The ‘Perfect’ Gay Man: An Exploration of Perfectionism with Gay Men in New Zealand

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of gay men in New Zealand who self-identify as perfectionists. The research had three aims: to explore how perfectionism is experienced throughout participants' day-to-day lives, to understand how participants perceived their perfectionism to develop and change over time, and to investigate the self-perceived effects of perfectionism on participants' relationships. Recruitment of participants was conducted with the support and assistance of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer plus (LGBTQ+) organisations using the snowballing method. Six individuals who identified as male, gay and perfectionistic participated in semi-structured interviews. The data was analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis, with participants' voices located centrally throughout the research. Participants' accounts were integrated to form three overarching themes: Contributions to Perfectionism, Living with Perfectionism and Journey towards (Im)perfection. It was found that most participants viewed their sexual orientation as contributing to the development of perfectionism, as they sought to compensate for not fulfilling heteronormative standards. Further, participants reported that their perfectionism changed over their lifetime, shifting from being central to their identity to simply being a part of who they are. Participants also reiterated sub-themes related to both positive and negative effects of perfectionism, as well as increased acceptance of their perfectionism over time that mirrored their self-acceptance. These findings challenge current understandings of perfectionism through the inclusion of wider societal and cultural impositions in the development of perfectionism. Further, the way in which participants reported that perfectionism has shifted for them over their lifetimes provides a unique understanding of perfectionism as being potentially changeable in nature.

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Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1: Introduction

This research project emerged through conversations with my supervisors interested in perfectionism. Further conversations with a close family member who identifies as a gay man and a number of his friends from the same community produced the possibility of conducting research about perfectionism in conjunction with this community. The conversations highlighted the conceptualisation of gay men as being generally perfectionistic, constituting a stereotypical trait within the gay male community they were part of. A review of the literature found no studies focusing on gay men and perfectionism, aside from a pathological focus on the body and eating disorders. As such, a proposal was put together and sent for review to a clinical psychologist who identified as gay and to a manager of a gay male organisation. Their feedback was incorporated and resulted in a shift away from a clinical position on perfectionism to focusing on the meaning making and life experiences of gay men who identify as perfectionists. Through this process and consultation with supervisors, cultural advisors and members of the gay male community, the research was deemed to be of value to the gay male community.

It was thus important to me to produce a research project that focused on a specific population that is currently under-represented in the perfectionism literature and for the voices of these participants to be central to the research. This aligned with the qualitative framework employed in this study, which focused on individual experiences while also being able to identify commonalities across participants. The goal of this research was to advance the understanding of the lived experiences of perfectionism, specifically that of a population underrepresented in perfectionism

research, and to understand the development and effects of perfectionism in relation to these participants.

Thesis Structure

The first three chapters of this thesis provide a broad introduction to the research topic, including the literature and the overall rationale for this study. Chapter 1 has briefly discussed the motivation for and contribution of this research and provided a brief chapter outline. Chapter 2 defines sexual orientation through exploration of sexual identity development theories, notions of masculinity and homosexuality, and the oppression that gay men face in society. Chapter 3 introduces perfectionism, highlighting prominent theories from the literature and the relationship between perfectionism and gay men. This chapter also explains why a definition of perfectionism was not utilised in this thesis.

Chapter 4 presents the research methods, including participant recruitment, interviews and analysis. Chapter 5 presents the results of the data analysis and the derived themes. Chapter 6 situates the results within the relevant literature and discusses the research limitations, research implications and possible future research directions. This is followed by the researcher's final reflections and conclusion.

Chapter 2: Sexual Identity Development and Masculinity

Sexual orientation plays a significant role in how individuals perceive themselves, both internally and in relation to others in society. There has been some contention within the literature as to whether sexual orientation is biological in nature or influenced by the society in which we situate ourselves in (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Morandini et al., 2015; Seidman, 2010). The past 30 years have seen a steadily increased understanding of sexual orientation in relation to identity. This chapter explores gay male sexual identity development and the potential effects of being gay within a heteronormative society.

Sexual Identity Development

Essentialism and social constructionism are the two most prominent theories regarding the development of sexual orientation and sexual identity. Essentialism posits biological foundations for sexual orientation, typically referring to genetics and neurological factors as being the common, underlying denominator within a social category (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Hubbard & Hegarty, 2014; Sanchez & Pankey, 2017). The term 'natural' is often referred to when discussing biological origins and refers to the 'fact' that sexuality and sexual orientation is something that each person is born with and is therefore considered universal (Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011; DeLamater & Hyde, 1998). Essentialism also argues that due to the biological nature of sexual orientation, it is consistent across a person's lifetime (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998).

Critics of essentialism argue that the emphasis on the biology of sexual orientation does not provide an adequate understanding of the development of actual sexual identity within the context in which people are situated in (Burr & Dick, 2017; Dar-Nimrod & Heine, 2011). Critics also argue against sexual orientation as a stable

factor, instead considering it to be dynamic in nature (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Morandini et al., 2015).

In contrast to essentialism, social constructionism takes into account how, where and when an individual is situated within society and the effects of these factors on the development of an identity (Burr & Dick, 2017; Seidman, 2010). Social constructionist models of sexual identity development incorporate Bronfenbrenner's (1977) ecological understanding to include factors outside of biology. This theory determines that sexual identity is constructed within the context in which an individual is situated, the interactions they have with society and others, and the culture in which they reside (Epstein, 1991; Seidman, 2010). This theoretical orientation supports sexual identity models in the suggestion that a large part of who people consider themselves to be as a person and how they identify is related to how we orientate ourselves sexually to others (Cerulo, 1997; Parker, 2009). This orientation has influenced the theoretical development of 'Queer Theory', which is based on the assumption that sexual identity is created largely through language and directly challenges the common assumptions made by a 'heteronormative' society (Burr, 2015; Clarke et al., 2010). It is through both challenging 'taken-for-granted realities' (Gergen, 2015, p. 54) and social action that sexual identity is formed (Burr, 2015). As such, the formation of sexual identity can be seen to be created in direct relation to the socio-political and cultural environment that one is situated in.

Research defining sexual identity has encountered some difficulty in specifying what exactly constitutes a sexual identity (Dillon et al., 2011; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). The literature is peppered with terminology often used interchangeably, such as 'sexual orientation', 'sexual behaviour' and 'sexual identity' (Dillon et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2014). It is important to distinguish these labels from one another to

understand the meaning of each and its relationship to sexual identity as a whole. By definition, ‘sexual orientation’ refers to a person’s preference or primary sexual, emotional, romantic, and/or physical attraction to others, whether that be same-sex attraction, opposite-sex attraction, both-sex attraction or other (Dillon et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2014). ‘Sexual behaviour’ refers to the acts towards another person(s) when participating in sexual activity, while ‘sexual identity’ can be understood to incorporate multiple factors, including both sexual orientation and sexual behaviour (Mustanski et al., 2014).

The term ‘sexual identity’ can thus be understood as being multidimensional in nature. This includes factors beyond the sexual attraction or orientation that sexual identity is often reduced to, to include individuals’ physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural factors; partner attributes; and self-labelling (Dillon et al., 2011; Jaspal, 2019; Moreira et al., 2015; Savin-Williams, 2011). Previous sexual identity development models suggested that sexual identity is determined by three main factors: self-identity, sexual behaviour and sexual attraction (D’Augelli, 1994). All three of these domains have been found to contribute to an overall sexual identity (Moreira et al., 2015). In a 2011 New Zealand study that sought to understand the link between sexual behaviour, sexual orientation and sexual identity, computer assisted interviews were conducted with 12,992 men and women over the age of 16 who were asked to best describe their sexual orientation, sexual behaviour and sexual attraction (Wells et al., 2011). Interestingly, nearly as many heterosexual participants (n = 118) reported experiences of same-sex behaviour as bisexual and homosexual participants (n = 133) (Wells et al., 2011). That research attempted to discern the differences between sexual behaviour, sexual orientation and sexual identity. It is important to reaffirm that sexual behaviour does not necessarily correlate with an individual’s sexual orientation or

sexual identity and vice versa (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Wells et al., 2011). Thus, there is much to be gained from further research into the development of sexual identity, including the process of how people self-identify and how that identity develops (Dillon et al., 2011; Mustanski et al., 2014; Savin-Williams, 2011).

Demonstrating the scientific validity of a construct such as sexual identity is difficult. As research in this area grows, core components of this research can be synthesised to produce a more scientifically sound construct to address this, though this also depends on the research paradigm being utilised (Mustanski et al., 2014). Capturing this process and producing a theory is difficult due to the unique individual experiences of sexual identity and the influence of different societal and cultural values on this process. The models developed to date are thus somewhat limited in scope and transference, but do provide a general overview of the many parts engaged in the process of sexual identity development. Despite the limited research on sexual identity development, there are several models available that seek to explain the process of gay male sexual orientation and sexual identity development in relation to gay men. These models are explored below.

Models of Gay Male Sexual Identity

Two of the earliest models of sexual identity development were introduced in the same year. Troiden (1979) interviewed 150 gay men to develop the first model of male homosexual identity, which denoted four individual stages: Sensitization, Disassociation and Signification, Coming Out and Commitment. Cass (1979) developed a model for lesbian women and gay men that comprised of six stages: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride and Identity Synthesis. Both models assume that the development of sexual orientation occurs in a linear process, requiring individuals to complete a stage before advancing to

the next (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1979). It is also possible in these models for development to stop and remain at a certain stage. For example, it is suggested that some men may stop at the Identity Tolerance stage of Cass's (1979) model or the Dissociation and Signification stage of Troiden's (1979) model, where men may not progress to Coming Out or Identity Acceptance and instead remaining at a state of tolerating but not necessarily accepting their sexual orientation. These two models were specifically developed to conceptualise sexual orientation among gay men and women living in a heteronormative society (Mustanski et al., 2014). Deviation from a 'straight' sexual orientation forces those that identify outside of this to perceive themselves as being 'different' and try to work through feelings of difference to make sense of themselves (Cass, 1979; Mustanski et al., 2014).

Additionally, these models reiterate that an individual is an active participant in the development of this identity, choosing when and whether to proceed to the next stage (Cass, 1979). Cass (1979) argued that her model can account for both public and private identities as homosexual or not, as the last stage recognises the synthesis of the identity in both of these arenas. This is based on the assumption that one's sexual orientation remains stable over time (Cass, 1979).

Though Cass's (1979) and Troiden's (1979) models provided an initial understanding of the development of same-sex sexual orientation development, there has been much criticism that their stage-by-stage, linear approach does not appropriately account for the realities of sexual orientation development and that the models are not specific only to homosexual identity (Bilodeau & Renn, 2005; Mustanski et al., 2014). Instead, a much more circular, interactive process may occur, with people switching back and forth between stages before coming to full acceptance (if this 'final' stage is reached). That is to say that sexuality is much more fluid than

Cass's (1979) and Troiden's (1979) models depict (D'Augelli, 1994). Further critiques include a notable lack of intersectionality in these models, meaning a substantial limitation in terms of their generalisability beyond that of the white male/female experience (Adams & Phillips, 2009; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014).

In contrast to Cass (1979) and Troiden (1979), D'Augelli (1994) developed a lifespan model of lesbian, gay and bisexual identities that suggested it was a longitudinal, dynamic process rather than one derived from periods of child and adolescent development. D'Augelli (1994) developed this model to include factors outside of the individual self that affect the development of identity, including the ability for individuals to experience the different stages simultaneously. This model is important due to its recognition that identity is formed in part due to the interaction with external factors, providing a holistic approach to identity in general and viewing sexual identity formation as a much more fluid construct than Cass's (1979) and Troiden's (1979) models (D'Augelli, 1994). Although D'Augelli's (1994) model does not have supporting empirical evidence due to the complex nature and changeability of identity development, it has added to our understanding of identity development among gay men, lesbian and bisexual persons (D'Augelli, 1994).

Hammack (2005) developed an integrative paradigm of sexual orientation that considers the historical, social and cultural contexts that people reside in. Hammack (2005) argued that both essentialism and social constructionism are important considerations in sexual orientation development. as sexual orientation has underlying biological mechanisms that create sexual desire, which then interacts with the wider social, historical and cultural discourses in society. This paradigm enables a transtheoretical approach to sexual orientation that places biology, history, culture, society and human agency as equally important considerations. Because of the breadth

of this paradigm, it allows for diversity of experiences with the LGBTQ+ community, across the lifespan and in conjunction with intersectional identities (Bishop et al., 2020; Hammack, 2005). For example, utilising this life course paradigm, Bishop et al. (2020) reported that sexual identity developmental milestones were impacted for gay men in puberty and emerging adulthood during the acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) epidemic of the 80s and 90s. This resulted in young gay men delaying sexual identity disclosure during this period of time to avoid discrimination and stigma due to the association that gay men were contaminated and diseased (Bishop et al., 2020; Hammack et al., 2017). It is evident that sociohistorical context over the lifetime is an important addition to sexual identity development research.

Research by Savin-Williams and Ream (2006) further provided evidence of the fluidity of sexual orientation and identity for the upcoming generation who are consistently challenging the meaning of labelling oneself in terms of sexual orientation. This has seen the development of new terms describing sexual orientation and convincing arguments against the need for labels at all (Bishop et al., 2020; Savin-Williams & Ream, 2006). This also coincides with research that suggests that gay men coming out, engaging in sexual behaviour with the same sex and having an awareness of same-sex orientation occurring earlier in life than in previous generations (Bishop et al., 2020; Drasin et al., 2008; Hammack et al., 2021).

Mustanski et al. (2014) undertook a meta-analysis of gay, lesbian and bisexual sexual identity development models and suggested that sexual identity is made up of several distinct parts. These parts can best be understood through a nomological network that incorporates these various factors of sexual identity. This network places sexual orientation at the centre of the network, with sexual attraction, romantic

orientation, self-identification and sexual behaviour on the outside, which, when accounted for, create one's sexual identity (Mustanski et al., 2014).

There are a number of common factors across the aforementioned sexual identity development models. These include the movement towards an identity that is integrated and inclusive of the homosexual self within a heterosexual society. This placement of self within wider society is particularly important for those who do not have opposite-sex attraction due to the internal conflict often experienced within a heteronormative society (Davis, 2015; Greene & Britton, 2012; Halpin & Allen, 2004; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Sexual identity models have shifted from rigid stage models to more dynamic representations of sexual identity that account for the fluidity of sexual identity across one's lifespan (Dickson et al., 2013; Hammack, 2005; Hammack et al., 2021; Mustanski et al., 2014; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). Further, earlier sexual identity models were situated within heterosexual, individualistic societies and utilised Caucasian males from Western countries as their research participants, often in the last few stages of their identity development, rather than in the early stages of questioning or realising their sexual orientation and identity (Eliason & Schope, 2007; Mustanski et al., 2014). Historical models may not have completely captured the development of sexual identity beyond that of the retrospective experiences of Western, Caucasian people. However, recent studies have attempted to address this gap through explicit consideration of intersectional identities in sexual identity research and exploring sexual identity formation as it happens rather than retrospectively (Bishop et al., 2020; Cerezo et al., 2019; Hammack et al., 2020).

Sexual identity is much more complex than initial studies assumed and, as some aspects of society have shifted towards an increasing acceptance of those outside of heterosexuality, models and theories related to sexual identity have replicated this. The

extension of sexual identity beyond that of the three most widely known orientations—heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual—to include people who identify with labels such as asexual (not sexually attracted to anyone at all), pansexual (sexually attracted to who a person is rather than their biological gender) and many others has raised the question as to whom exactly these labels are for (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). These varying spectrums of human sexuality have always been prevalent; however, only recently has language been assigned to better describe the multitude of ways in which individuals can be sexually oriented. This provides a prime example of language creating identity and being assigned to sexual identity.

This area requires more research, including on sexual identity over a person's lifetime (Bishop et al., 2020; Eliason & Schope, 2007). However, it has also been argued that these sexual identity models are situated within a heterosexual society and so have been developed in relation to heterosexuality rather than accounting for sexuality in and of itself.

Heteronormativity, Gender Role Norm and Masculinity

The term 'heteronormativity' refers to the construct of heterosexuality that permeates Western society and is automatically assumed of others, with any divergence from heterosexuality requiring individuals to explicitly 'come out' as non-heterosexual (Bullock & Freedman, 2006; Seidman, 2010). Therefore, heterosexual is the 'norm' in such society, hence the term 'heteronormative'. Heteronormative society refers to a society in which heterosexuality, or being 'straight', is always assumed of an individual and affects various aspects of life, such as the assumption that a man will marry a woman, or a woman will bear children with a man (Aggarwal & Gerrets, 2014; van der Toorn et al., 2020).

Heteronormative society also refers to the learned gender roles of strictly male and female, discounting those that identify as transgender, non-binary and gender fluid (Jackson, 2006). For example, gender roles include the presumption that men are required to be hard, emotionless and masculine, whereas women are assumed to be feminine, soft and emotional (Kowalski & Scheitle, 2019).

Heteronormativity essentially requires gay men to 'come out' regularly in different contexts and at different times throughout their lives because they do not fulfil the assumed heterosexual role in society. 'Coming out' refers to the self-identification to oneself and others as gay (Orne, 2011). Hammack (2005) developed the term 'cultural press' as a way to understand the process of 'coming out' in Western culture. He proposed that coming out first involved the individual developing an awareness of themselves as being attracted to the same sex. An internal motivational force then develops due to the internalisation of the societal value systems they are placed in (such as the value placed on being heterosexual), which in turn promotes both inward and outward identification of a sexual orientation that is relevant to both the system and individual. This identity is then adapted into overall life experience and identity to create a life narrative that is also influenced by sociocultural factors. Similarly, Meeks (2007) refers to coming out as being a rite of passage for gay men and women as they are not only informing others of their identity but also, she argues, becoming gay through the process of coming out. This is because coming out requires a rejection of society's heteronormativity and an altered sense of self (Kranz & Pierrard, 2018; Meeks, 2007). It is a way in which gay men and women are able to be who they are, with the awareness that they may face stigma, prejudice and discrimination by not identifying as heterosexual (Neville et al., 2015).

This is in stark contrast to what individuals with opposite-sex attraction go through. Heterosexuals are not required to publicly and specifically state the gender of their preferred sexual partner. A society where someone has to declare how they are sexually oriented showcases the value and meaning society places on sexuality (Burr & Dick, 2017; Weeks, 2016). In heteronormative societies, this clearly divides sexuality as being either moral or immoral, normal or abnormal, as the social construction of this divide perceives that anything different from heterosexuality is 'deviant' (Weeks, 2014, p. 102). It may also be argued that gay men defining themselves with labels produced within a (heteronormative) society is tantamount to reinforcement, with certain expectations of how to act and not act according to these labels (Adams et al., 2014; Henrickson, 2008; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Weeks, 2014). Seidman (2007) suggests that movement away from labels may incur more freedom: '…ironically sexual liberation might involve freeing ourselves from the idea of sexuality … approaching our erotic desires and acts not as expressions of sexuality but as simply feelings and acts that give pleasure, create social ties or are a source of cultural creativity' (p.13).

Fischer et al. (2007) argue that the divide of sexual immorality is constructed based on the cultural context in which one is situated and how people make meaning and sense of different constructs. An example of this is that 200 years ago, Western societies were concerned with how sexual acts were performed and stipulated that they were only to be performed in the missionary position, with anything else being seen as immoral and sinful (Fischer et al., 2007). The modern-day divisions indicate that the values of society have shifted from how sex is undertaken to who is engaging in sexual acts (Burr & Dick, 2017; Fischer et al., 2007; Seidman, 2010).

Like many Western countries, New Zealand has made substantial moves towards equality over the past 50 years. This includes the passing of the *Homosexual*

Law Reform Act (1986) which decriminalised homosexuality and the passing of the *Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act* (2013), which afforded same-sex couples the right to legally marry and enjoy the same rights as all married couples. In February 2022, the Conversion Practices Prohibition Legislation Act (2022) was passed preventing practices seeking to change and suppress a person's sexual orientation, gender expression and gender identity. Despite these advances in legislation, gay men still experience prejudice, discrimination and personal safety concerns due to their sexual orientation (Brickell, 2016; Ministry of Justice, 2019; Semp & Read, 2015; The Aotearoa New Zealand People Living with HIV Stigma Index, 2020).

The legal condemnation of homosexuality was paralleled by health professions in the twentieth century. The medical profession at large labelled homosexuality a medical condition and psychologists determined homosexuality to be a serious mental illness (Weeks, 2003). It wasn't until 1972 that homosexuality was removed from the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (a manual widely used by psychiatrists and psychologists to diagnose mental illness) (Weinstein, 2018). This signified a shift in societal attitudes towards the view that sexual orientation was not a cause for a medical or psychological illness that should be prevented or cured; instead, it was a natural part of human life. However, these damaging beliefs of homosexuality as unnatural and a sickness have permeated society and are still used as arguments against homosexual men.

The same rigidity can be said for how gender is understood, especially in the Western world. Gender is generally understood to represent the dichotomous natal sex that is assigned at birth (Reisner et al., 2014; Schilt & Westbrook, 2009). This conceptualisation of gender has been constructed through a way of thinking that is understood to be undeniable common-sense knowledge (Diamond, 2002). It is now well

understood that natal sex and gender may not align for some people (Reisner et al., 2014). As such, gender can best be understood to be a social construct in which one 'performs' gender in interaction with the values of the society they are part of (Butler, 1988). For example, in Western society gender roles place value on women as nurturers and caretakers of the family, while men should work and provide financially (Cosell & Urlich, 2009). Gender roles enforce a hierarchical power structure with masculinity seen as more valued than femininity, and heterosexuality being privileged over other sexual orientations (Schilt & Westbrook, 2009; Seidman, 2007). Butler (1988) states that in order for these constructed norms to be rejected requires individuals to consciously lose the knowledge that is seen to be 'common sense' and, instead, challenge the rules that society has established. This rule binding begins in childhood, with children in primary schools being subjected to 'education' on what a 'proper' boy and a 'proper' girl are; any slight deviation from these rules can result in a child being singled out by their peers and adults alike for not conforming (DePalma & Jennett, 2010). For example, if biological males transgress this system, they then have the potential to become a victim to others' assumptions that their behaviours are representative of 'being gay' (DePalma, 2013).

The establishment of gender (i.e., the feminine and the masculine) is a construct developed from societal values and interactions (Butler, 1988; Gergen & Davis, 1997; Green, 2005). When the prescribed masculine and feminine roles are not adhered to, gender role conflict can occur (Kaya et al., 2019; Simonsen et al., 2000), defined as 'a psychological state in which socialized gender roles have negative consequences or impact for the person or others' (O'Neil, 2008, p. 362). Research contends that due to the narrow scope of societal expectations on how a man is expected to act, there is little

room for emotional expression and physical contact by males, especially towards other males (Reeser & Gottzén, 2018).

Traditional gender roles in Western society assume that males are emotionless, strive for success, do not show any signs of weakness and are dominant and macho, inclusive of violent behaviour (Hearn, 2004; O'Neil et al., 2017). It is further argued that to fulfil these expectations, men and boys are made to endure times of 'homophobia, racism, classism and shame' as a type of social control on their identity, in an attempt to stifle any hint of femininity or behaviour outside of that of the traditional male role (Fields et al., 2015; DePalma & Jennett, 2010). Traditional masculinity is also perpetuated in sexist behaviours that normalise demeaning women and viewing them only as objects whose purpose is to please and provide for males (Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). Because sexual domination of women plays such a distinct role in the 'becoming' of a man in Western society (as does the perception that men should not be affectionate with other men), it is suggested that the concept of men having sex with other men carries with it the automatic disqualification of gay men from being masculine (Connell, 2005; Glick et al., 2007; Sanchez et al., 2009; Scaptura & Boyle, 2019). This creates an internal conflict that can further contribute to feelings of 'otherness' within society (Sanchez et al., 2009).

Despite the rigid rules adhered to regarding masculinity and the assumption that men who identify as gay do not fulfil this societal role due to their sexual orientation, research has found that within the gay community, masculine notions of behaviour remain highly valued, whereas feminine behaviours are looked down on, similar to that of wider societal expectations (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Fields et al., 2015; Glick et al., 2007; Hunt et al., 2020; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Tagg, 2008; Taywaditep, 2001). This creates a space within the gay community where men who identify as gay and act in a

way that does not align with the masculine norms of society are further marginalised within the gay community itself (Glick et al., 2007; Taywaditep, 2001). Research has found that such 'anti-effeminacy' attitudes are linked to internalised homophobia, often expressed as feelings of shame associated with identifying as gay and other gay men fulfilling the 'gay stereotype' of being effeminate (Greene & Britton, 2012; Hunt et al., 2020)

In a study of 106 men in the United States aged between 18 and 74 years, where 79% identified as gay, it was found that higher masculine ideals were associated with lower scores on positive aspects of sexual identity development (Parmenter et al., 2019). This study also found that sexual minority men whose perceptions of their own masculinity were 'less than ideal', experienced increased internalized stigma, identity strain and higher self-consciousness (Parmenter et al., 2019). Additionally, a recent study of 966 gay men in Australia reported that if participants perceived themselves as more masculine, then they were more likely to adopt and consider themselves as 'straight acting' which revealed an increased internal conflict about being gay (Hunt et al., 2020). It was also found that participants who experienced high levels of internalised homophobia and perceived themselves as feminine presenting experienced lower levels of overall wellbeing (Hunt et al., 2020).

Research thus suggests that masculinity, as traditionally defined, remains an important trait to display in public to decrease the possibility of facing explicit instances of discrimination and prejudice. Those that defy traditional male roles within society are more susceptible to discrimination not only from society in general but also from within the gay community (Fields et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2020; Parementer et al., 2019).

Figueroa and Zoccola (2015) explored stigma consciousness in their research, defining it as the acquisition of an awareness and knowledge regarding stereotypical

characteristics of a group. The individual proceeds to reject and internalise negative feelings about themselves due to the stereotypes associated with the group they identify with. Stigma consciousness has been found to increase the likelihood of the internalisation of homophobia in gay men (Figueroa & Zoccola, 2015). Gay men may experience both implicit and explicit acts of violence against their person, which can legitimately create a view of the world as unstable. This may then contribute to a valid insecurity in the ability to express themselves and their identity honestly, to themselves and others (Carvalho et al., 2011; Fields et al., 2015). Such research supports the theory that some gay men may feel ashamed of their sexual orientation because of the discrimination that gay men face; consequently, they seek to rectify this by embracing valued characteristics of society, such as masculinity, reducing public affection with other males and admonishing gay men displaying feminine qualities (Fields et al., 2015; Hunt et al., 2020; Thepsourinthone et al., 2020). It appears that this is a protective mechanism to reduce the chance of experiencing discrimination within society. However, this comes down to unique individual experiences as not every gay man necessarily experiences discrimination as an individual gay man.

Studies have found that gender roles for men who identify as gay are internally scrutinised and have resulted in gay men trying to reconcile the conflict of their sexual orientation with the traditional masculine roles and standards that society values (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Salvati et al., 2018; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2009). Hence the marginalisation within gay male communities of gay men that do not conform to traditional gender roles (Fields et al., 2015). This may be a result of gay men viewing those who break gender roles as being more likely to be marginalised and discriminated against by others and their own social group, hence the desire to distance themselves from such experiences (Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Thepsourinthone, 2020).

Additionally, those who perceive masculinity as most important and subscribed to traditional notions of masculinity were more likely to experience internalised homophobia (Hunt et al., 2020). Solid conclusions have not yet been drawn as there is limited research available and, as described above, there remains contention about the role and importance of the definition of masculinity among men who identify as gay (Glick et al., 2007; Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005; Nardi, 2000; Ramos et al., 2020; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Sanchez et al., 2009).

Minority Stress

Internalised homophobia is often believed to be a by-product of heteronormative society, as members of the LGBTQ+ community seek to reconcile their identity with societal values (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Bruce et al., 2015; Greene & Britton, 2012). As a result, members of minorities turn the negative attitudes they face externally in society towards themselves internally, promoting self-hate and higher levels of psychological distress (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Bruce et al., 2015; Carvalho et al., 2011; Greene & Britton, 2012; Lewis et al., 2003; McLaren, 2016). 'Minority stress' is a term used to encapsulate such experiences and refers to the stigma, prejudice, discrimination and oppression of marginalised groups in society, such as those who are part of a sexual minority (Meyer, 1995). Research on the experiences of those in the LGBTQ+ community consistently show that their lives are often riddled with experiences of discrimination, prejudice, oppression and stigma (Adams et al., 2014; Ayhan, et al., 2020; Bruce et al., 2015; Cameron & Hargreaves, 2005; Carvalho et al., 2011; Handlovsky et al., 2018; Neville et al., 2015; Figueroa & Zoccola, 2015). These experiences may shape how gay men interact with wider society and how they interact with themselves internally (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Greene & Britton, 2012). The minority stress model also refers to the effects that such experiences can have on wider

health outcomes for marginalised populations (Flentje et al., 2020; Meyer, 1995). Research has associated minority stress with poorer psychological outcomes, greater internal conflict and higher rates of alienation from society (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Kelleher, 2009; Meyer et al., 2021; Taywaditep, 2001). It is imperative to note the distinction that being gay in and of itself does not cause higher levels of psychological distress; rather, this is due to the discrimination and prejudice experienced within a society that values heteronormativity (Meyer er al., 2021).

The minority stress model suggests that people who have experienced discrimination due to a defining characteristic, such as sexual orientation, may come to expect these experiences from the wider community and become 'over vigilant' in scanning for such reactions (Meyer, 1995). This may also lead to a higher likelihood of perceiving others behaviour as discriminatory and stigmatising, even when they may not be (Meyer, 2003). The minority stress model has also been implicated in relation to overcompensation, where gay men feel the need to contest the stereotypical characteristics attributed to men who identify as gay; hence, for example, the desire to be perceived as masculine (Kimmel & Mahalik, 2005).

Further, those who have two minority identities (such as identifying as an ethnic and a sexual minority) face an even higher likelihood of experiencing discrimination and issues with visibility (Colgan & Rumens, 2014; Figueroa & Zoccola, 2015; Flowers & Buston, 2001; McConnell et al., 2018).This is referred to as 'double jeopardy', as they can face additional or compounded isolation, discrimination and estrangement due to belonging to two marginalised groups (Meyer, 2010).

Takatāpui

Given that this research is being conducted within New Zealand, it is imperative that cultural considerations of sexual identity are detailed. Prior to colonisation, it is

known that same-sex relationships were part of Māori culture, the indigenous people of New Zealand (Hamley et al., 2021; Hutchings & Aspin, 2007; Kerekere, 2017). Māori researchers have identified that Māori sexuality was fluid prior to colonisation, with historical representations depicted of same-sex/both-sex relationships and gender fluid presentations (Awekotuku, 2001). These depictions can be seen in pre-colonial carvings as well as diary entries from early settlers noting same sex/both sex experiences and gender diversity within Māori communities (Kerekere, 2017).

In Te ao Māori (the Māori world/worldview), concepts such as whanaungatanga (whakapapa and relationship connection), mana (prestige), tapu (sacred), noa (restoration of balance), manaakitanga (nurturing relationships) and many others all contribute to tikanga Māori (Mead, 2016). Mead (2016) defined tikanga Māori as "…a set of beliefs associated with practices and procedures…" (p.12) and is interlinked with mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). Mātauranga Māori is passed down through the generations and is held in the minds, whilst tikanga Māori can be understood to be the action of mātauranga Māori (Mead, 2016). Whakapapa (genealogical connections) is central to Māori, and relates to the interconnection of everything (Mahuika, 2019). Mahuika (2019) asserts that "everything has a whakapapa" to further demonstrate the centrality whakapapa has to Māori identity. It is this interconnection to all that underlies the collective culture of Māori. It is important to note that different hāpu and iwi hold different tikanga, indicating the diversity within Māori communities.

The use of the term 'takatāpui' has been reclaimed by Māori over the last 30 years to represent LGBTQ+ identities in conjunction with Māori identity (Kerekere, 2017). Takatāpui transcends static sexual and gender identities to incorporate Māori concepts such as (but not limited to) whakapapa, whanaungatanga, mana and wairua (spirituality) (Hamley et al., 2021; Kerekere, 2017). This is vastly different from

Western world views which aim to separate and explain, whereas for Māori, everything is connected and just ‘is’ (Mahuika, 2019). Māori provide a much more holistic understanding of sexual and gender identities through the underlying tikanga that guides day to day life (Kerekere, 2017; Meads, 2016). Hutchings and Aspin (2007) argue that the reclamation of takatāpui is a form of tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) and an active form of decolonisation. Experiences of takatāpui regularly highlight the marginalisation faced within New Zealand as a result of not only their sexual and gender identities, but their Māori identity too (Fraser et al., 2021; Kerekere, 2017). This can be traced back to the intergenerational trauma of colonisation and the resulting society which takatāpui are situated in that places dominant colonial discourse as central (Hamley & Le Grice, 2021; Wirihana & Smith, 2014).

Summary

On face value, sexual orientation may seem like a simplistic concept, mainly to heterosexual people. This is likely due to the fact that heterosexuality is an assumption that permeates Western society and, as a result, means that heterosexuals are not required to think of their sexual orientation—they just are. This chapter has outlined gay male sexual orientation and identity development. Because heterosexuality is always assumed of others unless declared as not, the term ‘heteronormativity’ encapsulates the way in which heterosexuals do not have to consider or challenge common assumptions simply because they are heterosexual. From this, a range of considerations were made regarding the effects a heteronormative society may have on gay men. An exploration of gender role norms, masculinity and minority stress was included to account for the negotiation of identity that gay men face in their journey to identifying as gay. Although not all gay men endure experiences of oppression or discrimination, it is more likely to be encountered as a sexual minority than a heterosexual person and is, therefore,

important to be mindful of in the current study. Consideration was also made regarding takatāpui and Te ao Māori understandings of sexual identity.

Chapter 3: Perfectionism and Gay Men

A considerable amount of psychological literature on perfectionism has been published over the last 30 years. These studies have varied in their understanding of perfectionism and a general consensus has yet to be reached. However, some key conceptualisations dominate the literature and are explored in this chapter. First, a brief overview of the current theories of perfectionism in the literature is presented. The development and effects of perfectionism are considered alongside perfectionism research on specific populations. Finally, a discussion of perfectionism as it relates to gay men, going beyond the current research literature to incorporate understandings from books, blogs and other media, is presented.

Development of Perfectionism

Perfectionism is complex, and it is thus fitting that the research on the developmental aspects of perfectionism is similarly multifaceted. The literature emphasises the influence of family in the development of perfectionism, with limited research going beyond this. For example, early models included the social expectations model, based on early work by Missildine (1963) where parents provide the love their children seek only when their own expectations are met; the social learning model, where parents themselves have perfectionistic tendencies which children then model (Bandura, 1986; Flett et al., 2002); and the social reaction model for children exposed to adverse conditions during childhood (such as abusive living environments and exposure to shame) (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). The social reaction model stipulates that growing up in an unstable and/or harsh environment promotes perfectionistic tendencies as a strategy to cope with the dysfunction occurring within this environment. This is further

demonstrated with goals of attaining perfection to establish control and predictability while avoiding shame and humiliation (Flett & Hewitt, 2002; Wilson et al., 2015).

Unfortunately, there has been only limited research into factors outside of the family that contribute to the development of perfectionism. Measures of multidimensional perfectionism often include 'others', which includes parents but does not necessarily extend to peers, teachers or societal influences. This suggests that current research attempting to extrapolate the factors contributing to the development of perfectionism tends to focus more on the immediate environmental (parents) than societal and cultural factors. It is also important to note that perfectionism studies are generally conducted within a Westernised, individualistic framework. As such, the development of perfectionism and conceptualisations of perfectionism outside of the Western individualistic culture have rarely been explored. Collective cultures' voices and experiences of perfectionism are missing from the research. Similarly, perfectionism research has not specifically addressed the experiences of sexual and gender minorities and the role that these identities may have on its development.

Unidimensional Perfectionism

Early research on perfectionism initially conceptualised it as a unidimensional construct strongly related to neuroticism and psychopathology. Perfectionism research can be traced back to early research on irrational thinking by Albert Ellis (1962), where he suggested that irrational beliefs and irrational thinking were a contributing factor to emotional and behavioural dysfunction. Ellis (1962) further elaborated that all or nothing thinking (such as 'I must be perfect in everything I do') was an example of how a perfectionistic mind functions. While Ellis's research did not focus solely on perfectionism, it did provide a basis from which perfectionism (and other behaviours) began to be understood through dichotomous thinking.

Hollender (1965) was one of the first researchers to explore perfectionism as a sole construct and proposed that perfectionism was a distinct personality trait. He defined perfectionism as 'the practice of demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation' (Hollender, 1965, p.94).

Researchers who adhered to the unidimensional model refer to perfectionism as being only negative in nature because of the excessive, often impossible demands individuals adhere to and rely on for self-worth, which is also tied directly to their ability to be successful in achieving these demands (Hollender, 1965; Shafran et al., 2002). Hollender (1965) described the basic cognitions of perfectionism as placing a strong emphasis on the inability to achieve self-prescribed demands. Further, if an individual with perfectionism does succeed in achieving their goal, they tend to diminish or completely discredit their success, so that it is instead perceived as a failure.

Subsequent research by Shafran et al. (2002) established the 'clinical perfectionism' model to conceptualise the pathological factors of perfectionism that contribute to heightened distress in individuals. Shafran et al. (2010) defined clinical perfectionism as 'the setting of, and striving to meet, very demanding standards that are self-imposed and relentlessly pursued despite these causing problems. It involves basing one's self worth almost exclusively on how well these high standards are pursued and achieved' (p.2). It was also argued that clinical perfectionism is the only true form of perfectionism because, at its core, perfectionism is pathological by nature. For example, the individual's self-worth is directly dependent on the high standards they set for themselves. These standards have little flexibility in how they are achieved and have limited (if any) room for error (Egan et al., 2011; Shafran et al., 2002). As personal worth is reliant on performing and achieving these self-imposed standards, perceived failure in any of these areas further promotes fear of failure and self-critical appraisal of

the performance of these standards (Limburg et al., 2016; Shafran et al, 2010). Shafran et al. (2002) explained that the interaction of perfectionistic cognitions can create behaviours such as avoidance and procrastination due to the individual feeling overwhelmed even to begin to attempt the task. This behaviour increases distress in the individual due to their critical evaluation of themselves. Shafran et al. (2002) also stipulate that in this cycle, the individual is occasionally successful in their achievement of the standards they have set, which provides reinforcement to the individual. However, this success can often mean that the individual perceives that they set their standards too low and, therefore, they readjust them to even higher standards, increasing the likelihood that they will experience failure in some form (Shafran et al., 2002). These cognitions and behaviours interact with each other in the development and maintenance of clinical perfectionism, creating a cyclical and escalating effect.

Multidimensional Perfectionism

In contrast to a unidimensional model of perfectionism, a multidimensional model of perfectionism incorporates both personal and interpersonal factors (instead of focusing solely on the internal cognitions). Multidimensional perfectionism is often referred to in the literature as normal and neurotic (Hamachek, 1978), functional and dysfunctional (Khawaja & Armstrong, 2005), positive and negative (Slade & Owens, 1998) and adaptive and maladaptive (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

Normal (positive/functional/adaptive) perfectionism typically refers to a 'pursuit of excellence', where an individual holds high but realistic expectations of themselves and does not base their self-worth on achieving the goals they have set (Egan et al., 2015). In contrast, neurotic (negative/dysfunctional/maladaptive) perfectionism is defined by the continued pursuit of exceptionally high standards despite the adverse consequences that coincide with this pursuit, leaving a small margin of error and the

individual basing their self-worth on their ability to fulfil the goals set (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; Hamachek, 1978).

Hamachek (1978) was the first researcher to propose a multidimensional model that categorised perfectionism into 'normal' and 'neurotic' categories. Normal perfectionists were defined as being more flexible in the measure of their performance as they accepted and moved on from making mistakes while still holding high standards. Neurotic perfectionists were perceived to be much more rigid in their evaluation of the performance and would accept any mistake, no matter how seemingly insignificant, as a sign of failure. Additionally, Hamachek (1978) put forth the argument that perfectionism was motivated by an underlying fear of failure.

Flett and Hewitt (2002) argued that perfectionism is best understood as a complex construct and, as such, cannot be explained with a singular, unidimensional approach. However, they disagree with other multidimensional models that conceptualise perfectionism as having two distinct and opposite types of perfectionism (positive and negative). They argue that perfectionism cannot by its nature have positive implications, only highly destructive ones (Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Flett and Hewitt are arguably the leading researchers of multidimensional perfectionism and propose that the core of perfectionism is the imposition of standards that requires impeccable performance to achieve said standards (Flett & Hewitt, 2002). Hewitt and Flett's (1991) model incorporates three domains of perfectionism: self-oriented, other oriented and social oriented.

Self-oriented perfectionism relates to the high standards perfectionists impose on themselves, being overly concerned about mistakes, constantly evaluating their performance in relation to their standards and maintaining the rigid expectations they have set for themselves (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Self-oriented perfectionism is believed

to be motivated by both fear of failure and the strong desire to attain perfection (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). As such, this dimension has been associated with a range of psychopathologies such as depression, anxiety and eating disorders (Egan et al., 2011). Other oriented perfectionism is defined as an individual having high, unrealistic expectations of others and constantly evaluating others performance based on these expectations (Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Hewitt and Flett (1991) have determined that other oriented perfectionism is associated with blaming others, low levels of trust and being hostile towards others as a result. Social oriented perfectionism relates to the perception of significant people in the individual's life expecting said individual to attain perfection in their performance of self within society, as well as a belief that others are intensely and regularly evaluating them to fulfil perfectionistic ideals (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Additional research by Hewitt et al. (2017) also proposed the perfectionism social disconnection model in relation to perfectionism. This model denotes that individuals who feel disconnected from others due to their social standing and the context in which they reside are likely to increase their experiences of perfectionistic standards. Though there is currently limited research into this model.

Alternatively, Slade and Owens (1998) proposed a multidimensional behavioural model of perfectionism that suggested adaptive (positive) perfectionism is maintained through positive reinforcement, while maladaptive (negative) perfectionism is maintained through negative reinforcement, drawing on Skinner's (1969) earlier work with behaviourism. In contrast to the cognitive behaviour model of perfectionism, this dual process model supports the notion that perfectionism can have both positive and negative qualities (Slade & Owens, 1998). Slade and Owens (1998) defined adaptive perfectionism as being focused on achieving success and setting achievable standards

that results in positive reinforcement and does not necessarily lead to psychological distress. Maladaptive perfectionism refers to people setting unachievable standards that are negatively reinforced through a fear of failure or negative consequences (Slade & Owens, 1998). Research has found that the core beliefs of perfectionism are fear of failure, fear of negative evaluation, high self-expectations and low self-worth (Conroy et al., 2007; Hewitt & Flett, 1991; Kurtovic et al., 2019; Shafran et al., 2002).

As evidenced above, there is much contention in the literature as to what exactly constitutes perfectionism and how perfectionism can best be understood. While some researchers suggest perfectionism can only be detrimental to a person's wellbeing, others view perfectionism as having both positive and negative qualities (Bieling et al., 2004; Egan et al., 2015; Lo & Abbot, 2019). Further, a consensus has yet to be reached as to whether perfectionism is generalised to all areas of a person's life, or if it can be limited to distinct, specific areas of life, such as work, sport, academics, the body and parenting (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007; Clark & Coker, 2009; Hill et al., 2015; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009). There has been limited research on determining the differences between generalised perfectionism and domain-specific perfectionism (Levine & Milyavskaya, 2018; McArdle, 2010).

Effects of Perfectionism

The effects of perfectionism are well researched within the literature, though, as often is the case, the main focus has been on the negative effects on individual wellbeing due to a positive correlation with higher levels of distress (Bieling et al., 2004; Smith et al., 2021). Recent studies have confirmed the link between perfectionism and guilt, shame, embarrassment and pride due to the exhausting self-evaluation that occurs in attaining perfectionist goals (Overholser & Dimaggio, 2020; Piotrowski, 2019). Due to perfectionists making it a constant requirement to evaluate themselves

thoroughly, they often experience higher levels of distress than their non-perfectionist counterparts (Bieling et al., 2004). This reinforces striving to be perfect at all they attempt, which at times results in not attempting things that they fear they will not be good at immediately, or utilising procrastination strategies for fear of failure. This is in part due to the perfectionist being more susceptible to experiencing shame as they generalise perceived failures to multiple areas of their life on multiple occasions, rather than allowing that 'failure' to apply simply for that one particular event (Schalkwijk et al., 2019).

Perfectionism has thus been considered an aetiological factor for depression (Asseraf & Vaillancourt, 2015; Blatt, 1995; Hewitt & Flett, 1991), eating disorders (Bardone-Cone et al., 2007; Davis, 1997; Vervaet et al., 2021), anxiety (Antony et al., 1998; Smith et al., 2018) and personality disorders (Dimaggio et al., 2015; Egan et al., 2011). Perfectionism is considered to be trans-diagnostic because it occurs across a range of different mental health disorders (Shafran & Mansell, 2001; Shafran et al., 2010). In contrast, there are few studies examining the positive effects of perfectionism, though they note that adaptive perfectionism has been linked with personal growth, active coping skills and lower levels of psychological distress (Lo & Abbott, 2019; Stoeber & Otto, 2006).

Some researchers have argued that perfectionism is a personality trait, while others refer to the cognitive and behavioural aspects of perfectionism and cite evidence that the successful treatment of perfectionism confirms that it is not a personality trait (Shafran et al., 2002; Stoeber, 2018). Again, the conceptualisation of perfectionism used within these studies appears to determine what constitutes the effects of perfectionism. For example, studies utilising the unidimensional model of perfectionism argue for only negative consequences (such as psychopathology) arising from this construct, thus the

research represents this. Those employing a multidimensional model of perfectionism may allow for both negative (e.g., psychopathology) and positive (e.g., personal growth, increase in coping skills) consequences derived from perfectionism.

Research into positive experiences of perfectionism is lacking in comparison to research on the negative effects of perfectionism. This is a result of conceptualisations of leading theories of perfectionism preferring to construct it only as negative and pathological in nature. The vast majority of perfectionism literature is quantitative, meaning that experiences of perfectionism have rarely been explored in detail using qualitative interviews that may provide further depth to our understanding of perfectionism.

Perfectionism and Specific Populations

Perfectionism research to date is quite limited in terms of the population groups targeted. Studies are frequently guided by a single specific theoretical orientation of perfectionism (such as clinical perfectionism) and how that model defines perfectionism. For example, studies have mainly focused on clinical populations or sub-groups where perfectionism is expected, including athletes and performers (Hill et al., 2015), mothers (Clark & Coker, 2009; Jeong & Jeon, 2018; Maia et al., 2012), gifted children and adolescents (Mofield & Parker Peters, 2015; Ramsey, 2002), university students (Brownlow & Reasinger, 2000; Hamilton & Schweitzer, 2000; Madigan, 2019; Rice et al., 2015) and people with eating disorders (Bardone et al., 2007; Davis, 1997; Johnston et al., 2018). In a recent review of multidimensional perfectionism over the last 30 years, Smith et al. (2021) made several recommendations to further perfectionism research including a call to increase the diversity of participant samples; investigate the relationship between perfectionism and social contexts; establish longitudinal studies to track the impact and changes to perfectionism over time, and

utilise a broader range of research methods. Research utilising qualitative methodologies is rare.

There is no current literature available regarding Māori perspectives and understandings of perfectionism in New Zealand. However, research on giftedness with Māori students sheds potentially relevant light on the distinctions between Māori and Pakehā epistemologies to consider with perfectionism. Macfarlane and Moltzen (2005) and Bevan-Brown (2009) examined Māori student giftedness within New Zealand schools. Bevan-Brown (2009) found that giftedness not only included the intellectual domains that are prominent within Western conceptualisations of giftedness; but also included artistic, psychomotor, creative, affective, leadership, social, spiritual and intuitive domains. Additionally, giftedness could be seen as both an individual gift and a collective gift (Macfarlane & Moltzen, 2005). It was highlighted that Māori conceptualisation of giftedness were interwoven with Māori concepts such as whānau (family) and manaakitanga (generosity), indicating the holistic and collective underpinnings of Māori culture (Macfarlane & Moltzen, 2005). These studies may shed light on potential distinctions between Māori and Western conceptions of perfectionism.

Perfectionism studies utilising qualitative methodologies do not tend to employ a specific definition of perfectionism, in order to provide participants with the opportunity to define perfectionism themselves (Hill et al., 2015). One qualitative study examined the experiences of 10 eating disordered Australian women, who self-identified as perfectionists, and the relationship to social identity (Bouguettaya et al., 2019). The results indicated that participants struggled with defining perfectionism initially, seeking additional prompts and reassurance from the interviewer. The results supported dominant theories linking the development of perfectionism with family dynamics. However, they also provided an extension of the effects of perfectionism,

which included the wider societal pressures of being a woman expected to achieve across all domains of life affecting the expression and maintenance of their perfectionism. Additionally, any changes in their perfectionism over time were related to the social group they were part of at that specific time, indicating perfectionism as more dynamic in nature than accounted for by previous models. Similarly, a study conducted by Hill et al. (2015) interviewed 15 athletes and performing arts students. This study also did not utilise a specific definition of perfectionism, preferring instead for participants to define perfectionism themselves (Hill et al., 2015). This study found that 'drive' was an overarching theme in relation to perfectionism, where participants consistently worked towards improving their performance and fulfilling their perceived potential. Sub-themes included 'accomplishment' which referred to participants striving for perfection in order to achieve set standards imposed on themselves (or by others). Lastly, the sub-theme 'strain' was depicted by participants as the constant anxiety and pressure to attain perfection. Most participants reported that without perfectionism, they would not have attained their success in the specific areas of sports and performance.

Another study examining the life narratives of self-identified perfectionists utilised a two-part interview with 20 university students, with the initial interview asking participants to define perfectionism and the second part adopting a life narrative methodology to examine perfectionism over time (Farmer et al., 2017). Results regarding the definition of perfectionism indicated two overarching themes: 'High standards and goals' and 'Never good enough'. Smaller themes were 'Neat and organised' and 'Feels superior to others' (referring to receiving praise from others and being critical of others not reaching their standards). Additionally, the life narrative aspect of the interview found that receiving acceptance and support from people closest to them was important in mitigating factors associated with not being good enough.

Participants found that their perfectionism promoted vulnerability with others, which created a stronger connection and feelings of acceptance from others.

At the time of writing, there was limited research on men and perfectionism beyond that of very specific clinical populations such as those suffering from eating disorders (Jones & Morgan, 2010), body image issues (Badenes-Ribera et al., 2018; Morgan & Arcelus, 2009) and sub-groups such as adolescent boys (Adams & Govender, 2008), of which perfectionism was not necessarily the main focus. Although perfectionism has been identified as a contributing factor to distress in the lives of gay men in several studies, these have focused specifically on body appearance (Cunningham et al., 2018; Morgan & Arcelus, 2009; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003).

A literature search found no research at the time of writing that focused on perfectionism specifically and gay men in a context beyond that of appearance-related perfectionism connected to eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Further, qualitative studies of perfectionism were also very limited in general. The lack of studies on this topic prompted me to go beyond the academic literature to examine perfectionism within the context of different mediums, such as blogs, books and television shows.

Gay Men and Perfectionism

Representation of gay men in the media provides important insight into commonly held conceptions and stereotypes among Western society of particular populations at a particular time. Therefore, it is useful to examine these critically for the purposes of the present study. To do this, it was decided to review a wide array of New Zealand domestic media (such as *Express* magazine) and international and national television shows, movies and advertisements to demonstrate common themes. Many of the representations presented gay men in the ‘ideal’ form (according to Western culture)

and are likely to contribute to increased pressure within the gay male community to conform to these ideals.

For example, in one study comparing the representations of men's bodies within magazines targeting gay men versus magazines targeting heterosexual men, it was found that content within the gay male magazine was more likely to have images that had low body fat and muscular and symmetrical features, further perpetuating the ideal body type that gay men should strive to attain (Jankowski et al., 2014). The gay magazines were also more likely to be highly sexualised and flawless, promoting the ideal body as being young, white and muscled (Jankowski et al., 2014). Another study interviewed five gay men, all of whom noted a preoccupation within the gay male community of obtaining a perfect body. The researcher argued that gay men's bodies continue to be oppressed and discriminated against even within the gay male community due to the continued prevalence of heteronormative values of traditional masculinity (Padva, 2002).

A review of several editions of the New Zealand *Express* magazine (which specifically targets the LGBTQ+ community) showed that the representation of gay men in advertisements was typically a young man with a muscled body, chiselled jawline, groomed hair, facial hair and immaculate dress. Similarly, there is a strong sense of sexual performance implicated by advertisers, as evidenced by a car advertisement with the statement 'Performance is everything', and an advertisement for lawyers with two half-naked men preparing to fight, with the slogan 'let's kiss and make-up' implying violence as well as sex. These portrayals of gay men as sexual objects contribute to an ideal of gay men as being perfect in the presentation of their body, holding masculine qualities while also being sexually available.

This ideal of perfection within the gay male community can be further understood through an examination of television shows that feature gay men in prominent roles. Television shows such as ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’, ‘Prince Charming’, ‘Will and Grace’ and ‘Project Runway’ all emphasise gay men with a heightened sense of taste, style and appearance. For example, in the original and recent reboot of ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’, all five gay men are physically fit, well groomed, appear immaculate and are experts in cooking, grooming, interior design, hair dressing and wellbeing, indicating that they are extremely successful in each of their chosen career paths (Clarkson, 2005; Malinowska, 2020). The point of this show is to assist a straight man who is seemingly helpless so that he can look and feel better in himself with the assistance of gay men. Further, the reboot of ‘Queer Eye for the Straight Guy’ delves into some of the social issues that the men have gone through on a personal level. Interestingly, perfection and striving to be perfect comes up numerous times both prior to coming out as gay and afterwards in conversations throughout the shows.

Another example of gay male representation in the media is ‘Prince Charming’, a bachelor-style reality show featuring gay men. Of the 20 potential bachelors, only one does not appear to be in physically peak condition, and by that it is meant he does not have what would be considered to be a muscular ‘perfect’ body or put in as much thought into his appearance in comparison to the other men on the show. High success in each area these men worked in was also guaranteed. The bachelor, the titular Prince Charming himself, was immaculately groomed, physically fit and very successful in his work life. Both of the aforementioned examples of gay men in television shows support the appearance and achievement of ‘perfection’, and there are many more examples from television and movies that advance this same ideal.

Several news articles that discussed perfectionism and gay men were reviewed. The LGBTQ+ Canadian magazine *Advocate* had a news article in their love and sex column 'Ask Adam' with the tagline 'Why Are Gays Obsessed with Being Perfect?' In this article, the writer denotes the otherness that many gay men can feel and associated feelings of negativity towards themselves for not meeting the status quo within society has resulted in many gay men feeling as though they needed to make up for identifying as gay (Blum, 2018). The concept of initially feeling a sense of shame as one begins to realise they are 'different' aligns with the concept of becoming a perfectionist to seek to rectify this feeling of being less than others due to sexual orientation.

Blogs provide limited access to communities that would otherwise be inaccessible to those outside of the community they target. A review of several blogs and forums specifically targeting gay men interacting with each other provided insight into gay men's perception of perfectionism within the gay male community. Perfectionism was a topic discussed a number of times on these blogs in regard to relationships, career and appearance as a way to compensate for the shame they experienced (Aarenhuang, 2020).The quest for perfection has also been found to be a topic of interest among web forums specifically aimed at gay men, with discussions on the pressure to be perfect in relation to compensating for sexual orientation within a heteronormative society (Ortman, 2019). The constant invalidation that gay men receive from wider society is identified as a motivator for obtaining high levels of success and appearing perfect to make up for the underlying feeling of not being good enough (Ortman, 2019). Further, perfectionism is a means to control feeling like an 'outsider' (Blum, 2018). Allsop (2021) identified the shame and trauma of growing up gay in a 'culture not made for us' as being a key underlying factor to the pursuit of perfection, while also stating that it is the 'stories we choose to focus on' that continue to

perpetuate the perfectionistic striving. By this it is meant that the focus is on attaining the ideal to be seen as worthy of acceptance within a heterosexual society.

In his *The Velvet Rage* (2012), Alan Downs, a clinical psychologist from the United States who identifies as gay and has written about his experiences with his predominantly gay clientele, identifies shame as a prominent factor in gay men experiencing high levels of distress due to 'growing up gay in a straight man's world'. He argues that gay men are taught from a young age that they are not good enough due to not meeting the requirements of a heteronormative society. Downs (2012) purports that this may best be understood as underlying rage in gay men, which is intertwined with shame, and is the "emotional product of being unable to achieve authentic validation" (p. 120). Gay men then seek to compensate for this by seeking fulfilment and striving to be flawless in other areas akin to sexual orientation. He posits that it is shame that motivates gay men to actively seek perfection, and that mistakes are to be completely avoided so they do not feel shame. Though Downs (2012) does not focus wholly on perfectionism in his book, he does refer to it frequently as an outlet that counteracts the shame gay men can feel because of the 'otherness' within a heterosexual society. *The Velvet Rage* provides insight into the lives of gay men in Los Angeles and provides further evidence of perfectionism and gay men being an important area requiring further research.

In a similar vein, the book *Straight Jacket* (2012), written by British gay male Matthew Todd, a former editor of the British gay magazine *Attitude*, examines the lives of gay men and the prominent distress that he found evident within the gay male community that presents itself in various forms. Along the same lines as Downs (2012), Todd (2012) discusses the long-term effects of the everyday 'abuses' that homosexuals (both men and women) endure from a young age and the internalisation of these

messages that often manifest in distressing or problematic behaviours. Though Todd makes it clear that this is not every gay man's life projection, he discusses the need for there to be more awareness of the everyday traumas that gay men go through and what that means for the needs of gay men. From the foreword onwards, perfectionism is regarded as being a survival mechanism: 'if we are to be accepted, we must be morally beyond reproach, or at least perfect in some sort of way. We can't be gay and average … We must make an effort to fit in' (Todd, 2012, p. ii-iii). Todd discusses his own experiences alongside those of numerous other men who identify as gay and have struggled in some form. He identifies, similar to Downs (2012), that shame is at the core of the distress that he feels many gay men encounter—a shame that has developed from a young age due to homosexuality being an 'otherness' within a heterosexual society. The author discusses his own experience of developing perfectionism to obtain validation and claims it is the most predominant character trait in the gay population he has noticed. Shame can be understood to be either healthy in terms of having an internal system that alerts ourselves to our limitations or unhealthy when it encompasses our whole identity as the individual perceives themselves in their entirety to be 'flawed and defective' (Bradshaw, 2005, p. 21). A number of studies have also shown a positive relationship between shame and internalised homophobia (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Brown & Trevethan, 2010).

Summary

As shown in this chapter, there are many ways in which perfectionism has been understood and theorised over the past 60 years, and there remains a lack of consensus on a single definition of perfectionism and its effects. This chapter provided a general overview of perfectionism from a psychological and theoretical perspective to situate my choice to refrain from adopting a particular theoretical stance in the present study.

This provided the current research with a broader framework in which perfectionism can be explored by those who experience it without the confines of a particular definition, theory, measurement or model. As such, this research may provide further insight into perfectionism beyond that of the current knowledge and populations researched thus far.

In contrast to the vast majority of prior studies conducted on perfectionism, this study utilised a qualitative methodology to explore the understandings, perceptions, meanings and lived experiences of perfectionism with participants. This research was guided by the realities and experiences of its participants, who self-identify as perfectionists. Further, this research is unique in its focus on a specific population—gay men—and a specific construct—perfectionism. As noted in this chapter, although there are books that include perfectionism as an aspect of gay men's lives (Downs, 2012; Todd, 2012), these have not examined beyond the sole focus of the body. The present research aims to begin to fill this gap in perfectionism research and the lived experiences of gay men within the context of New Zealand.

The objective of this study is to explore the experiences of perfectionism in the everyday lives of gay men who report being perfectionists. The following research question and research sub-questions are addressed with this research:

How do gay men make sense of perfectionism in their day-to-day lives?

- How do gay men perceive perfectionism to develop and change over time?
- How do gay men perceive perfectionism affecting their relationships?
- What are the perceived effects of perfectionism on their day-to-day lives?

Chapter 4: Methodology and Method

This chapter presents and justifies the methodology and method chosen for this research. It is imperative that any research is grounded in a well-founded theoretical base. The first section of this chapter discusses the theoretical underpinning that guides this research through qualitative approach and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA). This is then followed by a detailed description of the study's method, including the selection of participants, data collection and analysis procedure.

Qualitative Approach

As this research is focused on the exploration of participants' lived experiences of perfectionism, a qualitative research approach was utilised (Willig, 2013). In psychological research, quantitative methodologies have typically been employed to quantify participants' experiences and produce results that are deemed to be objective, value free and concerned with causal relationships (Willig, 2013; Yardley, 2016). In contrast, qualitative research focuses on the meaning attributed to particular experiences by people and seeks to understand how participants make sense of their world (Yardley, 2016).

It is important to note that qualitative methodologies refer to a broad context in which research can situate itself in. Qualitative research concerns itself with the subjective, unique experiences of people to access insight into particular phenomena and experiences at a particular point in time (Merriam, 2019). Therefore, it is necessary that a flexible, dynamic approach be adapted by the researcher. Qualitative methodologies also take into account the role of the researcher within the research and the position of the researcher in analysing and interpretating data.

The issue of reliability is less concerning within the qualitative framework due to being more concerned with the unique experiences of participants rather than the quantitative measurement of such experiences (Willig, 2013). Finlay and Evans (2009) developed the 'four r's' to assist qualitative researchers in producing quality research: rigor, relevance, resonance and reflexivity. Rigor relates to the systemic process of the research, relevance to the contribution such research makes to the current body of literature, resonance to whether the findings resonate with the readers (which also relates to the trustworthiness of the findings) and reflexivity to the researcher bringing an attitude of awareness and self-reflection throughout the research process (Finlay & Evans, 2009).

IPA

This study adopted an epistemological approach of hermeneutic and phenomenological inquiry, which aligns with the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith et al., 2011). IPA as a methodology is concerned with holistic, rich, detailed accounts of the lived experience of a particular phenomenon (Willig, 2013). Although the philosophical foundations of IPA are beyond the scope of this research endeavour, an outline of significant philosophical contributions to IPA is offered below.

Phenomenology can best be understood as the study of "human experiences and the way these experiences are made sense of in consciousness" (Langdridge, 2007, p. 10). Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) is considered the founder of phenomenology and was interested in "going back to their essence", or "back to the things themselves" (Husserl, 1900/2001, p. 79). It was argued that through returning to the essence of the thing itself that it makes itself known and is illuminated (van Manen, 2017).

Additionally, Husserl's contribution involved the notion of *epoche* (bracketing) (Husserl, 1900/2001). Husserl argued for the importance of being conscious of preconceived ideas and 'taken for granted knowledge', and to endeavour to set aside our assumptions of the phenomenon being investigated (Husserl, 1900/2001; Langdridge, 2007). He believed that it is through this suspension of our assumptions and preconceived knowledge, that the phenomenon in question appears in its essence (Husserl, 1900/2001). It is this 'essence' of the thing itself that enables us to describe it in its purest form. Part of bracketing is to challenge the cultural assumptions and meaning of the knowledge that we have acquired, to openly acknowledge that these assumptions serve a particular set of interests and, therefore, have their own forms of oppression and exclusion that need to be set aside to gain new insights and perceptions into being (Crotty, 1998). However, the capacity for a person to 'bracket' these assumptions and become a person void of context, even temporarily, is considered imperfect (Langridge, 2007). The purpose, rather, is to acknowledge and attempt to suspend these assumptions in order to open up the possibility to perceive the things that we may not have noticed due to the taken-for-granted-knowledge (van Manen, 2017). Husserl's phenomenological method has been termed as descriptive due to its preoccupation with "grounding secure knowledge" (Giorgi, 1997).

This research also considers Martin Heidegger (1889-1976), a philosopher who argued that knowledge is interpretative and founded within the lived world (Smith et al., 2009). Heidegger was concerned with the question of 'being' (or Dasein) and 'being-in-the-world' (Heidegger, 1962/2001). Heidegger argued that 'being' is inseparable from the world and it is through relations with others and objects that we make sense of ourselves (Heidegger, 1962/2001). This is particularly pertinent with phenomenology as Heidegger focuses on the foundational relativity that humans have with objects,

relationships and language, which assumes that our perceptions and interpretations of the world are always in relation to things; therefore, interpreting peoples 'meaning making' activities are central to phenomenological psychology (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2009).

One of Heidegger's major contributions to phenomenology is the hermeneutic circle of moving back and forth between the parts of the experience to the whole of the experience in order to engage an in-depth understanding of the phenomena in question (Laverty, 2003). Hermeneutics is an attempt to understand "how we have come to be situated in the world in the particular ways we find ourselves" (Eatough & Smith, 2017, p. 6). Hermeneutic phenomenology posits that experiences are always interpretative because we are always intertwined with the world and in relation to others (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). It is through moving back and forwards from the parts to the whole that we come to understand the phenomena in question. Therefore Heidegger's contribution is known as interpretative phenomenology (Applebaum, 2011). Both Husserl's descriptive phenomenology and Heidegger's interpretative phenomenology provide the foundation of IPA as a methodology where the aim is not only to describe the phenomena in question, but also to interpret it in relation to the contexts and interrelationships of participants.

The phenomenological approach seeks to get as close as possible to the phenomena experienced by participants (Smith et al., 2009). It aims to understand the experience itself, rather than the causes of the experience, as such it is the 'quality and texture' of the experience that is sought to be understood (Eatough & Smith, 2017; Willig, 2013). A phenomenological position assumes that there is more than one world due to the different ways in which the same phenomena can be experienced by different individuals (Willig, 2013). The epistemological assumption is that there is not one

objective reality but many realities, based on people's experiences, prior knowledge and the contexts in which they reside (Yardley, 2016).

Additionally, IPA takes an idiographic approach, which refers to the particular and is concerned with the unique and detailed experiences of humans (Smith et al., 2009). This is in contrast to many psychological approaches that are concerned with the ability to make generalisations at a larger, group level, rather than at the individual level (Smith et al., 2009). IPA enables participants to share their experiences as they perceive them without challenge from the researcher (Willig, 2013). IPA posits that in-depth analyses of individual experiences of particular phenomena provide the researcher with the ability to make specific claims about the participants, while also enabling the researcher to learn about general themes across participants (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Smith et al. (2009) argue that it is through the in-depth analysis of individual cases that realises the true complexity of the human condition and contributes to psychological research.

Central to IPA is that the experience cannot be directly experienced by the researcher, though the researcher can get as close as possible to the experiences which is to be expressed in its own terms by participants, rather than according to previous theories made regarding the phenomena (Larkin & Thompson, 2012; Smith et al., 2011; Willig, 2013). It is this that makes IPA phenomenological and most concerned with how participants make sense of their lived world experiences (Smith et al., 2009). From the beginning of the process, IPA research is an interpretative process as the researcher seeks to bracket their own preconceptions of the phenomenon being explored, while also coming with an understanding as to how that preconceived knowledge may influence the research process. It is argued that through in-depth exploration of specific phenomena, there is the opportunity to create new understandings of the subtle and

different ways that people understand the same phenomena, which will make a difference to the lived world of ourselves and others. It also renders explicit any research bias and the limitations of the studies (Smith et al., 2011).

Given the rich detail that phenomenological research elicits, it was identified as the most appropriate methodology for this study. It is applicable to exploratory research, sensitive to the context of the participants, seeks to understand individual experiences of perfectionism and seeks to identify similarities and differences between participants' experiences. IPA is not concerned with quantity but rather quality of data collected from participants. IPA is an inductive approach and seeks to generate knowledge through open-ended research questions (Smith et al., 2011).

Trustworthiness

Prescribed notions typically applied to quantitative methodologies to ensure credibility such as validity, reliability and objectivity are not transferable to qualitative research (Camic, 2021). Instead, alternative methods are employed to enhance the trustworthiness of qualitative research. The strategies used in this research included purposeful sampling, member feedback, compiling an audit trail, reflexivity and peer debriefing. To begin with, data acquired from intentionally selected participants improves the quality of an IPA study (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Participants in this study were purposefully selected based on the criteria of this research project, self-identifying both as perfectionist and as a gay man residing in New Zealand. In this study, although all participants attended higher education and lived in cities in the North Island of New Zealand, they differed in age, ethnic identity and cities resided in. The participants diversity was an added strength in this study as while they shared experiences of perfectionism and sexual orientation, the differences between

participants contributed to rich, thick and detailed accounts of the phenomena in question.

Another strategy utilised was member feedback instead of the more formal member checking. Member checking can be conducted in a variety of ways including verification of participant transcripts with participants, checking interpretation of themes with participants and ensuring theme accuracy with participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Initially, the researcher considered member checking in the original proposal for this research, however after discussing with fellow researchers and supervisors, member checking was judged unsuitable due to the interpretative nature of IPA (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). This is due to a number of reasons, including the passage of time between interviews, transcription and development of themes, the researcher's interpretation of the data, and the combining of participant experiences (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Smith and McGannon (2017) further stipulate that participant and researcher will inevitably hold different interpretations because knowledge is socially constructed, calling into question member checking as form of credibility checking in qualitative research.

Instead, a more informal process was utilised that included the researcher summarising and reflecting back to participants during interviews to ensure understanding of what was being said. Additionally, at the end of each interview participants were invited to provide reflections and feedback on the interview process. This allowed participants to elaborate further on important topics to them as well as reflect on the interview process, which strengthened understandings of participants experiences with perfectionism.

An audit trail was utilised through providing a transparent description of the research steps taken in this thesis. The analysis of the data was recorded in spreadsheets

to clearly stipulate the analytical steps taken with the data for the researcher to refer to. Peer debriefing entailed two raw interview transcripts sent to the researcher's main supervisor alongside the researcher's process of developing themes and extracts from the data. This was to ensure that themes were anchored in participants' accounts rather than whether the interpretation made was 'true'. Themes and interpretation of the data were discussed in supervision.

In qualitative research, saturation is commonly used as a tool to determine whether the data collected is sufficient (i.e. no new themes/codes) for the research aims, making further data collection unnecessary (Charmaz, 2014; Saunders et al., 2017). However, there is contention within the literature as to what saturation means, how it should be applied, and when it should be applied (Fusch & Ness, 2015; Saunders et al., 2017). Due to the idiographic nature of IPA, saturation is not a compatible tool of trustworthiness and was not applied in this research as it could, in theory, be continued infinitely (Brocki & Weardon, 2006; Vasileiou et al., 2018).

Lastly, reflexivity was utilised to clearly position the researcher's role in this research. Reflexivity provides a clear account of the researcher in relation to participants, the research and how the researcher impacts the research process. Reflexivity is noted to be one way to examine the role of the researcher in relation to the participants, the research process, data analysis and grounding the findings within the context that the research is conducted in (Berger, 2015). Reflexivity should be ongoing throughout the entirety of the research project, from its conception to its end, to enhance the trustworthiness of the research (Finlay, 2002). Medico and Stantiago-Delefosse (2014) argue that it is through the reflexive process that others can view the themes derived from the data as being situated in the interrelationship between the researcher's context and the participants. As such, reflexivity actively acknowledges that the

knowledge produced is dependent on the researcher (Finlay, 2002). Pillow (2003) states that it is through reflexivity that we can obtain new ways of understanding particular phenomena whilst also 'gain insight into how this knowledge is produced' (p.178) and is a strength of qualitative research. This reflexive account is provided in the next section.

Reflexivity

The issue of reflexivity is important to consider throughout the entire research process as it requires the researcher to be self-aware and self-reflective to the ways in which their personal values and experiences may affect the research being conducted (Finlay, 2002; Guba, 1981; Smith et al., 2011). This is particularly pertinent to IPA research, where the role of the researcher is readily acknowledged and considered part of the entire research process (Smith et al., 2009).

As the key researcher and, therefore, an active participant in this research, it is necessary to reflect on and be aware of how my own life experiences, age, culture, gender, sexuality and education have influenced and shaped this research. My personal life experiences have had a significant role in the development of this research, as I developed a more focused interest in the LGBTQ+ community as close family members and friends came out as members of the LGBTQ+ community. This led to a number of significant conversations about some of the adversity that they had faced in relation to identifying as part of this group. In particular, conversations with a family member and his friends regarding these adversities, as well as some of the personality traits that they believed were typically a function of being a gay man and were visible to them. Perfectionism was identified as a potential topic of interest for my doctoral research project and I was particularly interested in mothers and perfectionism due to my own experiences as a mother. Conversations of this potential research topic with my close

family member who identifies as gay and several of his gay male friends sparked my interest as they viewed perfectionism as prevalent within their gay male community and noted that it would be interesting to research this area. This led me to conduct a literature search that revealed there was already a significant amount of literature examining mothers and perfectionism but few studies on perfectionism and gay men.

My current pursuit (2016-2021) of postgraduate studies in clinical psychology also played a central role in the development of this current study, as I endeavoured to create research that is relevant to psychology and to populations typically left out of 'mainstream' research. I essentially wanted my research to be meaningful, particularly to the LGBTQ+ community and to psychology as a profession. As such, it was important to explore with members of the gay community whether this topic would be of importance and value from their perspective. Therefore, as described above, I first discussed this topic with my close family member (who self-identified as a gay man and a perfectionist) and several of his gay, male friends. They unanimously agreed that this was a topic of interest, as they viewed perfectionism as prevalent within the gay male community. I then contacted two men (previously unknown to me) who work within the mental health fields (a manager of an LGBTQ+ organisation and a mental health practitioner) and sent them my research proposal for feedback on the relevance of the proposed research. This helped shape the research, from a clinical and potential pathologising research project exploring clinical perfectionism within males who identified as gay to an exploratory research project that sought to investigate the meaning participants make of perfectionism in their lives.

Additionally, consideration was given in terms of positioning myself within this research. There has been contention within the literature that the insider/outsider dichotomy is not as clear cut as was once believed (Berger, 2015; Levy, 2013; Merriam

et al., 2001; Tinker & Armstrong, 2008). An insider status refers to the shared characteristics or identities between the researcher and participants, whilst an ‘outsider’ status reflects the researcher not sharing that identity or characteristics with participants (Breen, 2007; Levy, 2013). The ability to readily create trust with participants, participants being more open and the researcher being able to access the participant group more easily have all been recognised as advantages of having an "insider" position (Berger, 2015; Merriam et al., 2001). Outsider status benefits, on the other hand, include generating rich detail from participants due to the notion that the researcher requires more clarity, and participants perhaps feeling empowered as experts in the area under investigation (Berger, 2015). The insider advantage is the outsiders disadvantage and vice versa.

Dwyer and Buckle (2009) challenge the insider versus outsider dichotomy as unrealistic and instead argue that positionality should be viewed as dialectical in nature. A key issue with positioning the researcher as either an insider or an outsider is that this dichotomy fails to account for the fluidity and multiplicity of identities that each person holds (Nelson, 2020; Tinker & Armstrong, 2008). This can lead to difficulty in deciding what categories to include as relevant to identity and where the boundary is drawn in being either an insider or an outsider (Tinker & Armstrong, 2008). Throughout the research process, the researcher is likely to experience being an insider and moments of being an outsider at different times and within different contexts during the research process (Berger, 2015; Dwyer & Buckley, 2009; Levy, 2013; Nelson, 2020). Dwyer and Buckley (2009) suggest a third status in positioning; that of occupying the “space in between” where researchers are neither completely insiders nor completely outsiders. In this research, I position myself in the “space in between” (Dwyer & Buckley, 2009).

Reflecting on my own positionality throughout this research project, I had initially positioned myself as an 'outsider' due to being heterosexual and female. I worried that these identities may be a barrier and that participants may not deem me as "credible" to divulge information to due to my nonshared identities. I reflected on the role of my 'straight' identity in this research and queried whether I am the right person to conduct this research considering I am not gay nor male. Allen (2010) posits convincingly that heterosexuality itself does not preclude heterosexuals from an attempt "…to produce anti-(hetero)normative knowledge". Allen (2010) further argues that diverse sexual orientation and anti-normative knowledge are not explicitly linked to one another, rather that heteronormativity pervades identity. After seeking advice on this project from family and friends within the LGBTQ+ communities as well as professionals who work within LGBTQ+ organisations, I decided to conduct this research in a way that placed participants at the centre, allowing their diverse experiences to be explored and valued. Placing the responsibility of producing anti-normative knowledge solely on the LGBTQ+ community is not feasible and it is important that straight researchers take responsibility in challenging heteronormativity as well, especially considering the privilege and power they hold within society.

At the time this research was conducted I was in my late 20s, heterosexual, female, Māori and Pakehā, a mother and studying towards a doctorate in clinical psychology. As a result of these identities I hold and am aware of, I acknowledge that certain privileges come with some of them. I identify that being heterosexual, white presenting and obtaining higher education all hold certain power within the social context I reside. An example of this came to the forefront during the research process where one participant discussed having to 'come out' at work and the considerations he had to make when choosing to do this. I have never had to declare my sexual orientation

in my workspace nor in my academic classes. I have not had to worry about other peoples' responses to my sexual orientation. This evidenced the sanctions of heteronormativity where I did not even have to think or consider this aspect of sexual orientation disclosure prior to the literature review and then, with the participants interviews.

The initial concerns I had regarding being straight and female subsided as I met with and interviewed participants. We built rapport through conversation about the places we lived, university experiences, being Māori and perspectives on social issues. I found that building relationships with participants was relatively easy, despite my initial worry that my non shared identities may be a barrier.

After much consideration, I made the decision to disclose heterosexuality to participants at the beginning of the interview. For some participants, this was one of the initial questions asked of me and the intention of this self-disclosure was an attempt to reduce the power imbalance between myself and participants. I realised that the participants were letting me into their lives and disclosing information to me, some of it sensitive in nature. I felt that some sort of exchange and disclosure from myself to participants was necessary so they could have more of an understanding of who this researcher is. Further, the story of how this research came to be was of interest to participants and shared, highlighting that this research was not to determine the prevalence of perfectionism within gay male communities, but to explore their unique personal experiences with perfectionism. This was important to share with participants as it situated them as experts in this research project. During interviews, participants would frequently elaborate on their experiences within the diverse LGBTQ+ communities they were part of and question if I knew certain terminology used so that

they could provide further examples and meanings. These elaborations provided rich, nuanced and detailed interviews.

I was also mindful of my role as a doctoral student in a clinical psychology program, which may have influenced what the participants told me as they sought to tell what they perceived to be relevant to what I was researching. This was also the first time I had conducted interviews within a research setting; however, I have had training in clinical interview skills, which were transferable to the interview process. The recruitment method may have also influenced how participants divulged information, as some were recruited through LGBTQ+ organisations and others responded to posters (please see Appendices A and B). This may have also influenced their emotions and feelings when participating in this research.

This may have also influenced the data collection and analysis. Not being a gay man may have influenced the types of questions I asked, how I asked them, the terminology I used and, therefore, affected the way in which I analysed and interpreted the data. A gay, perfectionistic male may have elicited and interpreted the data differently to me due to their 'insider' knowledge in both sexual orientation and shared sense of experience regarding perfectionism.

The research design and implementation were influenced by my personal experiences and the chosen focus of my current career path. As such, it is important to consistently be aware of myself as a person and the role I have as an active participant throughout the research conception and implementation to ensure the process of reflexivity is being attended to. This will also be explored in the following sections as it is central to the IPA methodology.

Ethical Considerations

The ethical considerations of conducting research with any population requires attention before the research is conducted. It is argued that any examination or interview with a person about a particular phenomenon could be sensitive in nature, depending on the way in which participants interact with and perceive that particular experience (Willig, 2013). Therefore, it is of utmost importance that interviews are conducted with empathy, understanding and openness to enable a supportive environment for participants to divulge personal information.

A low risk notification was lodged with the Massey University Human Ethics Office prior to data collection and ethical considerations were discussed with the researcher's original supervisors. With any type of qualitative research, there is the possibility of it being distressing for participants; as such, if participants mentioned or discussed particularly pertinent issues related to their wellbeing, this was to be followed up with the opportunity for participants to access further support through a number of organisations, dependent on the presentation of the participant. A list of organisations and supports was assembled and taken to each interview for distribution as needed. However, this was not required for participants at any time during interviews.

There was also the issue of confidentiality, which was addressed through the secure storage and de-identifying of data. All participants were assigned pseudonyms. Another ethical consideration at the forefront throughout this research is the discrimination, stigma and oppression that some of the men I interviewed may have experienced as a result of their sexual orientation. As perfectionism in a gay male population may be considered to be a stereotypical portrayal of gay men, it was even more pertinent that I be aware of this and remain open, cautious and aware of these factors so as not to reinforce this in any way. In terms of my personal ethical

considerations, I had personal supervision options available if there was particular content that I had a particularly strong reaction to. I also maintained a reflective journal throughout the research process to note my responses and reactions to the interviews and assist in the reflection of the interviews.

Furthermore, consultation was obtained at the beginning stages of the research with the development of the project proposal, interview guide and information sheets, from two men who identified as gay within the health profession. This provided invaluable considerations of the research such as the framing of the research as exploratory and feedback implemented on the wording of the interview schedule. Cultural consultation was also obtained by a Māori cultural supervisor at Massey University who provided support in the beginning stages of the research and was available to the researcher throughout the interview process. An additional meeting with the supervisor was conducted prior to meeting with the Māori participant online to ensure cultural considerations were made prior to the interview. For example, the importance of whakawhanaungatanga (developing connection) with the participant prior to beginning the more formal interview process.

IPA Interviews

As IPA is concerned with rich, detailed, first-person accounts of phenomena, semi-structured interviews are considered the most appropriate method for data collection, Smith et al. (2009) further delineates that 'rich' is meant in terms of the participants' ability to share their story, reflect and further develop their perceptions, ideas and concerns of the phenomena in question. It is important that interview questions are open ended to ensure that the researcher is able to access the living world of the participant (Willig, 2013). This also places the participant as the expert on

themselves and their experience. As such, the role of the researcher can be seen as one of facilitation (Willig, 2013).

An interview schedule with open-ended questions was created for reference when conducting the interviews (please see Appendix E) (Willig, 2013). Semi-structured interviews may move away from the questions and into more unique and diverse areas that the researcher had not previously considered (Willig, 2013). The strength of semi-structured interviews lies in the rich, detailed accounts of lived experiences individually, providing space for participants to share their unique experiences and placing them as the expert on themselves, which is particularly pertinent to the current study. This requires the researcher to employ a naïve curiosity with participants and that questioning should be approached in this manner, rather than from a particular perspective or theoretical understanding (Smith et al., 2009).

Analysis with IPA

The analytical process of IPA is inductive and flexible in nature; however, Smith et al. (2009) have outlined various analytical stages as a general guide for analysis of data. Analysis is also guided by the IPA principles of being concerned with the idiographic experience and how meaning is made from it (Smith et al., 2009). The analysis of data is an iterative process that moves back and forth between the data and themes to ensure the integrity of the analyses. At the end of this process, the themes represent the interpretation of the researcher when interacting with the data.

Central to the analysis of data in IPA is the hermeneutic circle, which enables the researcher to examine the data within the context of the whole interview and the whole interview in relation to the smaller parts of the data (Smith et al., 2009). It is a cyclical approach that aims to stay as close to the data as possible as phenomenology

entails (Smith et al., 2009). The analysis involves making sense of the pattern of meaning that the participants use to make sense of their lived experiences.

As such, for each participant, Smith et al. (2009) suggests the following strategies as useful for IPA analysis. First, the researcher should undertake detailed close readings of the interview transcripts to obtain a thorough, holistic understanding of the individuals' data. Second, the researcher will begin to identify themes, initially making comments on the transcripts of anything of note, then, through multiple readings, begin to understand these notes in relation to themes. This is done with each interview transcript. Third, themes are condensed and refined through the examination of the connections between the themes. Fourth, a narrative of each theme is supported through detailed understanding and extractions of the data utilised to support these themes. Finally, a reflection is undertaken in relation to the researcher's own perceptions and conceptualisations of the data.

Method

Participant Demographics

Six men volunteered to participate in this research. Each man identified as gay, takatāpui or homosexual, and self-identified as a perfectionist. None were under mental healthcare, observation or similar, and all resided in large cities in the North Island of New Zealand. None of the participants were known to the researcher prior to contact being made for this research project. It was decided that interviewing people currently receiving treatment for mental health issues posed an increased risk for distress during interviews and that examining perfectionism may interfere with any treatment they were receiving. Therefore, the decision was made to narrow the research focus and exclude clinical populations.

Participants' ages ranged from 26–80 years old and all spoke English. Their ethnic identities were New Zealand European (n=4), Māori (n=1) and Irish (n=1). In IPA research, participants are sought from a mostly homogenous sample that have a shared experienced of the same phenomena. It is important to note the divergences between participants that may impact the experience of the phenomena being investigated such as age, culture, where participants currently reside and where they grew up. In this particular research project, participants were broad in age range and this is likely to have impacted their experience with perfectionism due to the socio-cultural context in which they have been situated in over time. For example, the two eldest participants recalled residing in New Zealand when being homosexual was illegal. This diversity within the participant sample was a strength as it provided rich, detailed narratives of their experiences of perfectionism. Table 1 provides the basic demographic information of participants.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant (Pseudonym)	**Ethnicity (Self-declared)**	**Age**	**Previous Hetero-sexual Marriage**	**Children**	**Geographical Location**
Tim	NZ European	Early 80's	Yes	Yes	Large City in the North Island
Henri	Irish	Early 40's	No	No	Large City in the North Island
Steve	NZ European	Early 60's	No	Yes	Large City in the North Island
Rau	Māori	Mid 20's	No	No	Large City in the North Island
Matt	Australian	Late 40's	Yes	No	Large City in the North Island
Bill	NZ European	Early 20's	No	No	Large City in the North Island

Procedure

Participants were recruited through several local LGBTQ+ organisations, social media, personal contacts and university networks. Purposive sampling was used in conjunction with the snowballing method when recruitment stagnated midway through the recruitment process. The recruitment posters (see Appendices A and B) invited potential participants to contact the researcher via email. An explicit definition of perfectionism was intentionally not used in the recruitment process, as part of the research aim was to understand how participants create meaning and make sense of perfectionism. Therefore, I did not want to precede any interview with my own definition or psychological definitions of perfectionism imposed onto participants as that could influence how they conceptualise their own experiences within this framework.

Recommendations on the number of participants in IPA studies have been made based on several factors including the iterative nature of IPA, the richness of the data collected, the type of research questions asked and the time and resources available to the researcher (Miller, Chan, & Farmer, 2018). Participants in IPA research are a mostly homogenous group, 'sharing a certain, contextual perspective on a given experience' (Larkin et al., 2018, p. 3). IPA gives value to the idiographic nature of one's experiences with the phenomena, with an illuminating of the diversity and commonalities of the human experience hoping to come to the forefront of the analytical process (Eatough & Smith, 2017). IPA has also been determined to be appropriate to use with LGBTQ+ populations due to its commitment to idiography, allowing researchers to capture the diversity within specific groups, as well as placing participants within the social, political and cultural context in which they reside (Chan & Farmer, 2017).

Sample size recommendations for IPA are generally between 4-10 participants (Peat et al., 2018; Pietkiewicz & Smith, 2014). The small sample size takes into account the focus of IPA (idiography) and the in-depth analysis that is required of each participants data, whilst also alluding to the subtleties that would be missed in larger case sizes (Miller et al., 2018). For this study, a participant sample size of 6-8 participants was decided in line with these recommendations and taking into account the parameters of the current study.

When contact was made by potential participants, they were sent an information sheet (see Appendix C) that provided details about the research process and eligibility criteria. Nine people contacted the researcher via email to express their willingness to participate. Two did not reply after being sent the information sheet and one was unable to participate due to a medical emergency.

Participants who had read the information sheet and confirmed that they would like to participate were then asked eligibility questions and had any of their own questions answered. After confirming eligibility, an interview time was organised. Participants were given the location options of the Massey University library, local (to the participant) meeting rooms or at a location of their choosing. All interviews were conducted at locations chosen by the participants which resulted in interview beings conducted at the Massey University Library (n=3), participants homes (n=2), Waikato University (n=1) and via Skype (n=1). There was one interview initially conducted on skype however due to poor internet connection, both participant and researcher decided to meet face to face at Waikato University to continue the interview a fortnight later.

The interviews were conducted one on one with participants. At the start of each interview, the researcher introduced herself to the participant, provided a hardcopy of the information sheet for the participant to read through again if needed, reminded the

participant of the reason for the research, and asked the participant to read through and sign the consent form (see Appendix D). This also acted as a catalyst for participants to ask any further questions they had about the research and build rapport with the participants through conversation. At the end of each interview, the participant was thanked for their participation and gifted petrol vouchers as a show of appreciation for their time, travel and effort in participating in this study.

Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method of data collection for this study as this was deemed to be the most effective method for participants to explore their experiences of perfectionism, allowing participants to direct the interview and discuss what was important to them, while providing the researcher with the ability to direct participants back to pre-selected topics if needed (Willig, 2013). One participant opted to conduct the interview over Skype due to recent illness; however, the low-quality internet connection led to the mutual decision (40 minutes into this interview) to reschedule for a face-to-face interview. This took place two weeks after the initial Skype interview.

Other forms of data collection may also be used such as photographs, diaries or written accounts of the phenomena (Frechette et al., 2020). Initially, this research project considered the use of photos as an additional form of data collection alongside interviews. This aspect of the project was voluntary for participants to complete after the interviews. Two participants originally consented to take part in the photo aspect with one participant following through and emailing three photos to the researcher with brief descriptions of how this related to his perfectionism. The second participant decided to withdraw from the photography aspect due to his own time constraints. Upon discussion with the original supervisors, it was decided that the photography aspect of

the project would not be included in this research and the focus would remain on the interviews provided. Instead, the participant's very brief descriptions of these photos were used to support analysis of their original interview.

Each interview took 60–90 minutes. The interviews were audio-recorded with two digital voice recorders (in case one recording device failed), with participants' consent. The audio files were then uploaded to a secure computer and into a password-protected folder that was accessible only by the researcher. This was consented to by all participants. At the conclusion of each interview, I spent some time reflecting on the interview, my thoughts, feelings, or anything interesting that occurred. This was recorded in a reflexive journal throughout the research process.

The interviews themselves were purposely quite informal to ensure that participants felt comfortable talking about their experiences. Therefore, interviews were more akin to a conversation to ensure that participants discussed what was important to them while the researcher ensured relevancy to the overarching research topic. The interview schedule was created as a conversation guide and had open-ended questions on general topics to promote discussion (Smith et al., 2009). This was naturally incorporated into the conversation and referred to only if necessary during the interview as participants directed the interviews, with the researcher guiding them back to the topic of interest if needed. Interviews were flexible in that there was no rigid adherence to the interview guide, especially because the researcher was interested in the perceptions of the participants themselves and discussion of what was important to them. This was done under the assumption that the participants are experts on themselves and their experiences.

Throughout interviews, the researcher kept her input to a minimum, guiding only when absolutely necessary and using prompts such as 'can you tell me more about

that?' or reflecting participants' own statements back to them to facilitate further reflection of their experience of perfectionism. Throughout the interviews, I used skills such as reflection, summaries, sitting with silence (which prompted the participant to fill the silence with further reflection), active listening and micro skills to facilitate an engaging, in-depth and detailed interview.

The researcher regularly summarised throughout the interview process to ensure that what was being said was understood and enabled participants to confirm or further clarify these understandings. Additionally at the end of each interview, participants were invited to provide feedback on the interview. As a result of this invitation, several participants circled back to previously discussed points to elaborate further and two participants reported having developed new insights into their experience of perfectionism as a result of the interview.

Once interviews were completed, the researcher noted down in her reflexive journal her thoughts, feelings, or anything of note that occurred during the interview as part of the reflexive process. Prior to transcription of the interview, the researcher listened to the audio file several times. Once the audio files had been listened to several times, transcription of the interviews took place in the weeks and months following the interviews. Transcription was completed by the researcher for all interviews to support immersion in the data. Transcription of the interviews were completed one at a time. This helped the researcher get as close as possible to the data and, therefore, as close as possible to the participants' experiences of perfectionism, as is recommended with IPA (Smith et al., 2009). Once transcription was completed for participants, the researcher checked accuracy through listening to the audio file alongside reading the transcription.

Data Analysis

The aim of IPA is to go beyond the description of the participants' experiences, towards a deep, rich and detailed meaning and interpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al.'s (2009) general guideline of IPA analysis (outlined previously in the methodology section) assisted in the analytical stages of the research.

Firstly, each transcript was read thoroughly alongside the audio recording to become familiar with the participants experiences. Initially, no coding was completed in the first read through alongside the audio recording. Transcripts were then read through again without the audio recording and anything of significance was recorded in the margins (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) recommend completing a multilevel analysis at this stage, specifically noting linguistic, descriptive and conceptual data of interest.

From these notes in the margin, emergent themes were developed for each participant individually. This was to ensure that the interpretation was situated within the participants experience of perfectionism. The emergent themes for each participant were then placed in an excel spreadsheet with representative extracts from the data to anchor each theme. The researcher frequently returned to the text to ensure that these extracts were best represented within the theme provided. This was completed for each participant individually and the researcher completed analysis of each participant individually before moving on to the next.

Peer debriefing was utilised in sending two raw data transcripts to the researchers main supervisor alongside the step by step analysis that took place to obtain themes from the data. This was to ensure that themes were grounded in the data rather than for accuracy of interpretation due to the subjectivity of interpretation (Larkin & Thompson, 2018). Additionally, themes presented in the results sections are anchored in

the extracts of participants and a clear description of the analytical process is provided to enhance trustworthiness.

Through this process, similarities emerged between participants themes and these were grouped together to best represent the participants experience. When discussing perfectionism, participants placed priority on particular issues, therefore they were grouped together (for example, efficient use of time was mentioned frequently throughout all participants' accounts). This analytical process was tracked using a spreadsheet where combining and excluding themes across participants could be followed on separate documents for each participant as part of an audit trail. This also supported the researcher in being able to clearly see the decisions made at each point of analysis. The themes and subthemes were reviewed and edited numerous times with the aim of ensuring the most cohesive way to capture and communicate the data without losing the participants voice. These results are presented in the next chapter.

Chapter 5: Results

This chapter presents the themes derived from the analysis of the interviews. Three themes and eight subthemes were identified through the analytical process (see Table 1). The first theme, 'Contributions to Perfectionism', describes participants making sense of how their perfectionism came to be. The second theme, 'Living with Perfectionism', details the processes and effects of perfectionism on participants' everyday lives. The final theme, 'Journey towards (Im)perfection', presents the negotiation participants undertook between reality and their perfectionistic ideal, prior to discussing the differing ways in which participants accepted and made sense of their perfectionism at the current time. The term (Im)perfection was used to describe the last theme as it was a term frequently used by participants to describe their acceptance of not only their own perceived imperfections, but others imperfections as well.

Table 2

Identified Themes and Subthemes

Themes	Subthemes
Contributions to Perfectionism	Making Sense
	External Expectations
	Sexual Identity
Living with Perfectionism	Process of Perfectionism
	Impact of Perfectionism
Journey towards (Im)perfection	Navigating the Tension between Reality and Ideal
	Acceptance of Self

Theme One: Contributions to Perfectionism

The theme ‘Contributions to Perfectionism’ encompasses the overall development of perfectionism and is comprised of three subthemes. The first subtheme, ‘Making Sense’, details the ways in which participants made sense of their perfectionism through their early experiences that contributed to their internal sensemaking of the world. It also captures how participants define perfectionism. The second subtheme, ‘External Expectations’, explores participants’ experiences with expectations from their family, friends, schools and within their career. The third subtheme, ‘Sexual Identity’, captures the perceived role that identifying as a gay man had on the development of perfectionism.

Making Sense

Participants described how they make sense of perfectionism in their internal world. They experienced perfectionism from a young age and recalled experiences from childhood that they denoted as being key to the development of definitions, thoughts, beliefs and values behind perfectionism.

Interestingly, three participants expressed uncertainty regarding their participation within the research due to the lack of a definition of ‘perfectionism’ provided in recruitment. They sought approval from the researcher to assist them in specifically defining ‘perfectionism’ to further confirm that they were ‘perfect’ enough for this research.

Steve experienced a high level of uncertainty as to whether he would fit the criteria of perfectionism, which created doubt for him. This doubt centred around not having a concrete definition with which to compare and contrast himself, to determine whether he would be the ‘perfect’ participant:

Yeah, 'coz I wasn't sure what your definition of 'perfectionism' is or was 'coz uh I don't think that anyone is perfect… What is perfect, you know? … Um…well when I read through your information sheet, I wasn't sure I would describe myself as a perfectionist but obviously the friend who forwarded the information and subsequently thought that I was a perfectionist. (Steve)

The participants held a common view on how they defined perfectionism through their personal experience. They agreed that no matter how perfectionism presented in different areas, it centred around doing the best that you can. For example, 'Generally, I don't think perfection is obtainable, I think it's a process. You're aiming for perfection but, unfortunately, that means you're never satisfied' (Henri). Tim extended this further: 'It's an individual thing and its, um, an aspiration which you work towards and think, "well that's the best I can do in the time I have got available anyway" '. All participants agreed that although perfectionism was an internal aspiration, they understood intellectually that perfectionism could not be attained. Though this did not mean that perfectionism should not be aimed for, despite knowing that the likelihood of attaining perfection was low.

All participants discussed early memories they perceived as being examples of their perfectionism. These reflections provided an understanding of perfectionism as being part of their life since early on. For two participants, this was most vividly recalled in their artistic endeavours as children:

I suppose I think the way perfectionism like, when I was younger, like a kid and stuff, I used to draw, and I used to have to draw perfectly and so I used to get frustrated when I couldn't draw right and so I would rip it up and then I would start all over again. And then over time I realised I really hated drawing and found it frustrating because it had to be perfect and I didn't want it to be crap

and if I'd done so much of it, I would be infuriated. So I started … I just stopped drawing. (Henri)

My earliest memories of that are colouring in and always being careful to go within the lines but I developed a system of rules about what colour crayons went together, that you could have next to each other. (Steve)

Participants identified thoughts in early childhood of a desire to achieve perfection in small tasks such as childhood art. This striving for perfection as children was echoed throughout participants' accounts. Through the lens of a lifetime of experience and defining their own identities, it is normal that viewing experiences retrospectively tends to mould and order these experiences into fitting with one's current understanding of identity. For Matt, he recalled that from a young age he needed to ensure that his clothes were pristine prior to leaving the house:

As I was growing up, I wouldn't go out of the house without my shirt tucked in and all that…as I grew up into a teenager I would actually um take time to say to mum, 'does this shirt look alright?', or I'd ask her to re-iron a shirt if there was a crease on the sleeve and throw a tantrum if it wasn't done. (Matt)

Steve understood his perfectionism as a mental concept and that perfectionism encompasses a series of items to complete to obtain that perfection, which together created the final piece of perfection. He further identified that having such a strong sense of needing to attain perfection created a sense of failure internally because that ideal could not be achieved: 'The sort of belief system that can go right into your brain and you think, "oh well I'm never going to be good enough in no matter what I do" '.

In contrast, Tim viewed his perfectionism as being fundamental to who he was as a person. He believed his perfectionism to be a combination of a biological component of his personality and the interaction with his environment:

It must be genetic I think because our son does the same thing in his house. I didn't tell him he had to do it, his house, his decision. But you look along their bookshelves and all the novels are in alphabetical order by author, so I don't know whether these things can be genetic or not, its environment isn't it. (Tim)

Tim is a very process-driven individual, having rituals and routines to attain perfection in his view, which appeared to bring him a sense of comfort. He accepted perfectionism as being part of who he was and that this meant he could not resist it, instead revelling in the order it bought to his life. He noted that this occurred from early on in life in the form of having his books in place: 'But I was probably always very fussy about having books in the right order [laughs] so that wasn't new' (Tim).

All participants held specific beliefs relating to their perfectionism. They held a strong belief that striving for perfection increased the reality of them achieving perfection and should always be attempted. This was important for five of the men, who believed it was a waste of time to not go above and beyond the expected standard for all tasks. For example:

It's a personal goal and the thing is I don't think any one else shares that goal a lot of people are like… just you know, I get this at work a lot, 'you're giving 150% and I'm worried about you why don't you just try giving us 80', and I'm like, 'why bother?' (Henri)

Some participants' self-identity was intertwined directly with their internal beliefs of self-worth. For these participants, this meant that when they did not achieve they felt it directly reflected who they were as a person and further contributed to the self-critical thoughts they experienced. For example:

Like I said earlier, I used to beat myself up…and it wasn't until last year when I really understood who I was that that's where I started to like to be, 'oh okay I

understand this now'. Um, it's about breaking away from some of those cycles. (Rau)

The participants expressed often struggling with achieving their standard of perfection and experiencing frustration when they did not meet this standard. This also meant they held a belief about themselves as not being good enough—an intrinsic belief that either motivated them to try harder to attain perfection, or to give up on the task at hand out of a desire to not re-experience that feeling of not being good enough. Participants described perfectionism as something to be performed despite feeling a level of resistance to it and pressure to attain ideals. This self-imposed pressure created thoughts and beliefs of feeling less than others.

External Expectations

Further to participants making sense of their perfectionism through their early experiences and internal world, they discussed the contribution that external expectations had on the development of their perfectionism. All participants described both individual people and professional environments as implicitly or explicitly having a certain level of expectation.

Each participant provided accounts of key people in their lives that they perceived as having contributed to the development of their perfectionism. All participants noted expectations from families, teachers, mentors, work and culture as being important in increasing, or having defining moments that increased, their motivation to achieve perfection. Each participant recalled nuanced experiences within their family that they viewed in hindsight as having been pivotal in the development of their perfectionism. For example, 'And then my parents, I would try live up to what I believed their expectations of me were you know, being the perfect little boy, not causing a fuss or creating problems' (Bill).

For Tim, this included his parents who had arrived in New Zealand as immigrants and often spoke to him of their hopes of coming to New Zealand: ‘When you hear your parents say that they did it so that their children can have a better life that’s exactly what my parents did, and it worked. But you have to take the opportunities’ (Tim) These stories provided an implicit message to Tim to strive and achieve in his life due to him having opportunities that were not available to his parents.

In contrast, Steve reflected on the role his father played in the development of his perfectionism, often making Steve feel as though he was not good enough as he was. This experience meant that Steve initially strived for perfectionism; however, upon further disappointment from his father, he began to develop a strong belief that he would never be good enough so he may as well not even try: ‘So, um, Dad’s attitude to me always seemed, from my perspective, to be that I was a constant disturbance. I couldn’t do anything right, constantly breaking things and making noise and, you know’ (Steve).

Steve’s experience was one of there being very high standards with which he was required to live up to in order to attain his fathers’ love and acceptance. Steve attempted to fulfil these standards, but later in life recognised that ‘it’s the perfect ideal that you can’t attain’. The striving for perfection was sourced from an explicit and implicit sense from his father that he was ‘not good enough’, which appeared to be a driving force for Steve to attempt to live up to these expectations: ‘The hostility, you know, ah, unable to meet the standards that are expected even when the standards are unreasonable and so on so that was sort of interesting for me’ (Steve). Bill experienced a similar feeling of needing to present himself in a certain way to his father through his father modelling a strong emotional reaction when he made mistakes: ‘I remember my

dad used to get really angry if he ever made a mistake and so I felt like I couldn't make mistakes around him' (Bill).

For Rau, his mother held implicit expectations of him being able to take care of himself from a young age in order for her to be able to support the family. This meant that Rau, who experienced medical conditions that required ongoing monitoring, became perfectionistic in holding the responsibility of getting himself to and from medical appointments from a young age. Rau's medical conditions meant that if he did not sustain perfection in attending his appointments and managing them, it could have serious consequences for his wellbeing. Rau viewed his medical conditions as having contributed to his perfectionism through their required management. There was a need for him to act in the 'right' way to keep himself well and live up to both his mother's and doctor's expectations of him.

A number of participants also discussed negative experiences with individuals outside of their families. Tim recalled a negative experience with a teacher who told him he would not amount to much: 'I wanted to be a lawyer since I was about 14 and dug my toes in because this wretched man was telling me I was aiming above my station' (Tim). Instead of using this as a reason for stopping to strive for his goal, this incident and explicit denunciation of Tim led to him striving to prove the teacher wrong, which he managed to achieve. Similar to Steve, Tim strived to demonstrate that he was good enough, in spite of what his teacher had told him. Negative messages that participants received from key people in their life appeared to influence their perfectionism in different ways. For example, Steve used the negative messages he received from his dad as confirmation that he was not good enough and that there was little point in trying. Conversely, for Tim, the comment from his teacher did not pierce his sense of self, likely due to it being a one-off incident.

All participants experienced pressure to perform within school and organisational cultures, which contributed to having high standards for oneself within an institutional setting. For example:

> *I think it really started to become more apparent when I was like 11 and got into an extension class at school and there were standards to perform to. All of my classmates were high performers and the teachers had high expectations because we were labelled as being more intelligent than the other kids… I often felt like I wasn't smart and that somehow, I had made it into the class because of a fluke or a mistake, so I felt I had to work harder to show that I was meant to be there. There was a level of competitiveness and comparison for sure, like, for others, they seemed to be naturally smart, but for me, I believed I had to work harder to be smart.* (Bill)

Three participants described their perfectionism as becoming more prevalent during their studies at university. There was pressure to perform well at university, and these participants noted that it was important for them to achieve to gain recognition from professors and peers working within the university. Henri was proud that he had never missed a class at university and spoke of spending hours on assignments to make them perfect. The driving force behind this appeared to be gaining recognition from his peers and professors, who would praise him for an assignment or presentation and seek his advice: 'So, in my perfectionism, I suppose that really came out in my assignments, so you know I never missed a class in my four years' (Henri).

For Tim, it was a mentor at university who motivated him to craft his perfectionism within his writing. Tim spoke of this mentor as not explicitly stating or consciously role modelling perfectionism, but he held high standards that Tim felt

needed to be reached, indicating implicit expectations of Tim to perform to a high standard:

> *He in a sense illustrated it for me and taught me not consciously or verbally or anything but just by being who he was, and I could see that and knew that there was a standard to maintain, to achieve first of all, and then to maintain. But I don't think it went beyond that.* (Tim)

Here, Tim explores the role of his mentor who implicitly motivated him to strive for perfection. Tim held a lot of respect for this mentor and appeared initially to seek approval from him by meeting and maintaining the standard the mentor had implicitly imposed onto Tim. Tim felt that striving for this standard created the success he has had in his career and was in part driven by the desire to not put anything out into the world that he would be embarrassed about. This mentorship later turned into a much more equal working relationship over a lengthy amount of time for most of Tim's life, and he found great comfort in being able to achieve a piece of work that was up to his mentor's standard.

Four participants noted external expectations at work; when they produced a high standard of work in their attempt to reach perfection, they received praise from others:

> *I think when people value me it gives me a lot of pride and that's something that has been consistently carried though to my career to date.* (Henri)
>
> *It's also wanting to prove to them that you put me in this leadership role, and you can see that it will be done and that it will be done in accordance, if not more so, than how you want it to be.* (Rau)

Rau spoke of the role that Māori culture played in his development of perfectionism as the eldest child and son. He explored the implicit expectation for him

to be a leader, which led him to seek leadership roles from a young age to demonstrate his competency in fulfilling the requirements of tuakana (oldest male) within his whānau (family). Rau also discussed an area of perfection not mentioned by other participants: 'I started to develop leadership skills…you know peer mediation, Kapa haka class rep… leadership positions I take pride in' (Rau).

Existing within these cultural confines also meant always being prepared to attend the marae or assist whānau in some way. Rau saw this as an extension of his perfectionism, as he did not want to be seen as failing within his tuakana role. Rau's environment consisted of responsibilities from a young age that meant he had certain standards and expectations to live up to according to tikanga Māori. Rau viewed these as positive standards and expectations, enticing him to strive for success despite some of the challenges he faced along the way. This appeared to give him a sense of purpose outside of himself.

Macro-level expectations of perfectionism were also noted. For Rau, this took the form of the religion that he was part of and how the message he received through his faith was one where he was considered to be perfect as a child of God. He also noted how this belief was internalised, where he saw himself as perfect in comparison to others: 'When I was younger growing up in the [specific] faith and [specific] church having my family inactive at church and I was the only active one I thought I was the perfect one' (Rau).

The era in which participants grew up also played a central role in the expectations they felt they had to live up to. Participants' ages ranged from 26–80 years old. In Matt's words:

> *In the seventies, you know, family arguments and that were very much kept behind closed doors. So while I was privy to my family's arguments and*

dysfunction, there was an assumption that all of our neighbours were the Brady Bunch so to speak you know like, so I suppose I grew up with the sense that my family was imperfect and by association I was probably imperfect. (Matt)

Rau felt pressure to appear perfect to others and this meant creating a 'public self' out of the fear of rejection: 'When I'm meeting people, I tend to put on a fake mask I guess, kind of hiding who I am because I don't want people to see the true me, so I will put on a mask' (Rau). For Matt, this was also present when having guests at his home, motivated by a fear of being judged by others as imperfect:

Though if people were coming over for dinner, you know, having visitors, I would need the whole day to go through the house top to bottom. And they may only be in two rooms, you know, but there might be the chance they will wander in to one of the spare rooms, you know what I mean? … So a lot of it was around judgement, being judged, but a lot of it was also about exhibiting how perfect our lives were you know we had this perfect house in the perfect setting and it was perfect. (Matt)

These performances for other people were conducted to create an illusion that the participants were perfect, therefore maintaining the public persona that participants felt they needed to present. Through doing this, participants were unable to be vulnerable due to not wanting to display themselves as imperfect.

Sexual Identity

Most participants described feeling different from others from a young age and being aware that being gay did not fulfil societal norms. There was significant discussion of the way homosexuality was viewed in the particular times that participants grew up in. This resulted in a conflict within the self and a feeling of needing to hide their sexuality from others while they identified, explored and accepted their sexual

identity. Participants noted that through this process, they felt the need to overcompensate, which contributed to their perfectionism.

Henri spoke of becoming aware of this difference from a young age: 'I suppose when you are feeling that you are less than, you strive to put forward that you're just as good if not better. And so, you do that through those ways of being perfect I suppose' (Henri). Five of the participants that experienced this feeling spoke of not being able to quite put their finger on what it was that was different about them until they were in their teenage years or early adulthood. Once they identified or acknowledged what made them feel this sense of difference, they described not wanting to experience the stigma and prejudice that was present within society. For example:

> *Um, I suppose it wasn't until I left home or left New Zealand in my mid-twenties to go to a [European Country] to pursue an artist career that I felt free enough to begin to come out, which was quite a long process because I'd had quite an anguished adolescent in the sixties. Not wanting to be, well, 'queer' was a prerogative* [derogatory] *term then, but not wanting to be queer.* (Steve)

Henri explained that having to hide part of himself caused his perfectionism to become more intense: 'Then what happened after I was a kid; my perfectionism came out in trying to hide who I am from my family and from my friends' (Henri).

One participant spoke of trying to hide themselves from not only others but also from themselves: 'I think I did very successfully convince myself that I wasn't gay for a decade or more you know' (Matt). Several participants described the desire to fulfil the norms of society through being and 'doing' heterosexuality. This was achieved through the development and maintenance of intimate heterosexual relationships in their adolescence and adulthood:

So determinedly having a girlfriend and pursuing sexual experience because I felt that if I just practised enough, not that I would be heterosexual completely, but that I would be close enough… I didn't think I wouldn't be gay, but I thought I would be able to be heterosexual as well and carry on a normal life. (Steve)

When I came out, I ended a long-term relationship, a marriage to a woman… so my coming out period was quite difficult. (Matt)

The conflict that participants felt in relation to being perceived first and foremost by their sexual identity created a sense of needing to demonstrate ability in other areas for which they could be applauded, given the likelihood for them to experience discrimination and prejudice for being gay. This discrimination and prejudice expected from others appeared to be internalised:

The conflict may not be conflict as soon as you come out, but then you're left with this sort of like feeling of where I've strived to be perfect in these other ways and its defined who I am and it's how I'm perceived. And yet I am perceived as being a gay person, but I'm also perceived as doing these things or I take pride in doing things really well because it gives me so much satisfaction. (Henri)

I felt that, ahh… you know. In those days, they were 'poofters' and 'fags', and that was an imperfection. So to kind of compensate, I think I felt there was a certain amount of compensation required, not to hide it but to do just that, to compensate for it, if that side of my life, my being, wasn't perfect then other areas needed to be. And that's where it bought in a certain amount of anxiety as well around the whole discovery. (Matt)

This conflict initially created a separation between the way participants perceived (or hoped to perceive) themselves and how they needed to present to others; that if they were perfect enough, then their sexual orientation would not matter:

> *I do associate it with being gay because I have many straight friends and they're a little bit more relaxed about things, and they don't really put that much, um, emphasis or attention on some things compared to what I would put attention onto.* (Henri)

> *And I guess you just feel that because you're gay that you will be perceived as less than other people, and that affected me and contributed to me kind of throwing my life away for a couple of years because I couldn't meet that expectation. So, why even try, you know?* (Bill)

Bill further explained:

> *There was this like conflict between who I perceived to be the perfect person within society, you know, like living up to society's expectations of being straight, and I think I was a really big people pleaser to fulfil that illusion that I wasn't different, you know.* (Bill)

Nearly all participants spoke of the pressure from heteronormative society and being initially resistant to coming out due to the perceptions and societal views of being gay throughout the different eras. As previously stated, participants ranged in age from 26–80 years old.

Henri spoke of the environment he grew up in, where being gay was against their country's conservative values and the assumption of straightness that was pervasive:

> *Being a gay person—and I don't want to say this in any sort of negative form and stuff—but being a gay person is different [than] if you're a straight person*

because you never have to come out to be straight, you're automatically assumed to be straight. So, therefore, when a gay child is growing up, the whole family and everyone around them automatically assumes that they are straight and that their future is that they will get married and have kids or reproduce, and that's how it's been for thousands and thousands of years. But the thing is that then, that construction that's placed upon the gay person, is something that's always going to be a conflict because that person is realising that they are not going to be able to fit that mould and they feel that's going to be a disappointment. So they will then manifest possibly traits of wanting to excel in different areas to be perfect, to be the perfect kid, to be the perfect son or daughter, um, to almost hide who they really are. (Henri)

Four participants spoke of how once they identified as gay, there was the desire to overcompensate, to prove that they were worthy despite not adhering to heteronormative society values, thus further perpetuating the desire to achieve perfection:

There is that common sort of strive to excel, to be better, to be really good so that you can kind of prove that I may be gay but I'm pretty brilliant. That I'm perfect at this or I am a perfect person. So that's where I think that may come from. (Henri)

But for a while there, yeah, you feel like that is your defining characteristic, your sexual orientation, rather than who you are as a person. And because being gay wasn't seen as the 'norm' where I was from, I felt I had to prove myself in other aspects of my life to show that there was more to me. (Bill)

Participants spoke of feeling less than others because of the societal views of homosexuality that placed this as an 'other' within society. This otherness meant that

most participants felt they had to prove that they were good enough to be on par with those who identified as heterosexual.

In contrast to the other participants, Tim did not view his sexual orientation as being a factor in his perfectionism, stating that he did not feel the pressures other participants had experienced and preferred to refer to his perfectionism as a personality trait rather than related in any way to his sexual orientation.

Summary

Overall, participants experienced the development of their perfectionism as multifaceted. All participants shared early examples of perfectionism, ranging from their artistic endeavours and requirements for orderliness to the presentation of their appearance. They made sense of their perfectionism as the result of high personal aspirations and appeared to have an intellectual understanding that while perfection was unable to be attained, it should still be aspired to. Participants defined 'perfectionism' as having high standards and were able to explore the conceptualisations of perfectionism and early experiences that, upon reflection, were regarded as early indications of perfectionism. Further, they described explicit and implicit incidences with family, teachers and mentors that they considered to be contributing factors in the development of their perfectionism. For some, these appeared to be motivating factors; for example, anything negative said that made them feel imperfect appeared to elicit a sense of failure to achieve perfection and contributed to them striving even harder to attain perfection. These external expectations appeared to contribute to feelings of self-worth as being intertwined with their ability to be perfect for both themselves and others.

Finally, participants provided in-depth accounts of the ways in which sexual identity played a role in their development and expression of perfectionism. The underlying construct of feeling less than others due to being gay in a heteronormative

society permeated most participants' accounts. This meant that participants felt the need to overcompensate by attaining perfection (or as close to this as possible) in various aspects of their life, to prove to themselves and others that despite being gay, they have many other things that they are perfect at within society. By participants' own accounts, perfectionism cannot be separated from being gay in a heteronormative and homophobic society. Additionally, participants appeared to want to avoid a sense of failure and judgement by others, which contributed to their perfectionistic strivings. The next section will examine the lived experiences and effects of perfectionism in their day-to-day lives.

Theme Two: Living with Perfectionism

The theme 'Living with Perfectionism' describes participants' experiences of living with perfectionism, with the two subthemes of the 'Process of Perfectionism' (about the day-to-day experiences of perfectionism for participants and how it presents) and the 'Effects of Perfectionism' (detailing the positive and negative consequences of perfectionism for participants' lives). These are explored below.

Process of Perfectionism

The 'Process of Perfectionism' subtheme details the everyday processes that participants incorporated into their lives to fulfil their perfectionistic ideals. This involved different types of organisational strategies and perfecting of systems to ensure efficiency. Time was also a concept frequently discussed by participants.

All participants discussed the importance of process in the presentation of perfectionism in their day-to-day lives. Participants perceived it as very important that they be organised in order to achieve their desired outcomes. Participants legitimised

this need for organisation through internal and external standards. For a number of participants, this was demonstrated within their home lives:

> *I can tell you precisely where any book is meant to be, not just that lot [points to books he previously indicated he had written himself] but any [laughs]. And there are very few rooms in the house that don't have books in them. But they're by category initially.* (Tim)

> *I used to have, well I still do have, CDs. I was an avid collector of CDs in the nineties and I used to, um, I had a wall of CDs, a wall, and I had them all stored in wooden wine boxes that would stack oblong shapes. But everything was in alphabetical order and everything. I knew where every CD was. … I just like to know where everything kind of is in that way and it's in my head it's kind of organised in that way. So it had to be perfect that way for me.* (Henri)

Having a system in place to make items easy to find appeared to provide participants with a sense of comfort in knowing where specific items were located. It also provided a sense of pride of being able to easily find and locate what they may need at any given point in time. Interestingly, these participants often spoke in terms of these systems being a need and imperative to their own wellbeing, for example:

> *I also have to keep everything tidy and know where things are and aesthetically. I'm very particular about what I have in my home. There needs to be order, it helps calm my mind.* (Bill)

> *I have to make my bed before I leave home, hospital corners and all.* (Matt)

All participants spoke of the varying strategies they used to be organised, including creating lists and planning ahead:

> *I plan ahead quite a lot in many aspects of my life, like even coming here or me going to a meeting or something. I've always rehearsed. 'I'll say that and she'll*

say that, and maybe she'll ask me this, and we'll talk about this, and then I can say that'. So some of the things I said to you today will already be things I've thought about. (Steve)

Yeah, so I'm really organised. It's important that I have lists for what I need to achieve and am able to tick them off as I go. This helps me remain focused but also makes me go, 'okay I have done this, this, this and this, you're on the right track'. (Bill)

Participants discussed the need to go over things several times prior to actually completing the task or event at hand. This repetition or rehearsal appeared to reassure participants that the likelihood of failure was minimal and increased the possibility of perfection for their desired outcome in the future. These processes provided participants with a sense of achievement as they worked towards their desired outcome:

But in that process of learning about interior design and colour and furniture, even to this day, I will rearrange a room, or the way pictures hang, or something, over and over again until I get it the way that I know is right. (Steve)

Participants described a sense of 'rightness', demonstrated through their perfectionism. This sense of rightness appeared to be intuitive and difficult for participants to define, though they all agreed that it was a feeling within themselves of being 'right' where it was meant to be, or done the 'right' way:

I think it's the right way to do it because its tried and true and it worked for me, so it should work for everyone else. (Bill)

I will go along and look at it, 'that should be a little over there, just there', you know? The clock should be in the centre of the bookcase, not off to one side… but, um, we have somebody who comes in and does the dusting and the cleaning and the vacuuming and everything, and he comes every fortnight. He picks

everything up and puts it back in approximately the right place but not exactly the right place. (Henri)

Participants discussed numerous rituals and routines that meant the task at hand was completed the 'right' way. For example, Steve had a particular ritual when stepping out of the shower that he believed dried him in the most efficient way. It was through these processes and the adjacent sense of rightness that these rituals and routines became ingrained in participants' lives:

When it came to personal grooming, these rituals evolved into a specific order in which I would clean myself in the shower, you know? When you did your hair, when you scrubbed your feet, the goal is to clean every facet of my body as quickly and efficiently as possible. And some of those habits, like about the way I dry myself with a towel, you know, the pattern became ingrained. (Steve)

You know, I'm a very routine person as well I suppose. I get up at the same time every day no matter what. You know, one of those kinds of things. (Henri)

Matt elaborated on and described the way this sense of rightness held a lot of meaning for him. It also provides an example of the rigidity this sense of rightness can bring for participants:

If I had a really bad day and my wife [referring to his previous wife] had parked her car on my side of the garage for a very legitimate reason, I'd just find it kind of like the final straw, you know? So I'd have to go in, get her keys and move her car over. I couldn't just park my car on her side of the garage and let her go. I just couldn't, you know? I needed something that day to work properly, and you know it was often when she had her father's car because it was too big to go in her side of the garage because there was a lot [of] stuff on her side. And she had a very small car, so that was why, so very legitimate reason. Which is why I

wouldn't be like, 'oh for fuck's sake can you move that car', you know? Because I know that's it my thing and I've got to deal with it, but it would really upset me. (Matt)

These rituals and routines provided participants with a sense of control over their lives—something immensely important to them. The participants appreciated having control, hence the organisation and requisite time invested in this. It was through this control that participants appeared to gain comfort in not only completing the task or situation, but the process in which it was done. Participants preferred approaching tasks methodically and followed specific ways to do something to achieve the outcome, usually developed by themselves:

I worked as a chef for quite a while, and making cakes is something that I'm very good at, and what I like about that is that you can, it can, be perfect, you know? There's set ingredients and set method and you know what it's supposed to turn out like. (Henri)

If I'm entirely in control of that process, then I'll take more achievement of that. Where I quickly realised that if the outcome of something depends on someone else's opinion or perspective, then chances are I'm not going to get the result I'm hoping to get and I'm going to have to accept something else. (Matt)

Participants strongly believed that having a set of rules to follow increased the feeling of control they had within a situation. All participants referred to structure and control as being imperative to their functioning and a motivating force behind how they performed different tasks:

I think one of the reasons I like making curtains, recovering furniture, painting furniture is because I have control. (Steve)

So, I could tell you pretty well everything of any significance is in the house. (Tim)

I couldn't cope with that kind of unstructured life. Like, my life's always been structured. (Matt)

Participants' feeling of control motivated a lot of their choices and processes in their lives, from work, hobbies and personal lives to menial tasks such as drying their bodies. All participants spoke of predictability and having control as central to their self-organisation, for example:

I think it's because I strive for perfectionism in my work and in my life, you know, and things I like to do when I go away and see things we have a…I have things organised, I am a very organised person, and, uh, I use them to be organised. I used to be a lot more fly by the seat of my pants about things but now things are a lot more calculated. (Henri)

This change for Henri occurred over time. As he encountered more success in his career, he received positive reinforcement from others, which contributed to him repeating similar processes and thought in other areas of his life.

For Steve, control also meant not giving away his power to others: 'Because I don't like to be controlled and I can see that being related to being gay' (Steve). Steve elaborated that he felt pressured by societal norms to be heterosexual and that there was a certain level of control exerted over him to 'not be gay'. He therefore rejected people who he viewed as trying to control him, and this could be seen in both his personal and professional life.

Matt discussed frequently providing himself an 'out' when he's trialling something new or has set a goal for himself, so he does not have to fulfil the perfectionistic standards if something disrupts the process that is outside of his control:

I find that enables me to feel like I'm still in control of the whole design process, that I'm leading it so to speak. And that when it does fall over, and I can go back and say, 'I knew it would, I said at the beginning I knew it would'. You know what I mean, so I'm still in control. (Matt)

This was also seen throughout his employment history, where he often became frustrated with organisations' or management's inefficient processes, as he perceived his suggestions and ways of doing tasks as being the best way to do things. This highlights a rigidity of thinking that some participants experienced.

Participants frequently referred to time as being important to the context in which they were asked to perform. Participants viewed utilisation of time as important to reduce the burden of feeling as though time had been wasted, which pulled them further away from the ideal of perfectionism they were attempting to achieve. Time was a core element of participants' accounts of perfectionism:

If you live in a jumble, you don't know where anything is and you spend an awful lot of time looking for it, which is very frustrating. I have to do a little bit of that, but I manage to avoid most of it, which is good. (Tim)

I'm never late (laughs). I'm a very punctual person. (Henri)

For some participants, the amount of time they put into the task they believed was conducive to the successful attainment of the desired outcome:

I remember editing videos and they had to be perfect. They weren't at all kind of compared to other people's videos, mine had to be perfect. You know, with music playing and everything was perfect. The editing, the time I'd edit it, I spent way more time than the others did. (Henri)

And then with work, I tend to overwork myself, feeling if I put more time in that it will better. And I have sometimes have missed deadlines because I'm like, 'no

just a little more time and it will be perfect', but it never is. I always look over my work after I submit it and still criticise it, but my managers and colleagues are always complimenting my work and say it's to a high standard. So that's meant I can let it go a little easier now and don't miss deadlines. (Bill)

Perfecting a way of doing something is something I take quite a lot of pride in, and I feel a real achievement if I can improve something now. And I won't say I've made it perfect 'cause it's not perfect 'cause someone will come along in 10 years' time and improve on it again or in 10 minutes. And I'll say at this moment in time this is the most efficient way of doing this or whatever, so, you know, so that is important. So that's one way of measuring perfectionism as well, if you can actually evidence it's a better way of doing something for whatever reason. (Matt)

A feeling of satisfaction once having achieved something to the best of their ability, given the time and resources provided, meant participants were able to shift their perception of perfectionism to a certain extent in order to achieve the goal. This appeared to promote a feeling of satisfaction and ability to let go:

It's where I just feel calm and at peace with what I've done. And I'm willing to let it go. (Henri)

I think too I'm at a place now where I don't need it to be perfect and other people don't need me to be perfect and that's like a relief. So I'm able to just feel satisfied—maybe not 100%, but like 98% satisfied—with something and let it go. (Bill)

Impact of Perfectionism

The 'Impact of Perfectionism' subtheme describes the different areas in which participants perceive perfectionism to affect their lives. Participants discussed the effects on relationships, career, sense of self, emotions, successes and failures in life.

A number of participants spoke explicitly of how perfectionism had affected their intimate relationships with others. Some participants acknowledged that they were more likely to criticise their partners and held them to a high standard, which could create tension:

> *I would criticise my partners and be like, 'no you should do it this way', or 'you should be like this'. I've come to realise though as I've gotten older that this was all in relation to me rather than my partners, you know? And I think it also was a way for me to distance myself, so I didn't have to make myself vulnerable to them. Like they wouldn't have the illusion of me as perfect, shattered (laughs), which I know now they would have seen me for what I was, and it was only me who thought I was fooling others into thinking I was perfect and had it all together.* (Bill)
>
> *I think I am less forgiving of my partner.* (Henri)

Steve discussed his idea of a perfect partner and held a strong ideal that he should not have to compromise his own standards for another person:

> *And I've come to the view that, you know, the myth of romance. There isn't the perfect person out there, that it's all…relationships are always a matter of compromise, but my standards are such that I prefer not to compromise rather than do, you know? I'd sacrifice any positive things that might come from a relationship in order to be independent and organise my own life as I want it.* (Steve)

Steve referred to romantic relationships as being a 'myth', which is further complicated by his own perceived refusal to compromise his standards to develop and maintain a successful intimate relationship. He was resigned to the idea that he would be alone in his life because of this inability to compromise his own expectations of others to be 'perfect' despite knowing that he is imperfect. Steve appeared to be repeating the relationship his dad had with him, where he often felt not good enough and sought to live up to his dad's expectations, though he ultimately gave up. Steve held a strong fear of failure, and this is likely to contribute to his rigid perception that others would not live up to his expectations and his unwillingness to compromise his standards for a relationship to be successful.

Rau had similar expectations placed on him by a previous partner and often felt he was not good enough. He attempted to live up to another's ideal of what perfect should be. This created distress for Rau, as he felt like he was flawed for not being able to live up to these standards: 'I felt I wasn't good enough for him so I would try even harder to be even more perfect for him'.

For a number of participants, intimate relationships were also a place of safety and healing, where they could express their perfectionism without fear of rejection from their partners. This was important to participants as the increased sense of emotional safety meant they were able to be more vulnerable and present their imperfections to another person while knowing this would not change their opinion or perception of the participant. For example:

> *I can make demands really outrageous demands in that relationship knowing full well that if he's chosen to descend to my command and then my demand it's because he's chosen it, not just because I've demanded it. There's that understanding.* (Matt)

The three participants that had long-term intimate partners spoke explicitly of their partners being not perfectionistic or being perfectionistic in some areas but not in relation to the home. There was a sense for these participants that home was a safe place, where they could express their perfectionistic desire without fear of rejection or reprisal from their partners.

Family relationships also demonstrated their fair share of tension and the confrontation of not being perfect created conflict:

> *I guess in my family too we all have high standards and that has caused some conflict. Like, we are all really stubborn when we think that we are right and strongly dislike being told we are wrong.* (Bill)
>
> *You know I have failed but at least I've done more than my father did.* (Steve)

A number of participants expressed difficulty in compromising with another person, preferring instead to remain rigid with their version of perfection within relationships. Bill and Henri reflected on their relationships with others and the shift in priority from wanting to present as perfect in front of others to placing connection and relationships at the forefront:

> *And based on the historic examples of relationships I have had and have ended because of my unwillingness to bend or relent, um…I think I've learned that it is much more important to have those friendships and be forgiving and understand that not everybody is going to be the same way you are…generally, it can be quite negative because people are thinking 'just let it go', and then I take that cue lately, and I think it's largely because the group of friends that I have is much more important than my need to be a perfectionist.* (Henri)
>
> *I think there's been negative things in the sense that my stubbornness, I suppose, on how I think something should be done because this is the way it should be*

done has lost me some friendships which, you know, I'd rather not have lost. You know? So it's the impact of my strive… for sort of doing things my way and because I think that's how it should be done and that's the perfect way for it to be done—it's kind of, it can rub people up, and I've lost friendships over it. But I don't regret it and I look back and I'm like, 'you know that was not going to work anyway'. (Henri)

As I've gotten older, I've realised that it's actually not that important to be right and letting it go more now than when I was younger, to make sure I can still maintain friendships and positive relationships with my family. (Bill)

For three participants, this also meant that they imposed perfectionistic standards on work colleagues they managed. They told of taking time to teach colleagues or students to support them in achieving goals that would also reflect well on the participants. They encouraged them to use the same processes that they (the participants) would follow to complete the task, believing that this method was the best way to proceed. However, these participants were also cautious to not impose their standards onto others, realising it was an individual perspective and preference rather than one that others could attain:

I'd like to…if I thought that I could just stand up once and state, 'this is how we're going to do this process from today on' and it would be followed to the letter, I would be more tempted to do that. But people are people, so you actually find that you're saying it almost every day or reminding them at least weekly at the team meetings, and I find that tiring. And also, you know, because I know I'm not perfect even though would like to be. … I'm quite pedantic, which is part of being a perfectionist I suppose, um, but I also try not to let my anxieties inform my pedantry. (Matt)

For some participants, perfectionism involved immediately fixing imperfections:

You know, I used to have, if my car got the slightest scratch, like, literally the slightest scratch from like a tree, I would be down at the panel beaters having it touched up and what have you. I don't do that anymore. (Matt)

In further discussion of the effects of perfectionism, all participants credited their perfectionism with getting them to where they are in life. All participants acknowledged the role perfectionism had in creating what they deemed to be successful lives, mostly in relation to their careers. For example, Bill stated, 'Perfectionism has also been positive because it's made me achieve things I wouldn't have otherwise'.

All participants noted experiencing a sense of pride when a piece of work lived up to their ideal. This feeling of success, attributed to perfectionism, appeared to give participants a sense of purpose and meaning as they strived to excel in their chosen areas: 'While at work, it's because of my perfectionism that I have excelled and done well in my career' (Bill).

A number of participants discussed the internal aspects of their perfectionism, which mainly revolved around not being able to achieve their standards. They deemed these experiences as being ones of failure that affected their sense of self-worth:

When I was younger, it was important to me to succeed. And then, as I failed more and more, it became not so important (laughs). (Steve)

I believed I had to work harder to be smart and that…I think it's called like 'imposter syndrome', where you don't feel like you belong but there's a part of you that wants to, so you strive to live up to the expectations you place on yourself and from others. (Bill)

For these participants, their sense of identity was comprised of not being able to achieve the standards and expectations they had set for themselves, which resulted in

them feeling inadequate. One participant, Steve, initially strived for perfection and success; however, his experiences of perceived failures meant that the desire to strive or work towards achieving perfection became less as the fear of failure overrode this aspiration. In reference to being a father, he compared and contrasted his performance as a father against that of his own father:

> *So, you know, for 20 years I've sort of felt this 'could have been this, shouldn't have been like this', 'this could have been better' and 'you know I have failed but at least I've done more than my father did'. You know in participating in their lives, so there's that sort of justification again.* (Steve)

This meant that when challenges arose in either his personal or professional life, Steve would often withdraw rather than continue to attempt to achieve his goal.

Bill also referred to a time in his life where the pressure he felt to be perfect was overwhelming, contributing to him not wanting to attempt to fulfil these aspirations for a few years:

> *There was this like conflict between who I perceived to be the perfect person within society, you know, like living up to society's expectations of being straight. And I think I was a really big people pleaser to fulfil that illusion that I wasn't different, you know? And I guess you just feel that because you're gay that you will be perceived as less than then other people, and that affected me and contributed to me kind of throwing my life away for a couple of years because I couldn't meet that expectation. So, why even try, you know?* (Bill)

Participants discussed continually striving to achieve more to fulfil their aspirations in different areas of their lives. Steve expressed that although he did not fulfil the aspirations he had once hoped to, he strongly believed he had lived a better life than he would have had he not had his perfectionistic aspirations:

I've got an idea of what my potential was, and I don't think I have come anywhere near developing or using my potential as a human being. But if I had been less perfectionist, I think I would have achieved even less [in my life] *and been satisfied with less.* (Steve)

It was also important to maintain the image of perfection for others, and several participants would dispose of evidence of uncompleted tasks that created a feeling of imperfection. Participants would place this out of sight in order for it not to be present in their everyday lives:

I would hide things, get rid of it somehow, ignore it, and it… Literally, you know, a book, you know? I'm going to read 'Lord of the Rings' trilogy, so I'd buy all three and I'd get four chapters and then just get rid of them, 'coz I don't like things sitting around reminding me. (Matt)

As a result, I have a room full of unfinished projects, some going back 10, 20 years, things I haven't completed. (Steve)

Steve discussed an avoidance of this room as it reminded him of imperfection and his failures at not completing these tasks. This appeared to reinforce his belief of 'not being good enough'. These participants preferred to disregard their perceived imperfections by removing them from their life, either temporarily or permanently. This appeared to be important to participants in order for them to maintain the illusion to themselves and others of their being perfect.

Participants also spoke of the emotional experience associated with perfectionism. Three spoke of feelings of anxiety and the effects that had on their wellbeing during the process of attempting to fulfil their ideal:

Anxiety is one of the side effects that has come through in the recent years as a side effect of me striving to do things the way I want them done, correct, perfect

and done correctly. So I suffer a little from anxiety, so I find it hard to go to sleep. My mind is racing. I do lists but sometimes I just wake up at 3:30 am and I'm lying there in bed for the next three hours until I get up and go to the gym. (Henri)

I've experienced really bad anxiety before. It's settled a lot now that I'm not constantly holding myself to be perfect all the time. But at it's worse it was like I couldn't even start a piece of work because I knew it wasn't going to be perfect, and I ended up getting social anxiety too because I thought that people would look at me and see imperfection, so I would avoid social situations. I see that as all being related to perfectionism, to its most extreme. (Bill)

Because that's just more of my anxiety around having things done my way. (Matt)

They attributed their anxiety to the stress and pressure of fulfilling their expectations to a high standard. Having such high expectations of themselves could lead to participants feeling overwhelmed at times, unable to complete tasks and perpetuating a feeling of 'not good enough'. A number of participants spoke of feeling 'not good enough', which appeared to derive from internalising self-perceived failure:

So from her [mother of his children], I've experienced subjectively the same sort of messages, 'I'm not good enough', 'I'm not measuring up', 'I'm not what's expected', you know, and it's the perfect ideal that you can't attain … I see that as perhaps being related to a fear of failure and growing up with four other siblings, all highly intelligent and energetic and, you know, being good at competition and sibling rivalry, and learning that, um, a good way to handle that stress was not to compete. You know? Not to put yourself out there to be knocked down. (Steve)

I put a lot of pressure on myself and would be critical of what I did, feeling like it was never good enough and I should do better. (Bill)

Matt elaborated on his coming out process and the striving for perfection during this time as creating distress for him:

Maybe five years of intense change and that, I think, I just got to a point where I…you can't keep control of everything all of the time and it was impacting everything. It was impacting relationships, it was impacting me now, I couldn't enjoy anything, you know, and it started affecting my mental health. You know, I've never been OCD, with locking the door three times or anything like that, but, uhm, yeah, I lived in [large European city], which is quite a frenetic type city. And if I was going to work and the trains were running late, it would make me really angry that things weren't working the way they should work, and I just realised that that shit's going to happen every day. So I had a lot of counselling, so I started to accept, you know, like the dead duck as being perfect in its imperfection, you know? The full circle thing. (Matt)

Hindsight was important in these experiences, as participants noted that their relentless standards caused tension with others and within themselves.

Steve discussed feeling a strong sense of guilt at not having lived up to his own perfectionistic ideal of what it meant to be a father: 'You feel guilty. I feel guilty' (Steve). Steve and Bill in particular discussed not being able to align their emotional needs and expression due to wanting to appear perfect in front of others:

I think this meant that I did supress my own needs and emotions though. (Bill)

…and reflecting on it as an older adult, I feel that you can't selectively repress feelings. If you have to hold back in one area, you tend to hold back generally,

and that has impacted on my ability to recall and relive emotional situations that would be useful in an artistic career. (Steve)

This desire to present as perfect was attributed to the repression of the wide spectrum of emotions and needs that make us humans. For Steve, this was likely to avoid the sense of disappointment that he experienced from key figures in his life, such as his father and his children's mother.

In contrast to the other participants, Tim did not associate anxiety or negative emotions with his perfectionism. On reflection, he noted that he could see how others may experience these negative emotions when attempting to attain perfection:

I guess there could be negatives in the sense that I could imagine other people perhaps striving to achieve what they think of as perfection in whatever it is they're doing but knowing they can't achieve it or haven't achieved it. That doesn't happen to me. (Tim)

Summary

Overall, participants shared a range of experiences of living with perfectionism in their day-to-day lives. Organisation was seen as imperative to attaining perfection and participants identified a range of strategies they utilised, mainly revolving around neatness, organisation and overall efficiency. The impact of perfectionism were vast and resulted in both negative and positive experiences. Participants credited their perfectionism as an important factor for their success within their careers, though there was also an overall sense of 'not feeling good enough' at the peak of their perfectionistic strivings and finding it difficult to accept their own imperfections. For some participants, this created anxiety, stress and anger. All participants noted the effects on their close relationships, with most participants reporting high expectations of their intimate partners, while also acknowledging that within the home/relationship

space was where they felt most accepted, able to be vulnerable and able express their perfectionistic tendencies.

The next section discusses participants' endeavours to accept their imperfections and the navigation they had to undertake to achieve this.

Theme Three: Journey towards (Im)perfection

The theme 'Journey towards (Im)perfection' encapsulates the processes described by participants by which they moved towards the acceptance of perfectionism and, ultimately, themselves. The first subtheme discusses the navigation of the tension between reality and their perfectionistic ideal undertaken by participants and explores the ways in which participants have drawn conclusions through this process. The second subtheme, 'Acceptance of Self', captures participants' acceptance of both perfectionism and imperfection.

Navigating the Tension between Reality and Perfectionism

The subtheme 'Navigating the Tension between Reality and Perfectionism' concerns participants' experiences navigating the tension between the reality of their experiences and the ideal that they had hoped to attain. This process occurred for participants over their lifetime, from a striving to fulfil unattainable ideals to a more realistic understanding of what can be achieved.

All participants spoke of perfectionism as being the ultimate ideal to achieve and that they often had to settle for less than perfect due to perfection not being attainable by humans. This led participants to navigate the tension between what realistically could be achieved versus their perfectionistic ideal:

> *I think it's something that regardless, whatever you're doing, that is aspired to, but whether it can be achieved, I don't know.* (Steve)

If you've done the absolute best you can, then the results are going to be perfection, if you can truly say to yourself 'I gave it everything I had', you know? (Matt)

I think that it's kind of like what you hope you could do or be, you know? This ultimate ideal that in your brain, you know it's not really able to be achieved or fulfilled, but to get as close to it as you can. (Bill)

Nowadays, I know I'm not perfect, although I try and be perfect, it's not a possibility. (Rau)

Participants explored the difference between perfection and what they could actually attain given the resources they had at their disposal, both physically and mentally. There was an intellectual understanding that perfection itself was impossible to attain and that they must acknowledge this in negotiating their aspirations of perfection.

Participants made sense of this through comparison and an understanding of themselves:

You compare and contrast between what you have and what you are, aware of the gap and the shortfall between what you have and what is in theory attainable. (Steve)

There's like right brain, left brain stuff going on. Like, your left brain is like, 'be perfect!' But your rational logical part is like, 'that's not possible'. (Bill)

They noted that it was not a rational process, but one in which it was necessary to improve the overall quality of their day-to-day lives. Participants noted that reducing the pressure on themselves and being more flexible with their expectations to achieve perfection was pivotal in this negotiation:

I don't think it's a rational process, it's more of a reflective process that you pause, time stretches out, and you try to achieve some things and try to have some measure of success and you have some failures. But you still have to keep on living day to day. (Steve)

I've learnt over time to balance the two. So like, attempt work and relationships and have high standards, but I think for me flexibility is really key too, so that I don't create a huge amount of stress for myself. (Bill)

For all participants, this meant a shift in the definition of perfectionism in relation to themselves. This is demonstrated by Matt's navigation between the cost and benefits of continuing to be perfectionistic:

As I said, I think that if someone is a true perfectionist then I think they could probably maintain that level throughout their whole life, if it really was that important to them. And I think if they are a true perfectionist, than that stuff comes more naturally, it's not so much of an effort. Whereas I was finding that I was putting so much effort into my idea of perfect that it was part of…it was shifting my ideas as well to what is perfect. (Matt)

Participants referred to this process of navigation as necessary to loosen their rigid expectations of self in striving for perfection. For a number of participants, it was difficult to define when it was time to let go and be sufficiently satisfied with what they had attempted to accomplish. For some participants, acknowledging their sexuality and living their lives authentically contributed to this negotiation:

Or you get to a point that you've got to let things go, that's it's not you, that it doesn't really fit your personality as much as you want it to because you're trying to be something that maybe you're not. And I think for me, that definitely was a part of it not acknowledging my sexuality. (Matt)

The incongruence between constantly striving for perfection and what participants desired their lives to be like caused them to reflect on their priorities and make adjustments as they deemed necessary. Participants reflected on the shift from childhood or adolescent to now and made connections with the change in their definition of perfectionism, from 'must attain' to 'do your best'.

There was a deep sense of reflection among the majority of participants who experienced some form of distress as a result of their perfectionistic tendencies. This navigation lead to the next subtheme, 'Acceptance of Self', which is discussed in the next section.

Acceptance of Self

The subtheme 'Acceptance of Self' describes participants' experiences of accepting their imperfections and, ultimately, themselves as imperfect human beings. A number of participants discussed a lessening of their preoccupation with perfectionism over time and being able to come to terms and live with being imperfect. When describing what this felt like, they discussed the need for compromise to occur to come to this acceptance. For Henri, this was most apparent in his relationships with others, where he realised that he needed to reduce his standards to maintain relationships with other people after losing a meaningful friendship when being rigid with his standards:

> *Over time, I've become a lot more understanding of the different views and I consider that a lot more now. I suppose I'm much more interested in the general collective view on things now and I won't really push.* (Henri)

Matt elaborated that he still identified as a perfectionist, though this no longer encapsulated his whole self; rather, it was just one part of who he was: 'I still think I'm a perfectionist, I do things a very certain way' (Matt).

For other participants, accepting themselves also meant lessening their preoccupation with perfectionism in order to be able to move forward. There is a level of acceptance that the ideal cannot be achieved; therefore, once participants reached this point, their perception shifted from focusing on perfection to being able to do the 'best I can':

> *I haven't been obsessive about my perfectionism, though I do have the ability to just say, 'oh that's as good it's going to be'. I don't have to keep picking at it like a sore, you know, if that's what it is. Or I just leave it and come back to it at other times.* (Tim)

Henri and Matt further elaborated on the importance of ensuring the goal was achievable:

> *It would be something that would be achievable, and if you could do it to the best of your ability, which gives you a feeling of great satisfaction that you can then leave it, I think that's perfect.* (Henri)
>
> *I don't set myself unattainable goals anymore either. I used to set myself completely unrealistic goals, um, which was just ridiculous.* (Matt)

Finally, participants' acceptance of perfectionism was accompanied by increased self-acceptance that striving for perfection is beyond human capacity. Participants gaining insight into their perfectionism was important to create a closer alignment of their public and private identity. Participants had different strategies to achieve this:

> *I think for me, flexibility is really key. That doing what you can, or doing the best you can in that situation, really is all you can do and that's enough.* (Bill)
>
> *And now I'm a bit older, priorities shift, things changed… but I think I can see now, it sounds kind of poncy, but I can see perfect imperfection.* (Matt)
>
> *It's been powerful for me to come to terms with.* (Rau)

All participants appeared to go through phases where their perfectionistic tendencies were more prevalent. There was an ebb and flow to their perfectionism depending on other factors in their lives, such as pressures at work or feelings of being overwhelmed. When participants experienced pressure or being overwhelmed, they discussed their perfectionism as becoming more intense and rigid. This was particularly apparent when participants spoke of their earlier experiences of perfectionism, which seemed to lessen over time. This was also the result of participants having learned different coping strategies to manage their perfectionism to lessen the negative effects. Participants reflected on these experiences, and there was a strong sentiment that they were doing the best they could in the moment. There was a notable shift as participants were able to be more flexible in their standards for themselves and began to move into a space of acceptance and compassion.

For Rau, it was important to first accept that he was not perfect and that this was okay:

> *I think for me, over the last couple of years, I've learnt that I'm not perfect and it's okay to say, 'I'm not perfect'. I always thought that if you said that, that people would have a negative reaction to you, and that it's okay to say, 'I don't know'.* (Rau)

Participants discussed the human condition of imperfection as being the only constant and that accepting this meant further acceptance of themselves as they are. They expressed a desire for a life of fulfilment and realised that in order to do this, they needed to take control of the perfectionist part of themselves. This resulted in participants developing strategies to manage their perfectionistic ideals and develop deeper insight into the effects that perfectionism was having on their lives:

So, you know perfectionists, where perfectionists fall down in my book is that they put their idea of perfectionism onto everybody else or everything, and we just don't live in that kind of world, and you will be constantly disappointed. And I think I got sick of being disappointed and annoyed and fed up and all that, and I realised that the common factor here is me. So and then, as I said, a little bit of insight and mindfulness. (Matt)

This resulted in participants having a more compassionate view of themselves and reducing their standards and expectations of themselves. For example, Matt expressed, 'Yeah, so now I'm much kinder to myself, less critical and aware that I have this thing that makes me want to be perfect…I don't become excessive and can let it go'.

The acceptance of, and freedom to make, mistakes was important. All participants accepted that part of being human was making mistakes:

Are they Turkish carpets or something? Where they always put a mistake in a carpet intentionally because only God can make something's that perfect. So that's sort of satisfying to think that I don't have to be perfect. I'm not God or the saying that 'you're perfect just the way you are'. So more self-acceptance or tolerance of myself helps me have less stress, I think. (Henri)

Summary

In summary, the theme 'Journey towards (Im)perfection' denotes participants' experiences of accepting their imperfection. This occurred over time for participants and led to navigation between what they had hoped to be and the reality they had to contend with. Participants noted that the tension created in their attempts to fulfil their perfectionistic standards was pivotal for change and acceptance to occur. There appeared to be a shift in participants, from perceiving perfectionism to be their whole

identity and thus required to fulfil their perception of self to perfectionism instead becoming one part of their multifaceted identity. This led to more acceptance of their perfectionism, rather than resisting it. Further, participants utilised strategies to reduce its negative effects on their day-to-day lives.

Overall Summary of Results

As can be seen, the men in this study shared their unique experiences regarding perfectionism, how it developed, what it looked like in their day-to-day lives, its effects and how it changed over time. Additionally, there were many similarities between participants, as evident from the role sexual identity played in the development of perfectionism, the processes and effects of perfectionism, and the attempts to navigate between reality and the ideal of perfection.

Participants viewed their perfectionism through a reflective lens, identifying the development of perfectionism over their lifetimes to date. Participants identified parents, sexual orientation and external expectations as contributing to the initial development of perfectionism. Additionally, links were made by all participants between perfectionism and identity. Participants noted both positive and negative effects of perfectionism and highlighted the day-to-day processes they performed to meet their perfectionistic standards. Organisation, planning, repetition and rehearsal all played an important role in its presentation. The results indicated that participants experienced emotional distress and conflict within their relationships with others as a result of perfectionism. This affected their sense of self-worth. Positive effects were noted as taking pride in their work, experiencing positive feedback from others and acceptance within close relationships—these facilitated participants' acceptance of not only their perfectionism but also themselves as a whole.

Over time, participants became more accepting of their perfectionism as a part of their identity, rather than it encapsulating their whole identity. As participants became more accepting towards themselves, distress caused by perfectionism also lessened.

Chapter 6: Discussion

This chapter presents the main findings of this study, which explored the lived experiences of perfectionism among men who identify as gay in New Zealand. Three themes were identified: 'Contributions to Perfectionism', 'Living with Perfectionism' and 'Journey towards (Im)perfection'. The main findings are discussed in line with the research question and sub-questions and linked to the psychological literature. The implications of the findings, study limitations, potential future research directions, researcher reflections and final conclusion are also presented.

Main Findings

The purpose of this research was to understand the lived experience of perfectionism in New Zealand from the perspective of six gay men. Seven semi-structured interviews were undertaken with six participants who self-identified as perfectionistic. The chosen methodology - IPA - positions participants who live with the phenomenon being investigated as experts of their world (Larkin et al., 2006).

While these findings cannot be generalised beyond the research group, they can provide insight into the lived experiences of perfectionism in their day-to-day lives and contributes to an exploration of perfectionism in the lives of other gay men, including in therapeutic situations. Participants' understandings and sensemaking of the development of perfectionism, the impact of perfectionism in their day-to-day lives (including relationships) and how their perfectionism changed over time are discussed in the following sections. These are presented in order of the most significant findings from this research.

Sexual Orientation, Identity and Acceptance of Perfectionism

This study found that perfectionism and sexual orientation went hand in hand for all but one participant as they made sense of their identity. Sexual orientation was considered to be a contributing factor to the development of their perfectionism. Participants discussed the experience of feeling different as children and adolescents. This created a desire to prove to themselves and others that they were perfect, in order to minimise and hide what society had deemed to be imperfect—their sexual orientation. Interestingly, some participants discussed a fear of judgement due to not fulfilling the heterosexual norms that were expected of them, which further perpetuated participants striving for perfection.

There are few studies detailing the effects of social context and membership of minority groups in the development of perfectionism. Therefore, this finding contributes to the current research via participants' accounts of 'othering' within society. This finding can be partly understood by drawing on the theories of minority stress (McConnell et al., 2019; Meyer, 1995), gender role conflict (Fields et al., 2015; O'Neil, 2008), sexual orientation and identity models (Hammack, 2005; Mustanski et al., 2014), as well as the perfectionism social disconnection model (Hewitt et al., 2017). While perfectionism can be best understood to align with cognitions of 'I am not good enough', the minority stress model has found that those who do not subscribe to the Western societal ideal of being white and heterosexual are more likely to experience stigma, oppression and discrimination (Figueroa & Zoccola, 2015; Meyer, 2003). This sense of being othered within society is compounded by potentially being 'othered' within their own families, experiencing a feeling of difference and of not fulfilling the traditional male role of being involved in heterosexual relationships (Greene & Britton, 2012; Parker et al., 2018). Additionally, coming to terms with sexual orientation within a heteronormative society generally permeates an initial conflict and tension internally

that sexual minority groups have to contend with (Meyer, 1995; Pollitt et al., 2021; Simonsen et al., 2000). This can provide sexual and ethnic minority groups with the distinct feeling they are 'not good enough' due to not fulfilling heteronormative values (Flowers & Buston, 2001). Being intrinsically flawed due to their sexual orientation creates a motivation for participants to act and be perfect to counter this.

The perfectionism social disconnection model provides further understanding on where disconnection from social supports and interpersonal problems can account in part for the development and maintenance of perfectionism (Hewitt et al., 2017). The need to be accepted and to belong underlies this model, which may relate to sexual identity. Most of the participants in the current study distinctly noted that their perfectionism developed in direct relation to their sexual orientation and, consequently, they considered perfectionism a key part of who they are. As society perceives their sexual orientation to be the defining feature of their identity (Adams et al., 2014), participants identified strongly with perfectionism to compensate for this perceived flaw. This is supported by studies using the social disconnection model, which show the development of an identity where self-worth is intertwined with the feeling of being defective (Hewitt et al., 2017; Sherry et al., 2016).

However, the perfectionism social disconnection model posits attachment and parenting only in the development of perfectionism, with little consideration for the larger structural consequences that these families face. When it comes to perfectionism, the social environment in which parents reside determines the context in which they parent, making them equally essential factors. Importantly, four participants in this study grew up in the era of homosexuality being criminalised in their respective countries (New Zealand, Australia and Ireland). All participants experienced the AIDS epidemic at varying stages of development, with the older four participants more likely

to have been impacted through grief, loss, discrimination and survivors guilt (Hammack et al., 2018). All of the participants in this study were at least in early adulthood when New Zealand passed the Marriage (Definition of Marriage) Amendment Act (2013). Notably, of the three oldest participants, two participants had previously been in heterosexual marriages and one participant reported attempting to be heterosexual in his early 20s in the hope of being able to 'live a normal life'. The ability to perform and 'do' heterosexuality during this period of their lives was a reflection of wider societal attitudes and may be understood as protective for participants, especially in terms of the potential legal implications participants could have faced and the physical and emotional safety of participants. The systemic oppression and discrimination participants have been exposed to is likely to have contributed to both the development and the maintenance of perfectionism.

Members of the LGBTQ+ populations may also experience a sense of not belonging due to the larger socio-historical context in which they (and their families) reside. A sense of belonging has been found to be an important determinant of wellbeing with gay men (Fingerhut, 2018; McLaren, 2008) and this current research highlights wider systemic implications that may contribute to perfectionism. Perfectionism may be a way for participants to obtain a sense of belonging and validation within heteronormative society. Downs (2012) posits that gay men experience an internal rage due to the sense of not belonging and invalidation experienced within heteronormative society, other people and themselves, which he distinctly related to shame. Perfectionism may therefore be considered a protective mechanism employed by participants in response to heteronormative society.

As such, these findings suggest that the current research literature may not be able to sufficiently explain the function of perfectionism for people outside of the

heteronormative model, as it does not explicitly account for experiences of oppression. Nor does it account for the social norms embedded in society and their contribution to perfectionism. The findings of this study offer unique insight into perfectionism that extends beyond the individual and family structure normally studied in perfectionism research to include social systems.

The analysis also detailed the ways in which participants' experience of perfectionism changed over time. Over time, their definition of perfection changed to 'do the best I can', rather than a comparative interpretation of perfectionism. All participants discussed perfectionism as ebbing and flowing throughout their life, with perfectionism becoming more apparent when they were under stress, and then easing when they employed helpful coping strategies to minimise the negative effects of perfectionism. This supports current research that identifies the positive effects of perfectionism as being linked with personal growth and increased coping skills (Farmer et al., 2017; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). Additionally, the results indicated a clear shift in priorities over time for participants. For some, this meant reflecting on the impact that perfectionism had on their lives and whether it aligned with how they wanted to be. This required participants to question its function, the cause of perfectionism and whether it was beneficial to their lives. For most participants, there was a shift from strongly identifying perfectionism as a key characteristic of their identity to reducing it to a smaller part of this identity. There was acceptance over time that although perfectionism had produced some notable benefits within their life (most evident within their career aspirations), it was not all of who they were. There was an increased acceptance over time that striving for perfection was conducted to overcompensate for the fact that they did not quite fit into societal norms, similar to the writings of Alan

Downs (2012) and Matthew Todd (2012), which identified perfectionism as being a coping mechanism of being gay within a heteronormative society.

Additionally, the increased social acceptance of LGBTQ+ communities, evident through legislative changes such as the decriminalisation of homosexuality and marriage equality, has likely played a significant role in this change over time. Perfectionism as a function (a coping mechanism) may not be as needed because of the societal shifts that older participants have experienced over their lifetimes and the increased self-acceptance of identity over time. This also aligns with research demonstrating that self-esteem, resilience and utilising effective coping strategies increase over the adult life span (Aldwin et al., 2011; Handlovsky et al., 2018; Robins & Trzesniewski, 2005).

As with later sexual orientation identity models (i.e. Hammack, 2005), an integrative model may also be considered to account for experiences of perfectionism. Participants described their perfectionism as fluid in nature and having different stages throughout their lifetimes. The life course paradigm proposed considerations of social, historical and cultural context alongside human agency, which seek to position people within their environment (Hammack, 2005) and may be beneficial to utilise a similar model within perfectionism research. Doing so would provide space to account for experiences of marginalisation within society and thus provide a more holistic, and less pathologizing, understanding of perfectionism. Perfectionism appeared to take a path where, initially, it was viewed as separate from oneself and most participants experienced a form of resistant to its demands. Over time, it was integrated into the whole identity of participants. This demonstrated a shift, where it was viewed as a part of who participants are, rather than all of their identity.

Bouguettaya et al.'s (2019) study, examining perfectionists and social identity with women who had eating disorders, found that the societal pressures of what it means to be a woman in Western society was a key factor in the development and maintenance of perfectionism. This lends support to the idea that societal ideals significantly affect the development and maintenance of perfectionism (Bouguettaya et al., 2019).

Farmer et al.'s (2017) study reported that relationships with others, acceptance and support, and the ability to be vulnerable with others facilitated further acceptance of perfectionism. Acceptance of perfectionism meant participants became more flexible with their standards, themselves and their ability to connect with others. Some participants believed this also aligned with them being more accepting of their sexual orientation, whereas for others it provided an increased awareness of the self and what they would like their lives to be like. This highlights the role that self-compassion has in counteracting the negative effects of perfectionism (Stoeber et al., 2020).

This navigation between the ultimate ideal and reality appears to be achieved over time and with personal reflection. Initially, participants would attempt to be perfect, to reach that ultimate ideal and become distressed when this was not met. As the distress begun to feel more and more overwhelming, there appeared to be a point where they reflected on the benefits and consequences of perfectionism in their life. For most of the participants, this meant adopting more flexible standards for themselves and others, as they wanted to enjoy life more rather than be so focused on attaining perfection. It appeared that perfection became all-encompassing prior to reaching a point where participants became aware of its effects on their lives and what they wanted their lives to be like. For these participants, increasing their sense of peace, joy and connection with others became a priority instead. When this occurred, participants noted

positive effects across their life and were more accepting of imperfection and making mistakes. Several participants noted they were now able to see perfection in the imperfections of life. At the time of writing, there are few studies on perfectionism's change or stability over a person's lifetime (Smith et al., 2021; Stoeber, 2018). The present research therefore adds to the literature by denoting that perfectionism for most participants appeared to change over time.

The above findings align with the current research that shows perfectionism as being adaptable. Indeed, most participants described a development over their lifetimes that suggests that perfectionism becomes more adaptable over one's life, as they learned coping strategies to ensure that perfectionism did not result in overwhelming distress. Participants were able to adopt a more holistic and compassionate view of their perfectionism, acknowledging that it served a purpose (i.e., facilitating success in their academic life and careers) and was a response to feeling like the other within heterosexual society. When participants were able to do this, there appeared to be a greater integration of their identity as a whole.

The Role of Relationships

Participants also spoke of the healing that took place within intimate relationships. Several participants spoke of the ability to freely express their perfectionism within their current long-term relationships. This vulnerability enabled participants to realise that they were loved regardless of whether they were perfect or not. Three participants with long term intimate partners all expressed that their partners provided space for them to strive for perfection within the home and, if this standard was not reached, partners did not withdraw their love, showing these participants that perfection did not need to be attained for love and acceptance to be present. This freedom of expressing their perfectionistic tendencies within the relationship appeared

to be important for these participants to come to the realisation that they could be imperfect without jeopardising their intrinsic sense of self-worth and value. This, in turn, enabled them to become more loving and accepting towards themselves. These findings highlight the importance of acceptance and can be aligned with Lundh (2004) and Stoeber et al. (2020), who found that acceptance can mitigate the difference between healthy perfectionistic strivings and unhealthy perfectionistic demands. Further, a qualitative study by Farmer et al. (2017) found similar results, identifying the mitigating role that healthy relationships had on perfectionism due to participants being able to be vulnerable and be met with acceptance and support.

For two participants, this did not occur. One participant appeared to be highly accepting of his perfectionism as it was and did not note any negative effects on his relationship, as he held the perfectionist standards just for himself, rather than for other people. This appears to be more indicative of the adaptive perfectionism reported in the literature (Kamushadze et al., 2021; Stoeber & Otto, 2006). He reported that his perfectionism was simply a part of who he was and how he liked to do things. The other participant noted that he had very high expectations of others and was constantly disappointed in his intimate relationships with partners, family and friends. This participant did not want to compromise his standards for anyone else and appeared to be reminiscent of his early relationship with his father, who held him to extremely high standards that he was unable to meet and was consequently very hostile towards him.

Most participants reported that their perfectionism had at times had negative effects on their most intimate relationships due to imposing perfectionistic standards on their partners. Participants reported that their perfectionism had created tension or caused conflict within their intimate relationships due to being overly critical and less forgiving. This relates to the conceptualisation of other oriented perfectionism defined

by Flett and Hewitt (2002), where individuals place high expectations on others and can direct their own feelings of self-loathing towards someone else.

In the present study, participants also discussed the relationships between themselves and their colleagues being negative at times, as participants expected high standards from others in being able to complete work to the same standard they perceived themselves as being able to fulfil. One participant noted that his upper management would at times get worried about him because of his work ethic and difficulty in being able to let work go because he required it to be perfect prior to submission.

Development of Perfectionism

A consistent finding across participants was that they experienced perfectionism in childhood in some form, whether it was through the organisation of the objects in their room, their creative endeavours or their personal appearance and grooming. Participants had varying experiences of the role they perceived their parents had played in the development of their perfectionism, though most experiences could fit within the current literature regarding perfectionism development. Some participants noted that there was an unspoken expectation that their parents held of them to be successful, while others reflected that the instability of their home life produced a desire for them to have some type of control within that environment. The results indicated that for most of the participants, there was an internalisation of messages from their parents that failure was undesirable. This created a belief system that mistakes were to be avoided at all costs. For some, this meant striving for perfection, while for one participant, this meant giving up on trying to attain perfection, despite the desire for it, because the consequences of failing far outweighed the benefit of attempting to achieve perfection.

Most participants held their parents in favourable regard and discussed perfectionism as being implicit as children. Participants each had unique experiences and perceptions as to the contribution their families made in developing perfectionism. Most participants discussed implicit expectations from parents or role modelling of perfectionistic behaviour as influencing their own perfectionism.

Drawing on perfectionism research, the social expectations model is considered, where parents who provide conditional love based on the child fulfilling their expectations create perfectionistic tendencies in children due to children's innate desire to attain love and acceptance from their parents (Flett et al., 2002; Hewitt et al., 2017). This model fits well with one participant, who discussed experiencing high levels of hostility from his father when he did not live up to his father's expectations. Other developmental theories regarding perfectionism stipulate that those children who grow up in unstable or harsh households develop perfectionistic standards to establish control and predictability (Flett et al., 2002). In the same vein, the development of perfectionism can be viewed as an attempt to avoid shame and humiliation (Hewitt et al., 2017).

Process of Perfectionism

For all participants, the need for order was an important aspect of how their perfectionism presented in their day-to-day lives. Participants utilised various organisational strategies in their home, work and personal lives in an effort to meet the desired ideal. An overarching theme within the processes utilised by participants was the concept and importance of time. For participants, this meant ensuring that time was not wasted, that routines were well established to ensure that what needed to be done was completed to a high standard, and that their actions were deemed by themselves to be efficient in nature. The way in which participants engaged with these processes were

closely tied to a sense of efficiency and self-efficacy. This ranged from their work to cleanliness of their bodies to cleaning their homes. All participants also discussed systems they had put in place within their work environment that produced exceptional outcomes for them and the organisation where they worked.

Participants also discussed the importance of rehearsal and repetition to ensure the quality of a task. For some participants, this was noted in repeatedly checking written work, while for others, this meant rehearsing numerous times (such as in preparation for the research interviews) in an effort to minimise mistakes. This provided reassurance to participants that the outcome of the situation would be in their control. Organisation was also apparent within participants' personal spaces, and all participants noted that at work and home, it was important that everything had a place and could be easily located.

Negative Effects

All but one participant noted that perfectionism had created emotional distress in their lives at some point. Participants reported emotional responses such as anxiety and guilt when they did not meet the standards they had set for themselves. This resulted in feelings of stress, sleeplessness and, in some cases, complete avoidance of the task or situation at hand.

Further, participants expressed feeling that their self-worth was tied directly to achieving perfection. When this was not attained, they felt a sense of failure that further elicited a feeling of not being 'good enough' and participants engaging in self-critical thoughts.

These findings align with research both from clinical perfectionism and multidimensional perfectionism theories that characterises perfectionism as being the continued pursuit of exceptionally high standards despite adverse consequences (Egan

et al., 2011; Flett & Hewitt, 2006). Research has identified common cognitions aligned with perfectionism as fear of failure, fear of negative evaluations, high self-expectations and low self-worth (Conroy et al., 2007; Hewitt et al., 2017). These were all present among the participants in the present study.

Positive Effects

The findings also showed that participants perceived perfectionism as being a cornerstone of their success. Several participants were highly successful in their chosen careers and credited their being perfectionistic as the reason for this success. They strongly believed that striving for perfection meant they were able to achieve more in their careers and life then they would have without it.

Five participants noted that a motivating factor for them engaging in perfectionistic behaviours was being praised and valued by others. This was apparent in their academic careers, where professors, teachers and mentors would provide praise and use them and their work as exemplars in front of classes. At work, participants noted that they paid a high attention to detail before submitting work and were frequently praised. This appeared to provide participants with further motivation to continue to uphold their high standards.

Participants expressed a strong sense of pride in themselves when they had achieved something that they deemed to be perfect, or as close to perfect as they believed they could attain. This sense of pride gave them a sense of purpose and achievement that they relished. Participants' expressed conceptualisations of perfectionism support a multidimensional approach of perfectionism that can have both adaptive and maladaptive qualities (Lo & Abbott, 2019).

There was also a sense of pride among all six participants that their work colleagues turned to them for advice and guidance as how to best undertake aspects of

their job. For several of them, this meant they were in management positions due to the high standard of work they produced and the success they had achieved.

All participants discussed perfectionism as ebbing and flowing throughout their life, with perfectionism becoming more apparent when they were under stress, and then easing when they employed helpful coping strategies to minimise the negative effects of perfectionism. This supports current research that identifies the positive effects of perfectionism as being linked with personal growth and increased coping skills (Farmer et al., 2017; Stoeber & Stoeber, 2009).

Limitations

This research sought to understand perfectionism among six gay men in New Zealand using a qualitative approach. There a several limitations to this study which are detailed below.

A limitation of this research is the geographical locations that participants resided in, notably, cities in the North Island of New Zealand. Cities are known to be hubs for the LGBTQ+ community much more so than rural New Zealand. Unfortunately, there was no representation of gay men from more rural areas of New Zealand in the present study. This would have provided valuable information in terms of the experiences of gay men with perfectionism in rural New Zealand, where there is likely to be a smaller community of LGBTQ+ peers.

While participants represented most of the adult developmental lifespan (26–80 years old), emerging adults and adolescents were missing from the participant group. As such, this generation of gay men who self-identify as perfectionist was not represented in this study. There was also a limited representation of ethnicities in this sample, with only one participant identifying as Māori and the rest being Pākehā.

Finally, the limitations of IPA must be acknowledged. IPA relies heavily on the subjective interpretation of the researcher. Therefore, this study's findings are subject to the researcher's own interpretation based on her past experience and acquired knowledge. The researcher identifies as female, heterosexual, Māori and Pākehā. The interpretation of the data may have been different for a man who identified as gay, and this should be taken into consideration in relation to this research. The current study involved only six participants and, thus, the transferability of the results needs to be treated with caution.

Clinical Implications

Given the nature of this research and the fact that the researcher is studying towards becoming a clinical psychologist, it is important to note the potential clinical implications of this research. Arguably, one of the most significant findings is the striving for perfection due to a feeling of being 'less than' due to not fulfilling heteronormative standards and values. With this in mind, as a clinician, it is important to critique and understand the social context in which individuals are situated. Many sexual minorities have experiences of discrimination and oppression at both an individual and macro level. While it is important not to generalise these experiences onto potential clients, it is imperative that clinicians provide space, provide acknowledgement and ask all clients how they identify their sexuality and what gender pronouns they prefer, regardless of how they present, in order to promote a space of inclusion and acceptance. As part of clinical psychologists' role, it is important to recognise and acknowledge the effects that healthy, positive relationships can have in facilitating our acceptance of self. As clinicians, we are also in a position to advocate for groups that are affected by discrimination.

Clinicians working with gay men must note the pressures that gay men experience from both heteronormative and LGBTQ+ society. Instances of perfectionism can therefore be understood within the context of these pressures and the internalisation of messages from heteronormative society that gay men are flawed. This research also touched on the process of coming out and developing a sexual orientation identity. Therefore, this study lends support for meaning to be incorporated into perfectionism and distress with gay men who present for therapy. Further, it enables clinicians to directly target aspects of perfectionism to support clients in reducing the distress that can be associated with perfectionism.

Future Research Directions

This study has provided various avenues for future perfectionism research. As previously discussed, there is currently limited research exploring the lived experiences of perfectionism and gay men. The current study highlights the rich nuances of perfectionism that participants experience and provides the basis on which further studies in this same area, utilising qualitative methodologies, would be of value. The findings suggest that being 'othered' has a significant role in the development of perfectionism and, therefore, warrants further investigation to determine exactly what role this has in the development of perfectionism and how it aligns with identity. This would extend the current perfectionism research, which denotes family structure as playing the central (and only) role in the development of perfectionism. Research into being perfectionist as a social identity and the potential implications of this would also be a welcome addition to the current literature. It would also enable interventions to be more meaningfully targeted for this specific population due to a more holistic understanding of the presentation of perfectionism within the social context in which people reside. Additionally, research into perfectionism over a lifetime would be

beneficial to understand the mechanisms of change that may occur with perfectionism shifting from being central to identity to playing a more marginal role.

Future research could employ both quantitative and qualitative methodologies in a top-down/ground-up approach. The inclusion, for instance, of a survey to produce quantitative data regarding gay men's experiences of perfectionism is likely to produce valuable insights into the prominence of perfectionism across the gay male community. This may enable better access to gay men in rural locations and a deeper understanding of perfectionism from a representative sample of gay men.

Cultural understandings of perfectionism would also be interesting to investigate. As highlighted throughout this research, perfectionism research as it stands tends to utilise a Westernised model of perfectionism with the individual at the centre. Current research does not necessarily provide a thorough understanding of how these practices are grounded in experiences of the larger sociocultural environment within which people are situated. The findings indicate Rau held a different conceptualisation of perfectionism that incorporated aspects of tikanga Māori which is not currently available within perfectionism research.

Beyond the above suggestions, research could also incorporate different sub-groups of the LGBTQ+ population to identify similarities and differences. For example, perfectionism in transgender, bisexual, pansexual or lesbian populations would be interesting to further explore the sense of 'otherness' that each of these groups experiences in relation to perfectionism.

Lastly, given the role that intimate partners played in alleviating distressing perfectionistic symptoms and facilitating an avenue by which participants were able to be more accepting of their perfectionism, this is another area calling for further investigation.

Researcher Reflections

This thesis was developed through organic conversations with a family member and his friends that are part of the gay community, as well as discussions with supervisors and LGBTQ+ organisations. I wanted to keep as close as possible to participants' voices throughout the research process. It was important for me to conduct a piece of research that contributed to the current literature outside of the general populations usually represented in psychological research. I was mindful that this research was one of the first to specifically study perfectionism and gay men, a population group that has been pathologised in the past. As such, a ground-up approach, including no specific definition of perfectionism, was used and the focus was on participants' lived experiences, placing them as the experts, to ensure their voices were central to this piece of work.

The recruitment process felt at times slow, and at times I questioned whether six participants would be sufficient to provide legitimate findings. However, the more engaged I became with the transcripts through the analytical process, the validity and importance of the research became apparent. The rich detailed experiences of participants provided insight into not only the construct that was being studied but also the ways in which each participant had demonstrated resilience throughout their lives. Interviews were more moving than I had expected, as participants were open about their life experiences, reflecting back to specific painful memories as well as moments of acceptance and healing in both themselves and others.

I struggled at times to even look at the research let alone begin writing, which required me to come up with alternate strategies. For example, I initially wanted to write each participant's narrative and detail their stories individually; however, this did not seem to flow. When I began writing my results section with all the participants

together instead, the writing became much easier and synchronised, and the richness of the data began to take form. Given that this was the first time I had conducted qualitative research, the messiness in which data analysis occurs was, I think, something I had initially taken for granted.

It also brought out the strengths and resiliency of participants in facing some of the challenges they reported. This understanding, knowledge and insight is, and will continue to be, implemented as part of my clinical practice.

Final Conclusions

This study has provided insight into the unique experience of perfectionism among six New Zealand men who identify as gay. Three themes were identified: 'Contributions to Perfectionism', 'Process of Perfectionism' and 'Journey towards (Im)Perfection'. The goal of this research was to capture the lived experiences of perfectionism of a marginalised group in order to amplify their voices within psychological and perfectionism research.

Participants reflected on their childhood experiences as being key in the development of perfectionism, aligning with the current perfectionism research. However, participants also highlighted the role of sexual orientation, noting that the feeling of being the 'other' contributed greatly to both the development and maintenance of perfectionism. Underlying this was the belief that they had to prove they were more than their sexual orientation by overcompensating in other areas of their lives to reduce the feeling of discontentment for not fulfilling societal norms. Perfectionism may thus be viewed as a symptom of wider societal values and, interestingly, aligned with identity.

Further, there was a broad consensus that the effects of perfectionism were twofold; participants associated perfectionism with both negative effects (such as

emotional distress and loss of relationships) and positive effects (such as success in achieving career goals).

Lastly, reflection on how participants' perfectionism had changed over time found that as effective coping strategies were employed and resilience increased, the perfectionism-induced distress initially described in early experiences dissipated over time. This meant that participants were more accepting of themselves, able to show themselves more compassion and able to create a more integrated sense of self that went beyond holding perfectionism as central to their self-worth.

In summary, this study provides a deepened understanding and unique insights into the lived experiences of perfectionism with six gay men in New Zealand. This research has illuminated, in particular, how experiences of perfectionism within the participant group have evolved as a result of societal systems that privilege heteronormativity. It is hoped that this study would inspire clinicians to examine perfectionism as a result of society norms and challenge the heteronormative assumptions they hold; and that future perfectionism research will consider more precisely social context.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Recruitment Poster (Version 1)

WANTED: THE 'PERFECT' GAY MAN

- Do you identify as a gay man?
- Do you live in the Auckland, Waikato or Bay of Plenty areas?
- Do you consider yourself a perfectionist?
- Are you over 18 years old?

If you answered yes to the above questions, I would like to invite you to take part in this research.

Kia ora, my name is Jessica Steadman and I am a doctoral student at Massey University. I am seeking gay men who consider themselves to be a perfectionist in one or more areas of their life to participate in this study. I would like to interview you about your experiences with perfectionism and (if you choose) to either photograph areas of your life or share previously taken photos that represent your perfectionism.

You will be reimbursed with a $40 petrol voucher for your time and travel at the end of this study.

If you think you might be interested and/or want to know more about this research, please contact me at: perfectionismNZ@gmail.com

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.
If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Appendix B: Recruitment Poster (Version 2)

Appendix C: Information Sheet

MASSEY UNIVERSITY
COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES
AND SOCIAL SCIENCES
TE KURA PŪKENGA TANGATA

An exploration of perfectionism with men who identify as gay, takatāpui and/or homosexual.

INFORMATION SHEET

Kia Ora Koutou!
My name is Jessica Steadman and I am a psychology student at Massey University. I would like to invite you to take part in my doctoral research project that seeks to explore the experiences of perfectionism with gay/takatāpui/homosexual men. Perfectionism is a concept that exists across gender, sexuality and culture, and can be considered both a negative and positive attribute. It can occur in one specific area, or across a range of areas in your life. The purpose of this study is to explore and generate further understanding of gay/takatāpui/homosexual men's experiences with perfectionism.

Who Can Take Part?
I am looking for the following participants:

- Identify as gay, takatāpui and/or homosexual
- Male
- Over 18 years' old
- Self-identify as a perfectionist (this could be in a specific area of your life or across a range of areas in your life)
- Not currently under mental healthcare

What would participation in the study involve?
If you are eligible and willing to participate in this research, you will be asked to attend an initial interview. This will be approximately 60–90 minutes long. These interviews will be conducted in a private setting that you prefer, such as interview rooms at the University library, public libraries' interview rooms, or I can meet with you in your own home. I would like to record our interviews for the study. These recordings will be transcribed and transcriptions kept in a separate location from the recordings.

In the first interview, we will spend our time discussing your personal experiences of perfectionism. At the end of this interview, we can then discuss whether you would like to take part in the photography aspect of this research. There are two ways you can do the photography part of the research. The first is that you will be provided with a disposable camera. I will give this to you at the end of the first interview to photograph whatever you feel best represents your perfectionism over a period of 10 days. These photos will then be developed and the second interview will take place within 21 days of the first interview.

The second option is to choose social media photos or other photos that you have personally selected that you feel are a good representation of your perfectionism. We can arrange a second interview time and place at the end of the first interview. The second interview will use these photographs as the basis of our discussion. I would like to use these photographs as part of my research but will get your consent first before I use them.

What else you need to know

Your identity and other identifying data will be anonymised in the research. Specific places or obvious events that could lead to your identification will also be omitted.
Recordings of the interviews, your photographs and any other data will be kept confidential and stored in a secure location that will only be accessed by myself and/or my supervisor. As per Massey University's protocol, the data will be stored for five years and then disposed of in a safe manner. In the event you would like to seek further support or discuss your experiences further, relevant local support services will be provided.

This research is important to gain an understanding of both the unique and common experiences of gay/takatāpui/homosexual men in New Zealand, specifically in relation to your perfectionism. It will provide you with a chance to explore your personal experiences with perfectionism, while also contributing to expanding the current knowledge of what it is like to be a perfectionistic gay/takatāpui/homosexual man in New Zealand.

To reimburse you for your time and travel, you will receive a $40 petrol voucher.

Participant's Rights

Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. If you decide to participate in my study, you have the right to:

- decline to answer any question
- ask for the audio recorder to be stopped at any time during the interview sessions
- withdraw from the study at any time; up to two weeks after the second interview
- ask any questions about the study at any time during participation
- be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

Ethics

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named in this document are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.
If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you want to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Dr Brian Finch, Director (Research Ethics), email humanethics@massey.ac.nz.

Project Contacts

If you have any questions about this research, or would like to participate in this research, you are invited to contact myself or my supervisor:

Jessica Steadman (Researcher)
perfectionismNZ@gmail.com

Dr Mei Williams (Supervisor)
M.W.Williams@massey.ac.nz
+64 (09) 414 0800 ext. 43104

Appendix D: Consent Form

The 'Perfect' Gay Man: An Exploration of Perfectionism

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM - INDIVIDUAL

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to the interview being sound recorded and used in this research

If I wish to use pictures that represent my perfectionism: I would like to:

- ☐ Be provided with a disposable camera to take photos of my perfectionism
- ☐ And/or personally select photos from my social media accounts that represent my perfectionism
- ☐ I agree/do not agree to the photos being used in the research and any subsequent publications.

I wish/do not wish to have a copy of the photos that I took.

I wish/do not wish to receive a summary of the findings.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature: ..... **Date:** .....

Full Name - printed .....

Appendix E: Interview Schedule

The 'Perfect' Gay Man: An Exploration of Perfectionism

Interview Schedule

Perfectionism

- What does the term perfectionism mean to you?
- Tell me about your perfectionism?
  - *Could you describe your perfectionism/ experiences of perfectionism/what is perfection to you*
- How do you feel when you are in the midst of your perfectionism?
  - *Physically, emotionally, mentally, thoughts.*
- On a day to day basis, what are your experiences of perfectionism?
  - *Describe a typical experience of perfectionism for you/recent time when you demonstrated your perfectionism/ what happened? How did you deal with it?*
- What does perfect mean to you?
  - *Particular areas of perfectionism or more broadly*
- In what ways does perfectionism personally impact on you?
  - *Values/Opinions/thoughts/feelings*

Development/Identity

- How would you describe yourself as a person?
  - *What sort of person you are/important characteristics*
- Has defining yourself as a perfectionist made a difference to how you see yourself?
  - *If so, how did you see yourself as different than before? How would you say you have changed?*
- Can you tell me about when you began to realize you were a perfectionist?
  - *Gradual/Sudden/Significant event/others input*?
- How has your perfectionism developed over time?
  - *Has it changed? Stayed the Same? Grown into different areas? Reduced? Frequency*
- How do you think your perfectionism developed?
  - *Others/Self/Influences/Events/Identity*

Relationships

- How does your perfectionism fit in your relationships with others?
  - *Partner, family, Friends work colleagues*
- How do you think others see you?
  - *Partner, family, friends, work colleagues*

- How do other people in your life manage your perfectionism?
    - *Openness with others about it/discussions*

Closing Question

How do you think your life would be different if you weren't a perfectionist?

Did you have any other questions or comments?

Appendix F: Research Case Study

Massey University
Clinical Psychology

CASE STUDY SIX

An Exploration of Perfectionism with Men who identify as Gay, Takatāpui and/or Homosexual

Candidate : Jessica Steadman
Clinical Psychology Programme Massey University
Student ID : [redacted]

This case was completed during internship at infant, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services, Rotorua in 2018 and represents the work of the candidate

---

Supervisor

Bev Haarhoff
Senior Clinical Psychologist

Student

Jessica Steadman
Intern Psychologist

Date : 6 November 2018

ABSTRACT

This research aimed to understand the experiences of perfectionism with men who identify as gay, takatāpui and homosexual and the meaning participants place on being perfectionists. In-depth interviews were conducted with six men and analysed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. This article focuses on one participant whose experience with perfectionism was identified to have had both a positive and negative impact on the relationship with himself and others. The participant expressed a need for control as being central to his perfectionism but also a relinquishment of that control through an acceptance process that humans cannot be perfect. The experience of conducting this research is then reflected upon as to how it has influenced the authors clinical practice.

Literature Review

Sexual Orientation. Sexual orientation can be understood to play a significant role in how individuals view themselves and in relation to others in society. Within the literature there has been some contention as to whether sexual orientation is biological in nature, determined by biological components, whilst other researchers refer to the influence of society in determining the construction of individual identities, including sexual identity (DeLamater & Hyde, 1998; Morandini, Blaszczynski, Ross, Costa, & Dar-Nimrod, 2015; Seidman, 2010). The past 30 years have seen a steady development of understanding sexual orientation in relation to identity. In this section, gay male sexual identity development will be explored as well as the impact being a gay man have on expected roles within society.

Sexual Identity Development. Research defining sexual identity has been met with some difficulty as to what exactly constitutes a sexual identity. Literature is peppered with terminology such as sexual orientation, sexual behaviour, sexual attraction, sexuality and more. It has been determined that sexual identity is a combination of these things rather than a singular factor.

Sexual identity can be understood in all its complexities as being multidimensional in nature. This includes factors beyond the sexual attraction that sexual identity is often peppered down to, to also include physical, emotional, cognitive and behavioural factors of individuals (Moreira, Halkitis, & Kapadia, 2015). Literature suggests that sexual identity is determined by three main factors – self- identity, sexual behaviour and sexual attraction. All three of these domains have been found to contribute to overall sexual identity (Moreira et al., 2015). In a 2011 New Zealand study, that sought to understand the link between sexual behaviour and sexual identity interviews were conducted with men and women over the age of 18 who were asked to best describe their sexual orientation (Wells, 2011). Many male participants reported experiences of same-sex behaviour, despite considering their sexualorientation to be heterosexual. This research attempted to separate out the difference between sexual behaviour and sexual orientation in order to further understand that sexual behaviour does not necessarily align with sexual orientation. Contrary to a simplistic understanding that sexual orientation aligns with who you perform sex with, this research helps tease apart sexual orientation from sexual behaviour. As such, it is important to reaffirm that sexual behaviour does not necessarily correlate with an

individual's sexual orientation and vice versa (Halpin & Allen, 2004; Morandini et al., 2015; Wells, McGee, & Beautrais, 2011). By definition, sexual orientation refers to a person's preference or primary sexual, emotional, romantic and/or physical attraction to others, whether that be same sex attraction, opposite sex attraction, both sex attraction or other (Wells et al., 2011). There remains to be limited research regarding sexual orientation beyond that of the heterosexual identity. Hence there is much to be gained from further research into sexual orientation including the process in how people self-identify and how that identity develops (Wells et al., 2011).

Requiring scientific validity of a construct is difficult and as research grows in this area, core components of such research can be synthesised to produce a valid and thorough construct to address this (Mustanski, Kuper, & Greene, 2014). To be able to capture this process and produce a theory is difficult due to the unique individual experiences of identifying as gay, as well as the impact that society and cultural values have in influencing this process. Therefore, models developed may be understandably limited in scope and transference however may provide a general overview of the many parts engaged in the process of sexual identity development.

Mustanski et al. (2014) suggest that sexual identity is made up of several distinct parts and can best be understood through a nomological network that incorporates the various factors of sexual identity (see Figure 1).

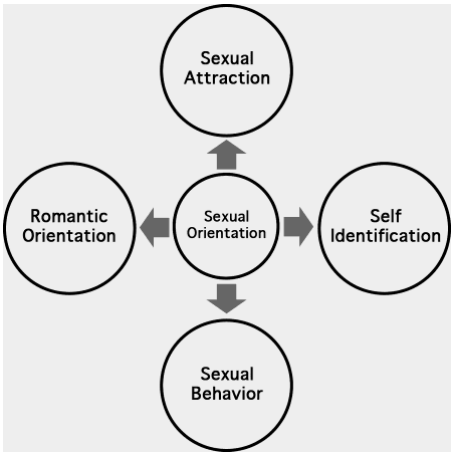

Figure 1. A nomological network of sexual identity.

Sexual identity is much more complex than previous research assumed. The extension of sexual identity beyond that of the three most widely known orientations; heterosexual, bisexual and homosexual, to include those that identify with labels such

as asexual (not sexually attracted to anyone at all), pansexual (those who are sexually attracted to *who* a person is rather than their biological gender) and many others, have raised the question as to whom exactly are these labels for (Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015). These varying spectrums of human sexuality have always been prevalent however it has only been relatively recently that language has been assigned to best describe the multitude of ways in which individuals can be sexually oriented. This provides a prime example of the language creating identity and being assigned to sexual identity.

Heteronormativity. The term 'heteronormativity' refers to the construct of heterosexuality that permeates throughout Western society and is automatically assumed of others, any divergence from heterosexuality requires individuals to explicitly 'come out' as non-heterosexual (Aggarwal & Gerrets, 2014; Bullock & Freedman, 2006; Seidman, Fischer, & Meeks, 2011). Therefore, heterosexual is the 'norm, hence the term heteronormative. Heteronormative society refers to a society in which heterosexuality, or being 'straight', is always assumed and impacts many different avenues of life, such as the assumption that a man will marry a woman, or a woman will bear children with a man. It refers to the things that people are told from a young age as to what humans should strive towards. For example, gender roles canalso come under heteronormative culture in that men are required to be hard, emotionless and masculine, whereas women are assumed to be feminine soft and emotional.

Heteronormativity essentially requires gay men to 'come out' regularly in different contexts and at different times throughout their lives because they do not fulfil the assumed heterosexual role in society. 'Coming out' refers to the self-identification to the self and others as gay (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Henrickson, 2008; Neville, Kushner, & Adams, 2015; Tasker, Barrett, & De Simone, 2010). Hammack (2005) developed the term 'cultural press' as a way to understand the process of "coming out" in Western culture. He proposed that coming out firstly involved the individual developing an awareness of themselves as being attracted to the same sex,an internal motivational force then develops due to the internalization of the societal value systems they are placed in (such as the value placed on being heterosexual), which in turn promotes both inward and outward identification of a sexual orientation that is relevant to both the system and individual. This identity is then adapted into

overall life experience and identity in order to create a life narrative that is also influenced by sociocultural factors. Similarly, Meeks (2005) refers to coming out as being a rite of passage for gay men and women as they are not only informing others of their identity, but, she argues, they *become* gay through the process. This is because it requires a rejection of societies heteronormativity as well as an altered sense of self in order to come out (Meeks, 2005). It is a way in which gay men and women are able to be who they are, with the awareness that they may face stigma, prejudice and discrimination by not identifying as heterosexual (Adams, Braun, & McCreanor, 2014; Bruce, Harper, & Bauermeister, 2015).

This is in stark contrast to what individuals with opposite sex attraction go through. Heterosexuals are not required to publicly and specifically state the gender of their preferred sexual partner. In a society where someone has to declare how they are sexually oriented, it provides understanding into the value and meaning society places on sexuality (Weeks, 2002). It therefore places a clear division of sexuality being either moral or immoral, normal or abnormal, as the social construction of this divide perceives that anything different from heterosexuality is 'deviant' (Weeks, 2002, 2014). It may also be argued that through gay movements defining themselves with thelabels society produced, reinforcement is occurring with certain expectations of how toact and not act according to these labels (Adams et al., 2014; Henrickson, 2008; Savin-Williams & Cohen, 2015; Weeks, 2002). Weeks (2014) further suggest that a movement away from labels may incur more freedom;

> "…ironically sexual liberation might involve freeing ourselves from the idea of sexuality…approaching our erotic desires and acts not as expression of sexuality but as simply feelings and acts that give pleasure, create social ties…".

Fischer, Meeks, and Seidman (2011) continue that the divide of sexual immorality is constructed based on the cultural context in which one is situated in and how people make meaning and sense of different constructs. An example is that 200 years ago, society was concerned with how sexual acts are performed and the only position that sex was to be had in was missionary, anything else was seen as immoral and sinful (Fischer et al., 2011). The value of the last two hundred years has shifted from *how* sex is undertaken to *who* is engaging in these sexual acts (Fischer et al., 2011; Seidman, 2010).

Masculinity and Gender Role Norms. The establishment of feminine and masculine is a construct developed from societal values and interactions (Bullock & Freedman, 2006; Gergen & Davis, 1997; Green, 2005). When conformity is not adhered to for the prescribed masculine and feminine roles, 'Gender Role Conflict' (GRC) can occur (Simonsen, Blazina, & Watkins, 2000). GRC is defined as "a psychological state in which gender roles have negative consequences or impact on the individual or others" (O'Neil, 1990). Research contends that due to the narrow scope of societal expectations on how a man is expected toact, there is little room for emotional expression and physical contact by males, especially to other males (Gosse, 2012a). Traditional gender roles assume that males are emotionless, that they strive for success, do not show any signs of weakness and that they are dominant and macho, inclusive of violent behaviour (Hearn, 2004). It is further argued that in order to fulfilthese expectations, men and boys are made to endure times of "homophobia, racism, classism and shame" as a type of social control on their identity, in an attempt to stifle any hint of femininity, or behaviour outside of that of the male role (Gosse, 2012b).

Despite the rigid rules adhered to in regards to masculinity and the assumption that men who identify as gay do not fulfil this societal role due to their sexual orientation, research has found that within the gay community, masculine notions of behaviour remain to be highly valued, whereas feminine behaviours are looked down upon, similar to that of wider societal expectations (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Glick, Gangl, Gibb, Klumpner, & Weinberg, 2007; R. G. Jones, 2015; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Tagg, 2008; Taywaditep, 2001). This creates a space within the gay community where men who identify as gay and act in a way that does not align with the masculine norms of society are further marginalised within the gay community itself (Glick et al., 2007; Sánchez & Vilain, 2012; Taywaditep, 2001). Research has found that such "anti-effeminacy" attitudes are linked to internalized homophobia, often expressed as feelings of shame that are associated to identifying as gay and other gay men fulfilling the 'gay stereotype' of being effeminate (Greene & Britton, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2010).

Minority Stress. Internalized homophobia is often believed to be a by-product of a heteronormative society as members of the LGBT community seek to reconcile their identity with societal values (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Bruce et al., 2015; Greene & Britton, 2012). As a result, members of minorities turn the negative attitudes they face externally in societyinternally towards themselves, promoting self-hate and higher levels of psychological distress (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Bruce et al., 2015; Carvalho, Lewis, Derlega, Winstead, & Viggiano, 2011; Greene & Britton, 2012; Harper & Harris, 2010; Lewis, Derlega, Griffin, & Krowinski,

2003; McLaren, 2016). Minority stress is a term used to encapsulate such experiences and refers to the stigma, prejudice, discrimination and oppression of marginalized groups insociety, such as gay men (Bullock & Freedman, 2006; Riggs & Walker, 2006). Research surrounding the experiences of all of the LGBT community consistently posit that their lives are riddled with experiences of discrimination, prejudice, stereotypes and stigma (Adams et al., 2014; Bruce et al., 2015; Cameron & Hargreaves, 2005; Carvalho et al., 2011; Figueroa &Zoccola, 2015). These experiences may shape how gay men interact with wider society and how they interact with themselves internally (Allen & Oleson, 1999; Greene & Britton, 2012).The minority stress model also makes reference to the impact that such experiences ofdiscrimination, stigma and prejudice can have on wider health outcomes for marginalised populations (Meyer, 1995). Research has expectedly associated minority stress with poorer psychological outcomes, greater internal conflict and higher rates of alienation from wider society (Flowers & Buston, 2001; Kelleher, 2009; Taywaditep, 2001).

Perfectionism

Perfectionism research can be traced back to early research on irrational thinking by Albert Ellis (1962). Research by Ellis suggested that irrational beliefs and irrational thinking were a contributing factor to emotional and behavioural dysfunction. Ellis (1962) further elaborated that all or nothing thinking (such as “I must be perfect in everything I do”) was an example of how a perfectionistic mind functions. Whilst Ellis’ research did not focus solely on perfectionism, it did provide a basis from which perfectionism (and other behaviours) began to be understood through dichotomous thinking.

Early research on perfectionism initially conceptualized it as an unidimensional construct strongly related to neuroticism and psychopathology. Hollender (1965) was one of the first researchers to explore perfectionism as a sole construct and proposed that perfectionism was a distinct personality trait. He defined perfectionism as “the practice of demanding of oneself or others a higher quality of performance than is required by the situation” (Hollender, 1965).

Researchers who adhered to the unidimensional model refer to perfectionism as being only negative in nature because of the excessive, often impossible demands individuals hold and rely on for self-worth, which is tied directly to their ability to achieve these demands (Hollender, 1965; Shafran, Cooper, & Fairburn, 2002). Hollender (1965) described the basic cognitions of perfectionism as placing a strong emphasis on the inability to achieve their self-

prescribed demands to the standard they think they should be, or if they do succeed in achieving their goal, often diminishing or completely discrediting the success to the point that it is instead perceived as a failure.

Multidimensional. A multidimensional conceptualization of perfectionism incorporates both personal and interpersonal factors, instead of focusing solely on the internal cognitions of the individual as a unidimensional model contends. Multidimensional perfectionism can be referred to as: normal and neurotic (Don E Hamachek, 1978); functional and dysfunctional (Frost, Heimberg, Holt, Mattia, & Neubauer, 1993); positive and negative (Slade & Owens, 1998) and adaptive and maladaptive (Rice & Preusser, 2002).

Normal (positive/functional/adaptive) perfectionism typically refers to a 'pursuit of excellence' where an individual holds high but realistic expectation of themselves and does not base their self-worth on achieving the goals they have set (Egan, Piek, & Dyck, 2015). In contrast, neurotic (negative/dysfunctional/maladaptive) perfectionism is defined by the continued pursuit of exceptionally high standards despite the adverse consequences that coincide with this pursuit, leaving little to no room for error and basing their self-worth on their ability to fulfil the goals set (Flett & Hewitt, 2006; D.E Hamachek, 1978).

Impact of Perfectionism. The impact of perfectionism has been well researched over the last 30 years with the focus of psychological literature focusing on the negative impact perfectionism has on individual wellbeing due to a positive correlation to higher levels of distress (Bieling, Israeli, & Antony, 2004).Recent studies have confirmed the link between perfectionism and guilt, shame, embarrassment and pride due to the exhausting self- evaluation that occurs in attaining their goals (Tangney, 2002). Due to perfectionists make it aconstant requirement to evaluate themselves thoroughly. This reinforces the end to be perfect at all they attempt, often resulting in not attempting things that they fear they will not be good at immediately. This is in part due to the perfectionist being more susceptible to experiencing shame due to them generalizing perceived failures to multiple areas of their life, on multiple occasions rather than allowing that 'failure' to be simply for that one particular event (Tangney, 2002).

Currently, there is a limited amount of research available concerning men and perfectionism beyond that of very specific clinical populations such as those suffering from eating disorders (W. Jones & Morgan, 2010) or body image issues (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009; Varangis, Lanzieri, Hildebrandt, & Feldman, 2012), of which perfectionism has not been the

main focus investigated. Although perfectionism has been identified as a contributing factor to distress in the lives of gay men in several studies, these have focused on the appearance of the body (Morgan & Arcelus, 2009; Yelland & Tiggemann, 2003) and have not gone beyond the body. A literature search found that there was no research currently available that focused on perfectionism and gay men in a context beyond that of appearance related perfectionism connected to eating disorders and body dysmorphia. Further, qualitative studies of perfectionism were also very limited. Because of the lack of studies available on this topic, it was deemed necessary to go beyond the academic literature

Perfectionism, gay men and the media. Representation of gay men in the media provides important insight into commonly held conceptions and stereotypes that wider society hold of particular populations in a particular time. It is therefore useful in this study to examine these critically. To do this, it was decided that local media (such as EXPRESS magazine) was targeted as well as international and national television shows, movies and advertisements to demonstrate common themes. Many of the representations presented gay men in the ideal form and is likely to contribute to increased pressure within the gay male community to conform to these ideals. Within the New Zealand magazine Express, which specifically targets the LGBTQ+ community, representations of gay men in advertisements typically show young men with a muscled body, chiselled jawline, perfectly groomed hair, facial hair and immaculate dress. Similarly, there is a strong sense of sexual performance implicated by advertisers, as evidenced by a car advertisement with the statement “Performance is everything”, whilst an advertisement for lawyers targeting gay male clients has two half naked men, preparing to fight with the slogan “let’s kiss and make-up” implying violence as well as sex. These portrayals of gay men as sexual objects contribute to an ideal ofgay men as being perfect in the presentation of their body, their style as well as holding masculine qualities whilst being sexually available.

This ideal of perfection within the gay male community can be further understood through an examination of television shows that feature gay men in prominent roles. Television shows such as “Queer Eye for the Straight Guy”, “Prince Charming”, “Will and Grace” and “Project Runway” all emphasize gay men with a heightened sense of taste, style and immaculate appearance, head to toe. For example, in the recent reboot of “Queer eye for the Straight Guy” (as well as the original), all five gay men are physically fit, well groomed, appear immaculate and are experts in cooking, grooming, interior design, hair dressing and wellbeing. The point of this show is to assist a straight man who is seemingly helpless so that

he can look and feel better in himself with the assistance of gay men. Further, the reboot of "Queer eye for the Straight guy" delves into some of the social issues that the men have gone through on a personal level. Interestingly, perfection and striving to be perfect comes up numerous times both prior to coming out as gay and afterwards.

Another example of gay male representation in the media is Prince Charming, abachelor style reality show featuring gay men. Of the 20 potential bachelors, only one doesnot appear to be in physical peak condition, and by that it is meant he does not have the body of David, nor does he put in as much thought into his appearance in comparison to the other men on the show. High success in each area these men worked in was also guaranteed. The bachelor, or Prince Charming himself was immaculately groomed, physically fit and very successful in his work life. Though both of the aforementioned examples of gay men in television shows support the appearance and achievement of 'perfection', there are manymore examples within the television and movies that pertain to this same ideal.

Blogs, news and books. Blogs provide a limited access into communities that would otherwise be inaccessible to those outside of the community they target. A review of several blogs and forums specifically targeting gay men interacting with each other also provided insight into gay mens' perceptions of perfectionism within the gay male community. Perfectionism was a topic that had been discussed a number of times on these blogs in regards to relationships, career and appearance , and was labelled as a "typical trait within the gay male community" (Kodo, 2016). The quest for perfection has also been found to be a topic of interest among web forums specifically aimed at gay men. For example,

There were also several news articles that discussed perfectionism and gay men. The LGBTQ Canadian magazine "Advocate" recently had a news article in there love and sex column "Ask Adam" with the tagline "Why Are Gays Obsessed with Being Perfect?". In this article, the writer denotes the otherness that many gay men can feel and associated feelings of negativity towards themselves for not meeting the status quo within society has resulted in many gay men feeling as though they needed to make up for identifying as gay (REF). The concept of initially feeling a sense of shame as one begins to realize that they are 'different' aligns with the concept of becoming a perfectionist to seek to rectify this feeling of being less than due to sexual orientation.

Alan Downs is a clinical psychologist from America who identifies as gay and has written about his experiences with his predominantly gay clientele. 'The Velvet

Rage' (Downs, 2012) identifies shame as a prominent factor in gay men experiencing high levels of distress due to 'growing up gay in a straight man's world'. He argues that gay men are taught from a young age that they are not good enough due to not meeting the requirements of a heteronormative society. Gay men then seek to compensate for this by seeking fulfilment and striving to be flawless in other areas akin to sexual orientation. He posits that it is shame which motivates gay men to actively seek perfection, and that mistakes are to be completely avoided so they do not feel shame. Though Downs (2012) does not focus wholly on perfectionism in his book,he does refer to it frequently as the outlet which counteracts the shame gay men can feel because of the 'otherness' within a heterosexual society. This book providesinsight into the lives of gay men in Los Angeles and provides further evidence of perfectionism and gay men being an important area of research to enhance the current knowledge in these areas.

The book "Straight Jacket" written by a British gay man, Matthew Todd, who was an editor of UK gay magazine *Attitude* examines the lives of gay men and the prominent distress that he found evident within the gay male community that presents itself in various forms. Along the same lines as Downs (2012), Todd discusses the long term impact of the everyday "abuses" that homosexuals (both men and women) endure from a young age and the internalization of these messages that often come out in distressing or problematic behaviours. Though this author makes it clear that this is not every gay man's life projection, he discusses the need for there to be moreawareness of the everyday trauma's that gay men go through and what that means for the needs of gay men. From the foreword section, perfectionism is regarded as being a survival mechanism "if we are to be accepted, we must be morally beyond reproach, orat least perfect in some sort of way. We can't be gay *and* average…We must make an effort to fit in."(Todd, 2012). Todd (2012) discusses his own experiences, alongside numerous other men who identify as gay and have struggled in some form. He identifies, similarly to Downs, that it is shame that is at the core of the distress that he deems many gay men encounter. A shame that has developed from a young age due to the homosexuality being an "otherness" within a heterosexual society. The author discusses his own experience of developing perfectionism in order to obtain validation and claims that "it is the most common characteristic I have noticed in gay people."

Summary. As can be seen, there are many ways in which perfectionism has been understood and theorized over the past 60 years and as such there remains a lack of consensus on a single definition of perfectionism, as well as its impact. This section provided a general overview of perfectionism from a psychological and theoretical perspective to situate this current research in choosing to refrain from adopting a particular theoretical stance. This provides this research with a broader framework in which perfectionism can be explored by those who experience it without the confines of a particular definition, theory, measurement or model. As such, this research may provide further insight into perfectionism beyond that of the current knowledge and populations researched thus far. The next chapter seeks to explore the development of sexual orientation in relation to identity and positioning that identity within a heteronormative society.

In contrast to the vast majority of studies that have been conducted on perfectionism, this current study will not utilize a specific theoretical models or measurement used in perfectionism. This is because of the limitations of adhering to one specific model when there is not a general consensus within the literature. There isone other study available that also conducted research with self-identified perfectionists which they argued meant they were not 'limited to one theoretical pre- existing perspective' of perfectionism (Hill, Witcher, Gotwals, & Leyland, 2015). As such, this research will be guided by the realities and experiences of its participants, who will self-identify as perfectionists, however that might be defined by them. This research deviates from the majority of prior studies done with perfectionism as it uses qualitative methods to explore the understandings, perceptions and meaning of perfectionism from its participants.

It is thus the objectives of this study to explore the lived experiences of perfectionism with men who identify as gay. The following research question and research sub-questions will be addressed with this research:

How do gay men make sense of perfectionism in their day to day lives?

How does perfectionism develop or change over time?

How does perfectionism affect relationships?

What is the perceived impact of perfectionism on their day to day lives?

Methodology

Participants. Six men volunteered to participate in this research. Each man identified as gay, takatāpui or homosexual, and self-identified as a perfectionist. They were not under mental health care and resided in Aotearoa, New Zealand. It was decided that interviewing those who were currently receiving treatment for mental health issues may be at an increased risk for distress during the interview, and that examining perfectionism may interfere with any treatment they were receiving. Therefore, the decision was made to narrow the focus and exclude the clinical population for the purpose of this research.

Participants ranged in age from 26 to 80 years old and all participants spoke English. Their ethnic identities were New Zealand European (n=4), Māori (n=1) and United Kingdom (n=1). All participants self-identified as a perfectionist.

Procedure. Participants were recruited through several organizations such as Outline, Rainbow Youth and AIDS New Zealand, as well as through social media, personal contacts and university networks. The snowballing method was also used when recruitment stagnated mid-way through the recruitment process. The poster (see Appendix A) invited potential participants to contact the researcher via email. An explicit definition of perfectionism was intentionally not used in the recruitment process as part of the research aim was to understand how gay men create meaning andmake sense of perfectionism. I therefore did not want to precede our interview with myown definition nor psychological definitions of perfectionism imparted onto participants as it could influence how they conceptualize their own experiences within this framework, should it have been provided.

The interviews were conducted one on one with participants. At the start of the interview, the researcher introduced herself to the participants, provided a hard copy of the information sheet that participants could read through again if needed, reminded the participants of the reason for the research and asked the participant to read through and sign the consent form This also acted as a catalyst for participants to ask any further questions they had about the research. The consent form also included consent to use the photos (if this was chosen to take part in) in research publications, which theresearcher checked again at the end of the second interview with the participant who chose this option to ensure that all photographs were intended and consented for use

within the research. At the second meeting with the one participant who had chosen to do the photography part of the study, the researcher bought along hard copies of the photographs the participant had provided via electronic means. At the end of the interviewing process, participants were thanked for their participation, reminded they would be sent a summary of the results, and gifted petrol vouchers as a show of appreciation for their time and effort in participating in this study.

Interviews. Semi-structured interviews were the chosen method of data collection for this study as it was deemed to be the most effective method for participants to explore their experiences of perfectionism, allowing the participant to direct the content of the interview and discuss what was important to them, whilst providing the researcher with the ability to direct back onto the topic at hand, perfectionism, if need be.

Each interview conducted took between 60 to 90 minutes to complete. The interviews were audio-recorded with two voice recorders (both digital voice recorders) just in case one recording device failed. These files were then uploaded to a secure computer and into a password protected file that was accessible only by myself. This was consented to by all participants. At the conclusion of the interview, I spent some time reflecting on the interview, my thoughts, feelings, or anything interesting that occurred. After this reflection, I then began to transcribe the interview verbatim.

The interviews themselves were quite informal and purposely so to ensure that the participants felt comfortable in talking about their experiences. Therefore, the research interview was more akin to a conversation to ensure that the participants discussed what was important to them. The interview schedule was created as a guide to the conversation and had open ended questions from general topics to promote discussion (Smith et al., 2009). This was naturally incorporated into the conversation and referred to only if necessary during the interview as the participants directed the interview, with me guiding it back to the topic of interest if it verged onto something else (Smith et al., 2009). These interviews were flexible in that there was no rigid adherence to the interview guide especially because the researcher was interested in the perceptions of the participants themselves and discussion about what was important to them. This was done under the assumption that the participants are expert on themselves and their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

Throughout the process, I tried to keep my input to the minimum, guiding only when absolutely necessary and using prompts such as “can you tell me more about that?” or reflecting their own statements back to them to facilitate further reflection of their experience of perfectionism. Throughout the interview I used skills such asreflection, summaries, sitting with silence (which prompted the participant to fill the silence with further reflection) active listening and micro skills to facilitate an engaging, in-depth and detailed interview. These research procedures were deemedlow risk by Massey University.

Data Analyses. The aim of IPA analysis is to go beyond the description of the participants experience, towards the a deep, rich and detailed meaning andinterpretation (Smith et al., 2009). Smith et al. (2009) suggests a general guideline of IPA analysis which assisted in the analytical stages of the research. Each interview was read thoroughly alongside the audio recording to become familiar with the data. Anything of interest or significance was noted in the margins. This was then read through again without the audio recording where again anything of significance was recorded in the margins (Smith et al., 2009). Smith recommends doing a multilevel analysis at this level specifically noting at linguistic, descriptive and conceptual. From these notes, emergent themes are developed. This was done by paying particularattention to the initial notes written on the margins of the interview. These emergent themes were then written out in an excel spread sheet so that they could be grouped together based on similarities. Further reductions of emergent themes were conducted to reveal a superordinate theme that encapsulates a number of the emergent themesinto sections. This process was done individually with each interview (8 interviews in total). The interview that was done with photographs was analysed the same and will use the photographs in the data analysis. Once data analysis was completed with each individual case, patterns were identified across cases. These results, both individual themes as well as those themes that were identified to be similar across cases, are provided in the next section. A single case is provided in the next section that denotes his experiences of perfectionism as a gay man.

RESULTS

There were three super-ordinate themes that emerged during analysis of the data. The first theme within Henri's interview was 'the conflict of self' and how he made sense of perfectionism in his everyday life in relation to himself and others. This is situated within the context and placement within which they reside. There was second theme that emerged was the 'relational' and provides meaning to Henri's relations with others. 'Need for control' demonstrates Henri's perceived desire for control which gave him a sense of accomplishment both internally and externally. The third theme that was derived from his interview was "Only God is Perfect" and denotes from Henri that while he holds the belief that no human is perfect in his, that it does not prevent him from attempting to attain perfection in his own life. This provides meaning into the discrepancy between his intellectual mind and emotional mind where he feels compelled to continue to strive for perfection.

'The conflict of self'. This theme summarised Henri's understanding of his internal and external self, and how these often conflicted creating an imperfect space for them toreside both internally and externally. Henri expressed a sense of conflict within the self in terms of self defining as a perfectionist *"I wasn't sure if i would describe myself as a perfectionist",* in part due to not knowing the expectations or regulations that would define perfectionism within this research but also in terms of his own and others definition of perfectionsim. It appears that this created a sense of distrust of truly knowing the internal selfdue to the potential imposition of external rules as to what constitues perfectionism.

> *"Perfectionism is having a very clear idea of that distance between what you are and what you ought to be. Or could be. Or should be. And devising strategies to try and lessen that gap and bring you closer to that ideal."*

Henri seems resigned that his internal expectations of self will not be able to live up to the ideal that he hoped. He demonstrates a sense of not being who he thinks he should be through the use of such a definitive term as "ought" when comparing his current self to that of hopeful perfection. This in turn may create a sense of internal strife as the ideal is viewed as not being his current state, but something that remiains to be acquired, something more that he is required to be. It is this striving to bridge the ideal with reality that causes the conflict as he acknowledges the effort to attain perfection whilst also perceiving it as being irrational;

"I don't think it's a rational process like that, it's more of a reflective process that you pause, time stretches out, and you try to achieve some things".

This sense of achievement he views as an internal guide to perfection, although it is external validation that creates that sense of achievement. He also describes the aging process as his expectations or demands of self-have changed and adapted over time.

'**Relational'.** Henri had long concluded that his perfectionism had been influenced by his relationships when he was younger and continued to impact as he got older. He clearly remembers the expectations from others when he was younger;

"I had remembered before an expression we were taught early on. Dad used to say, *"if a jobs worth doing, it's worth doing well".*

Henri got the sense from his father that he needed to be better and to do better in order to attempt novel tasks, and life in general. Shortly after Henri stated this, he remembered another key adult in his life saying something along the same lines as his father;

"I don't remember if it was a parent or a teacher um saying it but me saying "*well, I'm doing my best"* and them saying *"well your best isn't good enough".*

This reinforcement from a young age that simply being himself meant not being able to fulfil others' expectations of him created an inter-relationship dynamic that can be seen to be represented across Henri's different relationships throughout his life. He struggled to live up to expectations set by others, whether they were perceived or aptly stated by others. As such he withdrew from connecting with others as he felt a sense of failure accompanied relationships.

"*my greatest joys have not been so much from other people than making things."*

Henri instead found comfort in creativity where he was able to express his desires for perfection without the impending judgement that he felt others had on him. While he hopes others will be perfect for him, he struggles with compromise, re-iterating that his standards are such that they are unable to be shifted to accompany another person. There is a clear disconnect between himself and other people and the enjoyment that can be obtained from others.

Henri instead found himself be disappointed in his own intimate relationships, despite being authentic to himself and acknowledging that he was a gay man. He had expectations that once he was 'out' that access to sexual experience and men would become a larger part of

his life. The ability to have sexual experiences seems to have been unfulfilled by Henri and contributes to a sense of feeling unfulfilled with intimacy. However, Henri viewed it also as a protective factor, asserting it was his perfectionist manner that had in fact protected him from getting sexually transmitted diseases;

> *"On the other-hand I might have died of AIDS if I had not been so perfectionist, if I had no standards and you know had a rampant sex life because I didn't care what people thought, the consequences could have been quite different… yeah."*

Henri's perception that it was because he was not a sexually promiscuous man that meant he did not get a sexually transmitted disease is noted due to the period in which HIV was a death sentence. He compared being a perfectionist as being the opposite to not caring about what people thought.

'Need for control' A sense of Henri needing to have control was prevalent throughout the different areas of his life, including his sense of rules that he had for doing specific things in everyday life such as colouring in as a child.

> *"my earliest memories of that are colouring in and always being careful to go within the lines but I developed a system of rules about what colour crayons went together, that you could have next to each other…"*

Henri demonstrated that he has rigid beliefs about how things should be done and achieved. These rules and regulations he has put in place for himself are his attempt to achieve perfection in the everyday activities of life. It is likely that these small tasks provide an opportunity for Henri to feel as though he is in control and is achieving a sense of perfection by following the rules he has for these tasks. As such, it creates a sense ofachievement and happiness that may be lacking in other areas of his life such as relationships.

Henri also compared his sexual orientation as being part of the reason for striving for perfection.

> *"…I don't like to be controlled and I can see that being related to being gay."*

This statement of not wanting to be controlled aligning with his sexual orientation instigates that being gay is something that just is and that it cannot be controlled. There are also the compounding factors of the expectations that society has on sexuality and what that means to Henri. Henri described being in a heterosexual relationship prior to coming out as gay and that feeling of not fitting in continuing once he had come out too. He had expected

things to shift in his intimate relationships after coming out and being able to control the outcomes much more than he had when he was not 'out':

"It didn't mean that pursuing a homosexual life was any easier from the point of view of having sexual experiences or meeting someone."

"Only God is Perfect." Henri struggled to accept his imperfections at an emotional level, though at an intellectual level he understood that he would never be perfect. Henri beleives that perfection is not a straightforward ideal that you can acquire immediately but rather a process that is drawn out over time and that it is changeable.

> *"…generally I don't think perfection is obtainable I think it's a process. Your aiming for perfection but unfortunately that means your never satisfied because that idea that…Are they Turkish carpets or something? Where they always put a mistake in a carpet intentionally because only God can make something's that perfect. So that's sort of satisfying to think that I don't have to be perfect, I'm not God or the saying that "you're perfect just the way you are", so more self-acceptance or tolerance of myself helps me have less stress I think …yeah."*

He positioned himself as being tolerant of the self in not achieving perfection and, although he himself had stated he did not believe in God, utilising God as being the only perfect being provided comfort for him in the discrepancy of not achieving perfection in his own life. By utilising this as a personal mantra that only God can be perfect, Henri is attempting to discard the responsibility that he puts on himself and that he perceives others have put on him too. This is to provide some relief of the ideal of perfection from his life and focus instead on 'tolerating' himself as he is. This also extends to other aspects of his life that he regrets including with relationships and career. This attempt at tolerance and self-acceptance is something that has occurred over time as attaining perfection has become more and more distant in his life.

How my research has contributed to clinical practice

This research has impacted my professional practice in many ways. I think that one of the main ways it has impacted on my practice is that it has made me even more sensitive to the differences that groups in our society such as gay men, experience the world in a way that may not align with my own. For example, the process of having to come out as gay I have never had to think about personally as I identify as heterosexual as generally assumed by most members of society. However, the process of coming out occurs more than one time for those that are not heterosexual, it occurs again and again and again. This research opened up discussions and insights that I would not have been privy to regarding the difficulty that can occur in having to come out in new friendship groups or work places or other settings. This was eye opening for me as I have never had to declare my sexual orientation to groups of people due to society's expectations.

Similarly, there was a noticeable generational difference between participants in their 20's and participants in their 60-80's that I interviewed. This highlighted to me the huge change that has occurred over the older generations lifetimes where coming out was not usually done until later in life due to it being illegal during their younger years. Several of the participants also lived through the AIDS epidemic where they lost a number of friends and at times feared for their own health. There seemed to be a general sense of things are going great now if you're gay because of the large strides that have been taken towards equality and gay rights. This was especially apparent from the older generation in terms of comparing their generation to the younger generation where they feel that gay men today have it 'easier' as they are not having to experience some of the adversities that they had to experience as gay men when they were the same age. This is helpful to my clinical practice to acknowledge the

difference in the challenges that older gay men may have faced in comparison to what the younger generation of gay men are currently facing, or have faced in the more recent past.

What also come from this research is the perception of perfectionism from individuals and the large role it had played in the lives of these participants. I enjoyed being able to derive from the participants their own meanings they attribute to the experiences they have had with perfectionism. This created a strong sense in me as a clinician to be able to do the same with my clients professionally as I sought to derive what the clients meanings are of their experience. I found it a powerful experience as participants were reflective and often came up with meanings they reported they had not attributed to the experience before or that they had never properly reflected in that way about a particular event. I think this is also a good way to work with clients to be able to sit in reflection about key events that have occurred for the client that they bring up and elicit the meaning they place on it.

Spending time interviewing the participants also provided me with improved clinical interviewing skills as well. I think in particular it assisted with my ability to sit and be present with clients fully as it was during the times I got out of my own head with the participants that more meaningful conversation occurred as I was focused on the participants' experience completely. However it has also provided me with a point of difference as well as research interviewing can be a lot more free flowing in comparison to clinical assessment. With clinical assessment there is specific information that needs to be obtained within a set amount of time and generally follows a bit of a schedule. Whilst research interviews also have a schedule, the ones I conducted were very loose and followed much more of what the participants' bought to the interview. I was able to follow where the participant wanted to go much more than I am able to in a clinical assessment.

The literature review I conducted and the population I worked with has also provided me with a broader knowledge base than I had previously regarding the experiences of not

only gay men but the LGBTQ+ community. The example I used previously in terms of having to come out more than once and in more than one setting was a key learning that assists in my clinical practice in New Zealand and some of the history of gay men in New Zealand which I had not known before. It has also helped extend my knowledge regarding terminology, sexual orientation theories and models as well as how to provide a space in clinical practice which demonstrates that I am LGBTQ+ friendly.

More specifically I had an adult gay male client this year and my research and experience interviewing my research participants meant I felt comfortable exploring different aspects of his life that I might not have known to without that experience. For example, my client had not come out to his friends in the city he had moved to four years ago and also described feeling emotional after watching the latest Freddie Mercury movie because of him dying of AIDS. Because of the experiences my participants had shared with me, I felt comfortable in exploring this more thoroughly with the client, knowing the impact it can have on a person's wellbeing to not be out to those close to you and the fact that due my clients age, he was in the midst of it when AIDS was killing gay men in the late 80's and early 90's.

Overall my clinical practice is more open, understanding and broad due to the research I have undertaken with men who identify as gay and perfectionistic. This has assisted me in being able to apply this knowledge to my clinical practice in general, but also specifically with one client who identified as an older gay male. I feel it has made me a better practitioner because of the wider knowledge I have gained from participants first hand experiences of being gay and what that has been like for them, including the pressures they felt from family and wider society.

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