (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Galin, 2003; Reese et al., 2017; Yang, 2006).

These conceptions of narratives and a 'self' often relate to the study of consciousness and, given how vast consciousness is as an epistemological pursuit crossing over many disciplines (including religion, science, and philosophy), the resulting research is appropriately complex, layered, and socially constructed. In terms of self-worth, this is why this thesis references the notion of 'human value', as there are dynamic standards of value (worth) placed onto the self (a human) influenced by social perceptions (in dimensions of relationships, autonomy, and morality) with real world consequences (such as punishment and reinforcement).

Therefore, it is argued that how people make sense of the world and interpret self-worth are not solely due to intrapersonal characteristics and mechanisms, but negotiated through interpersonal relationships, informed by sociocultural structures of perceived human value, which are shaped and reshaped by humans themselves (Li et al., 2018). The sense making

sections attempt to capture how experiences, schemas, and narratives are interpreted and organised. These intrapersonal narratives of self-worth are then compared against master narratives (dominant sociocultural scripts), which are analysed using a master narrative methodology for the data analysis.

Reflexive research aims

The overarching aim of this research is to reveal the nuances of Aotearoa New Zealand men's experiences of depression, specifically in relation to "feelings of worthlessness" as one of the diagnostic criteria of depression. I have been continually inspired and perplexed when listening to different men sharing stories about their life experiences. One of my main curiosities was how men have described themselves as failing to meet standards of manhood while downplaying or not perceiving their personal characteristics and traits as offering distinct value and differentiation. Their perceptions of failure impacted their wellbeing and how they related to others. They had ideas of who they should be, and referenced stereotypes commonly associated with hegemonic masculinities, including physical strength, leadership, and stoicism (Gallagher et al., 2022; Newstead et al., 2026). For example, cutting one's eyelashes after being bullied for having thick 'feminine' eyelashes; being criticised for showing physical affection for the love and protection of their children; or feeling the pressure as a leader to already know how to lead, thus, asking for support to improve processes could undermine their legitimacy. Such expectations seemed to constrain their agency, spirit, relational connection, and productivity.

The thesis topic was also motivated by the desire to learn about "worthlessness" as a symptom stipulated in diagnostic criteria for depression: the lived experiences of worthlessness; clinical and research conceptualisations of worthlessness; reasons for why worthlessness was included in diagnostic criteria; and reasons for why worthlessness was aggregated with "excessive or inappropriate guilt" in the same criterion. During a project for clinical assessment in the clinical programme, it became difficult to recognise the conceptualisation and presentation of worthlessness for the purpose of clinical practice. Consequently, the decision to pursue a thesis on men's experiences of depression and wanting to understand self-worth as a concept occurred independently and simultaneously, corresponding to one another unexpectedly. By using a qualitative methodology, the aim of this thesis is to explore the intersections between lived experiences and academic theory of self-worth.

A core tenet that shaped this thesis included a reflection of how Victorian British cultural values and their gendered roles were introduced to Aotearoa through colonisation. Where masculinities research often referring to ‘traditional masculinities’, one of my mentors returned the question of, traditional for whom? This question amplified the idea of how standards of worth are structured into cultural systems of power, leading to a review of Dr Brendan Hokowhitu’s critical analysis of Māori masculinities and the colonial genealogy of savagery and sport (Hokowhitu, 2004). The initial and ongoing impacts of colonial history in Aotearoa New Zealand, cultural norms and world events, such as the World Wars, in shaping social structures of human value and subsequent practices were central to the writing of this thesis. With consideration for the humans that are not interviewed in this thesis and are affected by self-worth, and with respect to the men whose self-worth extend beyond their masculine identity, I focused on general theories of human psychology that could be more widely applied to self-worth as a concept that affects all; caveating that self-worth may be understood differently across cultures.

Chapter 2: Theoretical background of self-worth in life stages

Childhood self-worth

This section follows a life-stage trajectory of self-worth, beginning with a section on childhood, from infancy to about 10 years of age. For specific information about ‘average developmental milestones’, the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2024) and Aotearoa New Zealand’s Plunket (2025) webpages provide details regarding typical social/emotional, language/communication, cognitive, and movement/physical development in newborns to 5 years of age. This section on childhood includes a developmental overview of theories more regularly cited in self-concept research, three contingencies of worth identified from the data analysis, and making sense of self-worth development. The focus of the section starts by building a foundation of how self-worth exists as a human experience, and what a child learns in order to navigate the world.

A brief neurobiological-developmental view of the ‘self’

In self-concept research, the implicit self has been referred to as the subjective self, which represents a present and active state (I) (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; James, 1890; Kollakowski, 2024; Rochat, 2010). The explicit self has been referred to as the conceptual, objective, and possessive self, which represents a relatively stable image (past and future), (me, mine) (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; James, 1890; Rochat, 2010). The idea of implicit and explicit selves supports the notion long held in research that the self, including self-concepts or personality traits, is both fluid and fixed (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; Brown, 1999; Rochat, 2010). The view of embodying implicit and explicit selves provides a foundation to explore the cognitive, affective and social mechanisms of self-worth and other self-concepts. An infant’s sense of self has been theorised by how they distinguish sensory experiences as contingent or not contingent to the self (such as recognising their own body movements as materially distinct from other bodies and objects, and has agency), as well as interpersonal interactions (mirroring other’s expressions and affect) (Kollakowski, 2024; Rochat, 2010). At present, infant development of their self-concept is unknown, yet self-concept researchers broadly accept the structure of an implicit self and explicit self (Kollakowski, 2024; Rochat, 2010).

To further the notion of implicit and explicit selves, self-referential processing and self-appraisals are two cognitive functions that perform self-evaluating functions relevant to self-concepts, such as self-worth. Self-referential processing involves awareness, perception and evaluation of one’s own characteristics and skills, autobiographical memory, and third-person

awareness, perception and evaluation (D'Argembeau et al., 2007; Levorsen et al., 2023; Salehinejad et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022). Self-referential processing is likened to a glue between memory, perception, and decision making, which helps process information relevant to the self and others (Sui & Humphreys, 2015). Researchers have consistently located self-referential processing as activating areas within prefrontal cortex (i.e. medial prefrontal cortex and orbitofrontal cortex), limbic system (i.e. amygdala and hippocampus), and default mode network (i.e. posterior cingulate cortex and precuneus), which are brain regions that tend to be associated with executive functioning, goal directed behaviours, self-knowledge, emotion, memory, and self-regulation (Levorsen et al., 2023; Wu et al., 2022). Identifying the neurological pathways relevant to how a person interprets and attributes information, experiences, and meaning to the self and others can be useful for examining self-concept development (Levorsen et al., 2023). Accordingly, research has found that self-referential processing is a key mechanism involved with the construction and internalisation of enduring negative self-schemas (Jopling et al., 2020). Ethically, however, attempts to neurologically modify self-concept pathways could be highly dubious if the function of self-concepts is not well understood.

Self-appraisals have been described in self-concept research as a process of evaluating oneself, including self-worth and self-esteem (Crocker et al., 2002; Salehinejad et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022). Self-appraisals involve the evaluation of information, making comparisons, estimation and risk assessment, which lead to a judgment of the self (Salehinejad et al., 2020). The information evaluated tends to be meaningful (weighing several competing factors that do not occur in isolation), affective and relational (assessing temporal benefits and harms) (Salehinejad et al., 2020; Smith & Kirby, 2012). In behavioural terms, humans engage in self-appraisals to avoid perceived or actual harm, or acquire perceived or actual benefit (Salehinejad et al., 2020; Smith & Kirby, 2012). But what holds meaning and importance in a self-appraisal is relative to a given need at a given time. For self-worth, this may mean that evaluating one's *value* is done by comparing oneself to a given set of standards or expectations at a given time, for a specific outcome.

Across childhood, Putnick et al. (2020) argued that self-concepts develop from a relatively generalized and unidimensional view to a more compartmentalized and dimensional view. Development coincides with new experiences, tasks, and roles that are performed in different environments (Flynn et al., 2014). As such, self-referential processing and self-appraisals are continuous, allowing children to learn patterns, and gauge what information is

important to know about themselves and others, and in what contexts. The patterns a child learns about ‘what is important’ will depend on the frequency of situations (chronic, singular); consequences of harm and benefit; predictability (consistent, contradictory, unpredictable); the significance or saliency of different situations; stage and age; whether others are present and engaged, and how; and the relative sense of safety and dignity (Flynn et al., 2014; Gruhn & Compas, 2020; Smith & Kirby, 2012; Vermeire, 2020).

Framework of self-worth

The following framework of self-worth is based on three identified themes from the preliminary data analysis: relationships, autonomy, and morality. Researchers have identified forming relationships and the development of autonomy as key ‘stage-salient developmental tasks’ in childhood, which, if disrupted, contribute to later psychological vulnerabilities (Flynn et al., 2014). The ICD-11 further explain that worthlessness is related to cultural scripts of morality (World Health Organization, 2019). Levorsen et al. (2023) suggested that although a child’s sense of self encompasses personality traits, appearance, preferences, aspirations, abilities, and social group affiliations, these attributes will be interwoven into the framework of self-worth. Relationships, autonomy, and morality are examined with a greater emphasis on the social, cognitive, and affective experience of worthlessness, as associated with feelings of inadequacy, low sense of importance, and depression in diagnostic manuals (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; World Health Organization, 2019).

Relationships

Humans have an innate need for belonging and acceptance (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995). In the 1950s, Rogers developed person-centred theory, which stipulates that psychological vulnerability increases when a person’s social environment alienates them from their innate needs (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). More specifically, Rogers suggested that if children receive unconditional positive regard, they learn that they will be accepted regardless of how they experience and interact with the world (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). Whatever a child does, believes, thinks, or feels, successful or not, if they are accepted unconditionally, they will develop a sense of belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Conditional positive regard, on the other hand, communicates to children that to be accepted they ought to abide by others’ rules and expectations in place of their own experiences or decisions (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959).

Conditions of worth refers to the perceived introjected and external rules that define value (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). If children receive interpersonal acceptance or rejection based on their alignment with prescribed rules, they internalise the rules (conditions) as reflective of their worth (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). For example, children may learn that positive regard is contingent upon good grades at school, compliance with authority, empathy for others, or appearance, illustrating values of intellect, success, power, empathy, compassion, health, and beauty. Conditional positive regard posits that if a child does not meet those values and beliefs, they are rejected, and those contingencies become conditions of their worth (Rogers, 1959). Whereas unconditional positive regard posits that if the child does not meet those values and beliefs, even if corrective actions are necessary, the child remains accepted as they are (Rogers, 1959). The format of conditional positive regard sets interpersonal acceptance/rejection as a reward and cost system for conformity/compliance, which challenges the child to reconcile whether there is (in)congruence between the external conditions and their own perspectives, beliefs, or feelings (Patterson & Joseph, 2013). Here, external conditions of worth become introjected conditions of worth (Patterson & Joseph, 2013). Whereas unconditional positive regard is differentiated by the notion that guidance and corrective practices can still be used without interpersonal rejection (Patterson & Joseph, 2013). Still, *how* or *how well* a child demonstrates those values remains open to interpretation, thus, begins the perception and negotiation of value. Moreover, corrective action arguably suggests that there remain conditions or standards of human value.

Instilling structures of human value are also influenced by observing the treatment of others. Social learning theory posits that learning and behaviour occurs through the observation, socialisation, and imitation of others' actions (Akers & Jennings, 2015; Bandura, 1971; Powers et al., 2020). How social learning theory could apply to self-worth is that as children grow, they learn to distinguish what feedback is specific to themselves and others, learning about conditions of worth for specific people (Burton & Choo, 2019; Powers et al., 2020; Wu et al., 2022). For example, practices of power and dominance in intimate partner violence teach children about beliefs and norms for using violence against others, as well as the broader rules and roles of family members (Powers et al., 2020). However, the child's future perpetration of intimate partner violence may depend on how the children assess value from their own perspectives (judgments of deservingness and trustworthiness), personal relationships to family members, punishment and reinforcement outcomes, and broader social practices (Akers & Jennings, 2015; Powers et al., 2020). Children do not make such judgments

in isolation based on what they have passively learnt and observed, as they are actively connected and engaged with those around them (Allen et al., 2022; Burton & Choo, 2019).

Childhood maltreatment can lead children to consider their needs as unimportant or burdensome, even though it is typically the caregiver's behaviours that reflect their own limitations and not the child's worth (Burton & Choo, 2019; Humphrey et al., 2020; Jopling et al., 2020). Researchers have found that the type of maltreatment experienced in childhood may influence the expression of mental distress later in life: emotional neglect and abuse has a stronger association to later-depressive symptoms, whereas physical and sexual abuse appear to have a stronger association with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxious arousal, and unsafe sexual promiscuity (Jopling et al., 2020; Lumley & Harkness, 2007). The form of maltreatment also sets up an environment in which children become vigilant of others' disposition in specific ways, leading to them strategising safety methods that prevent the escalation of harm and protect of the self and/or others, such as appeasement, withdrawal, externalisation, or unresponsiveness (Dariotis et al., 2023; Gruhn & Compas, 2020). If their methods are successful, behaviour becomes adaptive and the interoceptive reward is double-edged (avoid further harm and create a sense of relief; Gruhn & Compas, 2020). Additionally, if a child internalises little relational or efficacious value at home, they may lower their global self-worth to reduce the risk of feeling disappointed (Vermeire, 2020). Lowering one's self-worth is adaptive to the current environment due to rejection and can become maladaptive for its limiting effects on alternative perspectives (Vermeire, 2020).

Relationships are one of the first structures that influence a child's sense of self-worth, including the relationships and systems of value that are endorsed outside of the home and at a sociocultural level (Allen et al., 2022). Stigma, prejudice, stereotypes, and bigotry are sociocultural practices with implicit messages comprised of an intolerance for or fear of diversity, a specific view of morality, and justified acts of devaluation (Allen et al., 2022; Powers et al., 2020). While family relationships are primary for children's relational wellbeing, sense of belonging and self-worth, children can also be direct or indirect recipients of rejection, humiliation, and bullying from peers as influenced by their own parents and other dynamics according to setting (such as school and neighbourhood) (Allen et al., 2022; Gifford-Smith & Bronwell, 2003). If maltreatment persists and is uncontrollable, children may learn that the best strategy available to cope and help is to suppress their own needs (Dariotis et al., 2023; Gruhn & Compas, 2020), which could be internalised as an early message that they are, or their needs are, worth less than others'.

Children continuously learn through interpersonal interactions (observing and experiencing) about what humans value across contexts, influencing their *developing* self-worth. Forming relationships, whether family, peers, or others, is also considered significant stage-salient developmental task of childhood (Flynn et al., 2014). Early life relationships are foundational to how children understand who they are in relation to others, and they shape future social, emotional, and psychological development and autobiographical narratives (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Burton & Choo, 2019; Flynn et al 2014; Vermeire, 2020). For self-worth development, relationships set the tone for how a child feels valued and what or who are perceived as valuable, while also developing a sense of what they personally value (Burton & Choo, 2019). Caregivers espouse beliefs and values that they were raised with and have learnt over their lifetime (Burton & Choo, 2019; Quinn, 2005). Likewise, peers and other community members will also espouse beliefs and values that they have learnt from their own caregivers and narratives (Allen et al., 2022; Vermeire, 2020). What others decide as ‘valuable’ is highly contextual.

Autonomy

Researchers have proposed that humans are actively motivated to grow, learn and develop in ways that exercise the full expression of oneself and one’s cultures (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Ryan & Deci, 2004; van der Putten, 2017). Self-determination theory broadly considers how humans become motivated to make decisions in line with their beliefs, principles, and desired outcomes (Ryan & Deci, 2004). For mentors (such as caregivers, family members, and teachers) of children, it can be a significant challenge to choose how to shape their children’s knowledge and understanding of the world: what behaviours and beliefs are safe/dangerous or (un)acceptable, moral values, the appropriate consequences to actions, and deciding what may be best for them to learn on their own (Grusec et al., 2017; Nadhifah & Hasiana, 2024). Autonomous behaviour can be compromised if those in positions of authority (assumed, perceived, or actual) are, for example, too permissive or too authoritarian (Grusec et al., 2017).

Permissive parenting practices are illustrated by low control, minimal limit setting and punishment, and high warmth (Nadhifah & Hasiana, 2024). The effect permissive practices have on children’ and adolescents’ autonomy can include undisciplined and irresponsible behaviours, individualistic attitudes, and low awareness of limits and abilities (Grusec et al., 2017; Nadhifah & Hasiana, 2024; Singh, 2017). Authoritarian parenting practices are illustrated as pressured, controlling, coercive, and conditional (Grusec et al., 2017; Nadhifah

& Hasiana, 2024; Singh, 2017). The effect authoritarian parenting can have on children and adolescents includes reactance (the desire to do the opposite of what was requested), submissiveness, guilt, and fear of mistakes (Grusec et al., 2017; Nadhifah & Hasiana, 2024; Singh, 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2018). If authority figures offer no clear boundaries and absent feedback or overly rigid conditions and harsh feedback, children may experience their mistakes and efforts as ineffective or futile (perceived or actual), and feel submissive, fearful, guilt, or confused (Nadhifah & Hasiana, 2024; Van Petegem et al., 2018). Children are reportedly better able to learn from their mistakes and follow rules if mentors can take the perspective of their child, identify and explain reasons for their mistakes, and let children take age-appropriate control when they do make mistakes (Emerson et al., 2019; Grusec et al., 2017; Van Petegem et al., 2018). In doing so, children may be less likely to internalise mistakes as indicators of their worth and effectiveness (Emerson et al., 2019; Mohanty et al., 2015).

Excessively lax and restricted autonomy supports the model of learned helplessness in depression. For children, learned helplessness occurs when they experience failure in controlling the occurrence of repeated negative events (Crandall et al., 2024; Mohanty et al., 2015). Depending on how they view the cause of the negative events, children may internalise a sense of powerlessness and ineffectiveness (Crandall et al., 2024; Mohanty et al., 2015). They may also defer future decision-making to others, relieving themselves of problem solving (Emerson et al., 2019). Deferring judgment may also reward and reinforce guardians' strategies for control or ineffective accommodations (Emerson et al., 2019). Negative events, strained autonomy, and the perception of lacking control contribute to learned helplessness, which may result in the internalisation of ineffectiveness, increased anxiety, and self-blaming (Crandall et al., 2024; Emerson et al., 2019).

Some research has indicated that the most effective strategies for building a child's autonomy involve providing meaningful justification for limits and requests, offering choices that encourage initiative, acknowledging the child's experiences, warmth, consistency and patience (Grusec et al., 2017; Nadhifah & Hasiana 2024; Van Petegem et al., 2018). These strategies have also found evidence in building effective self-regulated behaviours, internalisation of principles, and feelings of confidence and value (Grusec et al., 2017; Nadhifah & Hasiana 2024). These practices could be compared to guidance strategies used in other contexts, such as mentors at school or community-based activities (Nadhifah & Hasiana 2024). However, it is acknowledged that parenting strategies adopted cross-culturally have different effects in the child's development, depending on the outcomes being analysed

(Russell et al., 2010). Thus, what has not been articulated in this section of autonomy is how a mentor's own self-determination, self-regulation, worries, and cultural contexts inform their choice of strategies (Grusec et al., 2017; Singh, 2017; Russell et al., 2010). Moreover, a child's expression of autonomy and how their autonomy interacts with their social environment will also be influenced by their interests and alignment to their mentor's direction (Deci et al., 2017).

Morality

"Cultural scripts of morality" are a central feature for clinicians to recognise where feelings of worthlessness are grounded (World Health Organisation, 2019, p. 238). Morality is a social construction of universal and culturally prescribed rules for living, that guide humans about what in life is ethically (un)acceptable (Syed et al., 2020; Tangney et al., 2007). As a structure of self-worth, morality is argued as a guiding framework for self-appraisals and judgements of one's worth into good/right or bad/wrong; although it is acknowledged that many circumstances and traits contain moral conflict, contradiction, and context (Arpaly, 2002; Li et al., 2024; Tangney et al., 2007). This section briefly describes three moral emotions: guilt, shame, and pride (Tangney et al., 2007).

Moral emotions are described as illustrating a personal, instinctual, and learnt sense of right and wrong as it relates to the interests and welfare of oneself and society (Fontenelle et al., 2022; Tangney et al., 2007). Moral emotions are believed to develop in children around two or three years of age, compared to basic emotions (such as sadness and anger) developing around nine months of age (Leung 2024; Tracy & Robins, 2007). Researchers have explained that moral emotions may develop later due to the cognitive mechanisms needed for self-evaluation (such as self-referential processing and self-appraisals) and learning about cultural norms for social regulation (Fontenelle et al., 2022; Leung 2024). In behavioural terms, moral emotions have also been likened to internalised punishment (wrong) or reinforcement (right) (Tangney et al., 2007). In this way, children may learn and consolidate moral frameworks through affective valence (embarrassment, guilt, shame, pride) in response to upholding and violating social customs (Fontenelle et al., 2022; Kim et al., 2011).

Guilt is a moral emotion attributed to the negative impact of one's actions (Bilbao, 2018). Researchers have considered that the adaptive function of guilt leads to prosocial behaviours, such that if a person feels guilty about how their actions negatively impacted another person, they are more likely to make amends or other reparative action (Bilbao, 2018;

Duan et al., 2021; Tangney et al., 2007). Guilt is generally considered as adaptive, associated with empathy, and reportedly inhibits antisocial behaviours (Bilbao, 2018). ‘Excessive or inappropriate’ amounts of guilt, however, is indicative of mental distress (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; Duan et al., 2021; World Health Organisation, 2019). Excessive or inappropriate guilt can lead to an excess of psychological defence mechanisms including defensiveness, social withdrawal, chronic self-blaming, blaming others, rumination, reassurance seeking, and the misattribution of responsibility (Duan et al., 2021).

Shame, like guilt, functions as a way of promoting social cohesion and harmony as it indicates social violation (Bath, 2019; Chase & Walker, 2012). However, shame attributes fault as a defining feature of the self, as opposed to a specific behaviour as with guilt (Bilbao, 2018; Tangney et al., 2007). Shame involves a greater concern for others’ evaluations of the self and is associated with feelings of worthlessness and powerlessness (Bath, 2019; Tangney et al., 2007). Shame has been observed to elicit antisocial action tendencies, including distancing, denial, concealment, avoidance, hiding, escape, and disrupting empathic experiences and processes (Bath, 2019; Duan et al., 2021). Researchers have contended that because shame affects the global self-view more readily, intrapersonal psychological resources are focused on protecting one’s core identity, resulting in less capacity to consider one’s impact on others (Bath, 2019; Tangney et al., 2007). Because shame is associated with a submissive state (such as feeling powerless and worthless), defence mechanisms that shift blame away from oneself moves the self to a dominant state (such as anger), offering a greater sense of control (Bath, 2019; Kim et al., 2011; Tangney et al., 2007).

Pride occurs when a person’s behaviours and self-view are perceived as valuable and accomplished (Goffnet et al., 2021; Leung, 2024; Tangney et al., 2007). Researchers have distinguished two main types of pride, including hubris and action-based pride (Leung, 2024; Tangney et al., 2007). Hubris is associated with a global self-view of pridefulness, and action-based pride is more event-specific, similar to attributions of shame and guilt, respectively (Leung, 2024; Tangney et al., 2007). Leung (2024) described two subtypes of action-based pride, which are moral and non-moral action-based pride. Moral action-based pride is associated with actions that benefit others (such as acts of justice and care), whereas non-moral action-based pride is associated with actions that benefit the self (such as personal accomplishments) (Leung, 2024). Pride is reported to enhance self-worth as one’s actions align with conditions of worth, thus, reinforcing the actions to be repeated for the future (Leung, 2024; Tangney et al., 2007).

Moral emotions can function as guides, such as through behavioural reinforcement and punishment (Tangney et al., 2007). However, moral emotions are also elicited without any action having occurred (Tangney et al., 2007). Ratcliffe (2010) described how shame can be elicited for circumstances beyond one's control, such as one's appearance. Similarly, Chase and Walker (2012) described shame as a co-constructed (or socially constructed) emotion. They exemplified how the inability to acquire certain apparel (such as due to poverty and structural inequalities) can elicit feelings of shame when certain clothes symbolise social markers of success (Chase & Walker, 2012). In this way, the sociocultural content of morality reinforces values of social approval and self-evaluation, but not all values are necessarily achievable or easily achieved.

In terms of moral development and reasoning, children may be more likely to internalise moral narratives of their families, friends, or people with whom they are more regularly exposed to (Grusec et al., 2017). As they develop more diverse human relationships, children may come to recognise that moral reasoning is socially constructed (Haste & Abrahams, 2008). While progressing through developmental stages and internalising moral relativism, children are still active participants of morality. For example, in choosing whether to advocate for a peer being bullied or participate in the bullying (due to self-preservation, genuine devaluation, or revenge) (Recchia et al., 2019). Their behaviours, beliefs, and associated moral emotions respond according to their contexts, audiences, and expectations for outcomes (McDonald & Lochman, 2012; Recchia et al., 2019). This means that a child who engages in bullying could eventually learn that their actions were 'wrong' as per new contexts (such as different perspectives), leading to expressions of guilt and shame. Here, past/present moral emotions can inform future narratives and practices of morality (Tangney et al., 2007).

Sense-making: agency, knowledge co-construction, and schemas

Human agency, or initiated action, can be understood as embodied and functional, responding to internal organismic needs (Kollakowski, 2024). The expressed purpose of action can be understood in the behavioural framework of functional analysis. For example, the ABC model explains how behaviours are contingent upon trigger/s (antecedents) and reinforcers (consequences) (Melanson & Fahmie, 2024). Behaviours have been understood as having four main functions: attention (facilitate), escape, tangible items (receive), and automatic reinforcement (increase or decrease sensory input) (Melanson & Fahmie, 2024). In other words, people may act in ways that bring attention from others, escape aversive experiences, acquire tangible rewards, and seek out or reduce sensory experiences. Moreover, behaviours

can be maintained by multiple functions if there are multiple reinforcements, such as garnering positive attention can also lead to tangible rewards (Melanson & Fahmie, 2024). Melanson and Fahmie (2024) found in their review on functional analysis across children and adults that escape was the most common function of behaviour, followed by automatic reinforcement, attention, tangible, and then 'some other function'. Some researchers have argued that infant agency involves responding to internal cues of hunger and attachment prior to cognitively recognising the need for sustenance and connection (Kollakowski, 2024). Interpersonal responses to an infant's and child's actions, however, shape ongoing learning and action through moral narratives (Fivush et al., 2006; Shweder et al., 1997)

Through experience, embodiment, sensing, learning and memory, human develop schemas that inform how to understand and navigate the world (Pilkington et al., 2020; Vannucci et al., 2025). Schemas are internal working models that contain experiential representations of the self and world (Bizzari, 2024; Trope & Liberman, 2012). Schemas add meaning to past experiences and provide solutions for future events, anticipated or real (Trope & Liberman, 2012). Schemas can be formed for objects and events, such as learning how to use an item or what to expect in future situations (Pankin, 2013). Schemas are also social, affective and embodied, where humans learn and anticipate how to think, move, and act in social situations through interoceptive, affective, and motivational cues, and observational learning as per social learning theory (Bizzari, 2024; Emerson et al., 2019; Powers et al., 2020; Vannucci et al., 2025). During childhood, schemas about the self also adapt to one's circumstances, although they may not be true to who one is or what they can do (Pilkington et al., 2020). Negative childhood experiences tend to maintain certain schemas as a way of protecting oneself from further aversive experiences, perceived or actual, and to gain advantages (Pilkington et al., 2020).

Children and adolescents have highly adaptive schemas because they are in the process of experiencing new contexts and learning new lessons (Vannucci et al., 2025). Schema theory proposes that schemas can transform (solidify or change) through learning mechanisms of assimilation and accommodation (Dorko, 2019; Vannucci et al., 2025; Zhiqing, 2015). Assimilation occurs when new information is integrated into previous schemas that are congruent, thus, strengthening previous schemas (Dorko, 2019; Zhiqing, 2015). For example, if a young person receives harsh and rigid lessons at home and school, they may assimilate these experiences into negative self-schemas with attributions of shame and worthlessness (Lumley & Harkness, 2007). If schemas are consistent and salient enough, young people may

also learn to generalise these schemas across contexts (Dorko, 2019; Vannucci et al., 2025). Whereas accommodation occurs when new information is integrated into previous schemas that are incongruent, thus, modifying previous schemas (Dorko, 2019). For example, if a young person receives warm and encouraging lessons at home and harsh and rigid lessons at school, they may accommodate these experiences into self-schemas with differentiated attributions about who they are at home versus at school (Vannucci et al., 2025).

When new and/or contradictory information is presented, people are believed to experience ‘disequilibrium’ and seek to re-establish ‘equilibrium’ (Dorko, 2019; Zhiqing, 2015). Accommodation helps by integrating new variables that expand on and restructure original schemas (Dorko, 2019; Zhiqing, 2015). However, if a young person exists in environments that reinforce preexisting negative schemas, new information may be discounted in favour of safety and self-preservation (Sebastião et al., 2025). This means that even if young people are told that they have valuable qualities or skillsets, if this message is not shared across crucial environments (such as home and/or school), young people may be more inclined to maintain their negative schema because the alternative is unsafe and/or may result in ongoing disappointment (Sebastião et al., 2025). Still, consistent and trustworthy messaging can facilitate accommodation in schemas if their value is evident to others and stated as such (Sebastião et al., 2025).

Researchers have shown that early experiences of harm, abuse, or trauma led to the development of negative schemas, and early experiences of protection, care, and warmth lead to the development of positive schemas (Bath, 2019; Sebastião et al., 2025; Vermeire, 2020). However, this does not preclude the possibility that positive schemas can grow out of terror or that negative schemas can grow despite belonging and care. For example, if a child has been treated with predictably rigid and conditional positive regard from their family, they may recognise their worth through other meaningful relationships or achievements (Sebastião et al., 2025; Vermeire, 2020). Other children may learn that self-sacrifice alleviates others from preexisting stress and pressure, leading to the development of excessive responsibility and unrelenting standards due to their helpfulness and its advantageous effects for others (Bruysters & Pilkington, 2022; Dariotis et al., 2023). Researchers have also found that overprotective and overindulgent parenting practices can, despite caring intentions, result in schemas of dependence, thwarted competence, entitlement, and fear of abandonment (Bruysters & Pilkington, 2022).

The sections on sense-making will briefly describe a chronicle of ‘Alex’ to theoretically connect the development of worthlessness over time. His story centres on an intergenerational and cultural skill and value: cooking. That is, cooking represents a contingency of worth shared across Alex’s family and genealogy. As a child, if Alex experienced authoritarian parenting, he may start to feel helpless and fearful of his ability to problem solve different tasks, such as learning how to cook (including preparation techniques) (Crandall et al., 2024; Grusec et al., 2017). In social learning theory, Alex may have observed that cooking is attached to family roles in his household; observed how people appreciate, expect, or complain about cooked meals; and observed how his family members react to cooking as an experience and responsibility (Bandura, 1971; Powers et al., 2020). He may wish to help his family because of how much cooking is valued in the household, and he may wish to please them. However, regular criticism of his abilities may become internalised in a way where he feels he must cook (and do other tasks) perfectly or he will be punished (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Vermeire, 2020). As he learns how to cook while being criticised, he may begin to associate his learning and abilities to feelings of inadequacy and shame (Chase & Walker, 2012). He may also learn what conditions of worth are associated with cooking, such as success and achievement. These conditions shape what he knows and understands to receive praise and avoid punishment (as per functional analysis), while sensing whether he belongs (Melanson & Fahmie, 2024; Patterson & Joseph, 2013). Alex’s story will be continued across each subchapter of self-worth in the sense-making section.

Summary

This literature enquiry of self-worth in childhood focused on establishing a foundation for self-worth as a functional and interactive human experience based on social, behavioural, affective, and cognitive mechanisms. The World Health Organisation (2024) stated “it is very difficult to determine whether a pre-adolescent child exhibits problems in functioning in aspects of the self, such as identity, self-worth, accuracy of self-view or self-direction, because these functions are not fully developed in children” (p. 566). Analysing the innumerable examples of factors that facilitate worthlessness is not the purpose of this literature enquiry. Instead, three proposed structures of self-worth are chosen as enduring facets that help guide self-worth: relationships, autonomy, and morality. The experiences associated with these contingencies of worth are condensed into schemas, guiding a child’s knowledge of human value.

Adolescent self-worth

Adolescence spans from about 10 to 19 years of age (World Health Organization, 2025). Early adolescence, around 13 years of age, has been reported as a vulnerable period of precipitating mental distress, whereby positive self-views are reported to decline as negative self-views increase (Gambin & Sharp, 2018; Kirkbride et al., 2024; Sebastian et al., 2008; van der Cruijssen et al., 2023). The increase in mental distress may be due to transitional life stages, such as graduating from primary to secondary school (as per Aotearoa New Zealand education systems), increasing independence and autonomy, and considerations for what their future holds with the increased responsibilities (Auerbach et al., 2014a; Gambin & Sharp, 2018; Ministry of Education, 2024; Stein et al., 1998; van der Cruijssen et al., 2023). Additionally, self-concepts may be increasingly challenged by new peers, multimedia platforms (such as social media), extracurricular activities, work, poverty, and prejudice (Hoff et al., 2002; Stein et al., 1998; Utz, 2019; van der Cruijssen et al., 2023). Due to the general increase of responsibilities, many of these spaces require adolescents to present and perform different aspects of themselves (de Moor et al., 2022; van der Cruijssen et al., 2023). As such, it is likely that self-appraisals of worth gauge new contingencies alongside increasingly diverse experiences and values.

The development of the ‘self’

Researchers have suggested that self-concepts are at their greatest level of sensitivity and uncertainty during early adolescence and become more stable towards later adolescence (Gambin & Sharp, 2018; van der Cruijssen et al., 2023;). During this time, adolescents explore their self-schemas, or identity: who they are, what they are like, where they fit in, and who they can become (Stein et al., 1998; van der Cruijssen et al., 2023). Families who progressively expand adolescents’ autonomy (behaviours and opinions) as they age has resulted in better adjustment by late adolescence, including social skills, higher self-esteem, fewer depressive symptoms, and more effective identity development and moral reasoning (Ojanen & Perry, 2007; Smetana et al., 2006). Age-appropriate control/autonomy and matters of risk can impact the adolescent’s internal/external locus of control as well as the relationship between caregiver and adolescent (Emerson et al., 2019; Smetana et al., 2006).

Researchers have found that self-referential processing involves the ability to measure oneself against how they think others perceive them, based on assumed and actual feedback from audiences, as well as objective and subjective standards (Elder et al., 2023; Felson, 1993;

Rochat, 2010; Salehinejad et al., 2020). Humans also use their evaluation of others to inform who they are, especially in proximity to domains that are highly valued or important (Crucius et al., 2022; Felson, 1993). Social comparison theory can be used to describe how humans determine their self-worth via upward and downward comparisons (Crucius et al., 2022; Festinger, 1954). Upward comparisons can motivate and inspire an individual to be like the person they are comparing themselves to and can also lead people to feel inadequate or inferior (Crucius et al., 2022; Smith, 2000; Utz, 2019). Downward comparisons can elicit feelings of superiority, pride, as well as fear and contempt (Crucius et al., 2022; Smith, 2000; Utz, 2019). The range of affective experiences of social comparisons can depend on upward and downward direction, assimilation and contrast (sense of similarity or difference), and towards the self, other, or both (Smith, 2000). See Smith (2000) for a diagram of affective experiences according to different axes.

Adolescents are reported to invest more time in exploring their peers' behaviours, beliefs, and values (Auerbach et al., 2014a; Sebastian et al., 2008; Stein et al., 1998; van der Crujisen et al., 2023). Likewise, research indicates that adolescents engage in greater third-person perspective-taking, or, interpreting the perspective of others as a way of evaluating themselves (Sebastian et al., 2008; van der Crujisen et al., 2023). Smith (2000) explained that people who engage in self-focused social comparisons tend to have increased depressive symptoms compared to those who engage in other-focused social comparison. However, people can move between self- and other-focused social comparisons, thereby, eliciting dialectical affective experiences, such as feeling both shame due to feelings of inferiority and *schadenfreude* due to feelings of superiority (Crucius et al., 2022; Smith, 2000). These contrasting emotions could also suggest a psychological defence mechanism whereby individuals use downward comparisons to increase positive feelings for themselves, with a potential side effect of guilt (Crucius et al., 2022). Moreover, social comparisons not only occur strategically or intrapersonally, but can occur unintentionally and by groups (Brown, 2020; Crucius et al., 2022; Hornsey, 2008).

Framework of self-worth

During adolescence, the dynamics within relationships, autonomy, and morality become increasingly complex in relation to how human value is appraised and judged. The focus of this section considers how adolescents adjust to new social settings and view themselves in comparison to others. With consideration for Erikson's psychosocial developmental model, pre-adolescent and younger adolescents are reported to undertake a

sense of mastery (or failure) in their skills and competencies (referred to as industry vs. inferiority) (Birni, & Eryılmaz, 2024; Erikson, 1959). Whereas middle and older adolescents are reported to increase exploring their sense of identity and who they are or can become (referred to as identity vs. role confusion) (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2005; Birni, & Eryılmaz, 2024; Erikson, 1959). These themes according to Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages will be explored in relation to relationships, autonomy, and morality, although it is acknowledged that the stages are not isolated to adolescence alone (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2005).

Relationships

Self-concepts are shaped by one's social identity, such that there are cognitive, affective, and evaluative effects relative to the unique connectedness one has to others (interpersonal) and groups (intragroup and intergroup; Brown, 2020). During adolescence, pre-existing dynamics at home (such as between caregiver and child) will continue being transformed and challenged by uncontrollable (and controllable) external and internal events (Branje, 2018). These pre-established relationships mean that adolescents enter new relationships with a baseline of schemas or rules about human value and relational acceptance (Ojanen & Perry, 2007; Tariq et al., 2021). Still, because of the transitional period of adolescence, adolescents will develop and exercise social skills as they meet new peers and mentors, both of which grow in quantity and variable quality (Gifford-Smith & Bronwell, 2003). In combination with biological and temperamental factors, the relative desire for a relationship or certain kind of relationship is personal. Some may be more satisfied with solitude, some may want to be alone due to mistrust, and some may seek peace through others (Allen et al., 2022). It is also possible that some may experience all three. Whatever the want and need for relationships, learning about what humans value through relationships are a part of human development (Gifford-Smith & Bronwell, 2003).

Social identity theory investigates how self-concepts develop as per group membership and intergroup dynamics (Brown, 2020; Hogg, 2016). A person's self-concept and identity are shaped by the social groups with whom they associate with as well as whom they do not (Trepte & Loy, 2017; van der Crujisen et al., 2023). To belong to a social group, *in-group* membership is often evaluated by the person's alignment to the group's prescribed beliefs and other valued attributes, such as appearance, language, background, time invested, former networks (Godinić et al., 2020; Hogg, 2016). These attributes are constructed as distinct from other social groups, or *out-groups* (Godinić et al., 2020; Hogg, 2016). Still, how an ingroup is defined does not

include all possible members. For example, a group of adolescents who play music does not include all adolescents who play music. Thus, group membership theoretically exists independently of whether a person seeks active membership, and group invitation may also be necessary (León, 2023; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

In-group membership can offer a sense of belonging, emotional significance, a shared identity, a role, and social support (Crucius et al., 2022; Hogg, 2016; Trepte & Loy, 2017). By aligning with and maintaining group norms, a person's sense of self and social resource tends to be maintained and elevated in return (Crucius et al., 2022; Fairlamb & Juhl, 2022; Hogg, 2016). Self-worth may be enhanced more so if one's internal experiences are genuinely congruent to the standards determined by their sociocultural worldviews (Fairlamb & Juhl, 2022). Yet aligning with these standards could be likened to Rogers' conditions of worth, where interpersonal acceptance is the reward or cost for conforming (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Rogers, 1959). With this view, self-worth may also be challenged if a member's organismic needs are incongruent to the conditions of worth set by the group (Patterson & Joseph, 2013). Thus, differentiating from a social group's conditions of worth may increase the risk of rejection, discrimination, perceived lack of control, and lowered self-worth (van der Cruijssen et al., 2023; Verkuyten et al., 2019a).

In circumstances of rejection, a person may use 'psychological disidentification' to detach their self-esteem and global self-worth to not be reliant on specific contingencies, such as in-group membership. (Verkuyten et al., 2019a). Psychological disidentification is achieved via two mechanisms: devaluing and discounting. Devaluing involves decreasing the importance of a group as a basis of self-evaluation and, thus, no longer serves as a source for self-worth (Verkuyten et al., 2019a). Discounting is the rejection of feedback where it is judged that the predetermined standards are invalid (Verkuyten et al., 2019a). New relationships and feelings of belonging can also form amongst those who face similar identity threats and experiences of the world (Lund et al., 2019; Trepte & Loy, 2017; Verkuyten et al., 2019a). Moreover, rejection from a particular social group does not mean that the person does not share the same characteristics, beliefs, or traits. Rather, they may embody some distinction that is enough for other group members to feel threatened (Brown, 2020; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Self-worth during adolescence within the structure of relationships could be explained by social identity theory, where the sense of belonging and acceptance are affected by in-group and out-group membership in unique ways. 'Conditions of worth', as described in Rogers'

person-centred theory, appears to be a similar relational mechanism of social identity theory, such that social groups determine membership based on the alignment and practice of specific attributes, such as shared values (Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Trepte & Loy, 2017; Verkuyten et al., 2019a). Belonging drawn from in-group membership could be also translated into feelings of adequacy and importance, such that the person has demonstrated enough ‘worth’ to be accepted. The experience of in-group membership and one’s sense of belonging can become complicated as not all needs and expectations can be met and the dynamic of relationships evolve over time (Branje, 2018; Smetana et al., 2006). Thus, the intersection between self-worth and belonging is comprised of a complex web of individual, dyadic, and group dynamics, needs and preferences (Brown, 2020; Godinić et al., 2020; Hogg, 2016).

Autonomy

For this section, autonomy will be described in the context of intrapersonal and interpersonal expectations of behaviour in groups. Adolescents often focus more heavily on the significance of new relationships, new social expectations, and new perceptions of human value as they are granted increasing autonomy outside of their home (Auerbach et al., 2014a; Branje, 2018; Tomova et al., 2021). Autonomy can be constrained and permitted according to others’ expectations, which may influence how adolescents perceive themselves as having worth in others’ eyes (Tomova et al., 2021). Adolescence is typically perceived as novel and transitory period where their experiences and relationships may leave less of an imprint on self-concept, self-worth, and self-schema development (McArthur et al., 2019; Stein et al., 1998; van der Crujisen et al., 2023). But if adolescents highly value the contingency of group membership, group membership may have stronger weight when an adolescent appraises their self-worth. This section of autonomy is grounded by social identity theory and self-determination theory, which explores human motivation in accordance with three basic psychological needs: a sense of autonomy, competency, and relatedness (Ryan & Deci, 2004).

One area of adolescence that draws attention and concern is the uptake of risky behaviours (Sebastian et al., 2008; Tomova et al., 2021). Research on the interaction between adolescent self-concept and risky behaviours has tended to focus on three main hypotheses: (1) that the adolescent self-concept acts as an antecedent to subsequent risky behaviour; (2) that biological, social and cultural antecedents and risky behaviours are mediated by adolescent self-concepts; and (3) that adolescent self-concepts are a consequence of risky behaviours (Stein et al., 1998). There has been evidence supporting a bidirectional relationship between self-concept development and risky behaviours (Gifford-Smith & Bronwell, 2003; Stein et al.,

1998). There is also support for self-concept as a mediating variable between social antecedents and risky behaviours (Tomova et al., 2021). Researchers have reported that adolescents act according to social group norms, as they have shown greater motivation for avoiding social exclusion more than potential negative health, legal, social or academic outcomes from risky behaviours (Gifford-Smith & Bronwell, 2003; Tomova et al., 2021). However, if the social group norms discourage risky behaviours, its members are less likely to engage in risky behaviours (Tomova et al., 2021).

In support of self-determination theory, an adolescent may act with emphasis on the sense of autonomy and belonging, but that their choices are not independent from external evaluation (Branje, 2018; Tomova et al., 2021). In this way, their self-worth may be appraised depending on how they see themselves, how their social group perceives them, and how other groups also perceive them as individuals and as a group (Crucius et al., 2022). Research on social identity theory has found that the more positive appraisals a social group receives, the more its members embody positive self-concepts and social identity (Houkamau & Sibley, 2014). Likewise, an ingroup may differentiate themselves from an outgroup by drawing on evaluations and categorisations of perceived value (Trepte & Loy, 2017). The evaluation of value (and its associated narratives or reasoning) between groups may help explain the relative permissibility and constraints afforded to group and individual autonomy (Trepte & Loy, 2017). Moreover, Brown (2020) has noted that emotions of intragroup and intergroup associations have been overlooked as variables that could explain reasons for privileging autonomy for some over others. In line with self-determination theory, the sense of relatedness and the emotions associated with relatedness may be important drivers in the perception of autonomy and competency in adolescents.

For example, social hierarchies can shape a person's sense of autonomy and homonomy (self-regulation and integration with others) (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Members of higher social status groups (as per power, prestige, and influence) are more likely to endorse and practice discriminatory behaviours towards those perceived of a lower social status (Brown, 2020; Houkamau & Sibley, 2014). Acts of discrimination reinforces positive appraisals about one's own group, social identity, self-concept, and sense of worthiness (Brown, 2020; Houkamau & Sibley, 2014). However, positive appraisals following differentiation are not necessarily due to the act itself, but due to feeling protective. Brown (2020) described that outgroup discrimination occurs more readily when the power and influence of an ingroup is threatened by the power and influence of an outgroup, such that the ingroup experiences a collective fear,

anger, and disgust. Moreover, Brown (2020) noted how a collective guilt and shame can be experienced when an ingroup perceives their group as immoral or illegitimate. What this could mean is that moral values of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ govern intergroup dynamics, and that emotional experiences influence the choice of behaviours to protect the self and one’s group from threat (Verkuyten et al., 2019a).

This section of adolescent autonomy and self-worth was written to describe the pressures that adolescents balance as they seek belongingness to new social groups, as per intrapersonal and interpersonal mechanisms posited by social identity theory and self-determination theory (Tomova et al., 2021). In this way, self-worth contains a contingency of group membership, and the conditions of worth for group membership can challenge individual autonomy. Autonomy may be heavily influenced by the desire for relatedness and avoidance of social rejection, influencing engagement in risky behaviours (Stein et al., 1998; Tomova et al., 2021). Rejecting groups norms could increase risk of genuine threat and harm as rejecting or violating group norms can be perceived as a threat to the group (van Kleef et al., 2019). Therefore, self-worth may negotiate what contingency is more valuable according to its conditions: group membership (which includes social acceptance, relatedness, and a level of safety) or living according to one’s values and organismic needs (which may be valuable in unseen and unknown ways but could risk harm to self and from others in other ways).

Morality

Child and adolescent self-concept research often discuss the influence of academic achievement on self-worth. Researchers have reported that academic self-concept becomes relatively stable around 10 years of age (Wu et al., 2022). Leung (2024) suggested that achievement (such as academia or recreational activities) elicits non-moral action-based pride because achievement benefits the self. This is compared to moral action-based pride where one’s actions (as in upholding justice or caring for another) benefits others (Leung, 2024). However, this section argues that academic achievement is associated with moral action-based pride due to the belief that academic achievement benefits society and others (Dhingra, 2018). This section also positions intelligence as a contingency of self-worth, and that academic performance represents a condition of worth (or a measure) within the contingency of intelligence. More specifically, intelligence may be an important contingency that helps define a person’s self-worth, and academic performance (often measured by grades) represent the external conditions or standards that indicate adequate intelligence.

In mainstream education, standardised intelligence is a framework used to evaluate generalised universal and essential abilities, needs and pursuits (van der Putten, 2017; Zoeckler, 2007). To measure academic achievement, standardised intelligence is dictated by a graded scale (Zoeckler, 2007). Grades of failure can lead to an intervention/offer of support to increase the student's learning, and grades of exceptional success can garner awards, scholarship, extra responsibility and opportunities (Alerby & Brown, 2021; Docan, 2006). Grades are often accompanied with moral-based perceptions of achievement and performance, and function as both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators as per self-determination theory (Docan, 2006; Zoeckler, 2007). Lower grades have been associated with descriptions of idiocy, stupidity, and foolishness, and higher grades with descriptions of acumen, giftedness, and brilliance (Woods Jr. et al., 2019). Higher achievement is also associated with future opportunities and advantages, influencing the perception of who one is, who they can become, what they are capable of, and who they are in relation to others (Dhingra, 2018). Grades in academia represent one measure for the self-appraisal of one's worth in the contingency of intelligence (Zoeckler, 2007). However, the moral attributions and perceived responsibility associated with grades and its effects on self-worth function for both low and high grades (Docan, 2006).

A strengthened self-concept has been associated with academic achievement, persistence, motivation, enhanced self-worth, flexibility in learning, and self-determination (Docan, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2022; Wu et al., 2022). Research on self-referential processing has indicated that learning and memory consolidation is enhanced when the information is perceived as personally relevant, meaning that learning is more effective if the content is aligned with their interests, is accessible, and is useful (Renninger & Hidi, 2022; Sui & Humphreys, 2015). Thus, a student's self-worth contingent upon intelligence can be protected if their learning styles and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are supported (Docan, 2006; Renninger & Hidi, 2022). A student's learning is also supported when appropriate guidance is offered, including support for their learning style, useful suggestions and constructive feedback, have their efforts appreciated, and feel that their ideas are understood (Renninger & Hidi, 2022). Self-worth contingent upon intelligence can be undermined if external expectations of success or choice of pursuits are rigid or external expectations are disinterested, disconnected, and/or aimless (Dhingra, 2018; Zoeckler, 2007).

The contingency of intelligence is also likely shaped by what intelligence means for the adolescent, their family, and cultural contexts (Li et al., 2020; Na et al., 2018). Researchers have shown that social class disparities, (such as a lack of family resource and negative

stereotypes) and negative self-beliefs negatively affect academic achievement (Li et al., 2020). Li et al. (2020) found that self-concept in Chinese students from a low SES province partially mediated the relationship between family SES and academic achievement, which was consistent with other studies of students from low SES provinces in China. However, Li et al. (2020) also highlighted that adolescent self-concept in higher SES populations had a stronger mediation between family SES and academic achievement. Although Li et al. (2020) expressed that reasons for the differences in self-concept were unclear, it could be speculated that academic achievement may be relative to the values and needs of different SES classes. For example, researchers have reported that working class populations embody a more interdependent self-view and the need for flexibility and obedience due to fewer resources and greater structural pressures, compared to middle class populations who tend to embody values of personal growth and self-reliance while having greater access to resources (Dhingra, 2018; Hoff et al., 2002; Na et al., 2018).

In other words, an adolescent's academic achievement is likely affected by competing responsibilities, values, and needs of one's family and communities, but that the contingency of intelligence is not solely shaped by academic achievement as a condition of worth (Hoff et al., 2002). Helping with household or community difficulties can encompass significant social value, a sense of competency, and moral action-based pride (although the adolescent's pride may also be their caregivers' shame) (Chase & Walker 2012; Harkness & Super, 2002; Ryan & Deci, 2004). In this way, an adolescent's contingency of intelligence and sense of competency extends beyond academia (Harkness & Super, 2002). Comparably, if an adolescent experiences rigid pressure for success and exceptionalism, their perception of their intelligence may become defined by grades, leading to discouragement and self-defeating behaviours (Docan, 2006; Smetana et al., 2006; Zoeckler, 2007). The emphasis on success and exceptionalism could explain aspects of perfectionism, while also supporting the notion that self-worth contingent upon intelligence is shaped by sociocultural moral attributions of achievement and competency (Docan, 2006; Zoeckler, 2007).

Academic achievement is argued as a condition of worth, within the domain of intelligence as the broader contingency of worth. In this way, one's self-worth contingent upon intelligence can be protected or affected by other conditions of worth that exercise skill and competence that are measurably intelligent. For example, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences include language, music, logic, spatial awareness, interpersonal, intrapersonal, naturalistic, spatial, kinesthetic, and existential domains (Waterhouse, 2023). Although

Waterhouse (2023) reported that there is little evidence of the brain containing specific neural networks for different cognitive abilities, Gardner's theory is referenced here to state that valuable skills and knowledge exist beyond what mainstream academia measures. Perceiving intelligence in this way can allow for a broader view on how adolescents could develop the sense of competency as stipulated by self-determination theory, thereby, perceiving their worth, their skills, and their identity as more than their academic performance (Docan, 2006). In this way, an adolescent's self-worth contingent upon intelligence is uniquely structured in proximity to other contingencies and conditions of worth stipulated in their environment (Chase & Walker 2012; Hoff et al., 2002; Smetana et al., 2006).

Sense making: schemas and autobiographical narratives

Where memories could be likened to data of lived experience, schemas could be likened to correlations (associations that inform how the world generally works) (Pilkington et al., 2020; Vannucci et al., 2025). Schema theory assumes that memory development is a deliberate function for learning and recall (Fivush et al., 2006). Through experiences of repetition, saliency, affect, operational conditioning and relationships, knowledge of the world is built with increasing association, elaboration, and organisation as adolescents age (Auerbach et al., 2015; Bohanek et al., 2008; Fivush et al., 2006; Vannucci et al., 2025).

During adolescence, researchers have also found that cognitive styles become more stable, including generalised negativity (Auerbach et al., 2014b). Adolescents with negative schemas and depressogenic symptoms (including worthlessness and helplessness) have been reported to recall a greater number of negative memories in addition to an impaired ability to recall positive memories (Auerbach et al., 2015; Collins & Waner, 2024). Not only might this suggest that the accumulation of negative experiences prompts the development of a negativity bias, but that experiencing disappointment during and after positive experiences can further prompt an avoidance of positivity due to fear of disappointment (Auerbach et al., 2014b; Auerbach et al., 2015; Collins & Waner, 2024; Cox, 2020). This latter pattern is referred to as reward devaluation theory (Winer & Salem, 2016).

Where schemas are likened to correlations, autobiographical narratives could be likened to epistemologies (theories of knowledge; Moon & Blackman, 2014). Autobiographical narratives are the organisation of past experiences and events into a meaningful order, offering temporal continuity between the past, present and future (Bohanek et al., 2008; Fivush et al., 2011; Waters & Fivush, 2015). Reese and colleagues' research support the notion that

autobiographical narratives are constructed through intrapersonal sense making and co-constructed through relationships and intergenerational transference (Reese et al., 2017). Researchers have explained that mothers who are more elaborate in reminiscing conversations with their child, as per recent and past experiences, contributes to the child's coherent autobiographical narrative development (Fivush et al., 2006; Reese et al., 2008). Elaborate reminiscing includes techniques of open ended (who, what, why, where, how) and close-ended questions (yes/no) if the information contains additional information (Fivush et al., 2006). In contrast, unelaborate reminiscing involves asking few or redundant questions that does not add extra detail (Fivush et al., 2006). The more details provided in conversation, the more the child will be able to recall (Fivush et al., 2006; Reese, Hayne, & MacDonald, 2008). Interpersonal elaborative reminiscing helps illustrate spatial and temporal events (such as time, people, and place), evaluation of the events (such as internal states and subjective judgments) and, thus, creates meaning (Fivush et al., 2006; Reese, Hayne, & MacDonald, 2008). Interpersonal reminiscing also adds to the metaphor described by Leon (2023), who explained that 'seeing oneself through the eyes of another' is an active social practice that contributes to how a person understands themselves as they are perceived by others.

Researchers living in Aotearoa New Zealand have found that autobiographical narratives may begin in childhood, with earliest memories of the self being recalled from 2.5 years of age for Māori adults and 3.5 years of age for Pākehā adults (MacDonald et al., 2000). Reese et al. (2008) found statistically moderate and significant differences in narrative quality between Māori and Pākehā mothers, where Māori mothers provided more elaborative detail, such as temporality and internal states for momentous events of their child's life, such as birth. They reflected on how there may be cultural differences in choosing the significance and prevalence of certain events; temporality, such as how time is established through whakapapa (genealogy); and acknowledgement for the fullness of the child's environments (Reese et al., 2008). For example, through practices of mihimihi (introductions about one's whole self), purakau (stories of Māori history, culture, values, and legends), and pūtaiao (science grounded in Te Ao Māori, including mātauranga/knowledge, te reo/language, and tikanga/custom); greater participation in whānau/family events; and broader presence of whānau/family engaging in narration (Reese et al., 2008; Sands, 2022). Such cultural practices could explain how Māori adults have earlier and more detailed memories than adults of other cultures (MacDonald et al., 2000; Reese et al., 2008).

During the process of developing autobiographical narrative, adolescents are reported as initially recalling collective memories from their caregivers' perspective while beginning to integrate their own interpretation of events as they develop their unique identity (Merrill, 2022; Reese et al., 2017). Their recall of autobiographical narratives is also illustrated with increased affective evaluations, which has a direct influence on their wellbeing during later adolescence and into young adulthood (Marshall & Reese, 2022; Reese et al., 2017). The context of intrapersonal and interpersonal interpretations of history and memories are also embedded in sociocultural narratives and histories, containing ideologies, experiences and narratives of events shared and differentiated amongst groups and populations of people (Merrill, 2022; Reese et al., 2017).

Although sociocultural ideologies and ways of living inform how people live and understand the world, sociocultural narratives do not solely exist as a “top-down” construct that shape human thought and behaviour, rather, humans construct, reinforce, and deconstruct sociocultural narratives (Fivush et al., 2011; McLean et al., 2023). In practice, this means is that when human tell and retell their autobiographical narratives, their experiences are guided by sociocultural values, which have the capacity to be modified by their environment and ongoing intrapersonal development (Fivush et al., 2011; Merrill, 2022). Adolescent development in physiological, cognitive, affective, behavioural, and relational domains comprise a complex trajectory of learning and consolidating, which could theoretically support both schema and autobiographical narrative theories when considering how humans make sense of their experiences and the world.

As an adolescent, Alex may be particularly concerned about how his peers think about his ability to cook, training his cooking skills while considering what others think (Crucius et al., 2022; Felson, 1993). He may have increased feelings of social anxiety as tends to be more common during early adolescence (Salari et al., 2024; Sebastian et al., 2008; van der Crujisen et al., 2023). Despite generally receiving positive feedback, however, if Alex has a general baseline of negative self-worth, his estimation of his competency and worthiness contingent upon cooking may be interpreted more negatively regardless of his measured ability to cook and developmental stage (Auerbach et al., 2014b; Collins & Waner, 2024). To protect his self-view, he may underestimate his cooking to keep others' expectations low or overestimate his cooking to keep his self-worth protected and aligned with how important cooking is to his family. He may have learnt to respond in these ways from past experiences of being regularly criticised for not doing good enough in other abilities, leading to self-schemas of generalised

incompetency and worthlessness (Crandall et al., 2024; Emerson et al., 2019). Because of the importance of cooking in his family, however, cooking may represent an early aspect of how his identity is shared with his family and genealogy, becoming a contingency of worth (Marshall & Reese, 2022; Merrill, 2022; Reese et al., 2017).

Summary

Although adolescence is marked with great uncertainty and some stabilisation of self-concept and identity, van der Crujisen et al. (2023) explained that this journey can encourage the embodiment of more appropriate or adaptive views of the self. Without new experiences and perspectives that contradict one's preconceived ideas, humans can become stuck in their way of thinking and prevent change (Tariq et al., 2021). For example, where schemas may have initially been adaptive eventually become 'maladaptive'. There is a lot to be gained by opening oneself up to learning new worldviews or ways of understanding who they are and what they are capable of. They may meet new social groups who align with their values and beliefs, or they may find a new sense of purpose and interest by engaging in activities they would not have otherwise considered. Additionally, opening oneself up to new worldviews can also go entirely against their best interests; placing them in greater risk of harm, introducing them to social circles that reinforce harmful behaviours and beliefs, and prevent them from opportunities that would have otherwise facilitated their autonomy. A core issue in this process is that perceptions can be both relative and objective. Through the many inconsistent, unpredictable, and uncertain life experiences, autobiographical narratives offer meaning, predictability, certainty, and continuity.

Young adulthood self-worth

The age band for young adulthood in this thesis spanned from 20 to 35 years of age, although some researchers suggest that young adulthood, also referred to as emerging adulthood, occurs between 18 and 25 years of age (Fuentes & Desrocher, 2012; Zhu, 2023). Young adults, like adolescents, continue to face significant transitions albeit with more experience to draw on, new motivations, and some clarity in identity (Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Kuwabara et al., 2007). Research on psychological wellbeing in young adulthood, however, has been mixed (observed increases in both self-esteem and depressive symptoms) (Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Gonzalez Avilés et al 2021; Zhu, 2023). Young adulthood is a period in which individuals explore and develop different aspects of the self and their identity through new occupations, values, and relationships (Waters & Fivush, 2015; Zhu, 2023). They

may do so in accordance with what they wish for themselves and what others expect of them (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). By taking on challenges with greater autonomy and responsibility than adolescence, young adults come to experience and learn different problem-solving skills and methods of coping (Zhu, 2023). This subchapter of young adulthood self-worth discusses different group identities in the development of the ‘self’, romantic relationships, role accumulation, the idealised self, and autobiographical narratives.

The development of the ‘self’

Self-concept development in young adulthood demonstrates both stabilising and fluctuating trajectories (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). Neurological research has shown that the brain fully develops around 26 years of age, with the prefrontal cortex (executive functions for problem solving, decision making, and critical thinking) being the last area to develop (Demo, 1992; Mills et al., 2021). Personalities during young adulthood (from around 25 years of age to early 30s) take a general shape while also being able to respond and adapt to different social audiences and demands (de Moor et al 2023; Bleidorn et al. 2022; Mills et al., 2021). Alongside these developments, young adults generally construct more sophisticated narratives to make sense of their experiences and memories (Turnbull, 2021; Merrill, 2022). Within the theoretical foundations of social identity theory, Turner developed self-categorisation theory to investigate the interaction between social and personal identities during intragroup processes (Trepte & Lo, 2017; Turner, 1999). This section of the developing ‘self’ introduces self-categorisation theory to reinforce the multiplicity of identities and potential effects on self-worth.

Self-categorisation theory stipulates that behaviour is motivated by situations that reveal different parts of one’s social and personal identities (Trepte & Lo, 2017; Turner, 1999). For example, a young man is likely to express himself differently around his colleagues than with his friends. Self-categorisation accentuates different aspects of his social identity as they become more salient, which may be more readily expressed as per the norms of a group and demands of a role (Trepte & Lo, 2017). This process shares similarities to the ‘social investment principle’, which suggests that people adapt and express different personality traits to fit the demands of a role and functions within a group, becoming increasingly agreeable and conscientious (de Moor et al 2022; Hang et al., 2023; Roberts et al 2005). de Moor et al. (2023) tested the social investment principle with a participant group of young adults entering new jobs. They found that performing new traits was expressed temporarily, supporting the notion that a person’s traits are also stable. This may support why Hang et al. (2023) found somewhat limited evidence to the social investment principle, such that the longitudinal effects of

changing one's behaviours and aspects of their personality to fit social expectations is inconclusive due to context and gravity of social expectations. Yet, self-categorisation theory and the social investment principle suggest that a person's personal and social identities can accentuate and withdraw as per the context or role, and that there is an underlying stability to who a person is (Trepte & Lo, 2017).

Whereas León (2023) contended that self-categorisation theory does not sufficiently explain shared identities in close personal relationships, such as family, friends, and romantic relationships. That is, togetherness does not categorically 'depersonalise' or shift from a personal to a social identity. León (2023) referred to a 'we-identity' to acknowledge how complex connections bring people together in a shared 'oneness', rather than reducing the group on a series of externalised classifications that are used to identify a *group identity*, *social identity*, and *collective identity*. For example, a man may find that his gender identity is distinct when in the presence of women, but the 'we-identity' in his friendship group of different genders encompasses all members' unique and shared traits, remaining as one. León (2023) considered that, as per the 'we-identity', personal and social identities modulate with similarities and differences, rather than being defined by categorical constructs, which risks assuming homogeneity and generalisations.

"One should also make room for the idea that *social identities* are typically enabling conditions for the formation of close relationships, insofar as an appreciation of interpersonal differences and a recognition of the uniqueness of another tend to happen against a background of recognized similarities...we-ness involves an appreciation of complementarity and difference, since each party contributes to the relationship in a different way." (León, 2023, p15).

Psychological mechanisms described in social identity theory, self-comparison theory, and homonymy could affect how self-appraisals of one's worth comprise of salient differences and sharedness (Crucius et al., 2022; León, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2004). For example, a single man may evaluate his self-worth contingent upon intimate relationships compared to friends who are in romantic relationships; a social comparison to members of an in-group (Crucius et al., 2022). The single man may appraise his self-worth according to conditions that are shared, complementary and differentiated from these friendships, as his notions of a worthwhile intimate relationship contain his own values and narratives; recognising that 'we-identities' are not homogenous (León, 2023). He may appraise what elements make up his friends'

desirability, compared to his own traits and beliefs of desirability. He may also dialectically experience feelings of worthiness and worthlessness if he perceives his traits to be worthy and grieves not having a partner. His self-appraisal of worth is arguably in constant motion. However, if his self-worth for relationships is not contingent upon romance but other measures of intimacy (such as the sense of closeness, mutuality, security and trust in platonic relationships), other relationships can act as a protective factor from feeling worthless (Van Petegem et al., 2018; Zeigler-Hill, 2013).

Framework of self-worth

Feelings of worthiness and worthlessness can modulate depending on the context and audience at a given time. Contingencies of worth are the domains of life where a person holds value when defining their sense of self (Crocker et al 2003). In young adulthood, contingencies of self-worth become more intersectional as young adults transition into new contexts of life (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017; Merrill, 2022). The experiences and narratives of new audience members could elicit memories of one's personal history, raising questions about the congruence for the principles, values, beliefs, and morality of a past and present self (Merrill, 2022). While changes in self-worth may become uncertain and liminal, feelings of worthlessness can be motivating if a person desires to make amends for past mistakes (behaviours and beliefs) and aspires to become someone who they consider worthy or ideal (Ismail & Tekke, 2015).

Relationships

A significant domain of contemporary human life is romantic relationships and, as some may place romantic relationships as a more significant contingency of worth than others (Crocker et al., 2003). Researchers have attempted to capture typical developments in romantic relationships from adolescence to young adulthood (Jamison & Sanner, 2021; Lantagne & Furman, 2017). Namely, romantic relationships in young adulthood tend to become more significant in their effects on psychological wellbeing, intimacy, social support and resources, and length of time (Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Jamison & Sanner, 2021; Kuwabara et al., 2007; Lantagne & Furman, 2017). However, the quality and satisfaction of romantic relationships do not necessarily improve during young adulthood, even if romantic relationships start resembling qualities of mature, adult, long-term relationships (Jamison & Sanner, 2021; Lantagne & Furman, 2017; Lemay Jr. & Spongberg, 2015). A significant factor of relationship quality is reported to be perceptions of being valued by partners (Lemay Jr. & Spongberg, 2015)

This section will consider how sociocultural, interpersonal and intrapersonal attributes of romantic relationships affect contingencies of self-worth.

From a sociocultural perspective, master narratives (dominant sociocultural scripts) of romantic relationships have shifted rapidly over history, including the function of partnerships (union of two families, business advantages, political ties), notions of romance and intimacy, and acceptability of partnerships (Cross & Joo, 2023; Few-Demo & Allen, 2023; Ray, 2018). Dominant hegemonies typically promote heterosexual monogamy as the accepted form of intimacy, where adults are expected to enter a dyad of a cisgendered man and woman who are committed to only each other (Bollas, 2023; Few-Demo & Allen, 2023; Ray, 2018). The degree to which sexual hegemonies are upheld intersects with cultural and subcultural narratives for the values of romantic relationships in different communities, including religious, socioeconomic status (SES), and ethnicity (Cross & Joo, 2023; Few-Demo & Allen, 2023). That is, even if a heterosexual monogamous structure suits the couple, if one of the members comes from a different socioeconomic background, ethnicity, or generation (age), competing conditions of worth may need to be navigated, including the expectations and role of parents for the partnership (Cross & Joo, 2023; Jamison & Sanner, 2021). While master narratives of romantic relationships contain complex histories, values, and norms, its structures prescribe the acceptability of romance and partnerships, deeming who is “worthy” of a partnership and whose partnership is legitimate (Bollas, 2023; Cross & Joo, 2023; Herek et al., 2009; Ray, 2018).

From an interpersonal position, couples also then negotiate their personal goals, wants and needs for a romantic relationship, which include conditions of worth (Jamison & Sanner, 2021). Conditions may include values around health (physical, mental, spiritual, and financial), sexual intimacy, gendered roles and responsibilities, and children (Camirand & Poulin, 2022; Jamison & Sanner, 2021). Conditions of worth may also include personality traits, physical attributes, and attitudes (Cross & Joo, 2023; Overstreet & Quinn, 2012). As an example, financial circumstances are an important domain of a romantic relationship (Ward et al., 2021). The conditions of worth as per financial circumstances may include financial literacy, spending behaviours (frugality, flexibility), assets (housing, shares, art), and SES (Cross & Joo, 2023; Ward et al., 2021). As a couple, one individual may value financially supporting their family, whereas another individual may value counting every cent lent. While gauging the harmony of each other’s financial circumstances, other contingencies and conditions of worth for the

relationship may intersect, such as conditions of success, independence, and interdependence (Overstreet & Quinn, 2012; Ward et al., 2021).

Intrapersonally, the conditions of worth negotiated between couples may shape how each person feels about their self-worth contingent upon romantic relationships. However, the structure of heterosexual monogamy does not fit all human needs and identities (Few-Demo & Allen, 2023). For example, if a man experiences his social environment as stigmatising queer identities, he may find it safer to withhold his sexuality from stigma to maintain closeness with his family, friends, and acquaintances (Brozowski et al., 2025; Goffnet et al., 2021; Herek et al., 2009). In reference to the psychological mechanisms in social identity theory and self-categorisation theory, he may accentuate the shared characteristics to maintain in-group membership or we-identity, in addition to experiencing a level of internalised stigma for living with the characteristics of devalued people (Goffnet et al., 2021; Herek et al., 2009; León, 2023). The man's self-worth contingent upon romantic relationships may elicit feelings of shame, rejection, humiliation, and attitudes/perceptions of immorality and disorder for not fitting into romantic and sexual hegemonies (Bollas, 2023; Brozowski et al., 2025; Herek et al., 2009). This context also reinforces how in-group membership can exist independent of whether a person seeks active membership (León, 2023; Trepte & Loy, 2017).

Romantic relationships introduce highly intersectional contingencies and conditions of worth. As with other close connections and 'we-identities', romantic relationships are intricately linked to the sense of belonging, a basic psychological need (León, 2023; Ryan & Deci, 2004; Ward et al., 2021). Despite the commonness of romantic relationships as part of human development, not all young adults will fit into the dominant structures stipulated by their sociocultural context; never mind how dominant structures of romantic relationships changed due to geopolitical agendas, such as colonisation (Adjei & Mpiani, 2023; Stewart, 2023). Some humans desire romantic relationships and do not experience sexual attraction, and their sense of belonging may not be compromised if they have meaningful support and connection (Brozowski et al., 2025). Yet because their experience is different from what is expected, they may question their identity as sitting outside of what is accepted or prescribed (Brozowski et al., 2025). In this way, they may question whether they remain a person of worth despite experiencing romance and sexual attraction differently. One's sense of self-worth is challenged if their personal characteristics are saliently differentiated and devalued from other qualities that are embodied and shared.

Autonomy

The transition from adolescence to young adulthood tends to coincide with the uptake of adult responsibilities and social roles, including employment, intimate partnerships and parenting, and recreational activities (Kuwabara et al., 2007). Some research has indicated that self-esteem can increase during young adulthood, in part due to role accumulation (Kuwabara et al., 2007; Weber et al., 2023). The relationship between roles and responsibilities and psychological wellbeing are affected by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and the three basic psychological needs (autonomy, competency, and relatedness) as set out in self-determination theory as well as role accumulation and strain (Ryan & Deci, 2020; Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012). This section will explore how self-determination theory and role accumulation and strain could affect self-worth.

According to self-determination theory, the relative wellbeing and success in performing tasks is affected by intrinsic and extrinsic motivation (Deci et al., 2017). Deci et al. (2017) explained that if a person experiences intrinsic motivation (actions that rest in enjoyment and interest), their performance generally increases in quality as does their personal wellbeing (Deci et al., 2017). Extrinsic motivation (actions that rest on contingencies of reward or punishment, also referred to as ‘instrumental behaviours’), can functionally enhance, impair, or have negligible effects on intrinsic motivation, performance, and wellbeing (Deci et al., 2017). For example, contingent rewards and threats (such as remuneration and promotion in an occupation) have been shown to negatively affect performance because perceived autonomy and competence become contingent upon the reward, not the work itself (Deci et al., 2017). Here, conditions of worth shift one’s perception of their work from a sense of internal locus of control and effectiveness to an external locus of control and external regulation (other’s judgments of their competence) (Deci et al., 2017). This could mean that if one’s performance in a role does not meet external conditions of worth, feelings of worthlessness and inadequacy may arise. This effect may help explain why Ryan and Deci (2004) emphasised that *feeling* a sense of autonomy, competence, and relatedness predominantly affects psychological wellbeing and performance more than evidence of skill or formal role status (Ryan & Deci, 2004).

According to role accumulation theory, people who voluntarily accumulate social roles tend to show increased psychological wellbeing, where what is offered by the privileges and responsibilities associated with roles outweighs the compounding stress (Martinez, 2010; Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012). Whereas role strain proposes that individuals may experience

challenges in performing the demands of a role due to high demands and/or a lack of support and resources (Fontaine, 2019; Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012). Mize and Kincaid (2025) described that some roles have a greater sense of obligation, including the role of a parent, family member, spouse and employee, and some roles have greater sense of voluntariness, including roles related to recreational activities, hobbies, and lesser intimate relationships (such as acquaintances). Obligatory roles reportedly contain higher stakes for a person's life, eliciting a greater sense of meaning, purpose and commitment, whereas voluntary roles have lower stakes in a person's life, eliciting a greater sense of freedom and choice (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012). Mize and Kincaid (2025) considered that psychological wellbeing is threatened when the stress of obligatory roles feels inescapable, as compared to voluntary roles, which can be more readily discontinued. Yet they also suggested that individuals can exit obligatory roles and reenter under new circumstances, such as changing employment or romantic relationships (Mize & Kincaid, 2025). Performing obligatory roles, when supported adequately, can garner greater fulfilment compared to voluntary roles (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012).

As for how this may affect young adults, Kuwabara et al. (2007) described how young adults with depression struggled with upholding the sociocultural expectation that they must "settle down and conform to a productive adult life". The participants emphasised concerns in meeting parents' expectations, feeling misunderstood, exhausted from appearing normal, and shameful for being depressed. The young adults held these concerns in light of role transitions and major life milestones, illustrated by a want for satisfaction, concern for the future, and feeling behind compared to peers (Kuwabara et al., 2007). How a person upholds responsibilities attached to roles may be explicitly and directly measured as well as socially constructed and judged through perception (self and other, assumed or actual) (Fontaine, 2019; Deci et al., 2017; Thoits, 2012). Additionally, a person's capacity to fulfil their roles and responsibilities, such as time and resource availability (from financial to psychological), may compromise their sense of self-worth in performing roles (Thoits, 2012).

Role accumulation theory and role strain highlight how different roles and responsibilities are accompanied with varying degrees of obligatoriness, purpose and value, and effects on identity. Whereas self-determination theory focuses more on the underlying intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that aids performance and wellbeing. Intrapersonally, social roles can elicit feelings of accomplishment when performing tasks (a sense of mastery), a sense of identity, and a sense of control over one's life trajectory (such as working towards an

idealised self) (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Thoits, 2012). Interpersonally, social roles provide a sense of collective identity, belonging and pride as their contributions can benefit others, and the sense of feeling valued and appreciated (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012). Socioculturally, embodying social roles can enact the sense of upholding ethics of autonomy, community, and divinity (Shweder et al., 1997; Thoits, 2012). Self-determination theory can be used to explain how role accumulation and strain independently affect self-worth, such as whether performance in roles attend to one's basic psychological needs of need for agency, efficacy, and belonging (Deci et al., 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2004; Thoits, 2012). However, performance in a role is also determined by structured measurement and perception, and rewards and threats, which will also affect one's intrinsic and extrinsic motivation as well as the sense of wellbeing and strain (Thoits, 2012).

Morality

This section of morality in young adulthood considers the notion of an 'idealised self' as per intrapersonal and sociocultural scripts of morality. The 'idealised self' illustrates images of what a person hopes for, who one 'should' be, what they consider to be 'good', and a 'possible' self that is comparable to the 'actual' self (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2021; Demo, 1992; Zhu et al., 2019). The 'actual' or 'real' self is based on an arguably more objective evaluation of oneself in the present (Ismail & Tekke, 2015; Mälar et al., 2011). The intrapersonal 'idealised self' is argued as interacting with external conditions of worth, such as what is endorsed socioculturally. This section discusses how the 'idealised self' functions, how the 'idealised self' can be accessed, and how the 'idealised self' can be disrupted, thus, potentially shifting contingencies of worth.

During young adulthood, the idealised self may become more prominent in the pursuit of aspirational goals for the present and future self (Kuwabara et al., 2007; Zhu, 2023). The idealised self contains purpose and meaning, personal values and philosophies, and personal and social identities (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2021; Zhu et al., 2019). Ideals contain themes of pride and agency, such that the idealised self will have achieved a level of value after acting upon one's purpose, beliefs, and identities (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2021; Zogaj et al., 2024). The 'idealised self', thus, contains temporal, aspirational and ideological contingencies of worth, which is used as a template to gauge the status of one's current prospection for personal adequacy and worthiness (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2021). To understand the influence of sociocultural scripts of morality on the 'idealised self', self-congruence theory is an example of how external conditions of the good and 'ideal' person facilitate introjected conditions of worth.

In taking a lens of the ‘material self’, an identity conceived by James (1890) relating to one’s body, ‘foppery’, acquisitions and wealth, commercial companies aim to connect with consumers by persuading them to purchase their products that align to their actual and ideal self (James, 1890; Mälar et al., 2011; Zhu et al., 2019). In marketing, aligning self-concepts to inspire purchasing is based on self-congruence theory, which posits that consumers evaluate products according to qualities of the actual and ideal self thereby influencing purchasing behaviour and brand perception (Ekinici & Riley, 2003; Sirgy & Samli, 1985; Zhu et al., 2019). If a consumer recognises themselves in the product, motivated by self-consistency (the actual self) or self-enhancement (the ideal self), there is congruence or harmony with their self-concept, and they are more likely to purchase the product (Zhu et al., 2019). Self-congruence with products has shown enhancing effects on measures of self-esteem, authenticity, and wellbeing, although some researchers have noted that the benefits of self-congruence and disadvantages of self-incongruence are not linear (Huber et al., 2025; Mälar et al., 2011; Zogaj et al., 2024).

One way in which companies have influenced men’s purchasing behaviour is by presenting masculine archetypes including the ‘ruler’, ‘magician’, ‘lover’, ‘hero’, ‘caregiver’, ‘everyman’, and ‘outlaw’ (Kreicbergs et al., 2024). These archetypes contain traditional (aggressive and dominant), hybrid (strategic and adaptable), and modern (openminded and expressive) masculine characteristics, which are also contrasted against feminine characteristics portraying grace, gentleness, elegance, seductiveness, refinement, and charm (Kreicbergs et al., 2024; Ulrich & Tissier-Desbordes, 2017). With this view, self-worth and identity are not solely influenced by intrapersonal notions of an ideal self and one’s identity, but by ideological social standards broadcasted across multimedia platforms (Arias, 2019; Zogaj et al., 2024). In doing so, multimedia platforms and companies have the capacity to signal, reinforce, and disrupt sociocultural structures of morality and human value (Arias, 2019).

While marketing strategies and multimedia platforms can reproduce sociocultural characteristics of an ‘ideal self’, the ‘ideal self’ may also become more apparent following a marked disruption or change to one’s life circumstances; relationship developments (building intimate partnerships, breaking up) and role transitions (accumulation, discontinuation), or significant events (death, injury) (Boyatzis & Ghar, 2021). For example, acquiring a significant brain injury can markedly disrupt the pursuit of becoming a professional athlete and other components of an ‘idealised self’ attached to the career (Ownsworth & Haslam, 2016).

Conditions of worth in relation to becoming a professional athlete may now challenge the immediate self-appraisal of one's worth and trajectory of an idealised self that previously defined one's purpose, values, and identities (Ownsworth & Haslam, 2016). A significant injury could elicit the sense of grief or a loss of self, which could be attributed to the change in preexisting identity and unknown future of what now defines a worthy person (Ownsworth & Haslam, 2016).

The period of young adulthood tends to comprise of greater autonomous responsibility, thus, there can be immense pressure and uncertainty when assessing one's proximity to an 'idealised self'; through relationships (familial, peer, romantic, and occupational), actions (values, roles, and responsibilities), events and narratives, and identity formation (Fuentes & Desrocher, 2012; Kuwabara et al., 2007; Merrill, 2022). Conditions of the 'idealised self' may comprise of subtle and significant scripts of morality; from purchasing a razorblade that inspires masculinities to the sudden change in one's self-concept due to a significant injury (Ownsworth & Haslam, 2016; Ulrich & Tissier-Desbordes, 2017). In attempt to meet external conditions of worth, people may judge proximity to an idealised self and to others as per upward and downward social comparisons; the three basic psychological needs in self-determination theory; and be guided by temporal expressions of morality, past, present, and future (Kuwabara et al., 2007; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Smith, 2000).

Sense making: autobiographical narratives and intersecting contingencies of worth

Narrative identities contain privately contextualized cognitions of one's traits and actions over time, offering reasons for why and how a person is in light of personal events and relational experiences (Marshall, 2023; Waters & Fivush, 2015). McAdams (2013) proposed that autobiographical narratives take form during young adulthood as personality traits and intrinsic and extrinsic motivations start solidifying. During young adulthood, however, autobiographical narratives may take a more prominent form due to young adults' relative independence, increase in responsibilities, sociocultural beliefs about the self, the measured stability of personality traits during late twenties, and developed ability for logic, argument, and coherence and continuity over time (Marshall, 2023; Merrill, 2022). Narrative researchers have also proposed that, in addition to goals and motivations, values, beliefs, and schemas are shaped by sociocultural structures intersecting with intrapersonal decisions (Marshall, 2023; McAdams, 2013; Merrill, 2022). These structures are intimately tied to sociocultural perspectives of identity and self-concepts, such that autobiographical narratives with a 'beginning, middle, and end' format tend to be understood in Western countries, such as the

United States of America (Marshall, 2023; Li et al., 2018). This is comparable to Eastern countries, such as China, who may perceive their narratives in episodic and holistic formats (Li et al., 2018).

Marshall (2023) described that thematic coherence, more so than contextual and chronological coherence, was associated with wellbeing (subjective and psychological). In other words, the valence of meaning and elaboration in narrative identities has been found to influence symptoms of mental distress and flourishing (Marshall, 2023). These results are comparable to research on self-schemas, whereby positive self-schemas tend to create a linear progression for further positive self-schemas, and that negative self-schemas lead to further negative self-schemas and fewer positive self-schemas (Kennerley et al., 2017). Self-schemas could play a role in how autobiographical narratives are authored and maintained due to longstanding beliefs about the self and how the self relates to others (Marshall, 2023). If the context or environment changes, however, people may hear new reasoning and nuances regarding perceptions of human value, such as through accommodation in schema development (Dorko, 2019; Zhiqing, 2015). New perspectives of human value may promote the reconsideration of how one's experiences and thematic coherence in autobiographical narratives were learnt out of necessity and not due to a core *truth* about the self (Gruhn & Compas, 2020; Vermiere, 2020).

To return to Alex as a young adult, Alex has generally received positive feedback about his cooking skills. Because of how cooking is both a family value and identity, and a contingency of worth, Alex may engage in self-appraisals about his cooking more regularly and sensitively compared to others (Crocker et al., 2002; Thoits, 2012). His appraisal of the perceived value of cooking occurs at a snapshot in time and place, meaning that his self-appraisal considers the conditions in which cooking is valued, how other people value cooking, whether he is being actively judged on his cooking, and other contingencies that Alex refers to when defining his worth. Alex negotiates his self-worth according to his personal experiences and autobiographical narratives (in general and specific to the contingency of worth in cooking), and other people's narratives about cooking, which will comprise their own histories and diverse perspectives of cooking.

With reference to social comparison theory, if Alex is surrounded by professional chefs, his self-appraisal of cooking could increase if he feels inspired and/or decrease if he feels inadequate (Smith, 2000). With reference to self-determination theory, role accumulation and

role strain, if Alex is surrounded by people who expect him to cook or do not know how to cook, his self-worth in cooking could increase because he feels effective and helpful or decrease if he feels relegated to cooking in favour of perceivably more ‘valuable’ tasks (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Thoits, 2012). His intrinsic motivation may be enhanced by the internal advantage and benefit of performing a task that suits his role and skills, and he may feel pressured via extrinsic motivations, grounded in what others expect from him (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Thoits, 2012). If a group broadly perceives cooking as a low rank task, Alex may feel as though his worth (or contribution to the group) is devalued, which may be relevant to social comparisons of occupation intersecting with sociocultural perspectives of gendered roles (Fontaine, 2019; Thoits, 2012). His feelings of worthlessness may be appropriate if the perceived value of cooking is congruent to others’ actual negative judgments and devaluations.

Unless his audience are transparent about their attitudes towards cooking, Alex may appraise others’ perceptions of his worth based on educated guesses (such as history, observed patterns), intuition, and psychological defense mechanisms to protect his self-view (such as negative biases and affectivity). Alex may also design his kitchen environment to represent his identity via atmospheric qualities, further evaluating whether his material belongings add congruence to his idealised self (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). Alex’s appraisal of self-worth contingent upon cooking depends on the conditions and context that may not be immediately obvious. With a different context and audience, however, his self-appraisal could improve as the value of cooking changes.

Summary

Autobiographical narratives are deeply intertwined with intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural perspectives and histories, with the capacity to be shaped and reshaped upon new audiences and contexts (Hang et al., 2023; Merrill, 2022; Turnbull, 2021). With respect to the diversity of human experience, some young adults may have undertaken vastly different roles and responsibilities according to ethics of community, divinity, and autonomy during childhood and adolescence (Lodi-Smith et al., 2017; Shweder et al., 1997; Thoits, 2012). Feelings of worthiness may be elicited when roles, responsibilities, and relationships elicit a sense of mastery, pride, and autonomy to act in accordance with their values (Ryan & Deci, 2004; Thoits, 2012). Feelings of worthlessness could be brief and motivating if the person feels supported to change strategies to meet external conditions of worth (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). There is a complex interaction between personal dispositions (such as personality traits), experiences, motivations, and contexts that challenge whether feelings of worthlessness are the

result of intrapersonal dysfunction or a response to genuine social devaluation. For the latter, feelings of worthlessness may be a functional response to socially constructed hierarchies of traits and characteristics that bear no or little ontological truth. Recognising the historical perceptions of self-worth has important clinical implications, whether related to depression or other form of mental distress.

Middle adulthood self-worth

The age band for ‘middle adulthood’ in this thesis is from ages 36 to 60, which accounts for a combination of young adult, adult and older adulthood age bands according to some doctrines (Pulkkinen, 2017). Thus far, each stage of life has confronted new challenges, experiments, transitions, and relationships in accordance with individual and shared beliefs, attitudes, and expectations for living. In addition to intrapersonal predispositions, enough experiences of devaluation or threat detection in one’s environment can lead people to confirm evidence of their worth by only referring to negative situations, interpret neutral situations as negative, and overlook positive details and counter evidence (Bath, 2019). This section of middle adulthood focuses more on the intrapersonal experiences of worthlessness: a dialectical approach to how self-concepts affect mental distress, exploring how worthlessness (as per the contingencies of worth) perpetuates mental distress, and incorporating a cognitive behavioural lens of worthlessness in the ‘making sense’ subsection. This section also argues against the notion that one’s identity or sense of self is not solely challenged during adolescence and young adulthood but may recur in later life.

Development of the ‘self’

There is generally consistent evidence regarding the stability and coherence of self-concepts and its effects on mental distress across the lifespan with increasing stability from young adulthood (Hertel et al., 2024, Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). Self-concept clarity (SCC) is defined as “the extent to which the contents of an individual’s self-concept (e.g., personal attributes) are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and temporally stable” (Campbell et al., 1996, p. 141; Lodi-Smith et al., 2017). High SCC is reported to increase psychological wellbeing on dimensions of autonomy, environmental mastery (control over activities and opportunities), personal growth, positive relations with others, purpose in life, and self-acceptance (Diehl & Hay, 2011). Low SCC has been associated with an increase of psychological distress (stress, anxiety, and depression), low psychological wellbeing, and sensitivity to external feedback due to a sense of fragmentation of the self (Diehl & Hay, 2011;

Hertel et al., 2024; Pilarska, 2016; Weber et al., 2023). Self-concept differentiation (SCD), on the other hand, is defined as the “tendency to see oneself as having different personality characteristics in different social roles” (Donahue et al., 1992; p. 834). High SCD has been found to be related to intrapersonal and social difficulties, but also with adaptability to complex social situations (Diehl & Hay, 2011; Pilarska, 2016). SCD and SCC are strongly correlated, yet distinct in their focus: SCD emphasises social roles (such as friend, family member, and employee), while SCC refers to general self-beliefs and traits (Bigler et al., 2001; Pilarska, 2016).

Two key implications for this research include causation and qualitative differences in self-concept content. Regarding causation, it is unclear whether measures of psychological wellbeing and psychological distress cause the increase or decrease of SCC and SCD, or whether ratings of SCC and SCD lead to increases or decreases in psychological wellbeing and psychological distress. The issue of causation is also challenged by qualitative differences in self-concept content for those with recurring depression. Depression has been associated with negative self-descriptions and few positive self-descriptions (Cox, 2020; Kennerley et al., 2017). If individuals describe themselves negatively across contexts (i.e. generalised and without any positive descriptions), it is conceivable that a person may demonstrate a higher SCC and lower SCD with chronically negative self-descriptions, or negative self-schemas (enduring core beliefs), which act as guides to the world (Jopling et al., 2020).

An alternative theory of self-concept coherence with greater emphasis on temporality of identity, is diachronic unity. Diachronic unity (continuous identity) is the perception that, despite developments, deviations and events, the same self is present over time (Prebble et al., 2013; Turnbull, 2021). Sokol and Serper (2017) explained that ‘euthymic’ people tend to demonstrate a temporal positive linear perception of the self, such that perception of the present self is appraised more positively than the past, and the future self is appraised more positively than the present. Researchers have argued that a coherent autobiographical narrative and consistent sense of identity contribute to psychological wellbeing (Waters & Fivush, 2015). On the other hand, diachronic disunity (low or discontinuous identity) is a disconnected perception of the self across time, resulting in a feeling of not knowing oneself and the alienation from the self (Flury & Ickes, 2007; Turnbull, 2021; Waters & Fivush, 2015). Sokol and Serper (2017) found that people with depression appraised their past and future selves significantly more positively than the present, and that their future and past self were not significantly different from each other. The greater the difference in diachronic disunity was also associated with a

worsening depressed mood (Sokol & Serper, 2017). Researchers have also found diachronic disunity to be associated with impulsiveness, suicidality, and risky behaviours (Sokol & Serper, 2017; Sokol & Serper, 2019).

SCC, SCD, and diachronic unity appear to be conceptually and evidentially similar in that a consistent and adaptable sense of self can contribute to positive psychological wellbeing (Waters & Fivush, 2015). Regarding age bands, young, middle, and older adulthood are not consistently quantitatively different in ratings of self-concept and psychological wellbeing but are more likely qualitatively different due to life stages and pressures (Diehl & Hay, 2010). SCC and SCD may increase positive psychological wellbeing if the person feels self-assured and unencumbered, potentially embodying a sense of certainty and acceptance of consistency and adaptability (Diehl & Hay, 2011). Similarly, diachronic unity may also offer leniency in accepting that humans will explore, test, perform, and grow different parts of the self for different contexts while maintaining a coherent self (McVee et al., 2005; Vygotsky, 1978). For self-worth, SCC and SCD could offer insight into the relative clarity and consistency one has had in knowing their worth and accepting instances where their worth has been appraised differently. Whereas diachronic disunity could offer insight into why self-worth in the present is measurably lower than the worth of a past and future self, which are comparable to each other (Sokol & Serper, 2017).

Framework of self-worth

SCC, SCD, and diachronic unity challenges the reconciliation of one's self-concept and identity with who they have been, who they are, and who they would like to be. Self-discrepancy theory suggests that discrepancies between the actual, ideal, and ought selves can lead to distress depending on the affective experience of the discrepancy (Higgins et al., 1987; Schlechter et al., 2022). The actual self is considered a more realistic and objective reflection of the present self, the ideal self contains aspirations, and the ought self contains obligations and duties (Higgins, 1987). Self-discrepancy theory suggests that it is *unwanted* differentiation between the actual, ideal, and ought selves that causes distress (Schlechter et al., 2022). In this way, positive psychological wellbeing could involve a level of acceptance of the self while negative psychological wellbeing could involve a form of rejecting the self or a sense of unwanted incongruence (Diehl & Hay, 2011). Differences in self-appraisals for contingencies of worth could also operate similarly, such that if one's worth is appraised differently to what was expected yet *accepted*, one's psychological wellbeing may be less affected. Whereas if the individual does not accept discrepancies or ratings of their appraised

worth, this may negatively affect their psychological wellbeing. Self-discrepancy theory will be used as a guide for the middle adulthood framework of self-worth.

Relationships

Researchers have shown the significance of social connectedness and the need to belong as a measure of psychological health (Allen et al., 2022; Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Dienst et al., 2023; Yöyen & Keleş, 2024). Several known acute and chronic factors increase the risk of suicide, such as sudden life events (death, divorce, affairs, and job loss), adverse childhood experiences (neglect, abuse, and family members' exposure to harm), and different forms of mental distress (Yöyen & Keleş, 2024). These experiences contain significant and lasting effects on psychological wellbeing and self-perceptions, which may help explain why some die by suicide despite appearing to 'have everything' be it a home, a family, a community, skills and talent, a successful career and great admiration (Joiner, 2005). Given the association between worthlessness and suicidality, the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide is explored for this section on relationships (Joiner, 2005; Pulcu et al., 2013).

Joiner's interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide postulates that perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belonging instil suicidal ideation, and an acquired capability for self-injury facilitates suicidal behaviours (Joiner, 2005; Joiner et al., 2009). Perceived burdensomeness was described as a sense of ineffectiveness, that one's existence burdens others, and that their death will be worth more to their loved ones than their life (Joiner, 2005; Joiner et al., 2009). Thwarted belonging was described as a low sense of belonging, social alienation, and the belief that one is not an important part of a group (family, friends, or other; Joiner, 2005; Joiner et al., 2009; Yöyen & Keleş, 2024). The capacity for suicide was believed to be acquired via exposure and habituation towards lethal self-injury, overcoming the human instinct for self-preservation (Joiner, 2005; Joiner et al., 2009; Yöyen & Keleş, 2024). Joiner's model focuses on the psychological pain of perceiving oneself as a burden and unimportant to others, despite evidence that counter those perceptions (Joiner, 2005; Joiner et al., 2009).

More recently, researchers have found that thwarted belonging acts as a heterogeneous variable in its relationship to suicidality (Dienst et al., 2023; Espinosa-Salido et al., 2021). That is, the relative need to belong varies across humans, and those with a higher need to belong are at greater risk of suicidality if they experience thwarted belonging compared to a low need to belong (Dienst et al., 2023). Perceived burdensomeness has also appeared to be a stronger predictor of suicidality across a broader range of negative emotional states and styles of coping

(Espinosa-Salido et al., 2021). In this way, suicidal risk can increase despite having deeply meaningful and loving relationships (Dienst et al., 2023; Espinosa-Salido et al., 2021). How self-worth could relate to perceived burdensomeness may depend on the specific contingencies and conditions of worth being assessed and how effective one feels according to those measures (Ismail & Tekke, 2015). For example, a person who tries to protect the family from harm (such as in a role or responsibility) may perceive oneself as having failed them, thereby increasing the sense of ineffectiveness, inadequacy, shame, and perceived burdensomeness (Joiner, 2005; Yöyen & Keleş, 2024).

The sense of social disconnection bidirectionally relates to symptoms of mental distress, including negative self-concepts (such as worthlessness), depressed or empty mood, emotional dysregulation, disturbed sleep, social isolation, excessive guilt or shame, maladaptive coping skills and chronic stress (Dienst et al., 2023). For example, feeling disconnected can result in social withdrawal, and the distancing increases the perception of evidence that the person is socially disconnected, which may perpetuate feelings of worthlessness, feelings of inadequacy, shame, or beliefs of defectiveness (Suicide Mortality Review Committee, 2019; Yöyen & Keleş, 2024). Where psychological research has often emphasised the intrapersonal factors (personal experiences, behaviours and cognitions) that increase suicide risk, sociocultural and environmental factors contribute to the perception and practice of human valuation.

Addressing sociocultural narratives of human value extends upon qualitative factors that could illuminate intrapersonal expressions of worthlessness (Suicide Mortality Review Committee, 2019). For example, researchers have consistently found increased rates of completed suicide in populations who are underserved, including indigenous, diverse genders and sexualities, and low SES groups (Beautrais et al. 2006; Haregu et al., 2022; Suicide Mortality Review Committee, 2019; Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand, 2025; Wittgens et al., 2021). The words ‘underserved’ and ‘marginalised’ exemplify how human value has been prioritised (Browne et al., 2012). Sociocultural narratives of human value not only shape perceptions of human value but influence the design of systems through allocation of resources and support. Intrapersonally, the discrepancy between the actual, ought, and ideal selves is then not just solely due to personal expectations and preferences, but in relation to broader external conditions of worth dictating who and how people ought to aspire to (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2022; Schlechter et al., 2022; Suicide Mortality Review Committee, 2019). These frameworks could be useful for research and clinical contexts to help explain what contingencies of worth are

contributing to expressions of thwarted belonging, perceived burdensomeness, and capacity to self-injure.

Autonomy

According to identity theory, identity contains assigned meanings in roles, social groups, and personally-distinct characteristics and traits (Burke & Cerven, 2019). Identity is also reportedly determined by its subjective level of importance, likelihood of being activated, and commitment to the associated social structure (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Thoits, 2013). The relationship between identity and action is bidirectional, such that enacting one elicits the other (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Thoits, 2013). These conceptions of identity focus on autonomous and cognitive mechanisms of one's identity (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Thoits, 2013). Physical characteristics or personally distinct traits are not necessarily chosen as part of one's identity yet invite some of the most contentious conceptions in the morality of human identity (Bollas, 2023). This section of autonomy in middle adulthood will explore identities as both embodied and socially constructed. These constructions are argued as influencing self-determination, self-worth, and self-discrepancy.

The "identity accumulation hypothesis" suggests that personal meaning is drawn from the sense of connectedness and belonging to social roles, which increases psychological wellbeing, self-worth, and greater attachment and integration into the respective social structure (Burke & Cerven, 2019). The identity accumulation hypothesis draws similarities to both the role accumulation theory and the association between identity (e.g. roles) and the basic psychological needs in self-determination theory (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Ryan & Deci, 2020). Burke and Stets (2009) also suggested that one's identity is socially validated as per the "identity verification hypothesis". Identity verification hypothesis shares similarities to social identity theory, such that in-group membership is not just contingent upon shared characteristics but group affirmation and invitation (Brown, 2020; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Identity accumulation hypothesis and identity verification hypothesis are applied in the following situations.

A man adopts the role of a father because he is a father in connection to his child as well as the ideologies and norms associated with fatherhood (Burke & Cerven, 2019). His role as a father is evaluated by responsibilities of fatherhood, such as protection, providing, disciplinary actions, and role modelling responsibilities (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). The identity of fatherhood may depend on how his position is verified, such that he may not have

biological children but his enactment of ideological norms according to this role are what confirm his identity (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). Likewise, a biological father who does not act according to the ideological norms of fatherhood may have a compromised identity depending on the relationships with his partner and child(ren) (Burke & Cerven, 2019). Fatherhood also contains other conditions of identity. For example, a woman may not be verified as a father, as fatherhood is a patrilineal term assigned to the male sex (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). Yet her role as a parent does not prevent her from acting in accordance with the responsibilities often assigned to fatherhood. Equally, men may not be verified as a mother, as motherhood is a matrilineal term assigned to the female sex (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). Yet his role as a parent does not prevent him from acting in accordance with the responsibilities often assigned to motherhood. For example, responsibilities described as nurturance, nursing into good health, emotional support, and management of the household (Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). In this way, identity is socially constructed and socially verified, yet the essence and spirit of identity can be enacted much the same.

Personally distinct characteristics of identity are often unchangeable. Biological attributions such as eye or skin colour, for example, cannot be fundamentally obtained despite superficial mechanisms (e.g. eye colour surgery through iris implants or corneal tattooing or skin lightning) (Hunter, 2011; Zegers, 2025). Likewise, people have claimed different ethnic identities despite having no biological or ancestral commonalities (Orbe, 2016). Attitudes and beliefs about biological determinants of identity as taking precedence as to whether identity can be confirmed or validated have caused profound distress in people who descend from multiple ethnicities, where claims to identity are measured according to blood quantum (Bluck, 2022; Stewart, 2023). Prioritising biological determinants of identity have also caused profound distress in people who embody diverse characteristics different from binary and isolated constructions (Bollas, 2023; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). Biologically structured thresholds challenge what it means to be ‘enough’ to live an identity, according to characteristics that are entirely out of one’s control, while ignoring the significance of culture, relationships, and spirituality (Stewart, 2023; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). If conditions of worth are placed upon aspects of the self that are involuntary, there may be a greater risk to self-discrepancy and rejection of characteristics that are unobtainable and/or unchangeable. Moreover, beliefs about biological determinants of identity intersect sociocultural narratives of

human value that have stereotyped and moralised demographics of people (Stewart, 2023; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018).

The identity accumulation hypothesis and identity verification hypothesis could help explain how self-worth and autonomy interact with one another. One's self-worth may be affected by characteristics that they are born with, which have moral and ethical values placed on their existence (Bollas, 2023; Schweder et al., 1997; Stewart, 2023; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). For example, men can nurture but sociocultural beliefs about men's competencies on nurturing contain rules around permissibility and competency in social roles (Burke & Cerven, 2019; Valiquette-Tessier et al., 2018). Or that beauty and appearance represent a relatively common contingency of worth, with standards that are socially constructed (Hunter, 2011; Overstreet & Quinn, 2012). This dynamic is relevant for concepts such as intersectionality, which explores how structures of identity organise practices of privilege and discrimination (Cooper, 2015; Kelly et al., 2021). Intersectionality can also help explain how human worth is appraised with consideration for 'ethics of divinity', which contains sociocultural beliefs on the natural order of human hierarchy (Shweder et al., 1997). Because of these ethical structures, how a person is 'supposed' to live every day is reasonably predetermined. In other words, people are born into preset guides as per the histories, narratives and traditions for acceptable and unacceptable human characteristics. The ways in which a person then thinks of their own value can, thus, be hindered or enabled by social constructions and perceptions of human value.

Morality

So far, the sections on morality as a component of self-worth have moved between researching moral emotions and moral attributions, with examples describing how and why a person may feel guilty or ashamed for different aspects of their life, their actions, and their self. Recent researchers have found that guilt and shame are not neatly associated with adaptive and maladaptive action tendencies (Duan et al., 2021; ShamsAlam et al., 2025). Rather, factors that drive adaptive or maladaptive action tendencies in experiences of guilt and shame could be based on other personal characteristics, including personality traits, cultural beliefs, and attitudes towards moral emotions (ShamsAlam et al., 2025). This section on morality in middle adulthood returns to moral emotions, focusing on the impact of longstanding generalised shame and guilt and the risks associated with coping mechanisms.

Generalised shame and guilt perpetuate mental distress through broad and indefinite rejection of the self, which was likely to have developed in early childhood (Bath, 2019; Duan

et al., 2021). Researchers have stated that internalising external demands during childhood at the cost of own's own unmet organismic needs can lead to generalised shame and guilt (Duan et al., 2021; Goffinet et al., 2021; Sekowski et al., 2020). That is, others' needs may be incongruent, inappropriate, or unattainable for the child to uphold, which can lead the child to developing an "alien self" or an "unwanted self" (Sekowski et al., 2020). This process of embodying others' demands could be likened to the repeated introjection of external conditions of worth, as proposed by Rogers (1959). Repeatedly suppressing oneself to align with others' expectations may lead to schemas that inform the structure of self-worth and sustain autobiographical narratives of self-worth, which is uniquely associated with one's sociocultural contexts, emphasising elements of roles and responsibilities for the individual-self or the interdependent-self (Markus & Kitayama, 1991; ShamsAlam et al., 2025). Here, chronic worthlessness represents a longstanding unwanted and devalued self if there is no critical modification in one's self-perception and environment.

Repeated experiences of shame lead to generalised and global self-appraisals of worthlessness (McDonnell, 2017; Sekowski et al., 2020). Generalised shame is experienced as an overarching self-hatred towards all parts of oneself, such that positive perceptions of personal characteristics are inaccessible or thwarted (Duan et al., 2021; Sekowski et al., 2020). Shame can be both internal and external, such that internal shame is a more self-focused experience of inferiority, powerlessness and defectiveness, whereas external shame takes on the actual or assumed views of others' who perceive oneself to be inferior and defective (Chase & Walker, 2012; McDonnell, 2017). McDonnell (2017) explained that autobiographical memories with themes of shame illustrate core beliefs (e.g. "I am worthless") that are organised into self-concepts, which are maintained and regulated through intrapersonal mechanisms of self-perception (such as self-appraisals, self-blaming, SCC, SCD, and diachronic unity) (Diehl & Hay, 2011; Duan et al., 2021; Waters & Fivush, 2015). To reiterate, shame also need not be associated with an act of moral transgression, as people can feel ashamed for parts of themselves that are beyond their control (Ratcliffe, 2010).

Generalised guilt tends to result in taking excessive accountability for negative circumstances, including events where the individual may have borne negligible responsibility (Duan et al., 2021; Ratcliffe, 2010). For example, Duan et al. (2021) found that adults with depression endorsed an overgeneralised perception of control over others' actions and tended to apologise for their wrongdoings. Ratcliffe (2010) described guilt in depression as focusing heavily on past actions, recognition that past actions are unchangeable, estrangement from

recipients of one's past actions, and the expectation of being harmed or punished. Guilt has been recorded as so severe that people with depression have not been able to attach their guilt to any specific memory or action, becoming attributed to ongoing self with unknown opportunities for resolution (Ratcliffe, 2010). This may help explain why people with depression are inclined to ruminate about the past, as one cannot fundamentally change what has already occurred (Ratcliffe, 2010). Taking the view of attribution theory and its application for depression, generalised guilt may function as an extreme sense of personal control and responsibility for broad negative circumstances (Duan et al., 2021; Muschetto & Siegel, 2019).

Shame and guilt can indicate what contingencies of self-worth contribute to a personal sense of morality and transgression (Bath, 2019; Ratcliffe, 2010). Where shame and guilt become generalised, they become nonspecific; the self is broadly immoral, unwanted, underserving, and worthless (Ratcliffe, 2010). Generalised shame and guilt describe a perceived perpetual defectiveness and are associated with depression and suicidality, including after a depressive episode has remitted (Duan et al., 2021; Goffnet et al., 2021; McDonnell, 2017; Sekowski et al., 2020). Generalised shame and guilt also tend to be accompanied with highly self-critical, self-blaming, and self-punishing behaviours (Duan et al., 2021; Goffnet et al., 2021; Sekowski et al., 2020). This suggests that generalised shame and guilt could be a chronic risk factor for mental distress, with a greater likelihood for maladaptive and harmful coping mechanisms (Duan et al., 2021; Ratcliffe, 2010; Zahn et al., 2015). What may be particularly challenging in the treatment of longstanding negative moral emotions is that if an individual has learnt that their innate self is unwanted (by the self and others) and unattainable, the discrepancy between the actual, ideal, and ought selves are in constant conflict. The chronic conflict in identity may help explain how identity disturbance develops, a symptom often associated with diagnoses such as borderline personality disorder and anorexia nervosa, which also tend to be associated with severe guilt and shame (Fuchs, 2016).

Making sense: a cognitive behavioural lens of worthlessness

To complement former sections on schemas and autobiographical narratives, this section contains a non-standard clinical formulation of worthlessness based on the five-part model. The five-part model is a psychological framework used to conceptualise and formulate the function and mechanisms of a client's mental distress (Padesky & Mooney, 1990). The model provides an illustrated pattern of how a client is interpreting and reacting to stimuli and cues within a given situation, often one that is personally relevant to their distress (Dobson & Dozois, 2019; Padesky & Mooney, 1990). These cues are based on cognitive, emotional,

physiological sensations, behavioural, and environmental factors (Padesky & Mooney, 1990). The combination of factors can be used to hypothesise a client's distress, check with the client for congruence, and inform options for treatment (Padesky & Mooney, 1990). This section will formulate some of the perpetuating factors that contribute to worthlessness.

Alex has felt worthless since he was a child and is prone to experiencing episodes of depression. His depression has recently been interfering with his job as a chef, and his team has been managing a series of unfortunate mistakes. He doesn't want to ask for help or support because he believes that others think of him as inadequate. Asking for help risks proving to his team that he is worthless, and so he ignores the work challenges to prove to others and himself that he is in control and has value.

Cognitive patterns of worthlessness: Worthlessness can represent a core belief, "I am worthless" (Gilbert, 2006; Kennerley et al., 2017). In cognitive behavioural therapy, there are three theorised layers of cognition (Kennerley et al., 2017). At the centre, core beliefs are fundamental truths that a person holds about themselves, others, and the world or the future (Lavender & Schmidt, 2006; Kennerley et al., 2017). Core beliefs inform not only how a person views themselves, but how they interpret and respond to different situations (Kennerley et al., 2017). The second layer, rules for living/intermediate thoughts, represent guidelines attached to the core belief (Kennerley et al., 2017; Lavender & Schmidt, 2006). For example, "if I ask for help, then this will prove I'm worthless". Intermediate beliefs are intended to help someone respond across different situations; help seeking represents a rule about what factors lower human value, such as help-seeking (Kennerley et al., 2017; Lavender & Schmidt, 2006). The third layer, automatic thoughts, are the immediate reactions and interpretations to external and internal cues (Dobson & Dozois, 2019; Kennerley et al., 2017). For example, Alex interprets his teammate's agitation as evidence that he is personally irritating them. Alex's interpretation may be inclined towards taking personal responsibility for others' feelings, because if Alex was not so worthless, their teammate would not be agitated. However, Alex's interpretation may be influenced by cognitive distortions, also known as unhelping thinking styles (Blackburn et al., 2006; Cox, 2020). Cognitive distortions can include catastrophising (e.g. Alex considers the worst possible scenario than the most realistic), emotional reasoning (e.g. feeling worthless means that Alex is), and over-generalising (e.g. being asked to do something means that Alex cannot do anything right) (Blackburn et al., 2006; Cox, 2020; Dobson & Dozois, 2019).

Emotional patterns of worthlessness: Worthlessness not only represents a belief about oneself but an emotional experience (Bath, 2019; Gilbert, 2006; Goffnet et al., 2021; World Health Organisation, 2024). Feelings of worthlessness are associated with shame and guilt, and may also be accompanied by sadness, anger, embarrassment, regret, grief, resentment, and more (Bath, 2019; Gilbert, 2006; Goffnet et al., 2021; Ratcliffe, 2010). Emotions are functional indicators of the self, and shame and guilt provide indications of ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ behaviour. Depending on how Alex attributes mistakes (or past mistakes) can reinforce his core beliefs, which influences what behaviours he does to alleviate the emotion (Blackburn et al., 2006; Kennerley et al., 2017). Depending on the expression and severity of guilt and shame, actions to alleviate negative moral emotions can include hiding, deflection, withdrawal, other- or self-blaming, reconciliation, repair, and admission (Blackburn et al., 2006; Cox, 2020; Duan et al., 2021; Kennerley et al., 2017). Shame may also be experienced towards the self without an act of transgression, such as with characteristics you are born with (Bluck, 2022; Ratcliffe, 2010).

Physiological patterns of worthlessness: Physiological sensations may include biological indicators of depression, such as lowered libido, changed appetite and sleep, and lethargy (Blackburn et al., 2006). Moreover, physiological sensations may also reflect emotional arousal (Pivetti et al., 2015). While researchers have not explicitly described the physiological expressions of worthlessness, some researchers have described the physiological expressions of shame. Researchers have found that unlike basic emotions (such as sadness and anger), the complexity of shame (as with guilt) makes observing this emotional state difficult to recognise, or that observable expression of shame may present differently across cultures (Kim et al., 2011). Cognitively, shame comprises the sense of not belonging, not being good enough, and being defective (Bath, 2019). Physiological sensations of shame can include heaviness, gaze aversion, blushing, nausea, muscle tension, high temperature, and irregular breathing (Pivetti et al., 2015). These physiological sensations could also be shared in anger, sadness, and fear, thus, observing these expressions in others are subject to misinterpretation (Bath, 2019; Kim et al., 2011; Pivetti et al., 2015). Shame has been reported as one of the most physically painful emotion (Bath, 2019; Pivetti et al., 2015; Sekowski et al., 2020).

Behavioural patterns of worthlessness: Several behaviours can follow Alex’s thoughts, emotions, and physiological responses. Behaviours that perpetuate the distress could include rumination, denial of wrongdoing, hyperawareness of physiological symptoms, or others that attend to alleviating the thoughts, feelings, and sensations. Certain behaviours can perpetuate distress by alleviating the distress (feelings of worthlessness) in the short term, without

attending to the core foundation of worthlessness (Blackburn et al., 2006; Kennerley et al., 2017). Using functional analysis, Alex's worthlessness may be perpetuated behaviourally: made a mistake and unsure what to do (antecedent), does not ask for help (behaviour), consequence (further mistakes occur in the short term, long term, or not at all) (Melanson & Fahmie, 2023). Not asking for help has a function to *escape* current and future perceptions of worthlessness. Other functions may also include positive regard from others (attention), future financial bonuses (tangible item), and automatic reinforcement (attenuating emotional and physiological sensations of worthlessness, while inducing relief) (Melanson & Fahmie, 2023). If a mistake happens in the short or long term, Alex may interpret their mistake as evidence that they are worthless. Or, if nothing happens, Alex learns that their method of alleviating distress (avoiding help seeking) is useful. Regardless of the outcome, however, Alex's use of avoidance does not change their underlying worthlessness and, thus, risks exacerbating worthlessness.

This formulation is not a standard clinical presentation, rather, it is presented to pinpoint some of the intricate and potentially subconscious processes involved with worthlessness as a belief and an emotion. Examples used in the five-part model can overlap several components (worthlessness is both a belief and emotion) and reinforce one another (not asking for help risks further mistakes, prompting further beliefs of one's worthlessness). The psychological mechanisms that contribute to how a person embodies and understands their experiences over their lifespan and the autobiographical narratives that offer meaning, significance, and reason inform the core foundations of a person's beliefs around worthlessness (Gilbert, 2006; McDonnell, 2017). Regarding the literature enquiry so far, Alex's beliefs about why help-seeking is associated with worthlessness may be underpinned by narratives where help-seeking was met with punishment (relationships), expectations for independence (autonomy), and shame (morality).

Summary

This section on middle adulthood explored how unwanted discrepancies in one's self-concept are associated with worthlessness. Former sections have emphasised more interpersonal and sociocultural dynamics that structure self-worth, which was intended to describe how worthlessness is socially structured as intrapersonal distress does not substantiate the rules and standards associated with the value of a human. Still, feelings of worthlessness can be perpetuated by intrapersonal biases and tendencies. These include cognitive distortions, unhelpful coping mechanisms, misinterpretation of external situations and interpersonal cues,

misinterpretation of physiological cues, and generalised emotions and histories that do not fit all contexts. Thus, feelings of worthlessness can affect dynamics within relationships, one's sense of identity and self-determination, and how connected and accepting one feels to their core selves. These dynamics interplay both actual and perceived social cues and events, which make it difficult to recognise what evidence is real. Nonetheless, the beliefs associated with worthlessness, such as Alex's view of help seeking and worth, narrates a deeper story.

Older adulthood self-worth

Older adulthood is typically categorised as spanning from 60 or 65 years of age onwards (Nair et al., 2024; Palmér et al., 2019). In an academic context, prominent gerontology discourses have divided older adulthood into two ages (Lindsay, 2019; Palmér et al., 2019). The third age, which is initiated by retirement and accompanied with dialogues of activity, fitness, and enjoyment; and the fourth age, which is accompanied with discourses of decline, dependency, and disengagement (Lindsay, 2019; Palmér et al., 2019). Although some researchers consider the third age typically spans from 60 to 80 years of age, and the fourth age spanning from 80 years of age onwards, some researchers also these 'ages' as not bound to chronological age but by functional impairment (Lindsay, 2019; Palmér et al., 2019).

In terms of wellbeing, researchers have found inconsistent evidence that the older adulthood period is generally associated with higher or lower self-worth, self-esteem, coping skills, and self-concept clarity (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007; Diehl & Hay, 2011; Ravary et al., 2020; Wagner et al., 2015). Some researchers have theorised that older adulthood is associated with lower exposure and reactivity to daily stressors, and a 'positivity effect' where older adults tend to have attentional biases that enable perceiving things more positively (Carstensen & Deliema, 2018; Ravary et al., 2020). Yet, some researchers have found older adulthood as having lower self-esteem in the later years of life (Wagner et al., 2015), higher associations between anxiety, depression, and cognitive impairment (Šare et al., 2021), lower rated distress (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007), and lower rated self-worth compared to other age groups (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007; Zarghami et al., 2025). Considering such heterogeneous data, this subchapter will focus on the potential nuances of self-worth in relation to dominant narratives about aging and feeling valued.

The development of the self

Identity and self-concepts during older adulthood are, like other life stages, faced with age-related challenges and transitions. A history of identity diffusion (i.e. not knowing oneself),

low self-esteem, low SES and limitations in daily activities are factors that researchers have identified as negatively affecting older adult self-concepts (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007; Irungu et al., 2016; Kong & Jeon, 2018). Identity diffusion during childhood has been reported as enduring, impacting one's sense of direction and purpose in social and autonomous domains throughout adulthood (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007). Moreover, older adults who have experienced identity diffusion tended to endure greater psychological distress during transitional periods, marked with anxiousness, solipsism, dissatisfaction, and detachment from family and community (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007). Not knowing who oneself is appears to be a risk factor for psychological distress in adults entering older adulthood, alongside other increasing or anticipated vulnerabilities (Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007; Irungu et al., 2016; Zarghami et al., 2025).

More commonly referenced challenges of older adulthood relate to psychological and physical decline, increased care needs, loss of autonomy, functional impairment, and potential withdrawal from former activities and communities (Ravary et al., 2020; Šare et al., 2021). The degree to which health and welfare challenges affect one's identity and self-concept can be protected by familial and community factors (Kong & Jeon, 2018; Zarghami et al., 2025). Familial factors include family cohesion and adaptability, and community factors include support from friends and neighbours, community institutions (such as religious) and public services (Kong & Jeon, 2018). Despite the potential challenges and changes associated with aging, older adult self-concepts can be protected if they feel capable, supported, and able to focus on life domains that are meaningful (Lodi-Smith & Roberts, 2010).

Older adults' contingencies of worth may have remained over their lifetime, compounded with life experiences and possible shifts in how those contingencies are measured, similar to how self-concepts comprise of both stable and fluctuating characteristics (Crocker et al., 2002). Ravary et al. (2020) reported on aging as a contingency of worth, referencing youthful capabilities as conditions of worth. The contingency of aging was measured in relation to fears of cognitive decline and social rejection, however, why these two concerns were interpreted as seeing oneself as young versus old is unclear (Ravary et al., 2020). While declining cognitive functioning and social stigma affect older adults significantly, it is argued that these concerns about aging are not concerns about wanting to see oneself as young but wanting to feel valued by society despite aging and its challenges (Clancy et al., 2021; Kisvetrová et al., 2022). As such, aging as a contingency of worth is likely to contain conditions of worth that are more specific to feeling value while facing the challenges and changes in aging.

To elaborate, if an older adult has historically measured their self-worth contingent upon competency, they may not wish for the same youthful level of competency but for opportunities to exercise competency according to their capacity (Brudek & Steuden, 2017; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2011). Or if an older adult has historically valued beauty and appearance as a contingency of worth, they may not wish to have a youthful body but high-quality material, couture, and products to maintain their personal sense of fashion and aesthetic (Ahn, 2024). Their contingencies of worth in the domain of beauty and appearance may still contain former conditions of what defines beauty and appearance, while adapting to temporal changes in sociocultural narratives of beauty and appearance, and intrapersonal changes in what one's body needs (Ahn, 2024). As such, conditions of aging as a contingency of worth could be more effectively understood by recognising the attention and support available for older adults to adjust and adapt to different capacities, in addition to intersecting intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural narratives about aging. Comparing young to old could be one condition of worth in aging, but grieving or desiring youthfulness does not entirely explain aging as a contingency of worth.

As stated by Wagner et al. (2015), changes in the self during older adulthood are dependent on individual, environmental, and contextual circumstances. If older adulthood theoretically begins at 60 years of age, some may experience several decades of expected and unexpected changes in psychological, social, physical, and spiritual domains (Wagner et al., 2015). While concerns of death, decline, and loss may be more common during older adulthood, personal concerns may also relate to security, comfort, and dignity (Brudek & Steuden, 2017; Clancy et al., 2021). Šare et al. (2021) reported that health, wellbeing and prosperity are key general indicators for a good quality of life during older adulthood, in addition to positive attitudes that see aging beyond illness and exhaustion.

Framework of self-worth in older adulthood

Former sections for the framework of self-worth have explored contingencies and conditions of worth related to belonging, acceptance, and burdening (relationships); roles and responsibilities (autonomy); and moral emotions and moral scripts of human characteristics (morality). During older adulthood, individuals' vulnerability and dependence on others tend to increase, the ability to engage in daily activities may decrease, and they may face assumptions and narratives about their capacity and role in society (Erlingsson, 2007; Kong & Jeon, 2018; Nair et al., 2024; Ravary et al., 2020). The following sections will explore some of

the ways in which older adults' self-worth may be uniquely affected by what others expect of them in balance with what they may want for themselves.

Relationships

During older adulthood, while preferences for certain social relationships remain personal, older adults face social losses (including potential decreased community engagement and deaths) and increased dependence on others (Ravary et al., 2020; Zarghami et al., 2025). Older adults have unique pressure in access to resources and support while managing their own personal resources, which may require relational and social support (family and professional; Erlingsson, 2007). This section on relationships in self-worth during older adulthood discusses the different perspectives on feeling valued and valuing older adults, taking a lens of elder abuse, loneliness, and solitude.

One concept that connects self-worth and relationships is dignity (Clancy et al., 2021; Jütten, 2017; Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2011). Dignity has been described as a form of 'social esteem', comprised of respect, esteem, authority, control, freedom, and human rights (Clancy et al., 2021; Jütten, 2017; Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2011). Dignity is considered as a virtue of being human, however, the ability to live with dignity is not granted to all humans equally (Clancy et al., 2021; Jütten, 2017; Kisvetrová et al., 2022). Undermined dignity can be recognised through the subordination of one's authority and sense of equality, intimately tied into perception (actual and assumed) towards the self (intrapersonal and interpersonal) (Jütten, 2017; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2011). Researchers have noted how older adults may feel undeserving of attention and care, or do not request help due to the want to maintain their autonomy, leading caregivers and family to overlook their needs (Clancy et al., 2021; Nair et al., 2024). This sense of deservingness, respect, care, and positive regard appear related to other relational experiences, such as 'feeling valued' (Clancy et al., 2021; Lemay Jr. & Spongberg, 2015). Recognising a person's dignity is not just a social dynamic, but an exercise of advocating for their self-determination (Clancy et al., 2021; Kisvetrová et al., 2022).

Compromised dignity can be observed in practices of elder abuse, which can include physical, emotional, psychological, sexual, and financial, and neglect (Erlingsson, 2007; Kong & Jeon, 2018; Nair et al., 2024). For example, financial abuse may take the form of technological abuse, such as preventing older adults from learning and accessing internet banking (Erlingsson, 2007). Researchers have found that elder abuse is most likely committed

by family members, with some statistics measuring up to 86% (Ho et al., 2017; Kong & Jeon, 2018). Some risk factors of elder abuse include caregiver burden; psychological factors of the older adult and perpetrators of abuse, including self-worth; dependence; widowhood; conflictual relationships; social isolation; and older adult health issues (Erlingsson, 2007; Kong & Jeon, 2018; Nair et al., 2024). Older adults may also experience self-blaming emotions and fear of retaliation, which can prevent them from reporting the abuse (Erlingsson, 2007).

Another relational concern that may exacerbate feeling worthless in older adulthood is loneliness. Loneliness has been described as perceived social isolation and social dissatisfaction, noting that loneliness can be experienced despite the presence of relationships (Nair et al., 2024). Loneliness is a risk factor for abuse and neglect (as a recipient) and decreased social engagement, while also interrelating with feelings of worthlessness and low self-esteem and risk of suicide (Barak et al., 2020; Nair et al., 2024; Yöyen & Keleş, 2024). To build a sense of fulfilment and meaning while quelling loneliness, older adults may adjust their perceptions of what is more important in life, such as prioritising positive relationships and reducing negative relationships (Irungu et al., 2016). The experience of loneliness, however, can also be contrasted with the experience of solitude. That is, solitude can have enhancing effects on one's sense of autonomy, relief from social stressors, and freedom for spiritual and creative activities (Nikitin et al., 2022). Nikitin et al. (2022) found that, generally, solitude is experienced more positively by older adults compared to younger adults (in terms of subjective wellbeing, self-esteem, and social integration) as solitude tends to be autonomous, i.e. chosen to positive effect. Nikitin et al. (2022) also referred to solitude as experienced more positively if the person also has higher quality personal relationships and a secure attachment history. Perceived social support and autonomy (which relates to the basic psychological needs described in self-determination theory), thus, likely contributes to the enhancement of self-worth and feeling valued by others.

Perceived social support has been associated with higher self-esteem, self-regulation, vitality, and perceived belonging and autonomy (Lemay Jr. & Spongberg, 2015; Sánchez-García et al., 2019). A perceived (or actual) lack of social support or meaningful relationships, similarly, has been associated with lower self-esteem, loneliness, and insecurity (Allen et al., 2022; Lemay Jr. & Spongberg, 2015). Researchers have reported that strengthening the older adults' familial and community-level resources could be more effective in lowering the risk of elder abuse than relying solely on the older person's existing resources (Kong & Jeon, 2018; Nair et al., 2024). For example, by helping caregivers, they may feel better equipped to provide

care to older adults (Kong & Jeon, 2018). Moreover, Nair et al. (2024) suggested that interventions that strengthen older adults' self-esteem may help older adults speak about their experiences, advocate for their needs, and have the courage to seek support. At the same time, the wellness and dignity of older adults could also be emancipated by research that investigates how inequitable systemic structures (such as poverty, stigma, and marginalisation) might cause and maintain mental distress for older adults, their communities, and their loved ones (Dawes et al., 2022; Kisvetrová et al., 2022).

Autonomy

A higher sense of autonomy relates to having the capacity and motivation to act upon one's goals, values, and interests (Nikitin et al., 2022). For older adulthood, changes in autonomy and independence are common concerns (Wagner et al., 2015; Ravary et al 2020). Older adulthood autonomy can be affected by social and welfare related domains, such as financial strain and decreased community engagement, medical issues related to declining bodily functions (psychological, physical, and sensory), as well as pastoral needs (relating to one's spirit, emotional, and relational support) (Ravary et al., 2020). In this way, self-worth in older adulthood may face unique challenges as it relates to both longstanding perceptions of autonomy and increased care needs, and the potential effects on self-worth. This section will discuss the transitions in roles and mobility with consideration for financial resource.

Changes in role accumulation and strain during older adulthood are likely to be uniquely structured according to each older adult's needs and wants. Researchers have found that older adults who have a range of networks, such as through voluntary or prominent leadership roles, can have a lasting protective effect for older adult mental health, including reducing loneliness (Dawes et al., 2022; Mize & Kincaid, 2025). Researchers have explained that maintaining networks and roles are important as older adults may lose responsibilities due to retirement and connections due to deaths in one's communities (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Zarghami et al., 2025). Thomas (2010) reported that older adult's mental health is more positively affected by being able to provide support than receiving support, which could be related to maintaining the sense of autonomy, control, and feeling wanted. On the other hand, Mize and Kincaid (2025) noted the diminishing returns on role accumulation at the point that roles become strained, due to role-overload, role-conflict, and general constraints the roles have on personal agency.

Researchers have reported that a paternalistic model of healthcare is not necessarily preferable for older adulthood autonomy, but this can depend on the older adult's level of frailty

and how much the older adult trusts their assigned health professional (Clancy et al., 2021; Goldblatt et al., 2018; Sánchez-García et al., 2019). Paternalistic practices have raised ethical concerns regarding obscuring information from the older adult about their own care and not accounting for their personal opinions, thereby, compromising autonomy (Erlingsson, 2007; Goldblatt et al., 2018; Sánchez-García et al., 2019). But, it is possible for clinical care and older adult autonomy to be more effectively safeguarded with informed consent and advanced care planning (Sánchez-García et al., 2019); consideration for personal opinions and wishes (Goldblatt et al., 2018); helping titrate participation in social responsibilities, such as family and communities (Nikitin et al., 2022); promoting health behaviours (Zarghami et al., 2025); and reflexive thinking regarding assumptions on aging and capacity (physical, autonomous, and psychological) (Erlingsson, 2007; Goldblatt et al., 2018; Kisvetrová et al., 2022). Sánchez-García et al. (2019) recommended that older adults with cognitive impairment are still capable of making autonomous decisions, but that depending on their cognitive capacity and safety, decisions can be made on their behalf while upholding their known personal values and wishes.

Autonomy in older adulthood can also concern matters of decision making, frailty, financial security, and dwelling (residential or community based), further reinforcing the dual interaction between relationships and autonomy as potentially shaping perceptions of self-worth (Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Sánchez-García et al., 2019). Additionally, older adults may also face challenges in the transition towards increasing dependence following a lifetime of master narratives that have endorsed independence (relative to their experience of independence) (Clancy et al. 2021; Sánchez-García et al., 2019). Thus, decreasing independence may raise concerns of vulnerability and burdening (Clancy et al. 2021; Ho et al., 2017). Sánchez-García et al. (2019) noted that low perceived autonomy in older adults was more readily associated with symptoms of anxiety compared to depression, which is a consideration for the theoretical conceptions of self-worth in broader relation to symptoms of mental distress.

Earlier exposure to psychological distress, physical illness, low SES and occupational stress can also increase the risk of illness during older adulthood, thereby affecting autonomous decision-making and self-care practices (Sánchez-García et al., 2019; Zarghami et al., 2025). Lowered autonomy has been associated with lower levels of perceived social support, spirituality and activities, and greater anxiety and cognitive impairment (Sánchez-García et al., 2019). Sánchez-García et al. (2019) also reported the level of education as relevant to perceived autonomy, although specifically in relation to critical thinking and decision-making abilities.

Likewise, the sense of mastery and control has been reported as associated with higher self-esteem (Wagner et al., 2015). Perception, again, is reiterated as an important factor in the experience of wellbeing according to the basic psychological needs in self-determination theory (Irungu et al., 2016; Kisvetrová et al., 2022).

Moral

This section on morality during older adulthood introduces more gerontological theories of aging, and questions how self-worth may be impacted by systems that use these theories to understand older adulthood. This examination of gerontological theories of aging relate to structures of morality in older adulthood, recalling how morality represents a system of values and principles that guide behaviour and ways of understanding the world (Syed et al., 2020). Lived experiences of older adulthood may be confronted with systemised scripts of aging, which have arguably been designed with the intent of improving older adults' lives. It is proposed self-worth (and other dimensions of health and welfare) may be impacted by systems that measure lived experiences solely through what is observable, normal, pathological, and medical while inadvertently placing standards and expectations onto older adults through limited conditions of 'successful aging'.

Researchers have reported that gerontological theories of aging, including activity theory, disengagement theory, and geotranscendence theory, have attempted to capture what it means to age 'normally' and identify ways to live a 'successful' older adulthood (Brudek & Steuden, 2017; Lindsay, 2019; Jönson & Magnusson, 2001; Tornstam, 1997). Activity theory posits that the social and psychological needs of older people remain the same as when they were middle aged, and without these resources, one may experience reduced quality of life, self-esteem, wellbeing, and health (Lindsay, 2019). Disengagement theory posits that older people naturally and gradually withdraw from society and turn inward to promote the harmony and progression of social systems (Lindsay, 2019). 'Successful aging' has been referenced in research to indicate advantageous and beneficial measures of health and welfare that can be implemented to enhance wellbeing, virality and satisfaction during older adulthood (Irungu et al., 2016; Kisvetrová et al., 2022). Strategies of successful aging have tended to focus on reducing the risk of illness and disability, sustaining physical and cognitive functioning, and increasing involvement with social activities (Chen, 2018; Kisvetrová et al., 2022). These strategies are not argued as irrelevant or needless, however, the language of 'success' risks implying notions of achievement and attainment and that certain characteristics of aging are 'unsuccessful'. As

Ravary et al. (2020) proposed, aging may indeed be a contingency of worth in older adults. However, as with other age bands, if conditions of worth are unattainable, feeling worthless is both valid and measurably incongruent. Conditions of successful aging are useful to understand and promote strategies of wellness but restricts recognising value in older adults with diverse circumstances.

Activity theory and disengagement theory have also been criticised as individualistic and ignorant of structural inequalities while moralising personal realities through unattainable thresholds and conditions of what constitutes aging successfully (Lindsay, 2019). From a more psychoanalytical perspective, Tornstam reportedly developed gerotranscendence theory to encourage healthcare practitioners to consider a more positive, meaningful, and experiential understanding of older adulthood and aging (Jönson & Magnusson, 2001; Rajani & Jawaid, 2015; Tornstam, 1997). According to Tornstam, gerotranscendence refers to a meta-perspective in older adulthood that shifts towards cosmic and transcendence views of the world and away from the materialistic and rational views (Tornstam, 1997). Gerotranscendence theory is comprised of cosmic, self, and relational dimensions that are assumed to lead to an increase in life satisfaction (Brudek & Steuden, 2017; Rajani & Jawaid, 2015; Tornstam, 1997).

Gerotranscendence theory reportedly attempts to ‘re-enchant’ older adulthood and challenge Western sociocultural structures of secularism and rationalism and the overemphasised values of productivity, effectiveness, and independence at the expense of spirituality (Jönson & Magnusson, 2001). Inspired by gerotranscendence theory, Erikson’s stage theory described the existential reflection of life in older adulthood (Erikson, 1959; Jönson & Magnusson, 2001). Erikson’s stage theory proposes that older adults face a transition into the last psychosocial developmental stage of “ego integrity vs. despair”, an existential reflection of life regarding their achievements and failures, contributions, and sense of morality with varying degrees of acceptance (ego integrity) or rejection (despair; Beaumont & Zukanovic, 2007; Erikson, 1959; Rajani & Jawaid, 2015). Critical examinations of the theory’s empirical application are reported as unable to be falsified and that the characteristics of its dimensions (cosmic, self, and relationships) are not exclusive to older age (Jönson & Magnusson, 2001). Yet the essence of the theory is to step away from only knowing and trusting reality, life satisfaction, meaning and purpose by what can be captured through positivist methodologies (Jönson & Magnusson, 2001; Lima et al., 2020).

To highlight some lived experiences of older adulthood, researchers have explored how older adults tend to face existential reflections for the course of their life; past, present, and future (Brudek & Steuden, 2017). Palmér et al. (2019) interviewed 18 Swedish older adults aged between 72 and 91 years on their existential reflections. Their experiences described freedom, autonomy, vulnerability, gratitude, hope, death, guilt for living well compared to their peers, anxiety for the unknown, the meaning of life and being human, all of which sat under an umbrella theme of ‘accepting the facts of life yet enabling new projects’. In essence, Palmér et al. (2019) interpreted their participants’ existential reflections of aging as finding acceptance for their challenges and committing to living the time available. Imminent plans focused on current priorities and new interests, with longer term plans that committed to ensuring their wellness to the best they can.

Critical analyses of gerontological theories of aging appear to be driven by the desire to understand how best to support older adulthood across multiple dimensions of health and welfare. For example, identifying what can be conceived as ‘normal’ aging risks overlooking challenges in older adulthood that can be addressed (Jönson & Magnusson, 2001). Additionally, there are concerns that emphasising positive and ideal conditions of aging may place an unnecessary burden on older adults to be active, to withdraw, and to transcend (Rajani & Jawaid, 2015). Although identified factors of what generally constitutes ‘ideal’ aging need not be ignored, it may be worthwhile addressing the moralised language of ‘success’ and review common research methodologies and theoretical assumptions about aging that surpasses standardisation.

Making sense: assumptions and narratives of older adulthood

To extend upon the section of morality and theoretical assumptions about aging, this section of ‘making sense’ positions the potential impact of broad sociocultural narratives on the value of older adults, such as themes of stigma. Stigma poses legitimate concerns on the perceived value of older adults in society, encompassing stereotypes, prejudices, and assumptions about older adults as a group (Clancy et al., 2021; Goldblatt et al., 2018). Stigma towards older adults has included ageism, seeing older adults as genderless, discussing individuals as a population group (e.g. service users, victims, carers, clients), and seeing older adults as weak (Chasteen & Cary, 2015; Erlingsson, 2007; Goldblatt et al., 2018). Stigma can influence the design and accessibility of public services, practices of healthcare, and the degree to which older adults are included in different communities (Chasteen & Cary, 2015; Goldblatt et al., 2018; Irugnu et al., 2016; Zarghami et al., 2025).

Narratives of human value can also be identified beyond the descriptions of positive and negative characteristics, such as through visibility (Chasteen & Cary, 2015). Researchers have observed that, internationally, older adults (and more so, older men) have the highest rates of suicide (Barak et al., 2020; Okan et al., 2023; Van Orden et al., 2016). However, Barak et al. (2020) noted that the Aotearoa New Zealand Chief Coroner's media release for rates of suicide in 2018/2019 did not comment on the oldest age group (85 years and above) whose rates were comparable to younger adult cohorts (including 15-19-, 20-24-, and 25-29-age bands). Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand (2026), a government health agency in Aotearoa New Zealand, reported that reviewing rates of completed suicide in older adulthood poses a methodological challenge (Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand, 2026). Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand (2026) explained that small numbers of data are subject to volatile changes over each year and would benefit from longitudinal reviews to establish underlying trends (Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand, 2026). Although examining analytical methods is important for purposes of statistical reliability, the count of suicides need not take away from the fact that 'the oldest old' have a considerably high proportion of suicide rates. Barak et al. (2020) also stated that official statistics of suicide in older adults from 80+ years could also be underestimated by 15-50%, reinforcing the need to investigate older adults' experiences of aging and living.

As explained by van Rhyn et al. (2022), studies of the oldest old are subject to 'misery research' as their lives are predominantly perceived through medical events analysed with positivist methodologies. Positioning aging into perceptions of inevitable withdrawal (disengagement theory), maintaining activity (activity theory), and comparisons to youthfulness seem restrictive given the span of older adulthood (which can include several decades of life) and highly varied physical and psychological changes. A broader view of what it means to age well could instead consider what it means to *live* well as an older person; integrating voices of lived experiences with consideration for their sociocultural contexts (including attitudes and values), environments (including dwelling and social support), resources (including finances and services), descriptions of what has protected wellness despite health challenges, and queries of spirituality (Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Lima et al., 2020; Rua et al., 2017; Zarghami et al., 2025). Personal and autobiographical narratives can offer insight into priorities, preferences and values, offering a tailored orientation to how life has been lived, is lived, and will be lived.

The last section of Alex's narrative of self-worth finishes with a reflective account of questioning whether he did 'good enough' over his lifetime. If Alex started to enter his 'fourth age' of life at 65 years, he may be concerned about physical and psychological impairments shortly after retiring (Lindsay, 2019; Palmér et al., 2019). Disengagement theory might suggest that his withdrawal is inevitable, however, Alex may also be struggling with not having family to support him or feeling a sense of burdening when family members pay visits out of obligation and not for the genuine desire to connect (Clancy et al., 2021; Ho et al., 2017; Lindsay, 2019). His culinary career may not have provided enough income to support costs of living, nor enough income to enter residential housing. He may question whether his culinary career provided enough security for him during his older age, an existential reflection of his life's decisions coupled with current and future concerns about aging, eliciting feelings of guilt and shame, contrasted with peers whose aging appears meaningful and secure. Alex's contingency of worth pertaining to cooking may be impacted by his ability to prepare food and forgetfulness. Yet if he continues to experience difficulties in asking for help and desire to maintain independence, he may increase the potential for hazards, such as forgetting to turn the oven off. Alex's feelings of worthlessness have been built upon a lifetime of perceptions questioning his value and competence, intensifying with a transition into frailty, financial insecurity, impaired ability to cook, and a lack of social connection. He may also be grieving the lost time in which he could have honoured other domains of his self-worth, seeing himself as a full person beyond what he chose to pursue in a career.

Summary

As a natural progression of life, aging and its associated vulnerabilities are inevitable, but an older person's 'success' in aging may be more dependent on how their communities care for them, value them, include them, and how the older person feels valued in return (Clancy et al., 2021; Rua et al., 2017). Older adults' self-worth is likely affected by how their community perceives their value, with conditions pertaining to social responsibilities, health, activity, and financial circumstances (Clancy et al., 2021; Irungu et al., 2016; Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Rua et al., 2017). Theories of aging risk setting up expectations of what it means to 'age well' or 'successfully'. If older adults are perceived as failing to meet those conditions, aging as a contingency of worth may be appraised as per the external conditions of worth in aging, which may not necessarily be aligned with their preferences, values, and true capacity or ability. Aging as a contingency of worth may contain narratives about youthfulness, yet the loss of youth will not necessarily represent all older adults' view of their worth. In terms of moral scripts, a

condition of worth may be guided by their reflections on their life's purpose and contributions (Lima et al., 2020). To protect older adults' sense of identity and self-worth, transitions during older adulthood could be helped by tailoring clinical and pastoral needs with alongside personal wishes and considering welfare circumstances and structural inequalities (Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Zarghami et al., 2025). As with other age bands, self-worth can be protected if people feel valued, cared for, remembered, and included across intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural domains (Clancy et al., 2021; Kisvetrová et al., 2022; Rua et al., 2017).

Chapter 3: Philosophical framework and methodology

This chapter presents the philosophical framework and methodology used in this thesis. Kourti (2021) expressed the importance of having an explicit philosophical framework and methodology to position the research approach and clarify how the findings have been interpreted. The chapter includes an overview of critical realism and master narrative methodology, which were used to guide the data collection and analysis, as well as the structure and content of the theoretical background. A section on reflexivity presents some of the ethical considerations for designing the thesis according to my position and context as a researcher. The use of narrative inquiry to understand self-worth across life stages has shaped the literature review sections and the data analysis. It was important to capture the dynamic and temporal nature of self-worth, which this philosophical and methodological framework allowed for.

Critical realism as a philosophical framework

Critical realism is a philosophical framework grounded in ontological realism and epistemological relativism, used to investigate the layered and fluid interface between the natural and social worlds (Booker, 2021; de Souza, 2014; Hoddy, 2019; Pilgrim, 2014). 'Ontology', a philosophical study of reality, positions how reality can be understood depending on its methods (Willis, 2023). Ontological perspectives exist between realism (one reality exists) and relativism (multiple realities exist; Moon & Blackman, 2013; Willis 2023). Critical realism uses ontological realism, proposing that there is one reality, but that reality is layered (Johnson, 2023; Walsh & Evans, 2014). Layers of reality can shift according to human and non-human structures and mechanisms that operate between its layers (Booker, 2021). To *know* the structure and mechanisms, critical realism uses epistemological relativism (Willis, 2023).

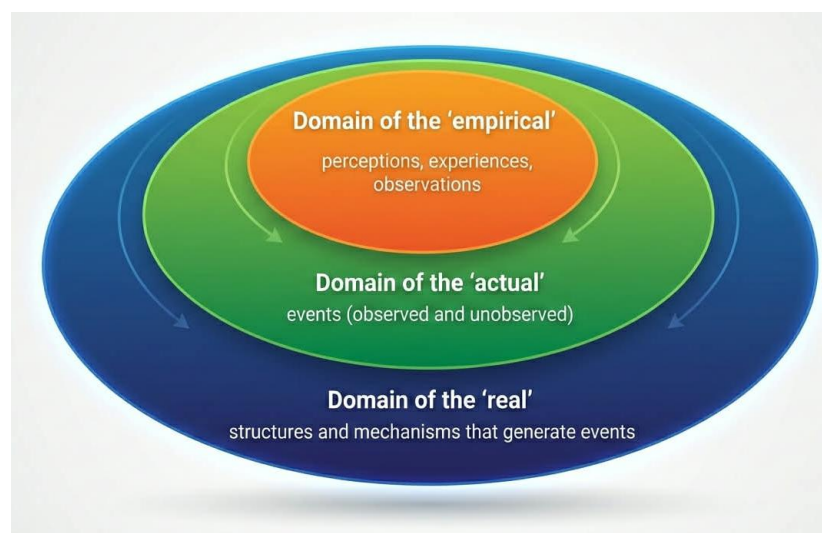
Epistemology is the theory of knowledge; 'how do we know what we know?' (Moon & Blackman, 2013; Walsh & Evans, 2014). Epistemological realism argues that knowledge is measurable, absolute, independent of context (Moon & Blackman, 2014; Willis, 2023).

Epistemological realism uses quantitative methods, such as randomised controlled trials and statistical modelling methods to derive causality (Willis, 2023). On the other hand, epistemological relativism proposes that knowledge is subjective (individually and collectively) (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Epistemological relativism often uses qualitative methods, including interpretivist and constructionist procedures (Moon & Blackman, 2014). Critical realism uses social constructionism to recognise how knowledge is contingent upon patterns in social context (Johnson, 2023; Moon & Blackman, 2014). In other words, how people use knowledge to understand reality depends on the world that *they* have specifically lived in; their needs, history, and experiences (Willis, 2023).

How critical realism investigates epistemological relativism to support ontological realism is through judgmental rationality. Judgmental rationality is the capacity to evaluate what theories are most likely to be true in a given context (Johnson, 2023; Willis, 2023). Judgmental relativism, on the other hand, asserts that because reality is relative and pluralistic, all theories are accepted as valid (Willis, 2023). The application of judgmental relativism, however, challenges the ability to assess theoretical merit and “the concept of evidence becomes meaningless – a matter of whose truth and whose evidence, and their acceptance becomes little more than faith” (Willis, 2023; p. 273). Critical realism uses judgmental rationalism to evaluate the validity of epistemological relativism in order establish an objective reality (Hoddy, 2019; Johnson, 2023; Willis, 2023). To do this, the critical realism framework is stratified into three concepts (see Figure 2).

Figure 2.

Critical realism (adapted from Hoddy, 2019).



Booker (2021) applied the critical realist framework to human agency. Lived experiences (the ‘empirical’) that follow individual agency and choice (the ‘actual’) coexists with social structures (the ‘real’) (Booker, 2021). Individual agency is variably enabled or restricted by generative mechanisms that operate within social structures, and the consequential experiences of individual agency can prompt change in social structures (Booker, 2021). Booker (2021) explained that individual agency and social structures are not wholly inseparable but symbiotic and temporal, reinforcing the critical realist position that objective reality is layered, which includes time itself (past and future). Critical realism is appropriate for this thesis as its framework can be applied to theoretical structures and mechanisms of self-worth.

In this thesis, the ‘empirical’ represents feelings of worthlessness (and worthiness), which have been experienced or observed by the self and others. Feelings of worthlessness and worthiness occur in response to events and dynamics in the ‘actual’, such as punishment, reinforcement, habituation, and extinction (or, experiences of praise, criticism, neglect, reward). Events in the actual are proposed as what is known (observed) but not always seen (unobserved) (Hoddy, 2019; Walsh & Evans, 2014). These events are enabled and constrained by the ‘real’, which represent intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural perspectives of human value (such as contingencies and conditions of worth). Perspectives of human value represent structures, which interact with generative mechanisms in self-concepts, relationships, autonomy, morality, and narratives. The empirical (feelings of worthlessness), elicited from the actual (punishment and reinforcement), can then overtly and covertly reshape the real (perspectives of human value).

Critical realism is used in this thesis to theorise that if self-worth contains appraisals of human value, humans will experience themselves through both real and perceived negotiations and judgments of their own value according to specific and layered social contexts. If that social context changes, appraisals of their worth may also change, compounding against former beliefs, and transforming and broadening new perspectives of human value (including others as well as their own). Recognising how social contexts shift perceptions of human value supports the critical realist position that reality has layers and the social constructionist view that the layers are structured according to social context and audience. Moreover, as outlined in Chapter 2, these structures exist across the course of one’s lifetime, suggesting that feelings of worthlessness and worthiness and structures of human value are symbiotic and temporal (Booker, 2021).

Challenging dominant conceptions of mental distress

Critical realism can also be used to investigate the layered realities of lived experiences of mental distress while intersecting the implementation of research in healthcare practices (Pilgrim, 2014; Woodard, 2014). That is, critical realism could help identify how institutions operationalise research and literature to inform the design of their systems and policies and the impact of their decisions (Johnson, 2023). Such data could indicate the adequacy or appropriateness of research in its design, which will continually be influenced by the researcher's philosophical orientation, methodology, and position (Johnson, 2023; Woodard, 2014). In this way, critical realism can be used as a complementary and critical evaluation of dominant theories of mental distress, such as depression.

Since the first publication of the DSM in 1952, the American Psychiatric Association have classified different forms of mental distress into operationalised diagnoses, drawing from psychodynamic (Freudian and Meyer) and neoKraepelin theories (Joobar & Tabbane, 2019; Kawa & Giordano, 2012; Kim & Park, 2019). In other words, the DSM nomenclature is grounded in theories of the psychological subconscious, early childhood experiences and disease essentialism (i.e. due to biological dysfunction) to explain causes of depression (amongst other psychological disorders) (Kawa & Giordano, 2012; Kim & Park, 2019).

In the 1970s and 1980s, the development of the DSM-III, ICD-9, and ICD-9-CM (Clinical Modification) were coordinated with one another (American Psychiatric Association, 2025). The development and alignment of the international nomenclatures of mental distress, focusing on depression and schizophrenia, were intended to increase international clinical validity and reliability for the diagnosis and treatment of mental distress, establish pharmaceutical regulatory processes, and legitimise psychiatry as a scientific field (Horwitz, 2011; Johnson, 2023; Kim & Park, 2019). The unification of Western conceptualisations of mental distress helped establish a dominant position in clinical literature, while also facilitating an economic industry for the treatment of mental distress (Kim & Park, 2019; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999). Likewise, the symptomatology of major depressive disorder in the DSM-5 is near identical to the International Classification of Diseases and Related Health Problems 11th Revision (ICD-11) (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019).

Through the primary use of epistemological realist research methods, Western perspectives of depression have produced knowledge for the aetiology of depression independent of social context (Pilgrim, 2014; Syed & McLean, 2023). With a biomedical

perspective, depression has been understood as a categorical state of biological abnormality that deviates from biological normality (Johnson, 2023; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999). With a cognitive behavioural perspective, depression has been understood as a dysfunction of psychological and behavioural mechanisms (Kim & Park, 2021; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999). With a psychodynamic perspective, depression has been understood as relating to psychoneuroses and reactions to stressors (Surís et al., 2016). The underlying theoretical assumptions for each perspective emphasise intrapersonal factors of depression (Syed & McLean, 2023).

One aetiological theory of mental distress (first applied to schizophrenia in the 1960s and depression in the 1980s) is the diathesis-stress model (Colodro-Conde et al., 2018; Persons et al., 2019). The diathesis-stress model determines that people have a biological predisposition to a form of mental distress (diathesis), and when combined with environment factors (stressors) the symptoms become ‘activated’ and expressed (Arnau-Soler et al., 2019; Colodro-Conde et al., 2018; Persons et al., 2019). Arnau-Soler et al. (2019) and Colodro-Conde et al. (2018) found supporting evidence that depression is heritable and more likely to be expressed following stressful life events. Arnau-Soler et al. (2019) further suggested that the expression of depressive symptoms may be influenced by the behaviours and personality traits of individuals, noting how gender (or how gender is practiced) often influences the coping mechanisms used and associated risks, which then shape how symptoms are observed and understood.

Another model (specific to self-concepts) is the scar model, which suggests that prior mental distress can make a person more vulnerable to future mental distress (D’Argembeau et al., 2007; Salehinejad et al., 2020; World Health Organisation, 2019). For depression, this means that symptoms of prior depressive episodes (such as worthlessness and negative affect) leave scars on one’s self-concept, perpetuating future symptoms of depression (D’Argembeau et al., 2007; Reed-Fitzke, 2020; Salehinejad et al., 2020). While there is evidential support for these models, exclusive focus on intrapersonal factors risks overlooking potential opportunities for assessment and therapeutic interventions that acknowledge causes of stressful life events (Arnau-Soler et al., 2019; Colodro-Conde et al., 2018; Jørgensen et al., 2023). For example, maintaining factors associated with symptoms of depression is vitally important to recovery, as is recognising that symptoms can be caused and perpetuated by structural barriers (such as the inequitable distribution of power and resources) that prevent individuals from feeling as though they are a person of worth (Kirkbride et al., 2024; Suicide Mortality Review Committee, 2019).

The theoretical assumptions and models of mental distress are also used to inform the design of clinical assessment tools, including psychometric instruments that determine the presence and severity of depression. The Beck Depression Inventory II is presently considered a psychometric instrument that has the greatest specificity and sensitivity of depression in research and clinical settings (Beck et al., 1996; Smarr & Keefer, 2011; Tung et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). However, some of the tools risk type II errors, or false negatives, as the instruments are limited in capturing heterogeneous presentations of depression (Tung et al., 2023; Zhou et al., 2023). For example, researchers have found that men are less likely to admit to crying and feelings of dissatisfaction, hopelessness, worthlessness, failure, and self-dislike; items that feature in the Beck Depression Inventory scales (Alcade et al., 2024; Allen-Burge et al., 1994; Li & Gal, 2022).

Upon acknowledging that the Beck Depression Inventory psychometric have not captured all presentations of depression (such as men), researchers suggested lowering the cutoff score due to the assumed underestimation of depression statistics (Beck et al., 1996; Tung et al., 2023). However, lowering the clinical cutoff scores does not address the construct and content validity of depression for different population groups nor does it address potential personal barriers, such as the risks of being honest about one's depression (including shame or work-related consequences) (Affleck et al., 2012; Li & Gal, 2023; Lin & Cheung 1999). Granted, researchers have advised that psychometric instruments are primarily intended for screening purposes and that users ought to conduct comprehensive assessments of mental distress when judged as appropriate (Smarr & Keefer, 2011).

Despite the scientific and technological innovations, the 'objective reality' of depression has variable etiological causes and heterogeneous presentations (Kim & Park, 2019; Pilgrim, 2014; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999). The difference in knowledge for causes of depression, presentation of symptoms, efficacy of assessment tools and treatment protocols challenges the rigour of research and its theoretical assumptions (Pilgrim, 2014). For example, in recent systemic reviews, researchers have found inconclusive evidence for the serotonin hypothesis of depression; work that was foundational to affirming the scientific field of psychiatry (Bremshey et al., 2024; Horwitz, 2011; Javelle et al., 2025; Moncrieff et al., 2022). In other words, the argument that depression is associated with or caused by abnormal levels of serotonin shows no consistent evidence (Bremshey et al., 2024; Javelle et al., 2025; Moncrieff et al., 2022).

Given the resource invested into understanding specific theories of depression and the privileged and political position of healthcare professionals, some researchers believe that

clinical fields are not likely to abandon their theoretical assumptions or diagnostic procedures despite inconclusive evidence (Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999; Woodard, 2014). Prioritising specific philosophies and research methods to understand the ‘reality’ of mental distress has resulted in the devaluation of alternative worldviews and methodologies, such as pūtaiao Māori (Stewart, 2023; Woodard, 2014). For example, in 1907, the Aotearoa New Zealand Labour Government passed the Tohunga Suppression Act, arguing that the legislation would protect Māori health from fraudulent Māori Tohunga (experts) and their healthcare practices (Norris & Beresford, 2020; Woodard, 2014). The legislation criminalised traditional healing methods, prioritised Western healthcare practices, which subverted efforts to resist colonial practices (Norris & Beresford, 2020; Woodard, 2014).

Janet Frame, an Aotearoa New Zealand writer, was admitted to a psychiatric ward and diagnosed with ‘incipient schizophrenia’ in 1945 (Evans, 2010). She had learnt and enacted the presentation of schizophrenia to receive care, despite experiencing significant distress, family deaths, and suicidality from earlier in her life (Evans, 2010; Frame, 1989). “It had become my only way of arousing interest in those whose help I believed that I needed” (Frame, 1989, p. 213). Few health professionals talked to her or considered differential diagnoses. “...I was ‘there for life’, and as the years passed and the diagnosis remains, with no one apparently questioning it even by formal interviewing or tests, I felt hopelessness at my plight.” (Frame, 1989, p. 213).

Throughout repeated admissions over several years and receiving electroconvulsive therapy and insulin coma treatment, her symptoms of mental distress worsened (Evans, 2010). In 1951, her award-winning success for her book, ‘The Lagoon: Stories’, influenced the Superintendent of the Seacliff Lunatic Asylum to halt the pre-frontal lobotomy procedure (referred to as leucotomy) she was about to receive (Evans, 2010; Fisher, 2021).

I repeat that my writing saved me. I had seen in the ward office the list of those ‘down for a leucotomy’, with my name of the list, and other names being crossed off as the operation was performed. My ‘turn’ must have been very close when one evening the superintendent of the hospital, Dr Blake Palmer, made an unusual visit to the ward. He spoke to me – to the amazement of everyone. ... The winning of the prize and the attention of a new doctor from Scotland who accepted me as I appeared to him and not as he learned about me from my ‘history’ or reports of me, ... Instead of being treated by leucotomy, I was treated as a person of some worth, a human being, (Frame, 1989, pp. 222-223).

Frame's experiences touch on several aspects of how self-worth might be experienced and negotiated. Her distress was not recognised until she was assessed by a mental health professional who saw her as a person beyond her diagnosis, and that her successful book prompted the termination of her scheduled brain surgery in recognition of her 'value'.

Maintaining critical analyses on dominant conceptualisations of health care and mental distress are imperative, as overvaluing Western philosophies and misuse of research has resulted in the disregard of inconclusive evidence, unclear efficacy, and broad iatrogenic harm (Fisher, 2021; Hayward, 2023; Moncrieff et al., 2022; Woodard, 2014). Epistemological realism claims neutrality by removing extraneous variables (such as social context) to understand an objective reality (Willis, 2023). However, reductionistic methods in psychiatric and psychological research have often come at the expense of diverse lived experiences (Syed, 2016; Syed & McLean, 2023). Perceiving individuals as having biological abnormalities and pathological psyche as reasons for their mental distress does not adequately consider the impact of traumatic experiences, cultural practices, hegemonies, power, discourse, and social events (Pilgrim, 2014; Senior & LaMarre, 2024). Epistemological realism is not necessarily unhelpful or irrelevant in psychological and psychiatric science, but the inferences of data have often been overstated and insufficient (Horwitz, 2011). The knowledge gained from epistemological realism is used with cultural- and value-laden interpretations and agendas (Clandinin, 2007; Horwitz, 2011; Pilgrim, 2014; Johnson, 2023; Senior & LaMarre, 2024; Willis, 2023). Or, as framed by Willis (2023), it is not the first order construal of the world (i.e. data), but the second order construal of the first order (i.e. interpretations of data) that ascertains accuracy.

Summary

Critical realism proposes that objectivity (fixed and stable variables) is understood through subjectivity (dynamic and personal variables) and uses judgmental rationality to weigh evidence in support of different theories (Johnson, 2023; Pilgrim, 2014; Pilgrim & Bentall, 1999). Researchers have used critical realism to understand how symptoms of mental distress (such as the heterogeneous presentations such as depression) are consequential to events (such as neglect, invalidation, and rejection), which interrelate with social and institutional structures of knowledge about mental distress (including sociocultural values, assessment tools, and treatment methods) (Booker, 2021; de Souza, 2014; Pilgrim, 2014). The critical realism framework supports how intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural factors are continuously woven, grounded in history and actively moulded for future knowledge and action (Batchelder & Hagan, 2023). Because academic theories and definitions of self-worth are

variably understood, master narrative methodology is used to privilege lived experiences of worthlessness and investigate the events that have been influenced by the sociocultural narratives of human value.

Narrative inquiry

Research on self-worth as a lived experience does not appear to be uniquely described beyond its association with self-esteem, morality, and references to feeling worthless, not enough, or inadequate (American Psychiatric Association, 1980; Ari & Mari, 2021; Wakefield & Schmitz, 2016). One of the first points of inquiry was trying to understand what it meant to *be enough*, and how the participants learnt about standards of enough-ness. In qualitative research, narrative inquiry is one approach of delineating how participants ascribe meaning to their experiences, meanings that are then used to navigate life, organise agency, and develop identity (Clandinin, 2007; McAlpine, 2016; Schubring et al., 2019; Stephens & Breheny, 2013).

McAlpine (2016) categorised narrative inquiry into sociocultural, naturalist and literary, suggesting that narratives can be captured through different means: cultural practices, significant moments, and through metaphors and imagery. Murray (2000) categorised narrative inquiry into personal, interpersonal, positional, and ideological perspectives, which emphasise experience, dialogue, morality, and social systems, respectively. From these structures, narratives take on an intricate focus of lived experience that is both individual and collective. This thesis used a form of sociocultural analysis and an interconnection between personal, interpersonal, positional, and ideological perspectives, Master Narrative Methodology.

[L]ife is understood not simply as a biological existence or psychological awareness of self, but as a social construct. Influenced by external forces, such as historical events, oppressive regimes and institutional opportunities, and steered by the individual will to survive and thrive, biographies provide unique accounts of social life. These accounts, seen as a product and part of social structures, give us an insight into the inner world of making meanings, forging identities and reproducing knowledge processes that lies at the foundation of most, if not all, research questions in the social sciences. (Eichsteller, & Davis, 2022, p. 1-2).

Master narrative methodology is considered as a complementary methodology to research on self-worth with its acknowledgement on dominant cultural scripts affecting mental distress and experience, which could precipitate feelings of worthlessness as they have been related to cultural scripts of morality (Syed, 2016; World Health Organisation, 2024).

Additionally, master narrative methodology is considered as complementary to critical realism in its active recognition of layers and social constructions of reality (Syed & McLean, 2023; Johnson, 2023).

Master Narrative Methodology

Master narratives are “culturally shared stories that guide thoughts, beliefs, values, and behaviors” (McLean & Syed, 2015, p. 323). Master narratives are identified through three distinct forms: structural (how stories are constructed), episodic (how life events are told), and biographical (narratives of how life ought to unfold) (McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed, 2016). The methodology was designed to account for cultural structures and mechanisms (such as systems and power dynamics) that give rise to psychological experiences (Syed & McLean, 2021; Syed et al., 2016). The methodology theorises that personal narratives are embedded with dominant cultural scripts (master narratives) and challenges to the dominant cultural scripts (alternative narratives) (Syed et al., 2017). Master narrative methodology centres dominant cultural scripts alongside personal experience, and the analysis focuses on the construction of personal narratives as they interact with societal norms and values, and differentiation from the expectations of social norms and value (Syed et al., 2016).

McLean and Syed (2015) detail five principles of the master narrative framework. *Utility* represents the foundation that members will draw on to understand societal groups and themselves, reasoned by the overarching cultural standards of how members are expected to align. *Ubiquity* represents the omnipresence of master narratives, such as within family life, institutions and law, and media. *Invisibility* represents the pervasive commonplace of master narratives, where the narratives are unnoticeable by those who ascribe to it. *Compulsoriness* represents the risks of deviating from the master narrative and endorsing an alternative narrative. *Rigidity* represents the power gained by a master narrative having its principles reinforced through maintenance of status quo (McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed, 2016). These five principles can be likened to the critical realist framework of the ‘real’, ‘actual’, and ‘empirical’ operating together as people participate in master narratives: rejecting or reinforcing cultural scripts through personal agency and experience, while also negotiating the permissions and constraints according to cultural scripts (Booker, 2021; Stephens & Breheny, 2013; Syed, 2016).

Alternative narratives are scripts that challenge master narratives (Syed & McLean, 2023). Alternative narratives are positioned in relation to master narratives by offering different perspectives (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020). An individual may use rejection, distancing,

and exception to resist master narratives (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020). Hochman and Spector-Mersel (2020) also suggested that alternative narratives need not entirely contradict master narratives, rather, alternative narratives can be critical and relative. For example, alternative narratives may contain alternative master narratives. In this way, alternative narratives can be positioned in relation to a master narrative depending on the context the master narrative takes precedence (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020). However, the nonconforming or discrete nature of alternative narratives mean that they tend to be recalled more saliently against a narrative that is dominant (Syed & McLean, 2015). For example, master narratives of traditional masculinities depend on whose masculinities has taken precedence, thereby, positioning different traditional masculinities as alternative.

Personal narratives represent the personally shaped scripts, containing both master and alternative narratives (Syed et al., 2020). During the development of a personal narrative, individuals make sense of their past through a process of autobiographical and moral reasoning (Syed et al., 2020). As described in the literature, autobiographical reasoning contains both intrapersonal interpretations and co-construction as relationships shape perspectives of events (Fivush et al., 2006; Merrill, 2022; Reese et al., 2008; Reese et al., 2017). Autobiographical narratives remain personal, however, as individuals move across different contexts, environments, and audiences over time (Reese et al., 2017). Changes and incongruence give rise to alternative narratives, thus, deepening the complex network of personal narratives and knowledge of the world (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020). It is speculated that changing contexts contributes to the structures of rules and standards, reinforcing how conditions of worth are likely predetermined by multiple master narratives.

Master narrative methodology has two key points of analysis (see Figure 3). *Content* refers to the static nature of narratives, details and conceptualisations (Syed & McLean, 2023). *Process* refers to how the participant relates to the narratives, and how the narratives are internalised (Syed & McLean, 2023). For this thesis, master narrative content was identified via ‘personal events as descriptions’ and analysed via event narrative (interviews). Event narrative (interviews) refers to the verbal description of personal events (Syed & McLean, 2023). Master narrative process was identified via ‘process through deviation’ and analysed via the participants’ direct and indirect event narratives. Direct event narratives involve personal experiences being measured against master narratives, whereas indirect event narratives are when participants refer to other relevant topics and events (Syed & McLean, 2023).

Figure 3.

The Master Narrative Framework (adapted from Syed & McLean, 2023).



In this thesis, master narrative content represented the dominant sociocultural conditions and standards in contingencies of human value. Master narrative process represented how the participants related to the dominant conditions and standards against alternative and personal narratives. Thus, to ascertain personal narratives of self-worth, the participants' event narratives were used to identify and analyse what was expected of them (master narrative content) and the relative congruence and incongruence they felt (master narrative process). The process between personal narratives and master narratives (arrow 1) indicates how participants personally related to dominant scripts of human value. The process between personal narratives and alternative narratives (arrow 2) contains countering and expansive perspectives of human value. The process between master narratives and alternative narratives (arrow 3) indicates the rigidity and fluidity in defining human value.

The master narrative framework is used to demonstrate how a personal narrative of self-worth corresponds to the internalisation and maintenance of both master and alternative narratives, negotiating the dominant and countering perspectives of human value (McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed et al., 2020). Master narrative methodology complements critical realism in

the pursuit of understanding how societal structures are preserved through various mechanisms that influence individual psyche, while acknowledging the static and dynamic nature of culture (Syed & McLean, 2023). For example, the interaction between personal, alternative, and master narratives (as per the three arrows in Figure 3) represent the regulation and change in structures of master narratives through mechanisms and events (Syed & McLean, 2023). Master narrative methodology also accounts for a constructionist epistemology in which personal narratives of self-worth depend on social constructions of human value. Therefore, master narrative methodology complements this thesis in its philosophical position to elucidate the structures and mechanisms of self-worth as a concept and lived experience.

Materiality and timeline mapping

A materiality approach was encouraged with the intention of using photos and objects to aid and symbolise their conceptualisation of self-worth (Aagaard & Matthieson, 2016; Cassim, 2017). Materiality was used in this thesis, as the technique has been endorsed as an effective method in qualitative research to elicit memories and richer narratives, ground abstract concepts in lived experience, and help articulate meaning that is difficult to speak to (Aagaard & Matthieson, 2016; McKenzie et al., 2026). Such a technique that incorporates the use of physical objects has also been encouraged as a method for interviewing men, where talking to one's lived experience may be challenging due to discomfort (McKenzie et al., 2026).

Materiality may also contribute to understanding or recognising conceptions of the self, such that interpersonal interactions take place in physical settings illustrated with routines, expectations, and material objects symbolising priorities and dominant narratives (Cassim, 2017; Grossen & Orvig, 2011). The self, as independent and interdependent, is established and sustained through one's physical environment and material self (Grossen & Orvig, 2011). Grossen and Orvig (2011) considered how social interactions take place in physical settings containing material objects, symbolising how sociocultural structures prioritise and design narratives of value through materiality. The self as an individual and as a group are established and sustained through material objects, routines and expectations (Grossen & Orvig, 2011).

Materiality has also been effective in identifying narratives in social contexts and physical spaces (Aagaard & Matthieson, 2016; Cassim, 2017). As such, materiality could be used to as a means to identify dominant cultural scripts within master narrative methodology. Here, materiality could be used to identify the five principles of master narrative methodology (utility, ubiquity, invisibility, compulsoriness, and rigidity) in physical places where dominant scripts are identified through prominent local art pieces that espouse a specific lens of history

(Cassim, 2017; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed, 2016; Traversa, 2023). One example of master narratives of human value through materiality can be observed in Loutherbourog's 18th century artwork of Captain Cook's divine ascension (Figure 4).

Figure 4.

Phillipe Jacques de Loutherbourog (1740-1812): The Apotheosis of Captain Cook (Thane, n.d.).



Although the location of his ascension rises above Kealakekua Bay, Hawaii, his role in colonising the Pacific was extensive (Bushnell, 1992). Through materiality, Captain Cook is positioned as a divine hero of a superior race immortalised into history (Bushnell, 1992; Thane, n.d.). Reactions to Cooks' death reinforces dominant narratives, through attributions of heroism, grief, anger, tears and sorrow from the Britons, King George III and Empress

Catherine the Great, and awarded a coat of arms the motto of “Nil intentatum reliquit ... He left nothing unattempted”, and “Circa Orbem ... Around the World” (Bushnell, 1992, p. 3). Whereas, an alternative narrative may perceive this artwork with grief, anger and sorrow, as Captain Cook is a key figure of colonial history that introduced disease, war, and land alienation (Liu et al., 1999). Loutherboung’s artwork exemplifies materiality as an object that contains dominant narratives of cultural (ethnic and religious) values, land and indigenous devaluation, and leadership and heroism qualities (Bushnell, 1992). Further examples of materiality that exemplify master narratives of British colonialism in Aotearoa New Zealand include the Queen Victoria Monument on Kent Terrace and the William Wakefield Memorial at the Basin Reserve, both of which stand in Wellington, the capital of Aotearoa New Zealand (Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, n.d.-a; Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga, n.d.-b).

Timeline mapping was initially incorporated into the methodological design to chronical the participants’ events into a narrative structure. Timeline mapping is a qualitative technique that complements narrative analysis by visually eliciting significant events in a participant’s life history (Kolar et al., 2015; Schubring et al., 2019). Timelines offer a creative and graphic structure for when narratives are shared in interview, building an awareness for both the interviewee and the interviewer to understand the significance and meaning of events as relating to one another (Kolar et al., 2015; Schubring et al., 2019). Biographical methods of interviewing have been useful to ground narratives where memories and the timing of events are difficult to chronical, such as due to age (young people) and experiences of trauma (Kolar et al., 2015; Schubring et al., 2019).

Reflexivity

My positionality in this thesis perpetually moves between insider and outsider roles (Bukamal, 2022). As an “insider”, *feelings of worthlessness* have stubbornly accompanied various parts of my life without awareness of the concept or the words to explain the feeling. Yet when making sense of the world, I have persistently observed the social influences that (in)advertently dictate permissibility and restraint on others, focusing almost exclusively on nuances of human psychology and relationships. As an insider, I experience a shared humanity with feeling worthless (Bukamal, 2022). This position as an insider offered a level of connection with participants when exploring the effects of self-worth on their wellbeing and how self-worth may be experienced and structured similarly. I also share ethnic identity with some of the participants, as my ancestors are of English, Scottish, and Welsh descent, first

arriving in Aotearoa New Zealand around 1860. Granted, this position as an insider need not assume homogeneity with the participants who share experiential or cultural backgrounds. Thus, my outsider role exists according to all differing experiences, standards, and perceptions of self-worth.

An “outsider” does not belong to the participant group and their identities (Bukamal, 2022). As a millennial woman, the cultural narratives that I was born into, and have been part of, are a consequence to the cultural narratives that the participants were also born into and been part of from birth to present day, as individuals, group members, and as part of society. My role as an outsider was particularly important to be accountable to, as I interpreted the participants’ stories and references from multiple different lenses, such as demographic categories and experiences within those categories (Bukamal, 2022). With a dynamic insider and outsider position, my cultural identities envelop shared and unique narratives with varying degrees of insight and limited awareness.

In terms of ethical research practices, because rates of depression affect Māori men disproportionality, and in my responsibility as Tangata Tiriti (people of the Treaty of Waitangi), this research has significant implications to the health and wellbeing of Māori men (Te Whatu Ora - Health New Zealand, 2025). In the early stages of this thesis, advice I received regarding ethical research practice was whether, as a Pākehā/New Zealand European woman, I *should* interview participants of different cultural identities if me and supervision team represented Pākehā/New Zealand European ethnicity only. On one hand, the advice was grounded in a backdrop of harmful researcher practices that have exploited and misunderstood different cultural populations’ worldviews and lived experiences, resulting in worse health outcomes for those groups (Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010). This advice was intended to uphold ethical research practices, such as beneficence, respect, honesty, integrity and accountability, as well as appropriate research practices that are culturally aware, responsive, and inclusive (Becker et al., 2022; Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010). On the other hand, when I relayed this advice to a different mentor, they argued if limited cultural representation of the author and supervision team meant excluding groups of people from participating in research, the research would be discriminatory and racist.

Despite the barriers that impeded timely remuneration for external cultural supervision and recruitment of prospective participants with different cultural identities, the responsibility of including voices that were absent from the data remained central to my research practice. In discussion with a Māori clinical supervisor, he offered his supervision should one of the participants be of Māori descent. I also built relationships with different community groups and

enquired about their interest in providing oversight of my interpretation of findings, while ensuring confidentiality and privacy of the participants. Although the participant group largely represented cultural identities that I could discuss with my supervision team, this did not prevent me from sharing my interpretation of findings with mentors across different settings who had different cultural identities. Invitations to discuss my interpretation of findings with mentors were grounded in consent and rapport and a genuine excitement for this research. By seeking out informal discussion, my mentors' perspectives prompted my reflexive practice in responding to cultural contexts. For example, during my intervention placement in the clinical programme, one of my Māori mentors prompted me to reconsider the use of the term 'physical abuse' when describing 'physical discipline' of a different time.

To elaborate, when the men described the use of corporal punishment (normalised and valued use of physical discipline), their experiences can be differentiated from conceptions of physical abuse of the time, contemporary perceptions of physical punishment and abuse, and cultural conceptions of physical punishment and abuse historically and presently (Abbas, 2022). Researchers of narrative analysis have advised that authors avoid inputting their own meaning that did not exist in the data, which raised the challenge between non-interpretive 'bracketing' and reflexive practice (Braun & Clarke, 2023; McAlpine, 2016). Although bracketing attempts to present data independent of preconceptions and bias, reflexivity endorses awareness and accountability to such preconceptions and biases (Habibullah et al., 2024). Ascertaining master narratives of self-worth was challenging given the inconsistency and vague definitions of self-worth in research, never mind then applying the theoretical background of self-worth to different cultural contexts.

These reflexive practices influenced how I structured the data analysis and theoretical background of literature. The participants shared similar cultural identities as Pākehā/NZ European, men, children of 'the Silent Generation', born in Aotearoa New Zealand, and have lived experience of depression. For data analysis, finding mutuality according to their gender risked incorporating personal preconceptions of masculinities, while overlooking broader power structures that shaped their experiences as per other identities and life events. For the theoretical background, I reflected on how focusing on their gender risked narrowing the proposed structure of self-worth while also excluding other voices. Although this research was inspired by men's experiences of depression and narratives of manhood, it was important to uphold principles of integrity and objectivity when analysing participants' data and investigating relevant literature (Becker et al., 2022).

As such, during the research process, I became variably uncertain about how to assign master narratives ('dominant cultural narratives') given the unique personal histories and historical events in Aotearoa New Zealand. As an example, had I drawn on master narratives of masculinities, 'traditional masculinity' would need to be researched with respect to its cultural contexts. As advised by one of my cultural supervisors in the programme, and as recognised in research, traditional masculinities can be differentiated by narratives according to Pākehā history, Māori history, and other cultural identities (Lindsay, 2019). If participants embodied multiple narratives of 'traditional masculinities', they may be negotiating multiple master narratives. Thus, one of the reflexive challenges was managing assumptions of a prevailing master narrative across participants, without overlooking the power of master narratives (as per the five master narrative methodology principles) (McLean & Syed, 2015; Woodard, 2014).

These reflexive considerations are incorporated into the design of the thesis. The participants' definition of self-worth grounded how self-worth was understood and used as a concept. Their definition was also compared to academic definitions of self-worth and other subtypes of self-concepts. The participants' event narratives indicated the contingencies of worth being evaluated, thus, the site of master narratives containing standards of human value. These narratives provided a platform where I abstracted the mechanisms and structures contributing to self-worth as a concept and experience. Prioritising lived experience narratives of self-worth guided the theoretical background and choice of literature, including the voices that were not represented in the interviews. Moreover, informal discussions with mentors helped me to reorientate my understanding and identification of potential master narratives of self-worth from different cultural contexts, such as time. While I attempted to conceptualise self-worth in a way that could resonate with any reader, I welcome readers to consider their own conceptualisation of self-worth, including how self-worth has been positioned in this thesis.

Chapter 4: Method

This chapter outlines the methods used for the research, including recruitment, participants, procedure, ethical considerations, analysis of interview data, ethical considerations, and the presentations of extracts.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via a request to access an organisation sheet and physical public advertisement poster at retail stores, email mailing lists, word-of-mouth, and in-person presentation to community groups (see Appendices A and B). The advertisement asked for New Zealand men aged 55 to 75 who have experienced depression and would be comfortable to discuss self-worth. I mentioned on the advertisement the following about self-worth.

What does self-worth mean to you? What are your experiences of feeling worthy or worthless? We will talk about self-worth across multiple contexts: childhood to present, significant people in your life, hobbies, employment, or whatever topic you believe is relevant.

The initial population group of interest was the Baby Boomer generation, to explore life experiences that have traversed significant social change, especially since World War II and the more traditional Western structure of family roles during the 1950s onwards (Pool & Du Plessis, 2017a). However, concerns were raised about the negative connotations associated with the label and the overlap with Generation X. As such, the label was made less specific for recruitment with just the age band stipulated. During recruitment, there were also concerns of low interest and, given the timeframe, the age range was lowered to recruit one man who showed interest; he was not included as he was not born in Aotearoa New Zealand.

One of the more effective methods of recruitment was through word of mouth and active recommendations by people who advocated for my thesis. Approaching specific community groups of men and introducing my thesis in person was another effective method of recruitment, perhaps because they could familiarise with who they would be speaking to as I explained the purpose of my research. Interested participants were provided with an information sheet (see Appendix C) outlining the purpose and principles of the research topic. My contact details were available to discuss any further questions and for their confirmed interest in participating. Two men were not included for interview, one due to concerns of mental distress, and another due to being born before 1940.

Participants

The inclusion criteria were for the participants outlined in the information sheet (Appendix C):

- people who identify as men;
- New Zealand-born; proficient in English;
- aged 55 to 75 years;
- have self-identified experiences of depression, or had a diagnosis of depression by a qualified health practitioner;
- if outside of Wellington, must have access to internet and online video capabilities.

There were two exclusion criteria:

- have a current medical diagnosis of dementia
- currently experiencing periods of very low mood

Six Pākehā/NZ European men, born between 1944 and 1960, participated in the interview. At the time of the interviews in 2023, participants were between 63 and 79 years of age, with a mean age of 71.5 years and standard deviation of 6.06. Five men were married to women, and one man referred to a former relationship as “*semi-gay*”. All of them had lived experience of depression which was not explicitly diagnosed by a health professional. Participants were all fluent in English and born in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Interviews

A pilot interview was organised to test the interview schedule and structure before subsequent interviews were conducted (Appendix D). This man’s data was not included in the main thesis. The interview worked well in preparing the timing of interview questions, the length of interviews, the coherence of questions, and testing of recording equipment. Although timeline mapping was used during this interview, the technique interfered with my presence with the interviewee and the flow of the interview. Consequently, timeline mapping was not used in subsequent interviews.

Interviews were conducted from June to September 2023 at the participants’ preferred location, with an offer for video-conference software and presence of a support person. All the interviews were conducted in person, at their home, with no others present in the room except

for pets. Two semi-structured interviews were conducted, up to 90 minutes each; no participants were discouraged from giving a fuller account if they wished. A safety plan was designed for the participants and the interviewer (see Appendix E). The primary concerns addressed physical and psychological safety for the duration of the interview process.

The first interview involved introducing myself and the research, and offering refreshments (range of tea, chocolate biscuits, cheese and crackers). Consent, privacy, and transcriber confidentiality agreement (see Appendix F and G) were discussed and provided. The first interview focused on rapport building and discussing the participants' background details and definitions of self-worth. Dedicating the first interview to building rapport was an intentional decision inspired by Māori kaupapa and tikanga (principles and protocols) of whakawhanaungatanga (establishing relationships and connection), which is a process of building trust for ongoing connection between people (Komene et al., 2024). A definition of self-worth based on literature was shared after the participants' own conceptualisation, which was discussed to consider its similarities and differences. The interview concluded with reflections, check in of wellbeing, gratitude and \$40 reimbursement, outline for the second interview and transcript process, and scheduling the second interview.

The second interview began with a check in and reflections of the prior interview. The interview was guided by the semi-structured questions. Life stages were used to anchor the participants' memories and relevance of self-worth (worthiness and worthlessness). Refreshments were provided (range of tea and homemade scones with jam and whipped cream; a purposeful choice to reflect Aotearoa New Zealand hospitality culture) (Manatū Taonga – Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2013). Where refreshments were refused, alternative refreshments were offered. Hospitality felt particularly important to this thesis, showing appreciation and gratitude for the participants' time and narratives and in being considerate of the energy required to speak for 90 minutes about, often, heavy and personal life experiences. At least from my reflections as the interviewer, bringing refreshments created a comforting dynamic while demonstrating one of my practices of valuing people. The effect of this hospitality could partially explain why one of the participants shared that the interview felt therapeutic.

Ethical considerations

This research was accepted by the Massey University Ethics Committee (HEC: Southern B Committee Application 22/54). Some of the issues that were raised during the ethics process included: organising breaks during the interviews; detailing a safety plan for face-to-

face interviews (see Appendix E); specifying the time gap between interviews; clarifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria; detailing how to recognise cognitive impairment; and detailing a process for number of volunteers exceeding what is needed. These were all addressed.

Ethically, I practiced informed consent at Interview One and again in Interview Two. It was important to ensure that the men felt comfortable when sharing their stories with me (as a younger woman interviewer) and with the knowledge that their stories would be shared in this thesis.

To build rapport with the participants, suicidality was not assessed upon first meeting the participants unless they referred to suicidality or if there were indications of low mood (including irritability, sadness, emptiness) and little social support. However, as the interviews progressed, most of the participants shared experiences of suicidality. When this occurred, I conducted risk assessments for suicidality, including plans (historical, present and future), thoughts and behaviours (intent, desire, and means), and access to support (family and professional services). After discussing with my thesis supervisors the presence of risk, I prepared and sent an email to the Massey University Ethics Committee for their knowledge and opportunity to advise of further approaches. All interviews involved a risk assessment for suicidality, including of those who did not readily share suicidality. Although it was already planned, the interviews were titrated to finish on questions that were intended to elicit hope or positive feeling, such as ‘what makes you feel worthy?’ or ‘what would you like people to learn from your story?’ After each interview, I debriefed with my clinical thesis supervisor to discuss mood and risk of suicidality. When transcribing was completed, ready for their amendments and authority to release (see Appendix H), I checked in with the participants again.

Data analysis

Interview transcriptions were converted using the transcribe function in Microsoft Word and revised by listening to and correcting the outputs. The data was formatted into a clear presentation for the participants, which they then reviewed, corrected or amended. All identifying information was anonymised (including names, work, and geographic locations) by using pseudonyms and generic terms (such as ‘friend’, ‘parent’, and ‘work’) (McAlpine, 2016).

To begin, the participants interviews were analysed individually with guidance from Braun and Clarke’s steps of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2023). These included familiarisation with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing potential themes, and defining and naming themes (Braun & Clarke, 2023). The initial codes, themes, master and alternative narratives were identified for each participant across their life stages.

Each participants' narratives were written individually, however, the process of identifying master narratives for each participant and each life stage was not analytically practical (for this thesis) given the multiplicity of their stories and circumstances. During supervision, we discussed how the analysis fit into the master narrative methodology and used the same life stage structure to identify master narratives that were shared across each of the participants.

Having taken this approach, the data analysis was inductive as the interviews were not substantially directed by the interviewer nor the other participants, and each participant's personal definitions and experiences contributed to the theoretical background of the thesis. However, the data analysis was also deductive, because the narratives are presented according to the identified master narratives that connected the participants' stories after each interview was analysed.

Chapter 5: A lifetime sequelae of human appraisals

This chapter contains the data analysis, beginning with the participants' conceptualisations of self-worth and expressions of materiality. Then, each time period (childhood, adolescence, young adulthood, middle adulthood, and older adulthood/present) is analysed with reference to a master narrative, a dominant sociocultural attitude of human value. Alternative narratives represent challenges to the master narratives, which were typically expressed by finding a broader appreciation for differences in human value. The participants' personal narratives of self-worth, a personal combination of the master and alternative narratives, are summarised at the end of each time period.

The data analysis prioritises narrative coherence in the participants' stories of self-worth. Isolated quotes did not always explicitly describe worthlessness and worthiness, as the sum of their stories contained the essence and underlying meaning. Thus, the data analysis draws on themes identified across their life stories, building on the context and development of self-worth, capturing moments and events that were relevant to their overarching contingencies of worth, while in accordance with master narratives of human value.

Introductions: definitions of self-worth and materiality

The data analysis begins with a brief introduction of each participant, illuminating their conceptualisations of self-worth and some of the key contingencies of worth that they referred to throughout their interviews. The participants were also asked if they would like to bring a material object to the interview that demonstrates self-worth. I outline what the participants brought or did to show self-worth (not all brought objects to the interviews).

John (born 1950)

John describes self-worth in the context of feeling worthlessness, compared to worthiness or self-worth as a concept. His contingencies of worth are underpinned by his connection to the world, what he sees in himself, and what others see in him. John feels worthy being part of nature and by creating art that overwhelms and surprises people. He feels worthless through disconnection, not being seen or accepted by those he loves, and in being 'ordinary'. *"I felt worthy ... I felt valuable [in my job], who was perceived by others to be a success. I saw with, in that, I saw value in that. But at no time in my life have I ever felt that I was intrinsically valuable."*

His self-worth materialises through a compact disc (CD) of his vocal projects, speaking to the versatility of his voice and expressions of deep suffering. He shares that, like himself, the artists he met in his career wanted to be loved and valued for who they actually are. His career inspired him to go on a journey of Jungian dream analysis; the weird and wonderful interpretations were beautiful, powerful and terrifying. In his compilation of life events, John came to develop an acceptance for human light and shadow, including his own.

Richard (born 1950)

Richard's conceptualisation of self-worth is grounded in contribution. He explains self-worth being able to contribute meaningfully to work and tasks for others, and having your efforts and outputs recognised and appreciated.

Richard: it's a sense of feeling good about yourself because you recognise that what you have partaken in, how you've managed to achieve your goals ... basically doing things that, that work, that are enjoyable, that are self-fulfilling, that are able to be recognised by someone else, has, as having value."

To illustrate his self-worth, he shares a photo of himself as an attractive young man in his early 20s, "*feeling my way through becoming a young man, you know, and become part of society... then I remember being almost terrified about just the thought of a camera and the fact that someone was actually going to take a photo*". He also shares an attractive photo of his mother, "*She looks like Rita Hayworth. She could easily be a film star. She's gorgeous. Yeah... pretty proud of her. I'm pretty sorry for the fact that how she ended up, you know, in the situation.*" Richard frames the photos of himself and his mother with a deep compassion and bewilderment for their family dynamics. Through his experiences of relational mistrust, he describes his self-worth as self-made.

Albert (born 1952)

Albert wishes he was born without two things: intelligence and empathy. He abstracts self-worth through the definition of value. "*But when you talk about worth, you're talking about value, and then you're talking about value to yourself and value to other people*". Albert finds that his intellect and empathy has been devalued by others and by himself for a long time.

Albert illustrates his narratives with intricate symbolism. The interior design of his home is considered, thoughtfully organising his life's work into exhibitions. Following the

interviews, he shared a photo of a swan that he fashioned out of bluetac during one of his work shifts (Figure 5). The next day, it was reshaped back into a ball. He reflected on this as a conceptualisation of self-worth.

Figure 5.

The Bluetac Paradox.



Albert: How come when we are undermined and regarded as useless by others we react immediately with righteous indignation, however, when we tell ourselves that we are unworthy we believe it without hesitation (even in the face of the contrary evidence, which we often dismiss so readily)?

Ralph (born 1944)

Ralph's life narrative is one of invincibility and resilience. He captures the essence of his self-worth in his cameras, a hobby that he picked up as a teenager. *"That camera has fallen off on top of a car at 50 or 60kms an hour. It's fallen into a creek. It's been several other places like that, just shoved in the oven to dry off. Still works!"* Ralph's conception of self-worth is confronting life's punches head on. He takes pride in the fact that he, like his camera, still works after many beatings.

Ralph: It's not something I've actually thought about a great deal. ... I was brought up not to have any idea of it, or why. I've probably got more idea

of it in the last few years than I have ever before. ... I'm at the stage now, I'm finding it difficult to think, to think about doing [things], which annoys the hell out of me. Umm. I know I should be a lot better, or should be able to do a lot of more woodwork and stuff like that, but now I'm not, I just haven't got the ability now.

Ralph's main contingency of worth is mobility. He has immense worthiness having lived a life of attending to all tasks in the face of physical and psychological injuries. As his mobility declines, however, he expresses feelings of worthlessness.

Burt (born 1960)

Burt shares his life stories as a testimony. While showing his family photo album, he exhibits just one photo of the life that he fought against: a standard family photo of smiling happy faces. *"That photo was taken immediately after I was given the thrashing, and I was thrashed regularly"*. Burt describes being exploited by those bestowed with power to protect. He looked passed the doily curtains to see how much people are more interested in self-serving pursuits than upholding their roles and responsibilities.

Burt defines self-worth as *"Value. Umm and values."* When reflecting on his specific values, he wrote down *"Honesty. Integrity. Justice. Brotherhood. Friendship and that sort of stuff, right?"* With justice as his main contingency of worth, he has seen to exposing oppressive powers that were perceived as customary. Fighting for those who have been taken advantage of, including himself, helped him develop a sense of worthiness. *"...it's, an inner sense of power? You know, I don't need a uniform or a costume to give me a sense of entitlement or power, personal power."* He gifted a toy puzzle. Burt described how he regularly makes these puzzles for children from low socioeconomic backgrounds, a way of giving to the community and hoping that his puzzles might provide a joyful conundrum while living with difficult circumstances.

Edward (born 1959)

Edward conceptualises self-worth as truly appreciating one's value. *"Self-worth. I suppose it's you being able to respect who you are and see value in yourself, I guess."* Edward's main contingencies of worth are his love for humanity and the importance of healthcare through nutrition and exercise. His narratives of self-worth, however, contain themes of continuity and maintenance in ways that make resolution feel just out of reach.

Edward: *I think I, sort of, focus more on the negatives in life, you know. I mean, I know that I'm a good person. I know I take my shirt off for anybody, and ... you know, and so that's ... very valuable I think in a human being. You know, I care about what goes on in the world, ... I've got a big interest in sport and in keeping fit...*

Edward's manaakitanga (care and hospitality) is conspicuous and material. He offers homemade food, signifying how he embodies his family and culture. Yet, he tends to look upon his life negatively, focusing more on what has made him feel worthless than worthy.

Edward: *I don't see myself as having worth, you know. You know, I go to work every day, but I don't see myself as creating value. And that's the thing, you know, I am a hard worker, there's no doubt of it. I've always had a really strong work ethic. And I probably, you know, I do produce very high standard work, but at the end of day, it doesn't satisfy me.*

Summary

The participants definitions of self-worth and materiality were seeped in value and values. As Edward says “*you know value is probably having some, having purpose, finding purpose, having self-esteem, and being, you know, confident about oneself. So, you know, the, the question for me is, how do you, how do you measure value? How do you interpret value? You know, what do you mean by ‘value’, the term ‘value’?*” They all thoughtfully question what kinds of standards determined human value and feel grounded in their personal values even if these values have not necessarily been shared. As they started talking about their self-worth, their experiences were both personal and relational, moving between feeling worthy and worthless. Self-worth was being recognised in relationships, the work that they did and the choices they made, and the feeling of being valued and valuable. Self-worth was not stable, but dynamic and shaped over the lifetime.

Childhood: Earliest memories to ~10 years of age; 1950-1960

Master narrative: Children should be seen and not heard

In the 1950s, families were marked with post-war mentalities, communal duties to expand settlements (homes, families, farms and neighbourhoods), and a strict hierarchical family system (Pool & Du Plessis, 2017a). The baby boom of World War II was in full effect, and the Government implemented Keynesian economics with abundant employment

opportunities, free healthcare and education, and welfare security (Fitzimons, 2000; Humpage, 2011; Pool & Du Plessis, 2017b). The sociocultural idealised image of the 1950s family was placed on a quarter-acre section with the husband/father heading the household, carrying out discipline, teaching outdoor skills to their children, undertaking manual labour, and attending paid employment; wives/mothers focusing on home sciences, including household maintenance, family health and nutrition, raising the children, and managing resources; and children playing in the yard encased with a fence, smiles, and civility (Pool & Du Plessis, 2017b; Pool & Du Plessis, 2017c).

Children should be seen and not heard reflects values of propriety, manners, discipline, compliance, and respect for authority (Angeli-Gordon, 2025; Keegan, 2018; Temple, 1970). The proverb is scaffolded by broader cross-cultural master narratives of child rearing; values of instruction and correction necessary to establish a sense of limits and boundaries for unsafe or harmful behaviours (Herewini, 2018; Pollock, 2011; Quinn, 2005). These cross-cultural master narratives also include respect for authority. Respecting one's elders is a demonstration of honouring their life, wisdom, sacrifices and contribution (Angeli-Gordon, 2025; Herewini, 2018; Quinn, 2005). Respecting those in positions of authority is also a demonstration of aligning with a social fabric (boundaries and laws) designed to protect people (Bornstein, 2013; Herewini, 2018; Quinn, 2005).

These values were accepted as the norm for all the participants as they were children with little power to change their immediate surroundings and, sometimes, less exposure to other ways of being.

Ralph: *I suppose I never knew anything different, so I just accepted it. Yeah. I guess I just accept that, 'well, that's life, I suppose, that's the way it must be.'*

Ralph's acceptance illustrates family homeostasis, where family systems represent the child's first introduction into what is normal (Bornstein, 2013; Quinn, 2005). Ralph follows with "[I] never knew what another kid looked like 'til I was six", reinforcing that he truly could not have known a different life in the absence of experiences and relationships beyond his family home.

Although fathers typically held the right and responsibility for discipline and leadership in the family, this was not always the case for the boys in this research. Ralph describes how farm work was gruelling but considered "*light relief*" in the face of an overbearing mother.

During one lambing season when his father was out with sciatica, he felt “*like death warmed up*” for eight weeks. Ralph was examined by his physician as having such severe mumps that he could have died. His mother, a qualified nurse, knew best regardless of whether she was right.

Ralph: My mother just tore strips off me, you know. But when I got to the doctor, he said, ‘oh, mumps,’ and I, ‘should have been dead right now.’ And I went back and told her, you know, ‘oh. No. Get out and go around again.’ Yeah.

The authority of the boys’ parents’ voices was regularly expressed through a domineering presence. The boys’ response to parental instruction became a condition of worth: respecting the rules meant respecting the authority of one’s parents. For Richard, his father’s leadership was “*ruled by decree*”. There was no room for negotiation, and any disagreement would be responded with, “*if you don’t like it, leave!*” Richard’s description of his father’s rule meant that any questions were direct challenges to the dominant structure of family, which could result in his expulsion from home unless he acquiesced.

In accepting their circumstances, the boys stayed out of sight and kept themselves occupied. In being alone, there was a temporary, quiet relief and safety. Yet, by withdrawing, they were left to make sense of their self-worth and the worth of others in isolation. With consistently harsh and unpredictable feedback, and no opportunities to understand why, they internalised alone who and what was valued or devalued, and when.

John: The parent is raging out of control. The child has two choices. The child can decide that the parent is unfit, and is unwell, and is not safe to be around. And the child should leave, in order to, to save itself, right? Or the child can say, ‘I’ve done something wrong that upset my parent. I must be better next time because look what’s happening?... I’m unsafe. Which option is the child going to take, right? The child can’t leave. Its system will tell it to leave, but [the child] won’t leave because where’s it gonna go? Where is the child gonna go and survive? It’s not. Alright, so that option’s gone. So, ... there’s only one option left. The option is, “it’s my fault”.

The boys’ worth as children depended on the quality of family relationships, consequences of their actions and decisions, and how they were perceived a good or bad. The

boys did their best to be behaved, hoping their compliance would be recognised or at least received with some neutrality. To ease their family's burdens and demonstrate their appreciation for their parents' hard work, the boys often found a sense of worthiness in being helpful. Edward explains how much helping his parents gave him a sense of personal value.

Edward: So, we sort of talked about as, as a child, I can remember yeah, you know, ... feeling some value and happiness out of being able to help my parents. That...was rewarding, I think. Being, knowing you were useful, in a sense, and being able to do something for, for them.

The participants reflected on their parents' upbringing with the aftermath of war and social appearances: Colonial and World Wars; national politics and geopolitics; religion; prejudice and stigma; and an intergenerational loathing for their spouses and/or own parents.

Richard: However, [my great] grandfather, apparently had all the attributes of so-called successful businessmen of their day. They have their family and they also have a mistress that goes with it, yeah. This mistress apparently got pregnant. Now we're talking back in the late, mid-late 1800s, ... My grandmother, who was the middle of eight children, saw what was going on and not only that, but experienced the total disgust and wrath of all the friends, family and relations around the area that they were operating in. [She] decided that all men were absolute bastards and she hated them on site. So, her way to deal with that ... she could dominate my father for ... being a male. So that was where it all started from. He had, and my grandfather would have had extreme low self-esteem for that particular reason. And it was a case of passing on from one family to another. And so, his experience ... with his mother were far worse than, than I've gone through. And I've thought I'd had a pretty rough time, you know. It's not, not really. I mean it gives, it gives a bit of insight, doesn't it?

Richard identifies an intergenerational pattern of punishing family as a result of breached moral boundaries. He identifies that his father was who he was because of his grandmother's past grievances from her father's transgression, maintained by hurt. Although *children should be seen and not heard* was intended to instil compliance and silence, their parents' subsequent practices of authority and dominance may have also developed from a

place of powerlessness in their own childhood. The participants' sympathy was often framed as possible explanations for their upbringing but not an acceptance of the impacts of being raised the way they were.

Alternative narratives: Not seen and not heard, still not good enough

The boys contemplated why they (their actions and beings) were never enough. They believed themselves to be inadequate, as the chronic tension and inescapable aggravation rarely ceased despite honouring their parents' instruction. Richard described his family home as, "*always yelling, always screaming*". Similarly, John reflected that his household was marked with unrelenting anger, "*the overwhelming response is yelling. Raised voices. Yelling abuse. Shouting. Angry. Judgemental. Negative. Just crushing, crushing words.*"

John: There was only two emotions that you were allowed to have, right? You were allowed to get excited if the All Blacks scored a try. You were allowed to really jump around and get excited, right? So that was OK. And you were allowed to be furiously angry, right?

John reflects that emotional expression contained rules of social permissibility, whereby furious anger and a certain level of joy were allowed.

Burt: ...we learn to be emotionally mature, at a young age, by virtue of little boys being taught not to cry. Otherwise, they'll be 'given something to cry about', which was usually a slap, but girls aren't given that training and emotional ... maturity.

Burt reaffirms the limited range of emotions that boys and men are allowed to experience, which contrasts Richard's and John's observations, who saw their fathers as expressing unbridled anger. Burt also notices that girls are not given the same level of training that would bestow them with standards of emotional maturity. He shares how household rules and consequences were tailored for family members, depending on gender, as well as family rank and order of birth.

Similarly, Richard notices how even though he personally received much of his father's torment, his mother and sister were primary targets.

Richard: ...my mother had to cope with an awful lot of abuse, both verbal and physical abuse, and when the situation started to turn towards, my father

directing his sights towards my sister, who had never ever really managed to escape the ... line of fire previously.

Richard's father may have continued the intergenerational hatred towards genders, although this was not explicitly identified. However, like Richard's mother, the boy's other parents tended to face similar circumstances. The other parent's presence was silenced. Had they spoken out of turn or fought back, they and the other family members would receive greater punishment, reinforcing silence and compliance for all. By actively withdrawing due to powerlessness, the household tension was inadvertently perpetuated. This created mixed feelings of sympathy for those punished more heavily, resentment for those treated more leniently, and disappointment towards those who could not improve the environment (including themselves).

Richard: I'm sure in a reasonable world, people don't act like that unless there's an extremely good reason.

When John and his sister washed the dishes, *"all you had to do was drop a fork. That's all you had to do. Just drop a fork. And this explosion would happen..."* Ralph's mother questioned him helping their neighbours, *"What [were you] doing, going down to the gate to get the paper for them!"* Both of Burt's parents' committed extensive assaults against their children, *"Have you heard of the Marquis de Sade? ... That was Dad's plan with [my sister]. So, he was interfering with her from the time she was six."* Edward wonders why his uncle insisted on excluding his father and sister, *"why did he treat my father like that? Why did he treat my sister like that? Uhhh, I don-...maybe he was just pissed off, you know. Pissed off with his own life, and he took it out on them. Sometimes he took it out on me as well, to be honest with you."* The boys' childhood experiences were punctuated with questions about why certain human behaviours were justified and with what rules and standards. There appeared to be no rhyme or reason behind others' prescribed expectations, and their self-worth became tied to unattainable benchmarks. Regardless of what they did, there was rarely a chance for reconciliation, relief, predictability, and pride.

Burt stated that he could never meet his parents' *"imagined set of standards"*. He once organised a talent contest for his school, where attendees paid five cents to watch the performances. Unaccompanied, Burt sang *'Hang down your head, Tom Dooley'*, *'Raindrops keep falling on my head'*, *'What do you get when you fall in love?'* The audience voted by cheering, and Burt won the contest. Thrilled, he rushed home to tell his mother. *"What a load*

of crap!’ was her response and she rang the school, ‘what’s this nonsense about my son winning a talent contest?’” His teachers said, “You should be very proud of your son, he did such a wonderful job.” You know, “he came up with the idea, he participated in planning it and, and carrying it out, and then he finally won.” Burt was prohibited to share his news with anyone. “You know, I was really crushed...I believe it’s because she didn’t want me to be congratulated or recognised or feel a sense of accomplishment or pride.”

Personal narratives: If I am not seen and not heard, what is enough?

Children should be seen and not heard is expressed in the participants’ description of compliant silence and respect for their parents’ rule. In the 1950s and 1960s, however, self-worth was not necessarily a known topic or concept. If anything, the very notion of self-worth would have been laughed at. John says his self-worth during childhood was absent, even doing the dishes was inadequate.

John: I didn’t have any self-worth as a child. My parents didn’t have any self-worth. ... There wasn’t such a thing. If you, if you spoke about that in my household, right? You would be ridiculed beyond belief, you would be shut down. Because that’s a subject that we just don’t talk about because that doesn’t even mean anything. Like in my world, self-worth? “What the fuck are you talking about?”

Richard’s self-worth grew out of challenging excessive negativity, a lack of positivity, a lack of curiosity, a lack of logic, and the expectation for accepting rules without discussion.

Richard: Yeah. And so, in a lot of ways, men are encouraged to, to not delve too much into why things happen, just accept them. And, and if it’s acceptance of something that isn’t... correct or isn’t rightly structured, then it’s a wrong conception, uh, but it never gets changed because it never gets looked at.

Albert’s self-worth grew from the pride he had for his mother, a socialist single woman on a beneficiary, constantly defending her outcasted family in the “*Alabama of New Zealand*”. His mother fought for what she believed in. Albert once told her, after school, that his woodwork teacher slapped him across the face. She promptly got on her “*bloody 18-inch wheel pushbike*” went over to the teacher, confronted him, and “*gave him a fucking good whack across the bloody face right in front of the bloody class.*”

Ralph's self-worth started with perseverance, trying to stay out of his mother's sight by quietly working on the farm alongside his father, who he looked up to with immense pride.

Ralph: I sunk an axe through my foot one day ... you know, ruined a perfectly good boot ... So, I went home...squish, squish out of me boot ... She wrapped it up and, and looked at it, and went, "ohh, yeah." Tied it up. Said, "just sit down for a couple of days and you'll be right." So, away I went again. And it was about a year later that the doctor had a look, and he says, "hmm. We've got to do something with that." So, they had to go open it all up again and...because I'd cut all the tendons and stuff, and I was in plaster from my toe ... up to my waist to ... keep it still. It was a bit awkward trying to drive a tractor when ... you get one leg in plaster.

Edward's self-worth grew from community values of unity and helping one another as a first-generation New Zealander. "you know, as a kid, basically I'd go with my mother to the GP and, you know, help her out and interpret, and so on, which is maybe the experience of a lot of people with immigrant families from non-English speaking countries." When Edward was 12 years old, he slipped during a sports game and landed on his arm. His family, "they strapped it. And the next day ... on a Sunday, ... my hand was all blue, you know So, I took myself, I got on a bus at the age of about 12 and went to the hospital, right? You know, without my parents or anything." A few weeks later, he was chasing his sister around the house, and his arm went through the glass door. "And, you know, I wrapped it up with tea towels and then [a family friend] took me to hospital. And, you know, I was just left there on my own, so, you know... I was there for hours, you know, until they stitched it up and I went home, I think on a bus by myself." His ability to look after himself gave him a sense of autonomy and strength while helping his family with fewer troubles.

Burt's self-worth grew out of self-defence; finding authority in his voice as he was the only person who would acknowledge himself as a person of value.

Burt: Mum never hugged me. My maternal grandmother never even picked me up as a baby. You know? My uncle did, Mum's brother, but Mum never hugged me, Dad never hugged me. My [paternal] grandparents did, they were fabulous, but Nan died when I was six or seven, and Pop, my paternal Grandfather, died when I was nine. And I knew how much Dad

relied on Granddad for everything, for lots of support and whatnot. And I remember thinking that although my life is a crappy at the moment, it's going to get a lot worse. And it did. Dad completely lost the plot, and he took it out on me. So, umm, I was thrashed regularly.

Self-worth and contingencies of worth were unique to family circumstances and dynamics. If their parents were shamed in the community for being different, they too carried that shame. If certain family members were the main targets of punishment, they too felt vicarious punishment. If they personally felt pride in their accomplishments, they were told to not skate. The creative, musical, and quieter pursuits of life were the domains of women and losers. Their worth was marked by being seen and not heard, but this was not enough.

Still, the boys embodied the characteristics of admired authority figures and values that emerged from chronic distress. Most of the boys had a stronger relationship with at least one of their parents, often described as showing true strength, acceptance, care, and support. Being useful for others was a resounding measure of worthiness, as their actions benefitted others while keeping their minds occupied. The men had diverse upbringings, and yet their values aligned through equifinality: advocating for the voiceless and powerless, valuing people for who they are, explaining rules with reason, courage for the unknown (because at least it could be better than the known), and working towards a life of autonomy, meaning and belonging.

Adolescence: ~11 to ~20 years of age; 1961-1970

Master narrative: Might makes right

A perceived successful and moral society is generally enabled through cultural practices of control (Bornstein, 2013; Dinn & Sunar, 2017). Psychological control may emphasise values and beliefs (such as social cohesion and harmony), which may be instrumentally controlled through rules and law, punishment and reinforcement (Bornstein, 2013; Dinn & Sunar, 2017; Quinn, 2005). In 1960s Aotearoa New Zealand, corporal punishment was an instrumental tool of corrective action to instil values of compliance, discipline and propriety; *might makes right* (Angeli-Gordon, 2025; Gregory, 2018; Pollock, 2011; Quinn, 2005). Corporal punishment was introduced to Aotearoa New Zealand state schools in the 1850s, drawn from British education systems as a means for building a moral society (Gregory, 2018; Pollock, 2011). Its use was intended to show care for school children's welfare (Hoskins et al., 2020).

The Criminal Code Act (1893) provided a legislative right to parents and teachers (people in place of the parent) to physically discipline the child to correct their behaviour (Pollock, 2011). Punishment was carried out with canes, rulers, and leather straps across the bum or hand ('the cuts'), getting kicked at the base of their spine, being thrown across the room by their neck, and having their mouth washed out with soap, to name a few (Gregory, 2018; Long, 2018; Pollock, 2011). Students were punished for getting answers wrong, gazing away from the blackboard, speaking out of turn, not singing, and speaking their mother tongue (Gregory, 2018; Hoskins et al., 2020; Long, 2018; Pollock, 2011). Teachers retained an authority to instil vital knowledge and skills for their students, many of whom insisted on the right to corporal punishment (Gregory, 2018).

Ralph's recalls a memory of how *might makes right* compromised the integrity of education:

Ralph: *"we had a ... maths test one day, this was when I was in form one, the first year I was there. And the teacher said, "right let's mark this," so they just took ... the majority one [as] right and went through them all. I think I got about the middle of the school for some reason and then you haul one of the kids out who got zero. That, whack, whack, whack, whack, whack, you know, six of the best. ... the most of the majority answers were actually wrong. ... and this kid was the only one who had 100% right.*

Ralph also recalls *"I would prefer to sit in the corner and read a book"*, but instead, *"[w]hat I hated was I, you were forced to play rugby and cricket."* To make the most of his time at school, *"we used to have a, boys used to have a competition and always bought a leather belt, ... you bought a new leather belt to school, and every time we got a whack, we put a notch in it and we had a race around the belt."* At age 15, Ralph left school to work on the farm full time. At age 16, he decided last minute not to take his life. He reflects that he must have been depressed, but in those days, *"nobody ever cared whether you got depressed or anything ... you just toughed it out."* At home, *might makes right* was experienced as, *"I was just a bit of rubber to be swept out the door"*. Ralph's reflections of *might makes right* saw no room for upholding dignity if it meant retaining control.

Similarly, for Richard, he found that school was much like his home, where there was no further sense of encouragement or tangible reward for effort.

Richard: There was nothing. That was the whole thing. That was really the whole thing. If [there] had ... been anyone that had taken an interest, ... that would have possibly made a huge difference, but that was exactly what was wrong, um, because there was absolutely no positive aspect coming from anywhere. I mean, I think, in fact, I know that last time we spoke, we dwelled for a little while on the fact of feeling suicidal. And that happened on numerous occasions at different times of, of my schooling life when, in fact, the feeling of total complete uselessness was so bad and so impacting, um, that nearly led to a rash decision.

To make learning harder, Richard shares that “*being partially deaf wasn't the best position to be in an open classroom situation*”. Additionally, “*it is quite well known that the more aggressive people will pick on the person that obviously has [no idea] how to stand up for [themselves], so that happened an awful lot.*”

Albert describes how he felt obliged to participate in others’ interests despite feeling incredibly repelled by them.

Albert: But unless I was out, you know, drinking and fucking, you know, Sheilas or, or um playing rugby then I really wasn't, I really wasn't much worth to anyone at all? And on top of that, being bullied and things for my family situation, because what I look like, ... stark red head with all of freckles and things like that ...I was always felt under, you know, under people, you know. And even though I looked, looked at them and said, you know, “well fuck me, is this, is this what humanity is going to be like? You can have it.” You know? Right ... from the early stage and I guess, uh, that is why, you know, that that would have, you know, accumulated my first suicide attempt, I suppose.

Differences of opinions are a threat to social norms as difference challenges conventional beliefs, values, and motivations, and structures of social hierarchy (Bäck & Lindholm, 2014; Brown, 2020). Although different ways of thinking and being captures diversity and boundaries between groups, difference can lead ingroups (status quo) to bias their own beliefs while devaluing outgroups (Bäck & Lindholm, 2014; Brown, 2020; Verkuyten et al., 2019b). If a person rejects dominant ideologies, they may be implicitly and explicitly told

that they are inadequate and wrong through bullying, rejection, and humiliation (Bäck & Lindholm, 2014; Quinn, 2005). Might, or dominance, is an effective technique for shaping people into performing favourable ideologies and agenda (Brown, 2020; Quinn, 2005).

Alternative narratives: Might does not make right

In the 1950s, parents and teachers' associations were increasingly advocating for the abolishment of corporal punishment, as it was becoming evident that its use was ineffective for education (Gregory, 2018; Pollock, 2011). Teachers and caregivers reserved the right of correction if the force was judged as reasonable to the circumstances (Pollock, 2011). The use of physical punishment for correction action was eventually legislated against in schools in 1990, and in the family home in 2007 (Gregory, 2018, Pollock, 2011).

Burt lived in “*abject fear*” at home, at school, and at state institutions.

Burt: Oh, so, ostensibly, to stop arguments, on Saturday morning, our, our Wheetbix were lined up in plates on the bench, and [Mum] did it like that so that she could get chlorpromazine and put it into my Wheetbix. So that by, like 20 minutes after breakfast, I was doing the chlorpromazine-shuffle around the backyard thinking, “why do I feel like this?” You know, I was like tranquillized. And, umm, that went on for, ohh six, eight months or more, and umm, because she didn't want to deal with me on, on the weekends. ... However, Mum must have annoyed my sister, and she whispered to me, “Mum did something to your Wheetbix.” So, I swapped my plate with my brother's plate, so this drugging had been going on for a long time, and she'd been increasing the dose. So, ... my brother ate the drugged Wheetbix and collapsed, and the ambulance was called, and he was rushed to hospital...

Despite his parents' might, Burt recalls that they also encouraged him to defend himself, “*I was bullied quite a bit, so they put me, the parents put me into judo.*” To cope, he started using cannabis from 16 years of age, which he described as a “*good emotional analgesic*”.

Edward reflects on how his childhood family dynamics made it difficult for him to have developed a close relationship with his father. Despite unity being a core value of Edward's identity, his family and heritage, he struggles to reconcile how his own father was excluded from the family for no obvious reason.

Edward: *It was a, it was a dysfunctional household in the sense that ... my grandfather and uncle, kind of, ... they didn't treat my father well, you know, there wasn't much respect for him, let's put it that way. And my father really became sort of the black sheep of the family. ... my father was a hard worker as well, extremely hard. You know, did some tough jobs, never, I can't ever remember him complaining about, you know, going to work or anything, you know, just, he was happy to go to work. But he was the black sheep of the family, and, and I never really developed a very close relationship with him.*

As an intergenerational talent passed down from his father and grandfather, John reflects that his skill for vocals inspired him to become a performer. At 16 years of age, his father proclaimed, “*you are not going to be a singer!*” According to his father, “*I was going to go to university, I was going to study engineering, and I was going to be an electrical engineer. Lucky me.*” John used the scholarship money his father acquired for him to pursue music. “*Wasn't my dream. I was busy, actually ... becoming a musical performer and a singer, of course. But I happily took the money. It was great.*”

The toll of *might makes right* significantly shaped how the adolescent boys discerned who was trustworthy, and who and how they were valued in return. Richard shares the effect this had on him and his relationships.

Richard: *...I've had had absolutely no ability at making friends with anyone because everybody to me was a potential threat. You didn't. You didn't. You didn't. Had no idea who was friend, who was foe? So, you had to treat everybody as possible foe...*

Quinn (2005) described how cultural lessons are what teaches people what is acceptable and unacceptable, not the instrumental tools in and of themselves. In other words, *might* is not what teaches people right from wrong, rather, *might* is a tool used to teach cultural perceptions of right from wrong. *Might* is a tool that instils fear as a means of teaching the cultural value of compliance (Quinn, 2005). However, an atmosphere of fear and silence also creates a false belief that there is no issue, where silence is used as a form of self-protection because of oppression and power (Alerby & Brown, 2021). Bullying can silence people, including those who may be witnesses to bullying and do not act due to fear (Alerby & Brown, 2021). Such a dynamic can result in the person being bullied feeling betrayed by witnesses, feeling

responsible for the bullying occurring, and feeling powerless to change anything (Alerby & Brown, 2021). Yet, in constructing alternative narratives of *might makes right*, the adolescent boys questioned how a successful and moral society could treat people with such excessive cruelty and disregard.

Personal narratives: Trying to make right

The might of social, emotional, and physical power to control young people can always be justified as right by people in power with the right conditions (Brown, 2020; Quinn, 2005; Shields, 2005). After all, it is the responsibility of adults and authority figures to raise young people into becoming culturally valued adults (Quinn, 2005). In developing a personal narrative of worthlessness, the adolescent boys were already familiar with their lack of worth at home, which was subsequently reinforced elsewhere (schools, peers, and state institutions). Despite their genuine eagerness for different pursuits, their enthusiasm was compromised by rigid narratives of worth, either within themselves, their family, or their communities. In developing a personal narrative of worthiness, the boys pursued an intrinsic sense of worth by upholding their interests, values, and principles in the face of dissent.

John's personal narrative of *might makes right* by reflecting that his father's attitude towards performance as a career was not necessarily unfounded.

John: He saw no value in it, but this is not an unusual story. I mean, every single rock'n'roll star in the world will tell you that their parents didn't want them to become musicians. Nobody makes a living out of music. Don't be bloody ridiculous. Yeah, it's like winning Lotto, you know, for every Elton John in the world, there are a million singer-songwriter pianists who failed. So, it's, it's a fair concern. ... And ultimately, I didn't end up being a full-time musician because frankly, the life was shit, I didn't like it. I did other stuff.

Richard's response to *might makes right* was not to disregard what was expected of him but to overcome his school difficulties. "So, one of the things that I used to do, which was something that I felt I had to do, was with homework, particularly, was to get, more umm...to, to get more involved in research than a normal kid would."

Similarly, for Albert, his intellectual curiosity was endless. "My favourite books are dictionaries and encyclopaedias and things like that." His mother "was quite happy to

encourage the things that I was interested in". However, he also considered that because he was raised by women, he had "*a predilection for the more sensitive things in life rather than, you know, being the macho male sort of thing*". Albert's challenge to *might makes right* was strengthened by his love for his family.

Ralph's personal narrative of *might makes right* was to shift his focus away from might (home and school) and into what he believed to be right (farm work). "*Actually lambing time was my favourite time, although it was hard work because you're doing the rounds at six o'clock in the morning and you might finish at 11, 12 o'clock at night and, but I, I enjoyed that a lot.*"

Burt reflects that that his childhood and adolescence set him up for a life of criminal activity. "*And I made, not so much friends because I didn't trust most people, and I was kind of thrust into a criminal element.*" The misappropriation of power and dominance by those in positions of authority motivated him to find a strength and worthiness in holding them accountable. To do this, he would start handing them "*their just deserts*".

Edward reflects his personal narrative of *might makes right* by focusing on what he could do to help each of his family members despite their dysfunction. "*But I've had a purpose towards my family in terms of, umm, helping them.*"

For the participants, adolescence was a time filled with obeying authority at home, school, and other places (might makes right). The young men attempted to carve out personal narratives that reflected their values and interests while working out how to become a valuable person in a world with narrow and unattainable definitions of 'right'. Three of the participants considered suicide during this time and, for all the participants, their self-worth was not talked about or considered. Given the time and culture, self-worth was more likely an intrinsic sense of being than an explicitly recognised concept.

Young adulthood: ~21 to ~34 years of age; 1971-1985

Master narrative: She'll be right

Popularised by a local comedian, Fred Dagg, satirising Aotearoa New Zealand farmers in the 1970s, a sociocultural attitude for enduring hardship is *she'll be right* (Manatū Taonga- The Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2025a). The attitude endorses perseverance, acceptance of misfortune, and trust that things will work out eventually (Manatū Taonga- The Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2025a). The 1970s and early 1980s saw significant changes in social and political attitudes. In response to the public's protests, Aotearoa New Zealand Government

seemed to be establishing several emancipatory changes to honour some of its colonial offences and better protect the public and environment (Manatū Taonga- The Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2025a). Advancements included legislation to protect women's and queer people's rights and Māori rights to their land, preventing French nuclear testing in Pacific waters, and challenging apartheid sentiments in Rugby Tours (Manatū Taonga- The Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2025a). For a description of the many social changes in Aotearoa New Zealand during the 1970s and 1980s, Manatū Taonga - The Ministry for Culture and Heritage (2023; 2025a) provides a webpage for each year.

During this period, the young men described an abundance of employment opportunities, a benefit from the implemented Keynesian economy. Albert explains that, *"those days in the public service, if you lost your job in the public service, you can be transferred to another department."*

At the start of the day, if they despised their job, they could quit on the spot and be hired into a new role by the end of the day. Several of the young men entered work having little experience and certification for the job advertised. The young men lived a new sense of autonomy, freedom, and excitement for the unknown.

Ralph: That's, that's another part of my bullshit, you know? Somebody said to me once and they said, "you can bullshit your way into any job and do any amount of trouble and bullshit your way out of it again."

Ralph's family had sold the farm without consulting him, so he went to university. Coincidentally, he ended up teaching for a job. His approach was enjoyed with a level of schadenfreude by engaging the students into arguments. He explains that he wanted to team them how to think for themselves and consider all factors at hand, not just believing what they were told to believe.

Ralph: And got them arguing over that, they had quite an argument over it and took out the, you know, I figured it was the easiest way to teach 'em. I wasn't particularly interested in teaching it. ... Allowing them to figure it out, yeah. Just steer them along on the, on the line that they should be going and, yeah, so that was all right.

During his twenties, Burt owned a house and a car. Burt became increasingly interested in the art of negotiation, influences, and sales. He reflects on the books he read, including 'I'm

OK, You're OK' by Thomas Harris, 'Games People Play' by Eric Berne, and 'To Have or To Be' by Eric Fromm, *"that's a monumental book that, yeah, that meant a lot."* These books helped him recognise his self-worth while orientating him towards learning about human nature and behaviour.

John shares how he saw a very relatable state of mind in the artists he met and the work they created: empty, inconsequential, scared.

John: And he's, he's got enough humility to just present that the truth of where he's at and how he feels. Well, that to me was, was inspiring. And one minute I'm thinking, 'you're a prick.' Next minute I'm thinking, 'Jesus, you're actually a genius.' And the next minute I'm thinking, 'wow. You're really scared. You're a frightened little boy. You're a really frightened little boy. Wow!'

Several of the young men found significant romantic love, a relationship marked with respect, care and warmth that they had never known before. As described during their upbringing, intimacy was met with a high degree of caution. When Richard met Sophie, he had to choose whether to risk it all for her or withdraw and protect the little trust he had left.

Richard: And I had to go through my head many times, 'what if I pull out of this and it doesn't come again?' And I could not. I could not reconcile and take that risk, and so I went full bore into it's this, or it's nothing.

Richard shares that the deciding factor was based on his uncle's decision to run from a previous love interest. *He was a crusty old animal, and he was, he was boring, actually. Boring is the kindest description you could give him. ... he was so boring, he, he wouldn't have lasted very long with anyone.*

In amongst the personal hardships and uncertain future, the young men felt level of optimism was growing, a sense that *she'll be right*. There is only so much one can control, how systems work, who holds the decision making, and who can be trusted. Even if they had poor experiences in one area, new opportunities would not be far away, and they felt a core sense of effectiveness that proved to them their own worthiness.

Alternative narratives: Is she all right?

During the 1970s and 1980s, geopolitical events were imminent and the Aotearoa New Zealand Government retained the power to decide whose human rights were honoured and how. In 1970, the Aotearoa New Zealand Government ordered dawn raids against alleged overstaying Pacific peoples, which were not ordered for overstaying British or Australian peoples; abuses were committed by state care and faith-based institutions, including psychiatric, social welfare, and several denominations of Christian organisations; an 1976 economic recession occurred due to rising overseas oil prices; and the Rainbow Warrior was bombed in 1985 by the French Secret Service to prevent further protests against nuclear testing in the Pacific Ocean (Abuse in Care – Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2026; Manatū Taonga- The Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2023; Manatū Taonga- The Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2025b). Despite the advancements and responses to protests, the alternative narrative questions, *is she all right?*

As Ralph shares his work in the public service, before he started, he was told “*‘there’s two occupational hazards, alcoholism and broken marriages.’ And I said, ‘well, I’m not married, so I’ll have alcoholism.’ Gave my liver a few hiding.*” Substance use, especially of alcohol, was not only a common form of coping amongst the young men, but an accepted cultural practice in Aotearoa New Zealand (Phillips, 1996).

At university, Edward chose to pursue a degree with his friend after listening to the advantages associated with its respective career: personal satisfaction, multiple overseas trips, and earning a decent salary. Edward hated every minute of it. “*It was the path of least resistance. And, and, and because I didn’t have any other options in my mind, I didn’t know any better.*” Edward reinforces his values of helping people in hindsight.

Edward: You know, I think I would have enjoyed being a Funeral Director, you know, meeting people and helping them through the process of a, of a funeral. You know, I think would have had a lot of satisfaction out of that. So, helping people, I think.

Burt shares two moments during his young adulthood where he found lucrative business opportunities, to which he sought out financial advice. Twice, the financial advisors sidestepped Burt and took the deals themselves.

Burt: So I went Equity Corp to see if I could do a deal with him to buy it together. And they side-stepped me, I forgot to ... sign an N-D-A, so we didn't have an N-D-A between us, so they side-stepped me and went to the government, and agreed that the government would lend them the money to buy the [business].

Burt continues, with feelings of failure and acts of self-sabotage.

Burt: I didn't have a firm enough foundation in my personality, my intellect, maturity, education and what not, to be able to pull these types of projects off, even though I was creative enough to kind of realise the value and whatnot, I just couldn't pull 'em off, you know, I just couldn't make it over the finish line. And that happened a lot, so I, I was failing, you know, and I couldn't succeed. ... when I did have opportunities from time to time, time come up, I wouldn't return phone calls. So, I'd be, I was sabotaging myself on multiple occasions. I sabotaged myself, perhaps because I didn't think that I could get past the post, you know.

The master narrative, *she'll be right* denoted an acceptance of uncertainty and burden while doing the best that one can with what one knows. Stepping into an independent life and contributing to society provided an element of meaning and purpose. Their independence and effectiveness proved to the young men that they were capable, that they have worth, and that they will be accepted. The alternative narrative, however, questioned whether what one chose to do was worth anything at all. If they did not succeed, would *she be all right*?

Personal narratives: I'll try make things all right

Richard's sense of worthiness only grew after meeting Sophie. With her family, he experienced for the first time a "*normal family environment*" marked with sensitivity and interest, which felt "*utterly foreign*". His caution for close relationships was turning for good, but not without one final act of betrayal from his best friend.

Richard: ... after a, a period of time of being engaged to my wife, my so-called best friend tried to move in on her. And umm, I found, well, I didn't find out about that until a few weeks after, and I couldn't believe that, that someone could actually betray me like that.

Richard's strong relationship with Sophie and value for trustworthy and meaningful relationship, however, meant that his best friend's move "...didn't end the friendship. I don't know why it didn't, but it didn't. Probably at my insistence." To make things all right, Richard found forgiveness for his best friend. "Because from then on, you know, everybody had got on really, really well."

Albert's self-worth was thwarted, where his efforts to build a meaningful life was met with heartache. "But anyway, in 1981, I got married, which upset my mother so badly that she took her own life...in very tragic circumstances." Despite her history of mental distress, admission to psychiatric wards and ostracism from society, Albert bears the responsibility for his mother's death. In response, however, Albert's criticises the hypocrisies of society, challenging who in life truly bears innate sickness.

Albert: *What I mean, now, Krishnamurti had a good expression about, I don't know whether you talking about mental illness or physical illness, or whatever, but he said, "it is no...it is no measure of health to be well adjusted to a profoundly sick society."*

Albert carries this mindset and appreciation for different people throughout his life, grounding his sense of worthiness by fighting for those perceived and treated as worthless.

As with his younger days, Ralph's focus on what he could do in the face of challenge and figuring it out along the way only strengthened his sense of worthiness.

Ralph: *Even if I've never done it before, I can look at it and figure out a way to do it. And...and that's the way I sort of work for most of my life.*

While building his career, Edward found greater purpose in helping others and upholding the health and wellbeing of his loved ones and communities. Edward describes his time while part of a local diasporic club of his family's heritage.

Edward: *I got a sense of value and a sense of self-worth within the [Club], which was the, you know, place where the community met and I'm talking about all the different ethnic groups, ... where I was on the committee and we, and, you know, the committee was, I think, committed and I certainly was. Strongly committed to trying to keep the club together, umm, you know, against forces that were trying to break it up.*

Edward has an endless motivation and intrigue to understand how geopolitical events affect different countries' peoples and how their peoples relate to their neighbours. *"Being able to see injustice, or what I consider injustice, and there's lots of injustices in this world. I have a huge interest in geopolitics, you know."* Being part of the diasporic club offered him a sense of self-worth while connection with his cultural heritage, trying to *make it all right* by bringing people together.

Burt reflects that he would *make it all right*, despite going bankrupt, losing his home and car, heavily misusing substances, and being sentenced to prison for burglary, theft, and assault. His sense of worthiness was channelled into upholding injustice and finding loopholes while accepting the criminal convictions that followed his strategies.

Burt: And then I was also making cannabis oil and I got busted doing that, and I thought I was going to prison. So, I plead guilty, and at sentencing my lawyer held up my tax return and showed it to the Judge and he said, 'look, you're wrong, he declared, he has all gotten gained on his tax return.' And the Judge was really surprised by that, which I did, I declared the income I made from selling drugs. And now I ended up to ordinance supervision.

Through "wins, losses, and draws", John learnt that he was very capable when he could immerse himself into different endeavours and bear the hardships.

John: The value was being somebody. Somebody in the eyes of other people, that was the value. It was like, if I could be somebody in the eyes of other people, then I would be valuable. And I, I would be, uh, successful. I would be accomplished. And I was all those things. I was all those things, however, in my bones, that's not how it felt. Did not feel like that at all.

Despite his success and talent, however, his career never quite fulfilled a sense of worthiness as he was not valued by his father. John shares how his father said to him, *"you know what, you weren't very good, you know."* To which John responded, *"...yeah, that's what I'd expect you to say. Thanks, mate...nothing if not consistent."*

The young men's personal narratives of *I'll try make things all right* was accompanied by hard work, proof of their own self-efficacy, rewards that they could be used for pursuits of

greater personal meaning, unique insights and experiences into human shadows. Given the social and political movements across the country, the fight for a better and just world provided a sense of hope. Their worthiness sat within their values, or the principles that they believed in; their value, or the skills and responsibilities that they were entrusted with; and feeling valued, or pride in their work and feeling appreciated by and connected to others. Their worthlessness sat within barriers of constraint, self-sabotage, experiencing their work as having no value, betrayals by loved ones, and the risky yet conventional coping mechanism of drinking alcohol. Their feelings of worthiness and worthlessness moved between one another.

Middle adulthood: ~31 to ~54 years of age; 1986-2005

Master narrative: You reap what you sow

You reap what you sow is a paraphrased proverb originating from the Christian Biblical reference in Paul the Apostle's New Testament, Galatians 6:7, "*Be not deceived; God is not mocked: for whatsoever a man soweth, that shall he also reap*" (Moody, 1896, p. 2). The proverb espouses that one's actions (behaviours, choices, words, and thoughts) will be followed by consequences, which cannot be hidden from high powers (Moody, 1896). In Aotearoa New Zealand from the mid-1980s and late 1990s, the Labour and National Governments espoused *you reap what you sow* by urging individuals to take personal responsibility for their lives and circumstances (Humpage, 2011). To achieve this, the Labour and National Governments implemented neoliberal practices (Humpage, 2011; Littlewood, 2022).

Neoliberalism endorses practices and principles of entrepreneurship, competition, deregulation, privatisation, reduced government spending, globalisation, personal responsibility, and self-reliance (Humpage, 2011). 'Rogernomics' prioritised lowering inflation over full employment, deregulated financial markets, removed price subsidies, sold off state-owned assets, and cut income tax rates on high earners in favour of implementing a universal goods and services tax (GST) (Littlewood, 2022). 'Ruthanasia' focused on redefining who was deserving of Government benefits and how the public ought to participate in the community by reducing social and employment assistance (Littlewood, 2022).

The men's master narratives of *you reap what you sow* illustrated a chronic underlying shame and worthlessness for one's choices and circumstances, and the effect of their decisions on others' lives. The more common strategies in being accountable to their worthlessness was self-punishment. They engaged in heavy substance use (alcohol and illicit substances) and

suicidality. Internalising responsibility for failing to build themselves and others a life that they deserved resulted in them believing that others would benefit from them not being there.

John: What happened to me at 31 was that I had a, I had not only a psychological breakdown, not only an emotional breakdown, my marriage failed, I lost my job, and my career, and then my physical health went into such a rapid decline that one year later, I had a near death experience, which, where I actually died...I had ostensibly committed suicide.

Middle adulthood was likened to a period of internal shut down, where despite spanning the greatest length of time and severity of distress, the men generally had less to say. Childhood and adolescence were likened to the training grounds of life, young adulthood was likened to freedom and living, and middle adulthood seemed to be an ongoing maintenance of what one has built, reaping whatever rewards and punishments came from earlier choices and circumstances. The men's self-worth and various forms of identity as adults were challenged, as enough time had passed to reflect on whether what they had achieved anything of value.

Albert: ...but when you talk about worth, you're talking about value, and then you're talking about value to yourself and value to other people. And I sometimes feel like I failed miserably in both, you know. You know, I experienced a lot of things a lot of people haven't experienced, but then a lot of people probably wouldn't have wanted those experiences anyway, and they weren't an experience that you would, kind of, share. Hmm.

Albert describes his life as having had a breadth of unique experiences that produced little meaningful value. He expressed an internal and external shame, suggesting that neither he nor others would not want or care for the same life he had. It is possible that Albert minimises how his past experiences were personally meaningful, interesting, and worthwhile. That without the sense of meaningful belonging and relationships to share his insights and experiences with, he withheld parts of himself to prevent others' lowly perceptions. By telling himself that his life choices were worthless, he reduces the risk that others may tell him the same, or if they did agree, he remained in control and aware. Speaking negatively about oneself can act as a protective mechanism, as positive outcomes are unreliable and negative outcomes

(perhaps due to repeated disappointment) are predictable and/or expected (Collins & Winer, 2024; Winer & Salem, 2016).

For Edward, his self-worth has been grounded in maintaining good health and relationships for himself and others. Maintaining his health goals has offered him a sense of accomplishment and completion in a very meaningful, personal, and valuable domain. During their middle adulthood, Edward and his partner, Eleanor, took on responsibility in caring for several family members' health and wellbeing. However, he feels guilt, grief, and a level of *unworthiness* for his advantages when others were in need.

Edward: I feel really sorry for her, you know. She's had a tragic life. And I feel kind of almost guilty, you know, guilty not in the sense that I've you know caused her circumstances. But guilty in the sense that maybe I've had a better life than her, I guess, than I've been able to, you know, not have the same tragic circumstances that she's had. Umm, so I feel guilty in that sense.

His family members have had varying degrees of prognosis and personal control, so what determined a 'good enough' or 'satisfactory' quality of life comprised shifting personal capacities and thresholds. Edward and Eleanor helped build access and capacity for autonomy, nutritious food, finances, and contact with needed services. A 'good' quality of life with challenging health conditions, however, sometimes require strategies that prevent suffering and the decline of health and wellbeing, even if the family would have preferred a level of sustained wellness. Within this context, Edward's sense of guilt and love for their families may have drawn focus away from what he and Eleanor have been able to give them: love, support, service, commitment, resource, belonging, company, and time.

Master narratives of *you reap what you sow* are marked with the internalisation of success and failure as a reflection of their morality and competency. They described how hard they worked to do right by others, but without obvious progression, success, or benefit, they felt as though they failed. After Labour and National Governments' neoliberal reforms, Aotearoa New Zealand experienced increases in immigration, foreign investment, availability and choice of goods, services, and entertainment (Littlewood, 2022). During the same period, trade unions were impeded, family-owned businesses and farms closed, trading enterprises were corporatised or privatised, and rates of unemployment, suicide and child poverty spiked (Littlewood, 2022; Ministry of Social Development, 2022; Te Whatu Ora - Health New

Zealand, 2025). The Governments reaped what they sowed and narrated the widening wealth gap as due to individual success and failure (Humpage, 2011; Littlewood, 2022). The participants were making sense of themselves in relation to a past time of *she'll be right* to a changing world.

Alternative narratives: What I sowed was impeded

The proverb *you reap what you sow* is found cross-culturally, embodying notions of sin, karma, religion, and spiritual guides of morality (Duong, 2024; Willard et al., 2020). The proverb is used to encourage consideration for the potential consequences of one's choices (action and inaction, words spoken and words unspoken), and to encourage accountability for one's past transgressions (Duong, 2024). Typically, morally good actions are believed to result in rewards, and morally bad actions are believed to result in punishment (Duong, 2024; Willard et al., 2020). What one sows creates immediate and ongoing consequences of both a physical and spiritual nature (Duong, 2024; Willard et al., 2020). As such, individuals may reap the consequences of transgressions from former lives, or from one's ancestors (Duong, 2024; Willard et al., 2020). On the other hand, what one sows does not always reap immediate reward, nor does doing the *right* thing garner admiration (Arpaly, 2002). Sometimes, what one sows, despite one's intentions or moral reasoning, results in punishment.

For the young men, their alternative narratives pointed to impediments when trying to do the right thing, while also feeling as though they did not belong.

Albert: You know, always feeling like the alien and the outlier, you know, and if the, if the society is in the majority, ... then until you get a bit older and a bit maturer you think, "well, because there's more of them than there are of us, then they must be right and I must be wrong." You know? And, and you try to attempt to engage, but, futile, you know.

In an ongoing pursuit of his philosophies and disdain for hegemonies, Albert promotes the rights of others at work. In one of his roles, Albert was appointed to gather evidence and report on addressing a workplace culture of sexual harassment and assault on women.

Albert: So, we investigated it and we found out that that was perfectly true. We made our report and all that sort of thing. [They] wouldn't accept it. 'No! No. No way would our people do that.'

Albert was restructured into a role that drew the life out of him, which prompted his resignation. He has never felt fear in biting the hand that feeds, yet in doing so, he was punished.

Albert: They got rid of me and put me in a shit, shit fucking job. I retained the salary, you know, which is a fairly good salary, but I was doing a job that I didn't like and mentally I, it was affecting me ... I stuck that other job out for five years, but in the end I, I, I had had enough of that sort of thing. But yeah. But there again, you know, you sometimes get no kudos for actually telling, telling the truth, yeah.

Ralph says he started to live life after he met his wife, Olivia. He described her as “a feisty thing”, and “five foot and half an inch of pure energy”. While Ralph and Olivia had a happy 43-year marriage and three beautiful children, his family described him as the “Ice Man” as he suppressed his emotions. He explains that he did so as the only way to maintain the strength needed as he continued to look after his mother. In *reaping what he sowed*, it was not just the personal toll that affected him, but one that affected his family too.

The men’s self-worth was challenged in their ongoing pursuits of changing systems that harmed people and drove divisions. Without finding resolution to their efforts, even if their contributions were impeded by others, they felt personal ongoing worthlessness.

Personal narratives: What have I sown?

John’s mental health declined significantly at the start of his 30s, where he faced a series of significant breakdowns and losses. For John, however, this period was also led to more positive changes and therapy.

John: Ohh, the most significant thing that occurred during that period, other than dying and then recovering from that, was the fact that I met Sarah, and that came directly out of the therapy that I was doing ... Because the therapy that we were doing there was, was about trying to understand why my marriage had, had fallen apart, and that, in itself, is a huge story. ... but the work that [my therapist] and I did was really around who I am, what I bring to a relationship, and what I don't have. What my shortcomings are, what my weaknesses are.

John reflects on the usefulness of being challenged to confront his “demons”. Thereafter, he felt a freedom to shift his focus towards connecting and reconnecting with his

most important relationships, and to exercise compassion and curiosity for people from all strokes of life.

Richard's self-worth grew when he met Sophie, and more so when he found the job that provided him a platform to live everyday practicing his skills and values: research, relationships, and dialogue. One challenge that Richard of Sophie faced was the decision to not have children. Five years after vasectomies were introduced in Aotearoa New Zealand, Richard got the snip.

Richard: The reason the reason was made by me, and the reason was made because I was not confident that after having had an upbringing like me, that something of that would come out in me if I'd had children myself. I was totally, almost, undeniably convinced that it is quite possible that under pressure, I could have snapped and it could have been right back to what it was before, and I could definitely not, with somebody so precious as Sophie. Could not risk it.

Richard explains his uncertainty of providing children with a good quality of life given his own upbringing, fearful that he might have perpetuated the intergenerational cycle of family harm. He forefronts his values of respect for trustworthy and respectful relationships by acknowledging the responsibility of managing the impact of extreme pressure and distress when raising a family.

Albert's self-worth during middle adulthood was varied. His philosophies of nihilism and existentialism conflicted with his love for humanity, especially those who are taken advantage of or demeaned. Despite having achieved many things, he describes feeling worthless in how he has performed in the roles handed to him, questioning whether he did good enough.

Albert: So then again that, you know, I mean you see, we still got a big mortgage. I've got a son who is a lot of the time ... disrespectful, being a bit of an asshole and so that gets you, you know, there's another measure of self-worth. Well, how do you, how do you measure up as a father? Well, pretty fucking piss poor if you ask me. How do you measure up with a husband? Well, pretty piss poor if you ask me, you know.

Ralph's sense of self-worth has also been contingent upon family and sense of competency. He describes relief when his mother died, but not without one final test of his patience.

Ralph: I mean, she wasn't reasonable in any way. ... And then we had the, the funeral ... There's a wee church, my father was buried there. And she wanted to be buried there too, and she wanted a private funeral And of course no body turned up for it, it was only family, ... And, so it was really only Olivia and me and about two others. So, we buried Dad. And then on her turn come, I saw what was on the will, she'd ordered, it was Dad's name ... across the middle of the tombstone, it had, 'husband of the above, [mother's name].' And then I thought, 'this is getting a bit extreme,' and then when she was buried, Olivia had to just about break up a fight between me and the undertaker, because the undertaker had instructions ... I mean, she took pride of place right across the tombstone twice and Dad had a wee bit across the middle.

Ralph honours his father by fighting the undertaker for his mother's instructions. After a lifetime of caring and supporting her, and valuing the gentlemanly nature of his father, Ralph could not stand that his memory would be shrouded by the person who rarely valued him. While Ralph developed a sense of worthiness in how helped and loved his family and achieving whatever he set his mind to, the cost tended to be his own wellbeing, a personal sense of feeling valued, and a personal sense of his family being valued in return. He worked immensely hard to reap the benefits of what he had sown, including how much he cared and supported his mother, and yet she continually put herself first.

Edward's self-worth centres on health, community, and living his cultural heritage.

Edward: I think you know what makes me feel like I have self-worth and, ... value and, you know, 'I am enough' sort of thing is helping others in some way. And it doesn't matter where it is, ... the situations like whether it's work or whether it's my family or others, that's, you know, where I feel a sense of value.

Edward saw how his father maintained a positive outlook even though he was a black sheep in the family, and Edward recognised that he might have developed a similar depression to his mother and uncle. Without the felt sense of resolve at the end of the day, however, his

dissatisfaction of outcomes has resulted in him feeling guilty: feeling guilty for feeling as though he did not do enough, and then feeling guilty for feeling guilty.

Burt's self-worth during his middle adulthood was marked with an unyielding anger at exploited power and feeling let down. Being the only person that he felt he could rely on, he reflected that his perspectives interfered with his ability to live a successful life. It was not until he found God again that he found a level of inner peace.

Burt: so it's only since I rededicated my life to God that I've become to improve my attitude about things, that to recognise the damage that I caused myself, auto-sabotage and stuff like that. You know, I always wanted to be successful, but I kept on falling flat...

The men's middle adulthood was darker and shorter in description compared to other life stages. Periods of depression were marked with social withdrawal, self-blame, emptiness, substances, and suicidality. For many, worthlessness had reached a peak, feeling that they had failed their duties in their roles as a father, husband, family member, and employee. Some changed their priorities and relationships, while others held onto the most meaningful commitments and challenges that life gave them. The number of years that spanned this specific period of middle adulthood (31 to 54 years of age) may have been long enough for them to have experienced all challenges according to Erikson's psychosocial stages of development in young and middle adulthood: intimacy, isolation, generalisation, and stagnation (Erikson, 1959).

Older adulthood: ~55 years of age onwards; 2010-present

Master narrative: No.8 wire

The *No.8 Wire* is a 4.0mm diameter wire used for fencing, and a tool that became more broadly adapted to fulfil other needs pertaining to farms, factories, and homes (Derby, 2015). The No.8 Wire has cultural significance in Aotearoa New Zealand as a symbol of *Kiwi ingenuity*, referring to the attitude of competency and resourcefulness for inventing and building all one needs with whatever tools and materials they have (Derby, 2015; Pennell, 2022). The No.8 Wire refers to a national attitude about self-sufficiency, resourcefulness, independence, and creativity (English-Lueck, 2003; Pennell, 2022). The usefulness of the No.8 wire meant that jobs were completed in isolation and with little resource, including people (Murphy, 2006). If successful, one can find pride and satisfaction in their work, while

reinforcing values of individualism (Murphy, 2006; Pennell, 2022). As a master narrative of self-worth in older adulthood, the No.8 Wire refers to how the men reflect upon what they have built over their lifetime with pride, scrutiny, satisfaction, and questions as to what they do now.

Edward: Now sometimes I think about, you know, what would people say about me? You know. At my funeral? You know, and I wonder, you know, what would they say? You know, what did he? What did he achieve? What did he do?

Richard has developed a strong sense of self-worth through his work and invaluable personal and professional relationships, having grown up not trusting anyone or having others believe in him. *Everything that you see ... um, speaks for itself, that this person is really self-made because I've had to be. ... And I'm very proud of the result, because of it, because it's taken an awful lot of work.* Richard still works, although by choice. He relishes in preparing a platform for others to share their work and discoveries. He now hears his name more than ever before and makes a point of reciprocating other's names in return. *'Nobody ever gets tired of hearing their own name.'* Richard reflects on a saying that captures the ultimate acknowledgement of one's being. The degree to which the saying is literal may be variable, but the essence is that seeing people and being present with them will never grow old.

Ralph talks about Olivia's death during one of the COVID-19 lockdowns as having significant influence on his self-worth. Instead of reflecting on how much her death negatively affected him, he describes how invaluable she was, from the small things to the significant: uncorking him a bottle of beer as he walked in the door; her gratitude as he fixed household furniture and built retaining walls for their neighbours; how she organised social gatherings with their friends every week, which he maintains to this day; and her tolerance of his mother. Ralph reflects her unwavering patience after his parents did not attend their wedding.

Ralph: Olivia said to me, "you know, when ... we took that wedding cake down to her, and you went to do something else, she said to me, "well, you might have him today, but I've got him for the rest of his life."" And I thought, "what a bloody thing to say to a woman on her wedding day."

Burt reflects his acceptance that he may not have expressed his anger in the best ways throughout his life.

Burt: And so, ov-, over the last 10 years, I've come to address my attitude about lots of different things, you know, my life, my relationships, my thinking and behaviour. Umm. And I've kind of calmed down a lot. And I think become a bit more agreeable. ... Because I was getting angry with myself, you know, and little stupid things were annoying me. And I think I might have been expressing that in the wrong way, which might have led to some of the troubles that I had with [public services] and, and whatnot.

Burt also describes having wanted meaningful relationships for a long time. He finds meaningful connections now with various community groups and his relationship to God.

Burt: You know, wanting in-, interactions with people to quell that loneliness. And so going to the [community group] has had the desired effect, if you like, to deal with that sense of loneliness.

The men's narratives of self-worth during older adulthood tended to audit their past intentions, actions, and outcomes. They reflect on what they have done, what they endorsed, and the consequences they observed, taking personal responsibility in varying degrees. When building a structure of No.8 Wire, they question the degree to which their creative solutions for stubborn issues were successful and had sustained usefulness. What the men built or resolved led them to question what kind of legacy they leave behind, what loose ends need tying up, and what they were ultimately most grateful for. In the present day, they reflect on how their life has culminated and what kind of No.8 wired structure they designed for themselves in relative isolation. They also reflect on what they can still do and relationships they can still build to live meaningfully.

Alternative narratives: Have I done enough?

Whereas the master narrative of the No.8 wire elicits an independent sense of pride and accomplishment in one's life decisions, the alternative narrative questions whether a person still has worth regardless of what they worked on to achieve. In the present day, the men reflect on how hard they worked and questioned whether they did enough for themselves and for others.

Albert: This is, this is the thing, you know. A lot, a lot of my problems right at the moment is, I've got a big, serious financial problem, you know. And

that's, you know, ... eating away at me big time, you know. Unfortunately, you know, when time's [were] good, the bank [was] very generous in lending money and things like that and, "oh, sure you, sure, you've got enough? Sure you've got enough?" ... But unfortunately, no one sort of said to me, who was, you know, financially [literate], I suppose, "there are consequences of doing this." They only said, "give me more", "Hey, do you want more?" They always want more.

Albert's mortgage challenges his identity as a protector and provider for his family. The structure of his *No.8 wire* raises questions as to whether he has worked hard enough or has *been* enough for himself and his family. He considers downsizing his home, and doing so would require *"getting rid of a lot of this crap that I've accumulated, you know, and that's going to be, you know, I mean, it's like my babies, you know? I mean it's like, like killing my kids"*. Albert feels conflicted about reducing his life's work, equating the notion to killing his children. His life's work is collected in art form, symbolise his identity, passions, the expansiveness of his knowledge, and his burden. He perceives his *No.8 wire* with contrasting feelings. It is intricate, thoughtful, and different, but its structural integrity is uncertain.

For Edward, the *No.8 wire* as per his career has been particularly challenging. At his job, his work is a constant churn of projects, overlapping each other, rarely offering time to appreciate its finality before more tasks come up. He describes

Edward: It's, it's hard to explain, but you know basically my focus has been on work. But I've never, never been able to get value out of what I've done workwise? Never. You know, and I think I'm a person that likes to, to see something concrete at the end of the day, you know, and I think I would have been better off as a builder and being able to say, "yep. This is what I've done today," you know, get satisfaction out of seeing something at the end of each day.

The *No.8 wire* as a master narrative of human value comprises several standards of what constitutes a sound and worthwhile life: marriage, home ownership, children, and success in employment. Achieving these aspirations, however, do not necessarily result in feeling worthy. In marriage, there is no promise of a fulfilling relationship. In home ownership, there is no promise of paying off the mortgage. With children, there is no promise that they will grow into the culturally valued adults their caregivers wish for. With employment, there is no

promise of success or fulfilment. And regardless of one's circumstances, even if these goals are achieved with acceptable quality, there is a perceived failure and guilt for feeling dissatisfied and trapped. Success in these aspirations is more than conventional achievement, but felt fulfilment and meaningful satisfaction. And if the outcome is lower than desired, the self is to be blamed for not knowing better or doing better.

Ralph: It got me down to the stage that I went to the doctor once and he said, "take two weeks off. Go bush, do something like that." So I told my mother that's what I was doing, but I actually stayed at home looking after the kids and got somebody else to go in and check on her. And guess what? ... She found out that I was at home. So, all hell broke loose again, and this, it got to the stage it was just too much to handle.

Ralph reflects on how the relentless demands his mother made throughout his lifetime took a toll on him and at his wife and children's cost. The doctor recommended Ralph remove himself to restore and recover and, so, he used the opportunity for reprieve to spend his time with his children. Predictably, his mother unleashed her wrath upon learning that he was at home when he should have been attending to her demands.

John: we have a, a consumer society where you buy everything. The, the idea is that the, the intrinsic value that my parents grew up with was work. The value was in the work. The intrinsic value of neoliberalism is the dollar. How many dollars do you have in the bank, right? And, and who are you going to give those dollars to ... do the thing that you need done? ... those are not the values that my parents were brought up on, and they're certainly not the values that I was brought up on. Although, you know, guiltily, I say, that I embraced neoliberalism when it arrived in the 80s. And I would have been one of the loudest and most vociferous supporters of it. And then about 10 years later, I started suddenly started waking up to the reality of what it was doing. And then, 20 years later, 30 years later, I suddenly realised, "Oh my God, we really have fucked it, haven't we? Look at all these people." You know, I look on the streets and I just I see beggars. There were no beggars on the street when I was a kid.

John reflects on the outcomes of neoliberalism, criticising the overvaluation of profit as a strategy to build a flourishing society has eclipsed the intrinsic value of work, responsibility and a personal sense of fulfilment, while also creating hardship through structural inequalities. John shares a level of guilt in having contributed to the sociocultural shift that inadvertently resulted in the belief that no work is worth doing unless the job can provide you with a worthy income. The neoliberal *No.8 wire*, a much larger structure than any one individual could take personal responsibility for, remains a structure designed and built by a powerful collective of people who insisted was the right design.

Personal narratives of self-worth and messages to readers

The alternative narrative to the No.8 Wire is not one of resistance, but for the protection from debilitating worthlessness. While the *No.8 Wire* represents resourcefulness and pragmatism, the *No.8 Wire* also represents helpfulness. A full circle moment, returning to the values they embodied from childhood, the men abstracted self-worth as having something to offer (value) and living according to what they believe is right (values). Self-worth means building a *No.8 wire* structure for the benefit of the self and others with whatever they have available. They recognise the implicit rules and standards of a worthy Aotearoa New Zealand man: one who is compliant, quiet, conforming, successful, productive, law-abiding, able-bodied, strong (physically and mentally), wealthy, self-sufficient, resourceful, humble. Any time in which the men were perceived as falling short from these standards, they responded by broadening what really matters in human value. Especially if their self-deprecating and other-deprecating criticisms came from trivial and illogical frameworks. For example, criticising young boys for singing.

Older adulthood has been described as a period of transcendental reflections (Jönson & Magnusson, 2001; Tornstam, 1997). The men's present-day reflections of self-worth in older adulthood comprised of reflections about their own lives having been built out of No.8 wires, guided by implicit and explicit social standards, and adapted to their own personal values and value. Their interviews finish with overarching contingencies of worth that have guided the men through their life, and words of advice for readers.

John's art, family, and connection to nature grounds his self-worth. In musicians and their music, he recognises the same anguish and pain that he has felt and values just how much art communicates the nuances of shared humanity. Without his father's love and acceptance, John had felt the need to become extraordinary as being ordinary would not suffice. Although

he recognises an inherent worthiness in his work, he had also been suspicious of those who admired him. He chooses to set aside blame for his childhood with an appreciation for the messiness of life, recognising that beauty can be found in torture (as expressed by music) and that torture can be found in what others insist is beautiful (such as submitting oneself to other's standards of worth). John encourages readers to experience life in its fullness, hoping his experiences might help readers learn, "*How to survive. It's just how to keep going, you know, ... you can't just survive, though, you gotta be able to live...*"

Richard's self-worth is contingent upon basic manners and overcoming the limitations set upon him. Prior to meeting Sophie, Richard felt worthless due to his father's abuses towards him and his mother and sister, and his schoolteachers' dismissal of his learning difficulties. In response, he maintains that people are deserving of respect and compassion. Despite having reasonable evidence to not trust others, relationships are everything to him. He feels worthy in being helpful, showing genuine interest in others, and having patience for people's mistakes or methods of figuring things out. Richard has drawn great satisfaction and worthiness in overcoming uncertainty, especially when he fulfils tasks asked of him. He shared that the challenges he overcame has all been worth it, as he feels strong and quietly confident. He encourages readers to, "*Never give up...Never ever feel that, um, that you can't. Or you, or you wont, because there is always a way, if you seek for it, you will find it.*"

Albert's self-worth is contingent upon seeing the faces of the smaller crowds. Having lived a life of not fitting the dominant notions of success and morality, he challenges its legitimacy. He questions the degree to which his mother's suicide was any more pathological than the people who degraded her for being a single mother. His dedication to learning about reality through philosophy, culture, language, health, and art, instilled both inspiration and vast disappointment as he values humanity and cannot stand the hierarchies that exist in large institutions. He found worthiness in honouring difference, yet in being different, he often felt worthless. Albert advises readers to "*stand up for your values*", because the payment for compromising your values "*is not worth it*". "*And if you do see somebody different that doesn't, that doesn't make them any less worthy than you, you know?*"

Ralph's self-worth is contingent upon his ability to move and fix things with a calm perseverance. Ralph's values grew out of his mother's unwavering lack of gratitude, and his schoolteachers' failure to educate effectively. In turn, he offers what he felt was missing: reasonable guidance and rationale so that others can thrive with confidence and autonomy. At

the same time, however, he built an emotional guardedness as a coping mechanism. His emotional containment helped him persist with his mother's lifelong demands that prioritised her own needs above those of Ralph's father, neighbours, wife and children. For the love of his family and surviving numerous physical and psychological battles, he finds immense worthiness, acceptance, pride, and courage in his ability to continue. Ralph would like people to know that *"life is survivable. It doesn't matter how bad it gets sometimes it's...there's usually light at the end of the tunnel...and it's not just the train coming the other way."*

Burt's self-worth is contingent upon upholding justice. He has continually fought for those who have been harmed by poorly administrated systems, using strategies and coping mechanisms that landed him in prison. Perhaps it was because of how much others made him feel worthless, that he found a sense of worthiness in pulling back their doily veils. He took glee in proving to the Court that his actions stood for what he saw was just, revealing how unchecked authority results in protected deviousness and offence. Burt emphasises the importance of knowing how to listen. He advised actively asking questions for the benefit of curiosity and respect, not just preparing yourself in what you want to say next. He would like readers to remember that *"we've got two ears and two eyes and one mouth, means that we should look and listen twice and much as we talk."*

Edward's self-worth is contingent upon unity and health. His expressions of care and humility are second nature, perhaps to a degree that overshadows appreciating the intrinsic value of his very being. His sense of worthiness may have been challenged by the absence of resolution, as he has dedicated much of his life to alleviating others' pain. The continuity and maintenance required to help others, however, contrasts the desire for resolution in his appraisal of self-worth. He does not choose to ignore other's needs, even if they have been hard to sustain. But in perceiving his values as regular, his worthiness is quiet. Edward wishes readers good health and agility. *"...exercise is good for you. Look after your nutrition. Do, in life, what really makes you happy. And if you find that it's not making you happy, whether it's your work or whether it's what you've studying at university or anywhere else, then change, make that change...it comes back to being agile."* He also wishes for readers to balance focusing on others as well as themselves. *"...do focus on other people, help other people, but also focus on yourself as well."*

Chapter 6: Discussion and conclusion

This thesis has contributed to the repository of knowledge of the concept of self-worth focusing on older men. Self-worth has faced academic jangle problems while being operationalised into the observation and diagnosis of mental distress, namely, depression, without fully conceptualising the complexities of self-worth within context. This thesis critically examines the consequences of human devaluation and, as described in Chapter 3, consequences of overvaluation by extending its definition beyond ‘self-esteem’ and considering self-worth not only linked to depression. Throughout the journey of this thesis, self-worth was identified as comprising multiple lenses: relationships, autonomy, and morality; intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural; and, according to synonyms of worth, value, values, and feeling valued. The master narratives that were identified, aligned with proverbs across time periods in Aotearoa New Zealand. These different lenses offer useful and insightful possibilities for future research on the conceptual and experiential knowledge of self-worth for individuals, clinicians, and society more broadly.

The discussion begins by summarising the findings in the context of the theoretical and methodological research on self-worth. This is followed by the contribution to the academic literature and research for self-worth and depression, wellbeing and mental distress. The discussion then moves to clinical implications for assessment and treatment. Lastly, limitations and future research are considered.

The findings and theoretical contribution

Prioritising the men’s lived experiences of self-worth across their lifetime helped identify unique personal histories, narratives, and perspectives of human value. The participants’ contingencies of worth appeared to be particularly salient during devaluing events (towards themselves, towards others, and from others), which often inspired and motivated the direction of their attention. These devaluing events also indicated the site of master and alternative narratives of human value, and the scripts and boundaries of social constructionism. The men’s lived experiences and narratives were contrasted and aligned with academic research, providing a framework for the theoretical background regarding research on self-worth.

Values, value, and feeling valued

Three pertinent forms of self-worth were described and identified in the men’s conceptualisations and narratives: values (living according to what one believes has merit and

worth), value (having something to offer), and valued (the sense of belonging, connectedness, and acceptance). These three forms of worth were grounded in experience and perception, and their overarching appraisals of self-worth were conducted by the subjective/implicit self evaluating their explicit/explicit self from a first-person perspective, and through the eyes of others' (Bırni & Eryilmaz, 2024; James, 1890).

Values were understood as the guiding principles that the men drew on to live their life. Values have been understood as desired goals and principles that guide one's actions and can be personalised to the individual and generally held by cultural groups (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). Values influence action, perception, cognition, and emotions across individual and cultural domains (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022). Values influence how society and its members practice what is perceived as "worthy and good" (Sagiv & Schwartz, 2022, p. 520; Shultziner & Rabinovici, 2011). The participants referred to values and personal principles when explaining what they did and thought, what they believed in, and why. In this way, values embodied elements of autonomy and morality, which were validated through relationships.

Personal values were often identified in the men's experiences and observations of devaluation, both towards themselves and towards others. To prevent perpetuating the same practices of widely held values that devalued certain people, such as in the home or at work, the men developed a sense of worthiness by acting in accordance with what they believed to be right, even if they witnessed others receiving favour for enacting disagreeable practices. The men's behaviours that upheld personal values were theoretically demonstrative of self-determination theory, which describes how acting in accordance with what one believes in strengthens intrinsic motivation and basic psychological needs (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Social and environmental restrictions of one's beliefs and values, therefore, can put strain onto feelings of relatedness, autonomy, and competency (Ryan & Deci, 2004). If one's principled acts are not readily recognised as valuable to themselves and others, feelings of worthiness and worthlessness oscillate and test one's overarching sense of self-worth. Devaluing or restricting one's personal values may question whether one has *value*.

Value was understood as the sense of one's contribution to life in ways that were much greater than their individual selves. Value was challenging to conceptualise by both participants and me, as this form of worth meant referring to socially shared standards and conditions that measurably ascertained whether humans have done *enough* or are characteristically *enough*. The men often referred to having value in their careers and relationships, which were guided

by their personal values. Despite actions that would enact one's personal values and sense of value, however, appraisals of self-worth comprised of perceived/actual instances of success/advantage to oneself and others, as well as perceived/actual failures/disadvantage to oneself and others. This meant that one's value was judged against intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural standards. Although researchers have argued that external validation of one's worth risks judging oneself against unreliable sources, if value is understood as the contribution one can offer to the world, then external validation is a part of the appraisal; knowing that what one does has value to others is confirmed by others (Crocker et al., 2004).

The sense of having value reinforces several theories referenced in the relational, autonomous, and moral dimensions of self-worth. For example, Roger's conditions of worth indicate social determinants of belonging, role accumulation and strain indicate the boundaries in which a person feels as though their contributions are valuable, all of which are judged against notions of right and wrong in cultural scripts of morality (Mize & Kincaid, 2025; Patterson & Joseph, 2013; Thoits, 2012; World Health Organisation, 2019). Lessons are learnt through induced emotional arousal, such as guilt, shame, and pride, with intentions to shape culturally valued people (Tangney et al., 2007; Quinn, 2005). These embodied lessons lead to self-schemas of one's worth, which are then organised into autobiographical narratives that contain diverse structures of perceived human value (Grusec et al., 2017; Vannucci et al., 2025; Vermeire, 2020). One's intrinsic sense of value is constructed alongside social rules.

Consequently, *feeling valued* was understood as feeling genuinely appreciated and cared for by others (Lemay Jr. & Sponberg, 2015). Feeling valued could be relevant to concepts such as dignity, in which a person feels as though, as a human, they are deserving of respect, freedom, and autonomy (Jütten, 2017; Kisvetrová et al., 2022). In the men's narratives, however, feeling valued was identified when they described situations of feeling appreciated, wanted, needed and recognised, and being treated as such. During childhood, the men's descriptions of feeling worthless did not seem astonishing when rejected by their own family. During adolescence, their descriptions of feeling worthless at school were related to how they fit into their peer groups (or not) and how they were helped by their teachers (or not). During adulthood, broadly, their sense of worth in occupational contexts were marked by extrinsic motivations and reward (or not). Being treated as a person of value challenged their sense of self-worth and, again, reinforces the importance of external validation.

Relational value is the degree to which people regard their relationship with a person as important, valuable, or close ... Perceived low relational value is a component of a variety of social experiences including rejection, ostracism, romantic breakups, expulsions from groups, being ignored, stigmatization, prejudice, discrimination, loneliness, and many (but not all) incidents of exclusion (Allen et al., 2022, p. 1150).

In addition to Allen and colleagues' reflection on the psychological need to belong and relatedness, social identity theory reinforces the potential for feeling worthy when belonging to a group and feeling worthless following rejection from one's own group, and rejection and discrimination from an outgroup (Allen et al., 2022; Brown, 2020; Trepte & Loy, 2017). These reflections also emphasise notions of homonymy, we-identities, and interdependent selves, such that self-worth is not solely the value that is perceived within the self but that one's worth is valuable to others, in connection with others, and made explicit or is intrinsically felt (León, 2023; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Ryan & Deci, 2004). To reinforce the relational dynamic, however, Allen et al. (2022) also described how part of human nature is that we do not value humans equally and that belonging is not everyone's motive, resulting in people devaluing relationships in favour of something more valuable. In this way, feeling devalued in a relationship understandably creates feelings of worthlessness, but this devaluation does not bear truth as to the intrinsic worth of that person (Allen et al., 2022).

When writing this thesis, it became imperative to include how social interactions communicate messages of devaluation and inadequacy, perceived and actual. Although the men's descriptions of values, value, and feeling valued represented the more intrapersonal appraisal of self-worth, their perceptions were not without the influence of external judgements. Their self-reflections support the notion that self-concepts use self-appraisal mechanisms to judge one's self-worth, and that cognitive mechanisms in self-referential processing (such as first- and third-person perspective taking) help determine self-worth from different angles and degrees of awareness (Crocker et al., 2002; D'Armentau et al., 2007; Levorsen et al., 2023; Salehinejad et al., 2020; Sui & Humphreys, 2015). On the note of perception, however, researchers have demonstrated that people with depression often embody negative self-biases of unrealistic negativity (Collins & Waner, 2024; Cox, 2020). As such, the appraisal of one's worth continually negotiates real and perceived evidence at specific points in time that is subject to misinterpretation, both from the individual's opinion and external parties' opinions (Galin, 2003).

An intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural perspective

To extend upon the mechanism of perception, another trio of lenses integrated in the theoretical background of self-worth were the intrapersonal, interpersonal, and sociocultural perspectives of human value. As this thesis was inspired by men who have shared feelings of worthlessness in relation to their masculine identity, it begged the question as to what contingencies and conditions of worth constituted a worthy or valuable man. When writing the theoretical background, analysing feelings of worthlessness exclusively from an intrapersonal experience seemed to ignore the negotiation of perceptions operating across different social relationships and identities, as an individual and as part of a group. For this reason, sociocultural identities were integrated into the theoretical background of self-worth, as culture governs our thoughts, behaviours, and ways of relating to one another; the routines and customs that guide group processions; and a lens that shapes how we understand and interpret the world and others (Lander, n.d.; Syed & McLean, 2021; Syed et al., 2017; Rua et al., 2017).

Narrative inquiry was one method of understanding the intrapersonal perspective of self-worth in men, from childhood to present, but to interpret their feelings of worthless as an intrapersonal dysfunction of depressive symptomatology seemed an inappropriate assessment of the realities in which they felt worthless (Kim & Park, 2019; Murray, 2000; Stephens & Bereheny 2012). To inspire and teach children with cultural values, lessons are imbued with emotional arousal and moral judgments of approval, disapproval, appropriateness and inappropriateness (Quinn, 2005). The men described the use of fear and aggression to instil compliance and good behaviour, justified emotional strategies to teach them what is valued and expected of them as they grow into an adult (Quinn, 2005). As adolescents, some of the more common mechanisms to instil social values were through bullying, teasing, humiliation, and 'the cuts' (Pollock, 2011). Yet, emotional reactions contain rules of social permissibility depending on the person conveying the emotion (Shields, 2005). Rules on emotional expression not only affected the men's sense of self-worth when they experienced emotions, which were generally unacceptable and rejected, but these rules were taught and understood through social interactions.

As such, the interpersonal perspective in the theoretical background attempted to highlight how conditions and standards of human value (such as masculinities) are influenced and reinforced by interpersonal perspectives, which can be dyadic and group based. Brown (2020) noted that the empirical support of social identity theory is limited when research on the mechanisms of social identity theory focus solely on cognitive and social reasoning,

without actively incorporating the influence of emotion. Brown (2020) proposed that ingroup favouritism does not fully explain outgroup discrimination through rationalism, but that ingroup favouritism involves practices of privileging at the expense of outgroups. The tension that exists between groups, Brown (2020) argued, is likely due to group narratives of superiority and pride that differentiate themselves from others. In other words, intragroup bias and intergroup differentiation (two highly researched phenomena of social identities) are influenced by emotion. Thus, inter and intragroup processes likely use emotions to sustain conditions of worth masculinity, or what constitutes adequate membership according to the group's definitions of acceptable masculinities, such as emotional indifference (Brown, 2020; Shield, 2005). Interpersonal interactions, therefore, may affect intrapersonal feelings of worthlessness due to group-based perceptions of worthy men in accordance with culturally valued characteristics (Galdas et al., 2023; Gallagher et al., 2022; Shield, 2005; Quinn, 2005).

Accordingly, interpersonal perspectives are reflective of sociocultural perspectives of human value; how we, as humans, perceive the value of men. Because master narratives embody ubiquity, utility, invisibility, compulsoriness, and rigidity, the dominance of master narratives demonstrate how its norms and boundaries can go unnoticed until differentiated, whether by choice or not (Lindsay, 2019; McLean & Syed, 2015; Syed, 2016). Such is the normative existence of dominant cultural practices that those who exist within its form sometimes may not perceive its presence (Shields, 2005). For example, a broadly endorsed worldview, one embedded in a Victorian medical history for the moral treatment of insane women, is that emotions are unacceptable, illogical, deranged and hysterical (Harris, 1990; Petrova, 2024; Shields, 2005). An exception to the rule of emotional indifference is that emotional expression is accepted if justifiable and rational and do not compromise perceptions of strength, power and restraint (Harris, 1990; Petrova et al., 2024; Quinn, 2005; Shields, 2005).

Shields (2005) recognised that boundaries of acceptable emotional expression go unspoken and taken for granted until faced with challenges to social hierarchies. For example, in colonialism, male emotional expression was justified and judged as a marker of strength and masculinity until different groups of people challenge their existing hierarchies and competition for resource (Shields, 2005). What this could mean is that, for example, Māori men may be excluded from expressing emotion because they have been perceived as illogical, savage, uncivilised, and barbaric, much like how women have been perceived as hysterical, albeit with different histories (Bluck, 2022; Harris, 1990; Hokowhitu, 2004). *Children should be seen and not heard* identifies children as holding a position where their emotional

expressions are not worthy of being seen nor heard. The sociocultural perspective of emotional expression contains social rules, even though some emotions are permitted to reinforce intragroup bias (some men are allowed) and intergroup differentiation (other men are not allowed) to sustain conditions for identity and power (Shields, 2005). Sociocultural perspectives of emotions ascertain whose identity and position is worthy of expression, therefore, dictating whose voices are valued.

For further knowledge on a nuanced investigation into the sociocultural perspectives of human value, Dr Hokowhitu has published critical research into the power of cultural and structural practices in colonialism as its effects on Indigenous masculinities (ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures, n.d.). Dr Hokowhitu has published several studies on the racist perceptions held by Pākehā about Māori capabilities and skills, how these perceptions have been structured into society, and the effects these perceptions and subsequent actions have had on Māori as people and as men (ARC Centre of Excellence for Indigenous Futures, n.d.). For example, Hokowhitu (2004) wrote about the cultural and structural powers that have permitted and constrained Māori men from participating in sporting and academic domains as per Pākehā systems.

Relationships, autonomy, and morality as a framework of self-worth

Taking into account social interactions, rules, and consequences of acceptance and rejection, men's narratives of self-worth appeared to be structured according to relationships, the sense of autonomy, and moral scripts. These dimensions indicated whether *who* they were and *what* they did were perceived as "good enough". The dimensions were useful to theoretically ground and structure how self-worth was presented across each life stage, even though many of the theories referenced could be re-examined across multiple life stages. For example, although the prominence of roles and responsibilities were primarily described in the young adulthood section of the theoretical background, some of the men undertook significant responsibilities to their family and communities as children and adolescence, while also recognising that some people's roles and responsibilities were relative to their circumstances and capacities. Therefore, theories on the importance of roles and responsibilities are not unique to young adulthood and may influence one's self-worth at different life stages. The framework of self-worth also widened the theoretical background by considering the vastness of intersectionality and interdisciplinary lenses.

For example, researchers might consider this framework of self-worth in Aotearoa New Zealand men from a historical lens. Phillips (1996) wrote extensively about the development of the Pākehā male identity in his book, *A Man's Country? The Image of a the Pākehā Male. A History*. In terms of the history of male friendships in Pākehā men, Phillips (1996) referred to how early frontier male friendships were primarily circumstantial due to the need for comradeship (including mutual aid and company) balanced with the transitory and dangerous nature of frontier labour that would disrupt developing friendships. Moreover, the task of establishing the colony comprised of substantially fewer women and children, with ratios of adult women to adult men as 622:1000 during 1851, equalising after World War I (Phillips, 1996). Phillips (1996) described how the imbalance of genders contributed to the experience of Pākehā males and their identity, with significant individual freedom and few familial and relational obligations and responsibilities.

In terms of self-worth and autonomy, Phillips also described how frontier men were tasked with developing a colony far away from the comforts of their European homes, “effeminate chains”, and a focus on manual labour (Phillips, 1996, p. 4). Phillips explained that men were encouraged in England to, effectively, reclaim their masculine identity by returning to the wilderness and building a society with very few tools and technology (Phillips, 1996). Men wrote about felling a kauri tree, so immense and grand yet able to be pulled down, taking smaller trees with it, achieved alone while invigorating one’s sense of pride (Phillips, 1996). Perhaps one of the sites in which the No.8 wire started to grow. Their pride was grounded in an internal sense of power by conquering nature, competing with their peers in challenges of strength, and building homes for future generations (Phillips, 1996). Here, self-worth and autonomy are reinforced through one’s accomplishments.

Coupled with this reclaimed masculine identity were the values of egalitarianism, an opportunity to establish new moral scripts that recognised each person’s value regardless of their background (Phillips, 1996). English politics inspired men to colonise Aotearoa and establish a new society where people will be treated with equal opportunities and a more harmonious recognition of each person’s contribution (Phillips, 1996). The New Zealand Graphic reinforced this Pākehā colonial male identity by mocking the ‘new chum’ (intellectuals, bankers, and government officials who sat at desks) as physically weak and ill-equipped in establishing a colony compared to the brave and strong colonial male (Phillips, 1996; Phillips, 2015). Their satire of the new chum was a response to valuing men who were capable of living and building a society with very little resource, rebalancing the influence and

power away from ‘desk-sitters’ into a more ‘equal’ playing field that would recognise the value that many men have to offer to society (Phillips, 1996; Phillips, 2015) Their response to building an egalitarian society in Aotearoa was, arguably, an alternative narrative to master narratives of human value during early 1800 Britain. This historical lens suggests that structures and narratives of human value existed in the early 1800s, regardless of whether self-worth was a salient concept. This historical lens also supports the notion that people are born into narratives, circumstances that are at the mercy of preexisting narratives of human value, which may be difficult to change but not impossible with enough support and power (Booker, 2021; Reese et al., 2017).

When developing the theoretical background of self-worth, relationships, autonomy, and morality were also identified as key topics of psychological research containing the greatest variety and number of articles to describe self-worth. This includes, relational dynamics, exercises of autonomy, and scripts of morality, which were inevitably related to sociocultural contexts as reasons for why specific notions of acceptance/rejection, approval/disapproval, good/bad exist (Syed et al., 2020). Moreover, such research contains temporality and historical accounts, thereby, locating the context of conditions and contingencies used for appraisals of self-worth (Crocker et al., 2002). These constantly shifting contexts of self-concept development, relational dynamics, exercises of autonomy and perceptions of morality often made it difficult to ground the structure of self-worth as narratives and perceptions of human value are extensive and contextual. Likewise, the constantly shifting contexts also resulted in a widening perspective of how self-worth affects humans more broadly.

Despite the men’s shared identities, their life narratives were fundamentally diverse, individual, and heterogeneous, as their lives branch out and include many different people’s histories. Writing about their lives as homogenous seemed insufficient, in addition to considering the implications of this research for the voices that were not included. Focusing on self-worth solely from the perspective of gender could have limited the perspective that men experience self-worth beyond gendered constructions. Still, widening the scope of self-worth inevitably resulted in the widening of perspectives, contexts, experiences, and theories. At times, researching self-worth felt unwieldy and, at the same time, this seemed very appropriate. If self-worth can be understood through dimensions of relationships, autonomy, and morality, narratives of self-worth will contain highly intersectional experiences with social constructions of human value that have the potential to affect multiple domains of life.

Methodological contribution

The combination of a critical realist ontology, social constructionist epistemology, and master narrative methodology were useful frameworks to understand the lived experiences of worthlessness and dominant cultural scripts of human value. The philosophical orientation and methodology were also complemented given each framework's centring of cultural mechanisms to understand everyday lived experiences (Hoddy, 2019; Syed & McLean, 2021). Although the men sharing similar demographic information, their narratives and contingencies of worth and contained intersecting conditions espoused in different identities, social groups and circumstances. The philosophical framework and methodology helped identify the different experiences, events, structures, narratives, and mechanisms that contribute to how certain conditions fulfil specific contingencies of worth.

Critical realism

Critical realism helped to find layers of reality in feelings of worthlessness, and social constructionism helped to find the men's experiences as unique to their identities and circumstances over time. Although there may be common contingencies of worth to a certain population group, such as identified by Crocker and colleagues (Crocker et al., 2002; Crocker et al., 2004), the identified contingencies need not be a strict set when taking into consideration other cultural contexts. As critical realism comprises a relativist epistemology, lived experiences in context are key to understanding how feelings of worthlessness exist as a phenomenon and as a symptom of depression or other expression of mental distress (Willis, 2023). Thereafter, the process of judgmental rationalism (identifying what theories are most likely true) can build a more robust theoretical background and structure to self-worth without abandoning people's nuanced insight (Hoddy, 2019; Johnson, 2023; Willis, 2023).

During childhood, men described how they felt worthless and ashamed when they expressed negative feelings in response to their caregivers' behaviours. These experiences and reactions can be represented by the 'empirical' domain, and the association between worthlessness and shame are reinforced (Bath, 2019; Booker, 2021; Goffnet et al., 2021). When the men expressed their feelings, they were met with invalidation, varying degrees of anger, physical punishment, and corrective action. These events (situations, interactions, and circumstances of punishment) are represented by the domain of the 'actual', while reinforcing the mechanisms of behaviour, such as what functional analysis attempts to capture (Booker, 2021; Melanson & Fahmie, 2024). The reasons as to why the caregivers responded the way

they did and the messages and values they were trying to instil contain the sites of rules, standards, expectations, and conditions that constitute and justify assessments of human value. These standards and conditions represent the domain of the 'real' as structures and mechanisms reinforce (and disrupt) the expression of events, while reinforcing the significance of culture (Booker, 2021; Lander, n.d.; Syed & McLean, 2021).

With respect to social constructionism, the men's childhoods were different. They experienced different obligations and connections to their families and communities, stereotypes (such as mental distress and low SES), expectations of success and achievement, family structures, and other cultural contexts. The critical realist framework guided how the events in the actual can be understood according to social constructions in the real while acknowledging the empirical through pathways of equifinality and multifinality (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996).

Critical realism can also be critically analysed in terms of how reality is measured and observed as per the methodology in and of itself. For example, Affleck et al. (2012) explained that 'normative male alexithymia' (socializing men to conform to masculine gender norms by not developing emotional vocabulary) has been recorded with variable rates across different communities, SES, and educational levels. Affleck et al. (2012) emphasised that the potential misuse of generalising positivist research as individuals internalise cultural values differently. Researchers have tended to describe hegemonic masculinities as characterising strength, pragmatism, and leadership (Fontaine, 2019; Galdas et al., 2023; Gallagher et al., 2022; Lindsay, 2019). Hegemonic masculinities also discourage femininities, such as nurturance, sensitivity, and empathy (Fontaine, 2019; Schippers, 2007). Hegemonic masculinities have been identified as potentially leading to harmful effects on healthcare behaviours, whereby the prioritisation of strength and opposition of sensitivity may discourage men from sharing their distress as it is associated with weakness (Fontaine, 2019; Galdas et al., 2023; Gallagher et al., 2022). Instead, men's distress is more palatable if expressed through aggression, risky behaviours, substance use, and silence (Fontaine, 2019; Galdas et al., 2023; Gallagher et al., 2022). In accordance with self-congruence theory and self-discrepancy theory, men may have certain conditions of worth necessary to achieve their actual or ideal self as a man, and if this cannot be achieved, they could experience a level of unwanted self-discrepancy, thus, challenging whether their masculinity is worthy or valuable (Boyatzis & Dhar, 2021; Higgins et al., 1987; Mälar et al., 2011; Schlechter et al., 2022).

However, the embodiment of masculinities may also depend on what people perceive to be desirable masculine traits. Traditional masculinities are unique to different cultural groups, including ethnicity, SES, and occupation (Fontaine, 2019; Lindsay, 2019; Rua et al., 2017). As suggested earlier, the challenge with epistemological realism is not the data, but the inferences of data that influences knowledge of reality and realities (Willis, 2023). In this way, when conducting qualitative research with population groups perceived to be “unforthcoming, laconic, and terse”, it may not be due to the inherent nature of the population group, but due to interviewees feeling uncomfortable, untrusting, or even uninspired (Affleck et al., 2012, p. 156).

Master narrative methodology

Stephens and Breheny (2012) noted how qualitative researchers can risk retelling stories during thematic analysis by overemphasising similarity without capturing the diverse social, cultural, and moral threads that inform the storied self. With master narrative methodology, however, master narratives provided a template to recognise the navigation of a morally good and coherent life story while illustrating what it means to be part of a community and that communities’ notions of success (Syed et al., 2018).

For example, *children should be seen and not heard* was originally written in a 15th-century English sermon about young women, ‘a mayde schuld be seen, but not herd’ (Atkinson, 2007; Martin, n.d.). As a master narrative, this proverb contains a long English history of whose voices are valued and how they are valued. When Pākehā frontiers and settlers arrived in Aotearoa, their written observations of traditional Māori child rearing practices saw children valued in society with a love, acceptance, and warmth unlike they had seen before, an alternative master narrative (Angeli-Gordon, 2025). They observed how respectful the children were, even as they were included in public discussion, raised by all family members, and never chastised; perplexing in comparison to Pākehā norms that emphasised individualism and discipline (Angeli-Gordon, 2025; Hoskins et al., 2020). The history and endorsement of this proverb provide a lens into master narratives of different cultural norms.

Accordingly, master narrative methodology helped identify what structures and perceptions of human value were important when growing up in the 1950s, and throughout their lifetime (Syed, 2016). The men’s alternative narratives of human value did not always contradict master narratives but would build upon the narrow definitions stipulated by master narratives (Hochman & Spector-Mersel, 2020). At the same time, their personal experiences

and beliefs about human value became more salient when their alternative narratives of human value expressly contested the master narratives. This finding supports how alternative narratives tend to be salient as they do not conform to the master narratives, which are considered invisible (Syed & McLean, 2015).

The men's alternative narratives of human value amended and challenged how cultural values were practiced, often with a desire to appreciate and respect others, understanding deeply what it meant to feel unappreciated, undeserving, inadequate, and worthless in the eyes of others. Values were not just intangible principles but were accompanied with behaviours intended to uphold the principle. Even as values are widely shared, the practices associated with upholding such values are compounded with differing beliefs, principles and impact. This supports Jütten's (2017) explanation that personal characteristics do not contain inherent value or clear standards, but that other people's characteristics become examples of what is comparably normal and good. Other's characteristics as guides of measurable value supports the mechanisms proposed in social comparison theory (Festinger 1954; Jütten, 2017; Smith, 2000). The men's endorsement of personal values further supports the idea personal narratives are developed from the interaction between master and alternative narratives (Syed & McLean, 2015).

Academic and clinical implications

The theoretical contributions described above, can help explain how self-worth may be understood in the context of self-concept research and its differentiation from other self-concepts, such as self-esteem. Academic implications also concern the intersection and application of clinical academia. This research reveals how psychiatric nomenclatures have operationalised self-worth into the diagnostic criteria of depression, despite the history of self-worth and self-esteem confronting the jangle problem (Weber et al., 2023). Without thorough knowledge of self-worth as a lived experience, research, assessment and treatment of worthlessness may be theoretically compromised.

Depression

Researchers have attempted to understand men's expressions of depression by evaluating the construct and content validity of the diagnostic criteria and whether the diagnostic criteria appropriately capture depression in men (Olfie & Phillips, 2008; Seidler et al., 2018). Depression is characterised as an internalising disorder, marked with symptoms that tend to emphasise internal states such as mood and cognitive distress (American Psychiatric

Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). Researchers have observed that women tend to exhibit mental distress through internalising symptoms, as seen in depressive, anxious, and somatic disorders (Brownhill et al., 2005; Chaplain, 2015; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Oliffe & Phillips, 2008).

Comparably, men are observed as expressing mental distress through externalising behaviours, such as substance use, antisocial tendencies, and risk-taking (American Psychological Association, 2018; Chaplin, 2015; Østergaard et al., 2023; Rice et al., 2022; Seidler et al., 2018). However, researchers have suggested that men do experience more commonly understood depressive symptoms, but that their embodiment of symptoms is expressed through socioculturally accepted forms of behaviour in men, including aggression, risk-taking, and substance use (Galdas et al., 2023). As a result, men embody a unique set of risks of harm that may refocus assessment and treatment, while being diagnosed with higher rates of antisocial personality disorder, substance use disorder, and other disorders that exhibit externalising behaviours (Galdas et al., 2023; Østergaard et al., 2023; Seidler et al., 2018).

Both the ICD-11 and DSM-5-TR have responded to these differences in men's expressions of depression, whereby the ICD-11 recently included 'irritability' and emotional emptiness ('emptiness') as alternative presentations of 'depressed mood' (Østergaard et al., 2023, p. 480). Additionally, the DSM-5-TR noted in their description of depressive disorders that men may be more likely to express depression through maladaptive coping and problem-solving strategies, such as substance use, impulsivity, and risk taking (Østergaard et al., 2023). These developments are an important reminder of how research and knowledge evolve as more people's experiences and expressions of mental distress are better understood, including critically analysing the lenses used to understand mental distress. It also remains that if the criteria in diagnostic manuals do not recognise diverse experiences, people's distress may be inadequately understood and remedied. While understanding the 'true' nature of depression may be different according to gender, context-specific narratives of human value could offer insight into the social expectations about men's experiences of mental distress.

As per the data analysis, the men's expressions of guilt and shame often seemed to be attributed to negative events that occurred beyond their control and against their moral scripts and beliefs. If they were involved in situations that did not develop according to personal expectations and standards, the circumstances were often attributed to a personal sense of failure and evidence of their worthlessness, despite other influences, timing, or systemic factors. Ray (2018) described an example of a man who pursued a prestigious degree with the intention of having a decent career becoming sidelined by subsequent economies that no longer

valued the knowledge taught in that degree. Consequently, the man is told he is a loser, is on the cusp of unemployment, feels anxious and tense, and finds ingroup membership in a nationalist organisation who endorse reclaiming one's masculinity (Ray, 2018).

Such expressions of worthlessness are more cognitive and affective and likened to internalising symptoms that researchers have often attributed to women's symptoms of depression (Jørgensen et al., 2023; Østergaard et al., 2023). Although some researchers argue that men's expressions of depression are exhibited more often through externalising symptoms, the academic implications of these perspectives may risk overlooking the nuances of their internalising symptoms and, at worst, risk reinforcing the belief that men have a 'normative male alexithymia' and that internalising symptoms are "female-typical manifestations" (Affleck et al., 2012; Jørgensen et al., 2023; Østergaard et al., 2023, p. 480).

Wellbeing

Some researchers have contended that attaining contingencies of worth leads to positive wellbeing, whereas yielding contingencies of worth leads to negative wellbeing (Crocker et al., 2004). However, assuming a linear relationship of an equivocally defined experience risks overlooking the rich and obscure nature of self-concepts as it changes across contexts. Assuming a linear relationship between achieving contingencies of self-worth and subjective wellbeing does not account for the potential value of worthlessness in bringing meaningful enlightenment during dark periods, nor does it account for the potential harmful circumstances of excessive self-worth, which may include feelings of superiority and entitlement (Birni & Eryilmaz, 2024; Brown, 2020). For example, self-determination theory explicitly references how the sense of competency encourages the seeking of challenges in order to maintain and enhance one's skills (Ryan & Deci, 2004). Whereas Van Petegem et al. (2018) also explained that unrestrained agency has been associated with greater distress, lower self-esteem, externalising difficulties, and a manipulative interpersonal style.

As described in the theoretical background, worthlessness has been associated with the emotion of shame (Bath, 2019; Goffnet et al., 2021). The experience of shame often appeared as an implicit and explicit undertone to the men's expressions of worthlessness across the course of their life, despite recognising that they could (and did) build meaningful relationships and life experiences. Their experience of shame, however, also seemed to interfere with their ability to be present, accepting, positive, and open to different perspectives, such as seeing themselves as deserving, worthy, enough, and 'adequate'. Chronic shame and worthlessness influenced how the men engaged in various forms of problem-solving to hold themselves

accountable, numb the pain, and avoid burdening others. They described becoming emotionally distant, using substances heavily, and considered whether suicide could resolve the immense suffering they felt while alleviating others from the burden they carried.

In support of the function and inevitability of emotions, despite their heaviness, shame (and guilt) can promote social harmony, which is valued by many cultures (Bath, 2019; Tangney et al., 2007). To rid guilt, shame, and pride entirely is not only impossible, but may create significant implications in wellbeing and social functioning. Not only do these emotions strengthen ties of belonging and acceptance, leading to better psychological and social functioning, but disregarding experiences of guilt and shame may ignore how power and value is directed into society (Bäck & Lindholm, 2014; Bath, 2019; Brown, 2020). In terms of mental distress, however, it may be the excess of guilt, shame, and pride that can become harmful to everyday functioning and cooperation with others (Bath, 2019; Fuchs, 2016; Goffnet et al., 2021). It may not be the emotion of shame that solely needs healing but that excessive shaming behaviours on people's innate characteristics, interests, and values needs critical examination.

The ICD-11 has explicitly recognised the impact of shame and stigma towards mental distress, which can lead to underreporting (World Health Organization, 2019). Lin and Cheung (1999) explained that Asian patients are more likely to report somatic symptoms of dizziness in depression, which are not readily recognised in diagnostic criteria but are recognised anxiety-based diagnostic criteria (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organization, 2019). Lin and Cheung (1999) also explained that Asian patients do experience emotional symptoms but may be negotiating master narratives around acceptable ways of expressing and presenting symptoms. The impact of shame is important for the recognition and treatment of mental distress, including men, as feelings of shame can result in the decision to not seek help due to difficulty recognising or describing symptoms and for fear of stigma as per lived experience and using healthcare services (Gallagher et al., 2022; Newstead et al., 2026). Researchers might benefit from considering the methodological implications of researching depression through dominant conceptualisations while remaining open to diverse cultural and moral worldviews of depression.

Mental distress

Although this thesis did not analyse whether worthlessness could be a symptom of mental distress more broadly, worthlessness does not appear to be a symptom that is uniquely specific to depression (Gilbert, 2006; Lavender & Schmidt, 2006; Lee, 2006; World Health

Organisation, 2024). Worthlessness, especially in a severe chronic form, may indicate a history of trauma, such as maltreatment, abuse, and neglect (Bath, 2019; Gilbert, 2006; Lee, 2006; World Health Organisation, 2024). As Joiner (2005) described in his interpersonal model of suicidality, “childhood adversity, especially severe, impacts all aspects of my model. It familiarises people with pain and provocation, and it makes them feel worthless and alienated - a lethal combination, according to the view developed here.” (p. 191).

It may be that the reason feelings of worthlessness are associated with presentations of depression due to saliency and prevalence, rather than other forms of mental distress (such as trauma, substance use, eating disorders, and emotional dysregulation) not presenting with feelings of worthlessness (Fuchs, 2016; Gilbert, 2006; Joiner, 2005; Lavender & Schmidt, 2006; Lee, 2006; World Health Organisation, 2024). However, when approaching a core and chronic sense of shame and worthlessness, a trauma-informed approach can allow for the establishment of safety and trust in psychological treatment (Bath, 2019). Future research could explore how worthlessness is expressed in different forms of mental distress.

Assessment and treatment

Feelings of worthlessness theoretically contain a vast network of perceptions and structural dimensions of human value that could be challenging to recognise and operationalise in clinical practice, both in terms of positionality (the health professional and client) and treatment goals (American Psychological Association, 2018). For assessment procedures, feelings of worthlessness may benefit from reviewing one’s personal and shared narratives and the conditions that constitute thresholds for contingencies of worth. For example, genograms may be a useful tool to identify the presence, dynamics, and influence of family members, who have their own perceptions, narratives and cultural traditions over time (Alexander et al., 2022). Or the Meihana model, a Māori clinical assessment framework, could be used to identify how a client’s feelings of worthlessness are understood and strengthened through personalised and collective histories with their whānau (Pitama et al., 2014). Feelings of worthlessness may be identified through Nga Roma Moana (ocean currents), which encompass ahua (cultural connections), whenua (land and genealogy), whānau (broad relationships), and tikanga (customs and protocols); and Nga Hau e Whā (four winds), which accounts for significant historical and sociocultural influences that have impacted Māori health, including colonisation, racism, migration, and marginalisation (Pitama et al., 2014; Rua et al., 2017).

The American Psychological Association (2018) encouraged health professionals to exercise cultural sensitivity and awareness of how masculinities present in the client's historical and present social contexts. For example, if a client is questioning their self-worth as contingent upon masculinities, the health professional might consider their own attitudes towards masculinities as similar and different to their clients', which can be informed by diverse sociocultural identities. Health professionals may wish to consider the how masculinities contain different relations to power; privilege, success, and subordination (Brown & Ismail, 2019; Waling, 2019). For example, Fontaine (2019) described how men can feel unworthy and inferior if they are perceived as failing to conform to the standards of his gendered role, a discrepancy that can lead to negative outcomes including low self-esteem and negative social feedback. Male roles are, therefore, tied to social context and perceptions of desirable and valued masculinities (Fontaine, 2019). And while health professionals may consider the implications of depressive symptomatology according to gender (and other cultural identities), health professionals may also wish to remain open to the client's own unique experiences of depressive symptoms and life itself, seeing them as a person beyond their presenting characteristics (American Psychological Association, 2018).

In terms of treatment, feelings of worthlessness could be integrated into several therapeutic modalities, offering different dialogues and philosophies to effectively communicate and build understanding between the health professional and client. For example, the core function and principles of acceptance and commitment therapy (ACT) are to accept what a clients' current circumstances are, commit themselves to choices that align with a life they wish to live, and further accept the outcomes of how a situation eventuated (Robb, 2007). ACT uses a values-focused approach, which help guide clients into make decisions that align with what is important to them, which aligns with one of the findings of this research (Robb, 2007).

Dialectical behavioural therapy could be a useful therapeutic intervention to recognise that worth is constantly negotiated and that multiple truths can exist at the same time, even when the truths appear to be in opposing realities (Linehan & Wilks, 2015). The core functions and principles of cognitive behavioural therapy are to understand how human thoughts and behaviour influence one another, followed by addressing whether these thoughts and behaviours are realistic and perpetuating the clients' feelings of worthlessness (Kennerley et al., 2017). Narrative therapy could potentially help chronic feelings of worthlessness that have dominated how clients have perceived their history through a lens of inadequacy and

immorality (Rice, 2015). Te Whare Tapa Whā could also be used in terms of understanding and healing feelings of worthlessness in line with hinengaro (psychological), wairua (spiritual), whānau (relational), and tinana (physical body) approaches, and recognising that these dimensions are connected, and cannot be perceived and treated as detached or isolated from one another (Rochford, 2004).

Schweder et al. (1997) described three cross-cultural ontologies and treatment for suffering: biomedical, interpersonal, and moral. Although many cultures do not use biomedical, interpersonal or morality treatment in a 'pure form', there is a reported underestimation of interpersonal and moral focus of treatments, which they considered may be due perceived control over the physical body (Schweder et al., 1997). Here, a clinical implication exists in the conceptualisation of aetiological cause and treatment for someone who is suffering, and to what extent are they personally responsible and have been impacted by inequitable social environments (Schweder et al., 1997). For example, the Royal Commission of Inquiry into Abuse in Care (2018-2024) acknowledged how Aotearoa New Zealand state-run welfare homes, mental health care, and faith-based institutions systematically abused and traumatised children in from 1950 to 1999 (Abuse in Care – Royal Commission of Inquiry, 2026). This may explain why Western medicine tends to prioritise physical (body and psyche) treatment despite interpersonal and moral aetiological causes; positioning individuals as responsible for maintaining their own wellness despite the possibility that their suffering was caused by interpersonal relationships, moral scripts, and sociocultural systems (Schweder et al., 1997).

Limitations and future research

One of the first limitations of this research was the use of a life stage approach for a couple of different reasons. Life stages can be somewhat limited when theories are perceived as isolated or dominant in a given age, such as Erikson's psychosocial developmental model (Erikson, 1959). Yet, the life stage approach also offered a structure to the theoretical background, interviews and data analysis. Future research might address how life stage models limit recognising the heterogeneity of life courses, in addition to the development of self-worth and life events that may challenge appraisals of self-worth, forcing experience and development outside of a chronological perspective into one that is more dynamic, reflexive, and pluralistic.

A second limitation of the life stage approach was the division of age bands. Young adulthood to older adulthood has been comprised of different specified age bands in research, with middle adulthood sometimes argued as having three age bands in and of itself (Pulkkinen,

2017). The specific age bands were chosen to simplify the time periods discussed in the interviews. However, the initial research plan was to interview the 'Baby Boomer' generation and following concerns regarding the label of the cohort and low participation rates, the older adulthood age period was amended to a lower age. On reflection, the research design would have benefitted from using the life stage of 'older adulthood' to include men from 60-65 years of age and above (Nair et al., 2024; Palmér et al., 2019). Although all the participants were over the age of 60, had there been participants under the age of 60, their results would not have reflected older adulthood self-worth. Future research might consider how life stages or generations are included into their research design, or whether a different population group of many ages is worth interviewing.

A third limitation of this thesis relates to the theories that were not included. For example, theories of personality and theories of attachment have been researched as highly relevant to mechanisms of self-worth and self-concepts (Granqvist, 2021). Yet, this thesis purposefully took a more social view of self-worth, which restricted the scope of theories that could be highly relevant. In this way, future research might consider expanding upon the intrapersonal theories and interpersonal theories of self-worth (including theories of personality and attachment) to reveal more comprehensive dynamics and events that facilitate self-appraisals of worth.

A fourth limitation relates to the voices that did not directly participate in the interviews, and the relative diversity of population groups despite the diversity and heterogeneity between the participants themselves. As depression disproportionality affects underserved groups in Aotearoa New Zealand and internationally, the breadth in which society can understand the nuances of feeling worthless and worthy is yet to be explored and elaborated on (Haregu et al., 2022; Hop Wo et al., 2020; Manatū Hauora - Ministry of Health, 2021; Statistics NZ, 2020). Within this, future research could also expand on the social constructionist epistemology by integrating different perspectives of the self and consciousness, and the way in which contingencies of worth and perspectives of human value are practiced in different cultures. One discomfiting thought that accompanied the journey of this thesis was whether researching self-worth breathed life into the notion that humans are organised into hierarchical structures of value, symbolising the capitalisation of humans. Here, future research could challenge the term and framework of 'self-worth' by incorporating and integrating different cultural perspectives of self-worth as a concept, and different sociocultural practices of how people are valued and cared for, even when they make mistakes and transgressions, or do not meet standardised thresholds of adequacy. Different perspectives of self-worth as a concept may also

provide more effective therapeutic options for people struggling with feelings of worthlessness, such as finding inherent worth in oneself through different perceptions of the 'self'.

Conclusion

This thesis approached feelings of worthlessness through everyday lived experiences so that readers might be able to recognise and reflect on what self-worth means for themselves and how they may internalise certain structures of human value when perceiving others. It is not the intention of this thesis to suggest that humans ought to rid perceptions of human value and ethical frameworks. Sociocultural values are the core of norms and standards that guide humanity, just as personal values were a core element in how the men perceived their self-worth (McAdams, 2013; Rua et al., 2017). This thesis, however, does attempt to reveal how feelings of worthlessness exist in the daily interactions with the people we are connected to, not just as a symptom of mental distress. Appraisals of self-worth (actual, assumed, perceived, biased, validated, graded, contextual) are precarious, and the research on self-worth could have vast possibilities for critical examination and nuance should humans be open to layered realities.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Request to access organisation

RESEARCH INFORMATION SHEET

To whom it may concern,

REQUESTING PERMISSION TO ACCESS YOUR ORGANISATION FOR RESEARCH

My name is Hester Roberts, and I am a doctorate student of the clinical psychology programme at Massey University in Wellington. My research is exploring the conceptualization of self-worth in older adult Aotearoa/New Zealand men with lived experiences of depression.

The aim of this research is to explore older adult Aotearoa/New Zealand men's experiences of self-worth across different contexts. For example, time periods (childhood to adulthood), and identities (masculinities, relationships, work, diverse communities). I would like to interview older adult Aotearoa/New Zealand-born people who identify as men (born 1940 to 1969) with lived experience of depression. This research will contribute to enhanced awareness of the pressures that men may experience in their lifetime, in addition to a better understanding of what 'self-worth' means and how self-worth functions.

With your permission, I would like to advertise via posters on your community notice board, to recruit older Aotearoa/New Zealand-born men who will feel comfortable speaking to me about aspects of their life history and experiences of self-worth. Notably, this includes any person who identifies as a man. If there are men who are interested in participating, they can contact me directly. Please find attached the information sheet that we would send to the men.

Ideally, I would like to interview men at locations where they feel most comfortable, such as meeting rooms that are private but available to use for these purposes, or if they would prefer, their homes. If face to face is not possible, there is the option to use an online video format. The participants are welcome to bring a support person with them to the interviews. I will provide them with refreshments and a reimbursement voucher of \$40.00 per interview.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 22/54. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Kind regards

Hester Roberts

Student, School of Psychology, Wellington Campus, Massey University

Phone: +64 [REDACTED] Email: hester.roberts.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

Appendix B: Advertisement poster



The poster features a dark background with decorative borders at the top and bottom consisting of stylized, overlapping leaf-like shapes in shades of blue, purple, and pink. The title 'What is self-worth?' is prominently displayed in a large, bold, black font. Below the title, the text is centered and reads: 'I am looking to interview men born in Aotearoa/New Zealand between 1940 and 1969 who have experienced depression and would be comfortable to discuss self-worth.' This is followed by a question: 'What does self-worth mean to you? What are your experiences of feeling worthy or worthless?'. Then, it states: 'We will talk about self-worth across multiple contexts: childhood to present, significant relationships in your life, hobbies, employment, or whatever topic you believe is relevant.' To the left of the contact information, there is a large, stylized blue fern frond. The contact details are centered and include: 'If you are interested and would like more information, please contact: Hester Roberts +64 [redacted] or hester.roberts.1@uni.massey.ac.nz'. At the bottom, a small block of text provides ethical approval information: 'This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 22/54. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.'

What is self-worth?

I am looking to interview men born in Aotearoa/New Zealand between 1940 and 1969 who have experienced depression and would be comfortable to discuss self-worth.

What does self-worth mean to you? What are your experiences of feeling worthy or worthless?

We will talk about self-worth across multiple contexts: childhood to present, significant relationships in your life, hobbies, employment, or whatever topic you believe is relevant.

If you are interested and would like more information, please contact:
Hester Roberts
+64 [redacted] or
hester.roberts.1@uni.massey.ac.nz

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 22/54. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix C: Participant information sheet

Exploring self-worth across the lifetime in older New Zealand men with experiences of depression

INFORMATION SHEET

Thank you for your interest in this research project. My name is Hester Roberts, and I am a student in the Doctor of Clinical Psychology programme at Massey University. I am inviting men born in Aotearoa New Zealand who have experienced depression, born between 1940 to 1969, to participate in research about self-worth.

Project description:

The aim of this research is to explore men's experiences of worthiness and worthlessness, over the lifetime. The reason for inviting men born in Aotearoa New Zealand is to enhance awareness of men's experiences of depression, which has been repeatedly overlooked. A crucial component of wellbeing is self-worth, which is under-researched in the Aotearoa New Zealand context.

If you choose to participate in this study:

You will be asked to think about your experiences of self-worth, and experiences of depression, and attend two interviews with me. I will provide refreshments for each interview, as well as a reimbursement voucher of \$40.00 per interview, for your time.

I would like to invite you to participate if you fit the following criteria and that you feel comfortable to talk about your well-being –

Inclusion criteria:

- people who identify as men;
- New Zealand-born; proficient in English;
- born between 1940 and 1969;
- have self-identified experiences of depression, or had a diagnosis of depression by a qualified health practitioner
- if outside of Wellington, must have access to internet and online video capabilities.

Exclusion criteria:

- have a current medical diagnosis of dementia
- currently experiencing periods of very low mood

What will be expected if you participate?

I will send you a copy of the questions prior to the first interview and be available to discuss any questions you might have. For example, I will ask you about what you believe self-worth means, how you have experienced worthiness and worthlessness, who in your life has influenced your sense of self-worth, and how your self-worth has changed over time. We will discuss self-worth over different contexts, such as childhood to present, masculinities, physical challenges, work, hobbies, and relationships, but what you choose to discuss is up to you.

The interviews will be recorded using an audio recorder. The interviews will be semi-structured, which means I will ask you to tell me some stories that reflect your experiences. I invite you to bring items that reflect your answers. This may include photographs, pieces of art or poetry, your writing

such as stories or diary/journal entries, or other personal objects/symbols. With these items, you can use them to help me understand why they are important to you and your experiences.

We will meet in a private, quiet location, such as your home or in a public area that will ensure your privacy. I welcome any supports that makes you more comfortable (including a friend, family member or objects and items to support you). If you do not want to meet in person, we could meet via Zoom (or other online video method). I expect that each interview will last between 60-90 minutes and there will be at least one week between interviews. I will work with you to make interview times that suit you.

The benefits and risks of this research:

This research will provide the foundation for literature around what self-worth means to Aotearoa New Zealand men and how self-worth relates to depression. I wish to highlight that men's experiences of mental health are diverse and often overlooked. It is hoped that this research will also contribute to how health practitioners engage with men and their experiences of mental health. Although you may volunteer to take part in this research, depending on the interest in this research, there may not be room to participate. If a participant withdraws from the interview, I will keep in contact with you. If the interview spaces remain at capacity, I am happy to send you a summary of the research findings.

As this research is discussing self-worth, the stories that you choose to share may be quite personal and could bring up unpleasant feelings or thoughts. However, this is a small risk, and I will ensure that the interview balances both positive and negative experiences. You have the right to decline any question that you do not wish to answer. All identifying information will be omitted to eliminate the risk of being identified. This includes your name, names of others, and places of residence, work, and organisations. There is a list of contact details for support at the end of this information sheet, and I will provide you with a hard-copy on the day of our interview.

Data management:

Your confidentiality and privacy are important and all names or identifying information will be removed from the transcripts, data and write up of the research. The information obtained in the interviews will be confidential and will form the basis of my thesis and academic journal articles. I will use pseudonyms when transcribing our discussion and will store the transcripts within a password protected file on a password-protected computer. A couple of weeks after our interview, I will arrange for us to meet again and show you the transcript or email it to you. You will be able to change the transcripts if you want. I will also offer to provide you with a summary of the research findings. Once you have approved the transcript, I will delete the audio files. I will store consent forms, with your real names on them, in a locked filing cabinet. Thereafter, I will digitise the consent forms, password-protect the files, and store them on a password-protected computer. After five years, all documents will be destroyed following Massey University's document destruction policies.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- *decline to answer any particular question;*
- *withdraw from the study up to two weeks after your second interview;*
- *ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;*
- *provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;*
- *be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded;*

- *ask for the recorder to be turned off and for no notes to be taken at any time during the interview. During this portion of the interview, information you disclose will not be included in the research.*

Contact details

My primary supervisor is Dr Ian de Terte, Senior Lecturer at Massey University, Wellington and Registered Clinical Psychologist. My co-supervisor is Dr Kathryn McGuigan, Senior Lecturer at Massey University, Auckland.

If you have any questions about the study please contact me or one of my supervisors.

Hester Roberts Student, School of Psychology Wellington Campus Massey University Phone: +64 [REDACTED] Email: hester.roberts.1@uni.massey.ac.nz	Dr Ian de Terte E-Mail: i.deterter@massey.ac.nz	Dr Kathryn McGuigan E-mail k.mcguigan@massey.ac.nz
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Support information

If you find the interview distressing, please use your existing support services. It can also be useful to talk with your GP or other medical professional that you have a good relationship with. You can also contact or use these resources:

- **1737, need to talk?** If you're feeling anxious, down, overwhelmed or that you need to talk with someone, you can call or text the helpline for free, anytime (24 hours, 7 days a week) 0800 1737 1737 – free call
- **The Depression Helpline** (0800 111 757) or text 4202
- **Healthline** (0800 611 116)
- **Lifeline** (0800 543 354)
- **Samaritans** (0800 726 666)
- **The Lowdown** www.thelowdown.co.nz or free text 5626
- **Health and Disability Commissioner** <https://www.hdc.org.nz/mental-health-addictions/where-to-find-help-and-support/>
- **Mental Health Foundation website** <https://www.mentalhealth.org.nz/get-help/in-crisis/support-groups/>

Ethics approval

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, Application SOB 22/54. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Dr Gerald Harrison, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Southern B, telephone 06 356 9099 x 83570, email humanethicsouthb@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix D: Interview schedule and questions

Interview schedule and questions

Interview one schedule:

1. introduce myself. Offer refreshments. Overview of the project.
2. Discuss consent, privacy, and transcriber confidentiality agreement, and ask participant if they have any questions.
3. Assessment of cognitive impairment and suicidality (historical and present). Upon informed consent form being signed, and satisfaction that participants are in a safe position to proceed, the interview can begin.
4. Background, rapport building, getting first impressions:
 - Tell me a bit about yourself
 - Tell me a little about your background
 - Where did you grow up?
 - What school you went to?
 - What jobs you have had?
 - Who are your family?
 - What do you do for fun, entertainment, hobbies?
 - How do you understand self-worth?
 - What is important to you and your self-worth?
5. *To help track the events, people, roles and values that have contributed to self-worth across your lifetime, would you feel comfortable for us to plot these moments onto a timeline? This will be in chronological order of the stories you wish to speak to, and we will note significant people and cultural values that were relevant at the time.*
6. Proposed interview questions (below).
7. Upon interview finishing: check in, thoughts and reflections of the interview so far, thank participant for their time, briefly outline what happens next and organise next meeting.

Interview two schedule:

1. in advance of the second interview, I will confirm the organised time and place for Interview Two and send Interview One transcripts to the participant for their review.
2. Check in:
 - How have you been since we last met?
 - How did you find the first interview?
 - Any thoughts and reflections about the first interview?
3. Reiterate discussion about their view of self-worth – raise the academic definition of self-worth and ask them about what their thoughts are about this definition.
4. Transcripts: query whether participant has read through the transcript and discuss any comments and amendments. Consent given on 'Authority for the release of transcripts' document (for the first interview).
5. Interview two begins. Use the timeline created from first interview.
6. Proposed interview questions (below).
7. Upon interview finishing: check in, thoughts and reflections of the whole interview process, thanking participants for their time.

Questions for interviews one and two (time-dependent and flexible to the participants' stories):

1. As a child (earliest memory to 10 years), what significant moment do you recall that influenced your sense of worthiness?
 - What sort of messages were you given about your worthiness at the time?
 - How did you respond to feeling worthy/unworthy?
2. As an adolescent (11-20years), what significant moment do you recall that influenced your sense of worthiness?
 - What sort of messages were you given about your worthiness at the time?
 - a. How did you respond to feeling worthy/unworthy?
3. As a young adult (21-30year), what significant moment do you recall that influenced your sense of worthiness?
 - a. What sort of messages were you given about your worthiness at the time?
 - b. How did you respond to feeling worthy/unworthy?
4. As an adult (31-54years), what significant moment do you recall that influenced your sense of worthiness?
 - a. What sort of messages were you given about your worthiness at the time?
 - b. How did you respond to feeling worthy/unworthy?
5. As an older adult (55 years-today), what significant moment do you recall that influenced your sense of worthiness?
 - a. What sort of messages were you given about your worthiness at the time?
 - b. How did you respond to feeling worthy/unworthy?
6. How have you spoken to yourself when you felt like you were not worthy? What did you typically do when you felt like you were not worthy?
7. How have you spoken to yourself when you felt like you were worthy? What did you typically do when you felt like you were worthy?
8. What is something that you would like people to learn from your story?

Follow up:

- check in.
- Thoughts and reflections from second interview.
- Amendments and comments on second interview transcript.
- Upon approval, send 'Authority for the release of transcripts' document (for the second interview).
- Offer to send through findings of research.
- Reiterate appreciation for their participation.

Appendix E: Safety plan for interviews

Safety plan for interviews in private spaces

The following safety practices for this research concern the physical and psychological safety of both participants and researcher for the duration of the interview process. Although this document details practices to ensure safety of the researcher and participant in private spaces, such as the participant's home, the practices here will be applied regardless of the setting of the interview.

Before the interview:

- 1) When organising the interview with participants, I will ask if they would like a support person in the interview room.
- 2) I will ask participants for the contact details for a chosen person who may be aware of the participant's participation in the interview and time of the interview. If the participant does not want anyone knowing about their participation in the interview, emergency services for whatever reason will be used. Prior to calling emergency services, I will discuss with the participant their wishes about how they want to manage the situation.
- 3) Notify supervisor (Dr Ian de Terte) of time and location of each interview, and estimated time of return.
- 4) Organise time to debrief with supervisor after the interview.
- 5) Just before the interview I will text my supervisor and after the interview finishes. I will confirm with my supervisor that the interview has finished. In addition, if the interview goes on for longer than 90 minutes, I will let my supervisor know via text that the interview has not concluded.

During the interview:

- 6) Have phone available (but on silent) to make any calls in relation to the physical or psychological safety of the participant or myself. Dr de Terte will be available to respond to any needed phone calls.
- 7) Take note of nearest exit and position seat towards nearest exit where possible.
- 8) Occasional check in with participant during the interview, asking how they are feeling and whether they would like a break.
- 9) Breaks will be offered when decidedly appropriate (i.e., not interrupting participants when they are sharing their stories) and when participants request a break.
- 10) Where participants appear distressed, and when decidedly appropriate (i.e., not interrupting participants they are sharing their stories), I will check in and ask if they would like a break. Participants will be reminded that they do not need to answer questions they do not feel comfortable answering.
- 11) Sit closest to the door so I can exit easily if required.

After the interview:

- 12) At the end of each interview, I will check in with participants and how they are feeling. Contact details of support and emergency services will be offered on a sheet of paper. I will also discuss with them the plans they have for the remainder of the day because this may be quite an intense topic.

- 13) Notify supervisor of the interview finishing.
- 14) Debrief with supervisor for any topics of conversation that may have been distressing to me.
- 15) In between interviews, I will check in with participants to see how they are.

Appendix F: Consent form

Exploring self-worth across the lifetime in older New Zealand men with experiences of depression

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read and I understand the Information Sheet. I have had the details of the study explained to me, any questions I had have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether to participate in this study and I understand participation is voluntary and that I may withdraw from the study at any time.

1. I **agree/do not agree** to the interview being sound recorded.
2. I **wish/do not wish** to have my recordings returned to me.
3. I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Declaration by Participant:

I _____ hereby consent to take part in this study.

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix G: Transcriber's confidentiality agreement

Exploring self-worth across the lifetime in older New Zealand men with experiences of depression

TRANSCRIBER'S CONFIDENTIALITY AGREEMENT

I (Full Name - printed) agree to transcribe the recordings provided to me.

I agree to keep confidential all the information provided to me.

I will not make any copies of the transcripts or keep any record of them, other than those required for the project.

Signature:

Date:

.....

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 22/xx. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact A/Prof Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800, x 43347, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix H: Authority for the release of transcripts

Exploring self-worth across the lifetime in older New Zealand men with experiences of depression

AUTHORITY FOR THE RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS

I confirm that I have had the opportunity to read and amend the transcript of the interview(s) conducted with me.

If I have not heard back from you in 3 weeks, then I will assume the transcript is correct.

Please note that transcripts or extracts from transcripts may be used in reports and publications arising from the research.

Signature:

Date:

Full Name - printed

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, Application NOR 22/xx. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact A/Prof Fiona Te Momo, Chair, Massey University Human Ethics Committee: Northern, telephone 09 414 0800, x 43347, email humanethicsnorth@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix I: Case study

Research case study: the existence of self-worth in mental distress

Hester Roberts

DClinPsych Candidate, Massey University

Intern Psychologist

Massey Psychology Clinic, Wellington

This case study represents the work of Hester Roberts during her internship in 2024. Clinical supervision was received during the assessment for the individual described within this case study.

Names and other identifying information within the case study have been changed to protect the privacy of the client. Please note, however, as a comprehensive description of the client's history and current circumstances are provided, this case study is to be kept confidential.

Candidate: Hester Roberts

Date:

Supervisor: Dr Ian de Terte

Date:

Abstract

This case study discusses the application of my doctoral research learnings as it presented in my clinical practice as an Intern Psychologist with the Massey Psychology Clinic, Wellington. My doctoral research explored the narratives of self-worth in older adult New Zealand men who have experienced depression across their lifetime. This case study incorporated the preliminary results identified by the doctoral research, namely, self-worth as it relates to values, value, and feeling valued. No older men presented at the Massey Psychology Clinic, thus, there were opportunities to listen to how self-worth was experienced by clients with varying demographics and presentations of mental distress. Reflections will consider the breadth of clients' contexts and the use of a cognitive behavioural therapy techniques to challenge notions of worthlessness.

Doctoral research overview

My doctoral research explores the narratives of self-worth in older New Zealand men who have lived experience of depression. International guidelines have called on psychologists to account for the diverse cultural contexts and pressures that impact men's wellbeing, as there is an identified gap in understanding how men express mental distress and, more specifically, depression (American Psychological Association, 2018). While the client base of my internship included no older adult men, the following case study will present the background, aim and methodology of my doctoral research with a focus on the psychological literature of self-worth. The learnings from the literature and preliminary data analysis were considered and incorporated throughout my work as an Intern Psychologist, with an emphasis on recognising the diverse cultural contexts and pressures that impact different clients' wellbeing.

Background

"Feelings of worthlessness" is a diagnostic criterion for depressive disorders in international diagnostic tools (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 125; World Health Organisation, 2019). The criterion of "feelings of worthlessness" is a compound symptom with "excessive or inappropriate guilt" (American Psychiatric Association, 2013, p. 125; World Health Organisation, 2019). The Diagnostic and Statistics Manual Fifth Edition (DSM-5) and International Classification of Diseases 11th Edition (ICD-11) note that the criterion of worthlessness is not met if the expression of worthlessness is exclusively focused on the clinical impairment of depression, such as the inability to fulfil occupational or interpersonal obligations (American Psychiatric Association, 2013; World Health Organisation, 2019). This suggests that worthlessness reflects a broader, negative, and unrealistic self-appraisal of worth. While the DSM-5 does not explain the definition of worthlessness, the ICD-11 refers to worthlessness (and guilt) as a cultural script of morality (World Health Organisation, 2019). Wakefield and Schmitz (2016) stated that worthlessness was first included in the third edition of the Diagnostic and Statistics Manual (DSM) in 1980 after clinical researchers repeatedly observed a pattern of self-revile and feelings of inadequacy in depressive presentations.

Self-worth as a part of self-concept

In psychological research, self-concept is defined as the way we understand ourselves and who we are in terms of personal and social identities (Hay & Ashman 2003; Oyserman, 2001). Self-concept is a term that encompasses self-esteem, self-efficacy, and self-worth (Hay & Ashman 2003; Crocker, Sommers, & Luhtanen, 2002; Oyserman, 2001). Self-concepts have

been likened to personality traits, embodying both a stable and malleable presentation of traits (Crocker et al., 2002). On one hand, self-concepts are grounded to our innate temperament and formative developmental periods (Crocker et al., 2002). Whereas self-concepts are also responsive to motivations of actualisation and changes in one's environment or context (Oyserman, 2001). Self-concepts are conscious and subconscious, activated in certain contexts, and recognised through salient details or invitation to recall (Oyserman, 2001).

In psychological literature, self-worth has been referenced interchangeably with self-esteem, self-efficacy, and subjective wellbeing (Crocker et al., 2004; Itzick et al., 2017; Lane et al., 2004; Miller Smedema et al., 2010; Stapleton et al., 2017; Zeigler-Hill et al., 2015). Self-concepts share qualities that include general feelings of self-respect, self-acceptance, self-reliance, capability, locus of control, cognitive appraisal, and affective valence (Crocker et al., 2002; Zulkosky, 2009). Self-concepts require cognitive appraisals, or self-evaluations, whereby one positions themselves in proximity to domains of life that are considered important to them (Crocker et al., 2002). For example, relationships, appearance, power, virtue, autonomy, and spirituality (Crocker et al., 2002; Lindberg et al., 2021). The importance of these domains is relative, where the importance of one domain over another will change for each person.

Worthlessness and self-worth defined

Although the different terms of self-concepts are deeply interrelated, worthlessness has been specifically operationalised in the diagnostic criteria of depression. Feelings of worthlessness have been found to be closely linked with moral emotions of guilt and shame, feeling inferior to others, suicidality and hopelessness (Harrison et al., 2022). Ari and Mari (2021) likened the experience of worthlessness to poor self-esteem, feelings of inferiority, experiencing one's life as a mistake, experiencing oneself as an arbitrary creation, guilt for having made wrong choices, and shame for being defective. Such descriptions suggest that worthlessness centres around disdain for oneself and not having a purpose or meaningful role, which are underpinned by moral emotions (Wakefield & Schmitz, 2016).

For this research, self-worth was defined as the appraisal of one's perceived value. Self-worth represents how much a person considers themselves to be "enough" in relation to domains of life they consider important. 'Worthiness' represents the perception of having value and being "enough", and 'worthlessness' represents the perception of having little or no value

and being “not enough”. ‘Contingencies of worth’ represent the domains of life that a person values.

Aim

From a lived experience view, this research aimed to explore how worthlessness and worthiness is felt and understood, and how self-worth may change over time. From an academic view, this research aimed to ascertain how worthlessness is distinct from low self-esteem, low self-efficacy and an overarching negative self-concept; and why worthlessness was included in place of other negative self-concepts to define depression.

Methodology

The research is grounded in a critical realist ontology and constructionist epistemology. Critical realism was used to capture the framework of dominant narratives of self-worth that are perpetuated through cultural systems and scripts, which are varied across intersecting identities and not always consciously observable (Booker, 2021). A constructionist epistemology was used to promote subjectivity and diversity in the experience of self-worth, supporting the idea that ‘self-worth’ is determined by personal experience (Moon & Blackman, 2014).

Master narrative methodology

Master Narrative Methodology is used in research to capture the formation of a personal narratives (McLean and Syed, 2015). Personal narratives are believed to be influenced by master narratives (culturally shared stories, beliefs, values, and behaviours) and alternative narratives (challenges to dominant scripts of the master narrative). Personal narratives are interrelated with moral reasoning and identity, where one’s autobiography is explained and justified through the experience of dominant cultural scripts of morality and virtue, and challenges those dominant scripts (McLean & Syed, 2015). Thus, the development of a personal narrative is incremental (Syed, 2016).

Participants and recruitment

Six older New Zealand-born Pākehā men, average age of 70 years, with lived experience of depression were recruited for interview. Participants were fluent in English, and their lived experience of depression was self-identified. Exclusion criteria were men who were assessed as not having capacity to consent or are at high risk of suicide. Participants were recruited through public advertisement of physical posters at organisations, word of mouth,

email correspondence through clubs, and visiting community organisations to speak to men face to face.

Interview

Two interviews up to 90 minutes were conducted at the participants' homes, face to face. Participants were encouraged to bring photos or objects to help build on the meaning of their answers (a materiality approach; Aagaard & Matthieson, 2016). The interview questions were semi-structured with a timeline map of the participants life. Timeline mapping is a qualitative technique that complements narrative analysis by grounding significant events with chronological progression (Kolar et al., 2015; Schubring et al., 2019).

Ethical considerations

This research has been accepted by the Massey University Ethics Committee (HEC: Southern B Committee Application 22/54).

Preliminary findings

Data analysis has not yet been completed. However, three different forms of value were identified as representing the conceptualisation of self-worth. *Values*, which represent the ability to live one's life through the beliefs and principles that are personally important. *Value*, which represents the output that one creates in contributing to something greater than themselves. *Valued*, which represents the feeling that one is appreciated and considered to be important.

Internship reflections: Narratives of self-worth

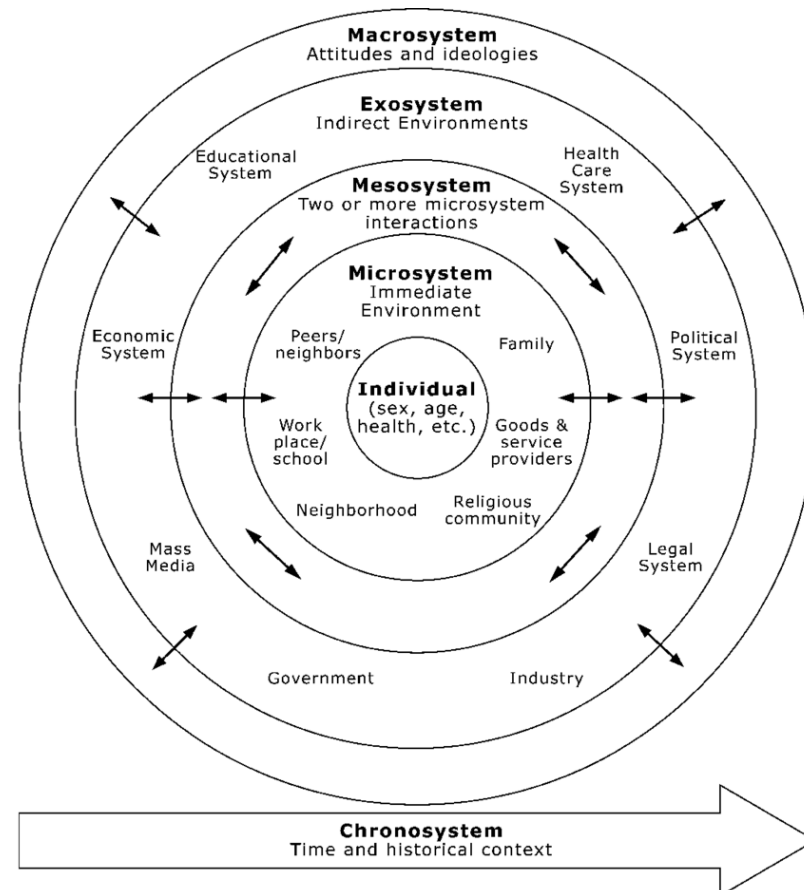
Literature on self-concept emphasise the importance of one's context, thus, emphasising the need to hold space for varying dominant cultural scripts of 'healthy' versus 'unhealthy', 'normal' versus 'abnormal', and 'realistic' versus 'unrealistic'. There was an ongoing need to be present and reflexive in my own positionality and beliefs about what self-worth might represent for a client and how they appraise their self-worth. The preliminary data helped guide how I explored self-worth with clients, acknowledging the relative advantages, disadvantages, privileges and disempowerment within clients' intersecting identities. Likewise, I listened to how perceived worthlessness can be both detrimental to the client's mental health and motivating in their decision making.

Assessing self-worth

The clinical interview formed the basis of exploring a client's self-worth in place of the explicit use of psychometrics to measure self-worth. In the clinical interview, Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory helped guide discussions about where a client's narratives of self-worth were drawn from (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Lau & Ng, 2014).

Figure 1.

The model of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems model (Brown & Stommen, 2018).



If self-worth were placed in the centre, Bronfenbrenner's model exhibits the integrated network of systems that influence narratives of worth. Each system comprises cultural scripts that ascertain what is considered valuable or worth something. The people who make up each of those systems will have their own ecological model, contexts, and histories. The unique combination of people within each system thus reflects a specific time period. For this reason, a person's self-worth is theoretically in a constant flux as they grow older, develop new relationships, and enter new worlds of experience (Lau & Ng, 2014).

Bronfenbrenner's ecological model was used as a guide to explore the relationship between the named representatives in each system, though the exact structure was applied flexibly. The graphic representation separates the individual from their family, placing the family alongside work and school. The individual's extended family and parents' friends are placed within the same system as local governments and mass media. Yet for many clients, their identity was inseparable from their families. The extended family and parents' friends were more centred than their place of work and school, and neighbours. Thus, it was necessary to give space to how the client perceives what influences their self-worth.

Psychometrics and screening tools were not substantially used to assess self-worth. The Depression Anxiety and Stress Scales, which were most often used during the internship, incorporates items of worthlessness (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995). How the client answered these items could prompt a discussion about self-worth, but this depended on the rest of the clinical assessment as to whether worthlessness was a significant focus for the client. Rosenberg's Self-esteem Scale has regularly been used for clinical and research purposes (Rosenberg, 1965). In addition to inaccessibility, the scale primarily assesses factors pertaining to self-esteem, with some items of self-worth. Beck's Depression Inventory Second Edition incorporates one specific item of worthlessness (and related items pertaining to guilt and self-reproach; Beck, Steer, & Brown, 1996). Again, this scale was not used due to accessibility. While psychometrics and screening tools can be useful in prompting a discussion about self-worth (and tracking a quantitative measure of self-worth as part of treatment), appraisals of self-worth were primarily assessed through clinical interview and grounded in the domains of life that were important and meaningful for the client.

One of the first major reflections of assessing self-worth was recognising the language that clients used to describe themselves and their challenges. Clients tended to start by describing the difficulties that interfere with their ability to fulfil important obligations in their current life; their occupation (such as education and work), day to day tasks (such as chores and managing their health status), and important relationships (such as family, friends, acquaintances and colleagues). When they described the emotional experience of these difficulties, or the thoughts that accompany these difficulties, their language was punctuated with self-loathing and expressions of not being good enough. It was sometimes unclear whether their present severity of mental distress was influencing the view they held of themselves and/or whether their language reflected enduring core beliefs. Formulating the client's language in how they described themselves was important for any context. However, this was

recognised as particularly important if the client were undertaking an assessment for a mental health diagnosis, as clients would describe quite neutral behaviours as disordered.

Values

Exploring values formed an important part of my work as a clinician, as it provided clients with a guide about who they were and what kind of decisions they can make when they were uncertain about what to do. Russ Harris' Values worksheet was used (Harris, 2016), and clients regularly commented on how much they enjoyed learning about what was important to them. Additionally, some clients shared this exercise with their partners and found it interesting to orientate to what was important to their partners. What was particularly valuable about these exercises was finding a language to describe things that matter. Thereafter, they were able to see a clearer path of how they wanted to live their life. I learnt that it can be particularly helpful to design treatment goals based on a clearer idea of what clients would like to happen, or who they would like to be. Rather than what they would like to remove from their life, and who they do not want to be. In exploring clients' values, they were also able to identify the contexts and situations that bothered them. By orientating themselves to what was most important, the values that they wished to live by, they felt better able to recognise their alignment with important domains of their life.

Clients' values were often grounded in the values promoted during their upbringing. These values were reflected in their families, peers, school environments, and messages portrayed through media. Most often, clients were able to resonate with the values that their loved ones endorsed; these were the expectations that set clients a baseline of appropriate behaviours, beliefs, and attitudes. Endorsing the same values as loved ones allowed clients to feel safer in themselves, as they were more likely to be accepted. However, through ongoing interpersonal experiences, clients often detracted from the original values endorsed by their loved ones as well. Disagreeing with their loved ones' values may have been consequential to how clients grew to understand their unique personal identities (gender, sexuality, personality), how they observed the objectionable actions conducted upon others (let alone towards themselves), and how their loved ones demonstrated behaviours that countered what they endorsed yet remained to assert upon others.

In terms of school and university, client's enjoyment of learning was influenced by the values promoted by the education systems that they attended. The structure of rote learning specific curriculum was sometimes viewed with resentment, as education was limited in the

knowledge that the system considered to be most valuable. Standardising knowledge acquisition via Crown entities will inherently be tied to political hegemonies, which aim to produce the 'best' outcomes that encompass the average abilities of students across the country and compared to students internationally. Yet it was more the teaching of these subjects that clients disliked, as opposed to the value that these subjects might hold for future work. The values held by an education system were not necessarily aligned with the values held by its teachers and students. So, when clients described their reasons for not enjoying certain subjects, which was most often Maths and English, it was generally because they did not care. They were just told to do it, and there were negative social and academic consequences if they decided to disengage.

Values endorsed by mass media have further influenced the shape of one's identity in relation to society. With specific reference to gender, there remains certain archetypes and stereotypes of what it meant to be a girl or woman of worth, and what it meant to be a boy or man of worth. For those who identified as gender diverse there has been growing representation and language to describe their existence. Through greater visibility in mass media, people who are gender diverse have found some spaces and paths to discover their own unique expressions of gender. Despite the ongoing stigma of gender diversity, many gender diverse clients have found safe spaces to express themselves and experience significant worthiness.

Clients who identified as a girl/woman struggled with the values that society expected them to demonstrate; softly spoken, unopinionated, gentle and graceful manner, an attractive appearance, a history of chastity coupled with the skills of an adult sex worker. These expectations led some cisgendered women clients to disregard parts of their personality and identity that were perceivably opposite to the abovementioned traits. Clients who identified as a boy/man struggled with the values that society expected them to demonstrate; physical strength, stoicism, sexual desirability, occupational success, and relentless independence. While many clients believed these characteristics have become less strict in recent years, these values remained a baseline for self-worth. Where clients 'fell short' of these values, which were defined with immeasurable targets, they expressed self-hatred and a reluctant pursuit for the same values as this has been and still is expected of them.

Value

Clients described themes of self-worth in places where they worked or in hobbies that they invested a lot of time into. They found intrinsic value in activities that provided a sense of

purpose and meaning. In the domain of employment, worthiness was felt when clients were able to contribute to a project or path that was more specifically meaningful for them. While their sense of value may not have reflected their overall enjoyment of the job, there were components of the work that would help them to recognise what they felt was most important and fulfilling. For example, helping their colleagues, learning new skills, or providing good customer service.

In the domain of education, clients felt an intrinsic value as they were able to study subjects that interested them. They felt worthy when they received good grades, which occasionally inspired them to pursue higher education. They felt worthless if they did not receive good grades, or if they believed that what their work was poor quality despite the grade they received. Grades are a crude measure of someone's value, yet it is the process that determines a pass or fail and, if you passed, how *well* you passed. A grading system can be devastating for someone who experiences great interest and excitement for the subject. A poor or fail grade was sometimes enough to discourage them from finding alternative pathways that could better exhibit their skills and abilities. Whereas for some clients, they may have had a consistent history of high grades, yet still expected themselves to do poorly. Upon receiving further high grades, this achievement was discounted or reflected "how it should be".

In the domain of hobbies, there was also an intrinsic value felt by clients as they could choose to spend their time in areas that please them. They felt a sense of worthiness when they were able to immerse themselves, find their flow state, work through challenges and feel satisfaction when they overcame the challenges or learn new skills. In this way, regardless of their estimated 'expertise' of their work, the enjoyment of learning and participating bolstered their worthiness. For hobbies that had accompanying social communities, they also felt worthy in being there and adding to the knowledge and enjoyment of other members.

Clients felt a sense of worthlessness if they perceived their efforts are not as impressive as others, or that their hobbies created no substantial reward. In this way, it seemed that people would compare their participation as worthless compared to that of someone who may be paid experts in the field. Moreover, they compared themselves to others who demonstrated qualities that they do not perceive themselves to have. This feeling of worthlessness was often reinforced through social media pages and communities, and especially where communities promoted advancement over enjoyment.

Valued

A contentious aspect of self-worth is the experience of feeling appreciated and valued. Expressions of appreciation can become contentious as there is a reliance on external validation, which will depend on the other person's expression of gratitude. Additionally, a client's negativity bias can result in them discrediting any positive feedback they receive.

External validation is a fundamental function of socialising as the acceptance of others determines survival. External validation also helps elicit a sense of achievement and satisfaction. External validation creates a sense of belonging and helps people to gauge whether their efforts and achievements are enough. Comparably, a lack of external validation can cause uncertainty and stress, and there are inherently fewer rewards. Yet external validation cannot be controlled, as this is dependent on another person's perceptions. The contingency of self-worth in relation to positive feedback from others is both necessary for wellbeing and acceptance, as well as a fickle gauge of one's efforts and contribution.

For some clients, their temperament and predispositions may have led them to develop a strong negativity bias. Life experiences of rejection and reprimand from family, friends, and mentors may have further entrenched their core beliefs of worthlessness. Some clients set the expectations of themselves low in preparation for future reprimand. Consequently, their self-concept remained intact, and anything positive that they were able to achieve was an unexpected bonus. Yet sometimes, when positive feedback was offered, clients found it hard to process. Positive feedback and gratitude had not been their expectation or experience and perhaps experienced as unsafe. "If people congratulate me on my work, it's a fluke, a randomly good day", "their perception is wrong because they're trying to be nice", "they're being nice because they pity me", "if only they truly knew how useless I am, then they wouldn't be saying nice things". Such comments reflected a worthlessness that intersected with the experience of imposter syndrome.

For clients who experienced significant worthlessness, their enjoyment of the activities they did was interfered with the lack of acceptance by people who were important to them. For example, when dedicating themselves to important work or long-term goal, without the acceptance or validation from those they loved, they did not experience their efforts as worthy and lost opportunities to experience joy and fulfilment. Despite their sense of worthlessness, their desire for acceptance of others remained motivating to them.

Cognitive behavioural therapy techniques

Psychoeducation about self-concepts and mental distress were generally more useful for clients to orient themselves to recognising how the perception of themselves may not reflect a balanced judgment of their skills, talents, and characteristics. For example, self-concepts were introduced by describing how the view that they hold of themselves may have a baseline, informed by their early life experiences, which also fluctuate depending on the context: relationships, communities, occupations, and hobbies. Discussions about self-concepts appropriately led into introducing concepts including core beliefs, rules for living, and automatic thoughts. In this way, it was highlighted that negative self-concepts can perpetuate mental distress. It became evident that worthlessness, while relevant to depression, was also relevant to expressions of anxiety, nonsuicidal self-injury, suicide, and personality disorders.

Self-concepts and, by extension, identities, were an important part of clinical practice with most clients. Many clients who attended the Massey Psychology Clinic spoke about themselves with such disdain, and their want for a mental health diagnosis was considered a validating acknowledgment of their distress and an answer for why they are who they are. The topic of wanting mental health diagnoses was emotional and important. Time was often dedicated to exploring the positive and negatives of having a mental health diagnosis, and how clients would feel if a diagnosis was not made. Therapeutic techniques were still discussed in terms of what a client would like to be different, alongside a meaningful formulation of their difficulties.

In practicing grounding techniques, it was proposed that clients consider moments where they started to feel or think that they had no value and nothing to offer. Grounding techniques allowed for clients to give themselves permission to rest and sit with their emotions. Clients were regularly encouraged to find grounding and mindfulness exercises that better suited their needs and preferences, especially for those who were not interested in mindfulness activities.

The five-part model is a useful framework to help clients recognise the experience and function of their self-worth. For example, worthlessness accompanied several negative emotions, including anger, sadness, hopelessness, resentment, confusion, guilt, shame, and insecurity. The accompanied physiological symptoms may include feeling a pit in their stomach, and tense muscles. Thoughts can be broad, but generally reflect core beliefs, such as “I am not enough”, “I am worthless”, “I am a mistake”, “I have nothing to offer”, and “I am not deserving of nice things”. Behaviours may then be shaped to control the outcome of their

worries about their self-worth, through rumination, cognitive avoidance, self-sabotage, or directed actions to align with the expectations of others. In many ways, behaviours served to protect the view they had of themselves and control the view others held of them.

The use of SMART goals (specific, measurable, achievable, realistic, and time-bound) was introduced in a way that challenged how clients measured themselves against qualities that they value. Worth is not distinctly measurable, and I fundamentally believe that everyone has worth. Therefore, I encouraged clients to find past examples where they have practiced their values, worked towards something of value, and felt valued either by themselves or by others. Additionally, I encouraged clients to recall examples of times where they experienced feeling valued and did not consider those examples to be worthy. Often, clients would reason that those examples were “standard”, “expected”, or “nothing special”.

In cognitive restructuring, examples of automatic thoughts were used when clients spoke negatively about their self-appraised qualities and value. For example, if a person felt worthless, we considered what evidence would determine someone’s worth. This exercise related back to the difficulties with measuring worth, and the dominant narratives of society regarding worth. We also considered what it would mean for others if they ever made mistakes, experiencing guilt and shame, and whether that can be forgivable. There is a function in guilt and shame, which guides people to recognise their transgressions and demonstrate prosocial behaviours. Moreover, what are the consequences of those who have made transgressions and are never given the opportunity for forgiveness.

These conversations led back into discussions about morality and cultural norms and the values, beliefs, and attitudes that they have been raised with and internalised. Whether clients agreed with dominant cultural norms, these norms affected them regardless. For some, it was likened to warfare to choose to see oneself as someone different to whom they have been told they are. The discomfort of perceiving themselves as different to how others have told them who they are was unsettling, and we were present with why that was. But it was a useful exercise to draw on alternative narratives, and to broaden the view that they had of themselves, which helped to elicit hope and motivation.

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