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Portfolio for Professional Doctorate in Counselling Psychology (DPsych)

Thriving or Struggling: The construction and performance of male entrepreneurs' identity narratives.

by

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of: Doctor of Psychology

City, University of London Department of Psychology August 2021.

Dedication

I dedicate this work to the memory of Jack Nathan, my supervisor, my mentor and friend. His joyfulness and warmth, his rigour and insight have made me, for better or worse, the therapist I am. He gave me the mettle to find my own voice, take measured risks and strive to attune to my patients with the care, good humour and courage he demonstrated with me and with so many others whose lives he touched.

I also dedicate this work to Lisa Glenn for holding me over so many years and encouraging me to grow and learn, challenge myself, question and explore, and finally to fly. She was, is and will be an unparalleled interlocutor and crucial grounding force.

Lastly, I dedicate this work to the man whose voice I never had the chance to hear. I know I would have loved him.

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I would like to express my gratitude to the men who participated in the study and generously shared their insight, stories and experiences with me. I would also like to thank my many patients over the years who have taught me so much and humbled me with accounts of the challenges they endured and worked so hard to overcome.

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Most of all, I thank my family for their humour, indulgence, encouragement and good sense. To the women in my family whose example galvanised me to identify and celebrate the feminine in myself, and to the men in my family for invigorating my own reflections on what kind of son, brother, partner, father and man I want to be. To Odin for his infinite inquisitiveness and for always providing perspective. To Elinor for making all the difference. And to Oz. Wow.

Declaration

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Preface to the portfolio

This portfolio consists of three sections: an empirical research project; a piece of clinical work; and a redacted version of the overall thesis, formatted as an article for submission to a relevant journal. The two central subjects that connect the three sections of the portfolio are masculinity and identity. My initial motivation in focusing on men, in particular, was driven by growing concern regarding both suicide rates amongst men (Office for National Statistics, 2018; Hom, Stanley and Joiner Jr, 2015), and the extent to which inadequate help-seeking behaviours might be responsible for high numbers of avoidable deaths among men of all ages (Call and Shafer, 2018). Connor, Hudson and Power (2020) demonstrate the degree to which deaths from cancer amongst men, for example, might be significantly curtailed by overcoming the psychological barriers to seeking help.

Another motivation was the desire to engage with masculinity as a subject in relation to urgent and widening debate regarding toxic masculinity particularly in the wake of the #MeToo movement. A third is that I am father to two sons and am deeply invested in helping them develop the tools to negotiate their own gender identities in the context of equality and respect for all gender identities. I also hope to help them develop empathy towards themselves and others, and to acquire an emotional vocabulary to support them in seeking help in the future should they need or want it.

My overall academic ambition for this portfolio was to consider contemporary masculine identity within the context of personal and professional challenges. Thereafter my professional clinical interest lies specifically in considering what conditions lead men to find equilibrium between their personal and professional lives and conversely what conditions might lead men to struggle in this regard. This interest has in mind questions of how clinicians might best support men in accessing and engaging with psychological support. This is particularly pertinent in the context of complex social debate regarding gender equality, gender roles and gender identities. It has been widely suggested that the single most detrimental phenomenon to mental health and wellbeing is loneliness (Fernet, Torrès, *et al.*, 2016). All three sections of the portfolio emphasise the extent to which the vacuum of isolation can inhibit an empathic understanding of self. This points to the notion that amongst the most reparative and restorative antidotes to loneliness is to engage in the co-construction

of a meaningful self through dialogue with others, be it friends, family, a confidant or a therapist (Lykes and Kemmelmeier, 2014).

The empirical research project constitutes the core of the portfolio. I decided to focus my research on entrepreneurs for a number of reasons which I shall discuss below. I identified a gap in the entrepreneurship literature specifically concerning the moderating role of identity construction and performance on self-concept and psychological wellbeing of male entrepreneurs. This piece of research thus brings together questions of masculine identity and narrative construction and performance in the context of the mental health of male entrepreneurs. The principles I applied in my approach to the research and to the relational engagement with participants included attunement, engaging with narratives of self and others, creating a space for the participant to have agency over the interview itself, co-constructing meaning and considering both the content and function of narrative performance.

At the start of my research, I had in mind a (no doubt apocryphal) quote from Freud (Elms, 2001). The quote was a response to a question about what psychologically healthy people should be able to do, to which Freud's answer was 'lieben und arbeiten' (to love and to work). Regardless of the veracity of this attribution, this idea has often been present in my observation of patients in a clinical context as a reminder of how personal and professional identities are intertwined. The interplay of the relational and the professional plays a vital role in the psychological health of the individual and it is with this in mind that I chose to focus my empirical research project on a group of men whose principal commonality was their professional career (Thornton, 2005; Omrane, Kammoun & Seaman, 2018; Giazitzoglu & Down, 2017).

The clinical piece is a combined case study and process report relating to a male patient with whom I worked over many months, whose presentation reflected many of the questions I had regarding work, masculinity and wellbeing. This was completed during my training as a Counselling Psychologist at City University. It is intended to demonstrate features of my working practice and competencies in applying my learning and engagement with research and theory to the emerging skills of my clinical work.

MX (as I have designated him in the report) is an Afro-Caribbean male in his thirties. A core feature to emerge during our work together was the relationship between

mental health problems and notions of masculinity as viewed within the Afro-Caribbean community. As a black male, MX said he felt added pressure to conceal vulnerability which compounded his reluctance to engage in social activities or share his suffering with others. This reflected the dangers of someone isolating themselves socially.

In his wide-ranging study, *Speaking of Sadness*, sociologist David Karp proposes a concise description of depression (MX' central diagnosis) as the 'illness of isolation'. (Karp, 2017: 7). As we shall see later, this issue of isolation, be it ostracism or self-isolation, is one of the central threats to entrepreneurs' wellbeing. Dave Mearns' concept of 'facilitating' a meeting at relational depth underlining the primacy of the client in guiding the therapy and cautioning against a therapist 'agenda' or implementation of specific skills (Mearns and Cooper, 2017) was a guiding principle for me. Exploring the ways in which MX constructed and performed identity (Mearns *et al.*, 2013) was key in considering and co-constructing alternative narratives in which his agency began to emerge and his ability to engage socially improved. By taking a person-centred approach that placed a strong emphasis on the therapeutic alliance and core conditions of empathy, congruence and unconditional positive regard, it became possible to establish a nurturing therapeutic environment. This allowed for what Carl Rogers describes as the client being 'received' by the therapist (Rogers, 1957). MX's presentation also reflected the extent to which masculinity, as well as other cultural factors, impact help-seeking behaviour and stigmas regarding mental health (Yorke, Voisin, Berringer, and Alexander, 2016; Friedman and Paradis, 2019; Gesinde and Sanu, 2015). As I acknowledge below, the narrow demographic range of my research participant group, a deeper exploration of cultural differences in help-seeking behaviour and more varied social influences was less available. In my suggestions for future research, I have recommended a more thorough consideration of this rich area.

The final section of the portfolio is an abridged version of the research project as a whole. This piece of work is intended for journal publication as a way of making my findings available to the psychology and entrepreneurship research community. It also hoped that eventual publication might afford interaction with other scholars in these fields and lay promoters of mental health awareness in the entrepreneurial community. I selected the *Journal of Business Venturing* (JBV – see Appendix A) as an appropriate

destination for the current study partly because a significant number of highly informative articles in this journal were of considerable use and relevance to my research; and also thanks to its broad scope in drawing from numerous research fields and emphasis on crossover studies. Its openness to all aspects of psychology relating to business settings and interest in risk management, health promotion, and psychoeducation was of particular interest.

Part One. Research project

Thriving or struggling: the construction and performance of male entrepreneurs' identity narratives.

Abstract

Narratives of selfhood can offer valuable insight into the personal and professional experiences of male entrepreneurs that act as either threats to, or protective factors against psychological distress. The identity constructed through an individuals' telling of their life story reveals much about their self-concept and about how they situate themselves in relation to the challenges of their chosen career. Identity was considered here through a social constructionist lens; thus, self-concept, identity performance and sociocultural context were central. Using a narrative analytic framework, the following study employed semi-structured interviews, conducted from a life-course perspective, with seven UK-based male entrepreneurs who had engaged in psychotherapy. Participants were sourced via a flyer (Appendix G) posted on various social media platforms and distributed through friends and acquaintances in the entrepreneur community. The principal findings were as follows: (1) participants' constructions of childhood and adolescent self contained the seeds of entrepreneurial identity; (2) two distinct overarching narratives of either thriving or struggling were observed within the participant group; and (3) meaningful relational support was associated with self-knowledge and identity integration amongst participants whose narratives suggested they were thriving. The discussion focuses on what insight can be drawn from the content and manner of participants' narrations in relation to both risk factors and protective factors that impact their psychological health. Some conclusions are made regarding the importance of relational support and therapeutic engagement.

Chapter 1. Introduction

1.1 Conceptual overview

This study's focus on identity as constructed through the telling of narratives offers insight into both the external realities entrepreneurs face and the contexts in which they work, as well as how they make sense of and perform their own identities within these contexts and realities. By taking an individual life story approach using a qualitative methodological framework, the intention is to offer an empathic consideration of how individual entrepreneurs construct their entrepreneurial identity (Down and Giazitzoglu, 2015). By selecting a narrative analytical approach the aim is to challenge more positivistic and functional conceptions of entrepreneurship as either a set of skills and actions or as resting on a fixed and narrow set of personality traits. Bent Flyvberg (2006) has written convincingly about how individual case studies have played a central role in both the natural and social sciences. Qualitative research with a small number of individual cases offers context-dependent knowledge. Exploring paradigmatic cases such as male entrepreneurs encourages theorising about general phenomena because it sheds light on behaviours and attitudes that may be taken for granted and overlooked. This approach has the virtue of depth rather than breadth and can play an important role in debunking preconceived notions; several eminent researchers have acknowledged the role played by case studies in forcing them to revise hypotheses, including Campbell and Stanley, 2015). Finally, by focusing on narrative detail and the minutiae of everyday experience, readers are invited to reflect on their own experiences and actively participate in the interpretive process.

With a focus on the wellbeing and mental health of male entrepreneurs, the current study explores the relationship between participants' identity constructions and performances and the nature of their self-reported professional and personal wellbeing. The term 'construction' suggests an active process and thus points towards both the evolving nature of psychological health, as well as the agency involved in the individual's achievement of equilibrium.

This question of agency sheds light on my reason for recruiting participants who had experienced some form of talking therapy. I felt that individuals who had sought out support might bring useful insights into the processes involved in seeking help, as well

as an awareness of their own agency in ameliorating their psychological health (Berger *et al.* 2005).

1.1.1 Outlining the focus

My aim in the following piece of research was to gain insight into what factors might influence the ability of some male entrepreneurs to thrive, both professionally and personally, and conversely what factors might lead others to struggle both professionally and personally. More generally, this research hoped to interact usefully alongside other qualitative research concerned with identity and the mental health of male entrepreneurs.

My approach was threefold: firstly, to explore the thematic content of male entrepreneurs' identity constructions, secondly to explore the narrative performance of male entrepreneurs' identity constructions and, thirdly to consider the moderating role of participants' identity constructions and narrative performances on their psychological wellbeing across the life-course. Using a qualitative narrative analytical methodology, I invited participants to share their life stories in the context of a semi-structured interview, with as little interference from me as possible. Narrative analysis (NA) allowed me to consider both the 'what' (thematic content) and the 'how' (construction and performance) of participants' narratives. Given the interpretive nature of NA, I was able thereafter to explore the 'why' (function and purpose) of the narrations and to propose some cautious conclusions regarding some of the risks posed by an entrepreneurial career to psychological health.

Examining how entrepreneurs construct, enact and make sense of their own identities from a narrative perspective affords insight into identity construction across the life-course and invites consideration of early influences and experiences. It also offers insight into what factors might be at play in participants' identity constructions conveying narratives of either 'thriving' or 'struggling'. Given the emphasis on male entrepreneurs and masculine identities, it is hoped that the study might contribute more broadly to the literature which focuses on improving protective measures for safeguarding the mental health of future male entrepreneurs. It is also hoped that it might shed light on attitudes and behaviours that are specifically tied to masculine identity narratives to support male entrepreneurs in identifying how those outmoded

narratives of self-reliance, or risk-taking, for example, can represent a very real health risk.

The viewpoint I espouse here considers identity formation through the life-course, from childhood and adolescence through to the present day. As outlined in Chapter 4 (Analysis), I have chosen to consider the life-course of participants through three principal stages: 'Origins', 'Entrepreneurship', 'Psychotherapy and Current Situation'. Each 'stage' informs the narration of successive identity constructs and participants' identity performance at the time of interview. The construction of identity narratives is viewed as an evolving organism rather than the exclusive result of cumulative cause and effect, as convincingly explored by McLean and Lilgendahl in their 2018 study of the evolution of identity narratives from adolescence to adulthood.

A caveat in considering the accounts given by the participants in this study is that they are time-sensitive. The interviews were conducted at a particular moment in each participants' entrepreneurial journey and as such reflect a conception of identity that Alversson *et al.* (2008:6) described as 'a temporary, context-sensitive and evolving set of constructions, rather than a fixed and abiding essence'. While those participants I interviewed might experience significant changes in circumstance going forward, this study fully acknowledges that neither 'thriving' nor 'struggling' are fixed states and that the hazards of engaging in entrepreneurial activities mean that fortunes can change. It also acknowledges the part played by learning. Studies focusing on serial or habitual entrepreneurs offer a fascinating insight into how entrepreneurs learn from their mistakes as they move from one venture to the next (MacMillan, 1986; Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2014).

This study draws from the identity constructions performed on the day of interview and on what can be gleaned from the similarities and differences in the narrative content and performance of participants. As considered in greater depth in Chapter 2 (Literature Review), the research may be broken down into four essential foci: (1) masculinities; (2) narratives and identity; (3) entrepreneurship; and (4) psychotherapy and wellbeing.

1.1.2 Masculinity in crisis

'Traditional masculinity', with its narratives of toughness, self-reliance, stoicism and strength, has increasingly been viewed as a phenomenon that hampers male

wellbeing, particularly with regard to seeking help for physical and psychological suffering (Berke, Reidy, Miller and Zeichner 2017). These narratives are abundantly displayed by male entrepreneurs; the impact of adhering to them not only contributes to the risk of interpersonal conflict (with business partners and colleagues as well as family and friends) but also to the experience of psychic distress.

Recent literature on gender and identity challenges the essentialist idea of the former as fixed, static or unquestionably binary (Ward, 2016; Hyde, Bigler, Joel, Tate *et al.*, 2019): highlighting the question of agency in individuals' constructions of gender identity. This offers a basis for exploring the idea of multiple masculinities and understanding the different ways in which men experience masculine paradigms (Borkowska, 2018; Ralph and Roberts, 2020). Social debate regarding gender paradigms is constantly in flux, as well as being dependent on sociocultural context (Brooks, 2017). For various reasons, men have not adequately engaged with and responded to successive seismic changes in the re-evaluation of gender roles and identity, and they are suffering as a result (Galdas *et al.*, 2004; Call and Shafer, 2015).

The term 'traditional masculinity' (Thompson, Pleck and Ferrera, 1992; Leaper, Farkas and Starr, 2018; Isacco, 2015) is widely used and, over the last 20 years or so, an overwhelming number of measures have sought to quantify and apply aspects of masculinity and gender roles to health promotion and help-seeking behaviour.[1] However, there is a notable absence of studies regarding the nature of current masculine narratives, their origin and tendency, and how the performance of these narratives might shed light on the kinds of coping strategies men use in the face of stress, conflict and other challenging life experiences.

[1] For example: the Multicultural Masculinity Ideology Scale (Doss & Hopkins, 1998). The Male Attitude Norms Inventory (Luyt, 2005), the Adolescent Masculinity Ideology in Relationships Scale (Chu, Porche, & Tolman, 2005), the Traditional Attitudes About Men Measure (McCreary, Saucier, & Courtenay, 2005), the Male Role Norms Inventory-Adolescent MRNI-A-r; Levant *et al.*, 2012), the Machismo Measure (Arciniega, Anderson, Tovar-Blank, & Tracey, 2008), the Meanings of Adolescent Masculinity Scale (Oransky & Fisher, 2009), the Macho Scale (Anderson, 2012), the Russian Male Norms Inventory (Janey *et al.*, 2013), and the Measure of Men's Perceived Inexpressiveness Norms (Wong, Horn, Gomory, & Ramos, 2013).

1.1.3 Narratives and the co-construction of meaning

The telling and sharing of stories are intimately linked to the evolutionary development of language, human social formations and the historical construction of individuality and identity (Bamberg & Cooper, 2012). From a constructionist perspective, narration itself is a process of collaborative meaning-making; a co-construction. As Catherine Kohler Riessman puts it: 'Personal narratives are meaning-making units of discourse' (2016: 23). It is a universal social and personal phenomenon to both story and sequence our lives (Mishler, 2006). Of course, a natural life sequence exists from infancy through adulthood to old age. Within that sequence, milestones, such as walking, talking, going to school, coming of age, sexual maturity, coupling, reproduction, ageing, decline and death add shape and sequence to a life lived in linear time. Sequence alone, however, is not enough to lend consequence to a life lived. The theory of a network of meanings, developed by Rossetti-Ferreira, Amorim and Silva (2007) for mapping meaning-making across the lifespan proposes that 'development occurs through a network of meanings, of semiotic configuration, composed by organic, physical, interactional, social, economic, cultural, and political elements' (Rossetti-Ferreira *et al.*, 2007:277). Amidst each of the life stages listed above, innumerable contexts, experiences and thoughts contribute to innumerable choices and decisions; these are the most granular building blocks in the daily performance of identity and self. The impulse to story our lives is thus what Julia Kristeva denotes as the attempt by our 'psychic apparatus' to lend coherence to a chaotic amalgam of external conditions and contexts, and interpret the myriad signs and symbols with which we are daily confronted to 'register representations and their meaningful values' (Kristeva, 1984: 207).

The study of personal stories and narratives gives the researcher unique access to the experience of identity construction from a lifespan perspective (McAdams & Cox, 2010). In the context of entrepreneurs 'thriving' or 'struggling', it also affords avenues through which to identify where a sense of value is felt to have been lost and how it might be possible to address its retrieval.

Because, by their very nature, stories are shared, the construction of self is also conducted through interaction with an interlocutor or audience (Fivush, 2019). Through their reconsideration of Paul Ricœur's theory of interpretation, Missel and Birkelund (2019) provide insight into both the individual's participation in a broad social

construction of meaning, and the wider social context's inevitable influence on the very stories expressed. Embedded within the need to construct meaning is the question of legacy. Legacy is both material, in the sense of what is physically passed on, and narrative, in what 'legacy of values' (Hunter and Rowles, 2005: 333) is transmitted. This may account for how narratives of entrepreneurial success are framed and performed. It is perhaps by embodying the values of determination, perseverance and courage that the entrepreneur endeavours to build an identarian and material legacy.

I view narrative as a valuable tool for helping individuals reflect on and challenge the underlying assumptions and contexts through which they view and enact their own masculine identity. To establish some working sense of what I mean by NA, the following description by Catherine Kohler Riessman (2000: 24) is pertinent:

> Narrative analysis allows for systematic study of personal experience and meaning. The approach enables investigators to study the active, self-shaping quality of human thought, the power of stories to create and refashion personal identity. (Hinchman and Hinchman 1997: xiv)

1.1.4 Entrepreneurship

I chose to focus on entrepreneurs for several reasons. The first was because of a pre-existing curiosity regarding society's tendency to lionise so-called 'maverick' entrepreneurs such as the (male) founders of Google, Facebook, Tesla and Amazon amongst others. The second concerned the need to recruit a participant group from a relatively homogenous group of men and the very practical question of access. I know a number of entrepreneurs and knew that, through them, I could gain access to other entrepreneurs and the entrepreneur 'community'. The third was to do with my early reading concerning the debate around the role played by entrepreneurship in creating socioeconomic prosperity, in both the developed and developing worlds (Terjesen *et al.*, 2016; Ahmetoglu *et al.*, 2017). This felt particularly pertinent today given the increasingly changing nature of employment (Schwab, 2015) and of an increased awareness regarding the psychological risks of undertaking entrepreneurial ventures.

The concept of risk is a complex one. While for many it is a factor to be avoided or at least mitigated, it might be perceived by some nascent entrepreneurs as a desirable badge of honour. It is important to acknowledge that many researchers question the heroic notion of the entrepreneur and of the social reification of behaviours that might in fact be viewed as unhealthy and solipsistic (de Vries, 1977; Down and Giazitzoglu,

2014). In his seminal essay regarding the entrepreneurial personality, Kets de Vries dispels some myths regarding the entrepreneurial hero and the disparity between this constructed character and the more pedestrian realities of the manager or of managerial responsibility. While my study is concerned with individual experiences, this does not mean that individualism as a social construct and attitude should be overlooked (Downing, 2005).

This promotion, for example, of the 'great person' theory (John Stuart Mill, 1998) or the 'lone genius' myth (look closely however at any notable innovator and one will find a community of collaborators and supporters) is dangerous because it encourages the view that the entrepreneur needs to 'go it alone' (Montuori and Purser, 1995). This perception often leads to the conviction that their very core identity, their personal worth, is determined by the fate of their venture (Johnsen and Sørensen, 2016; Johnson *et al.*, 2018). Loneliness and the inability to separate personal and business identity are widely evidenced causes of depression, anxiety, aggression and suicide (Miller, 2015).

This study does focus on the relational and dialogic aspects of the individual's identity creation, but also acknowledges the tensions experienced by individual entrepreneurs as they confront social discourses regarding what an entrepreneur should be or do (Beech, 2008). Responding to a split in the constructionist research methodologies exploring identity work, Tony Watson (2009) outlines the concept of 'identity work' and goes some way to convincingly suggesting that identity is constructed both internally or individually, as well as externally in response to dominant discourses. The entrepreneur is thus positioned as having both agency in their construction of identity as well as having to confront unavoidable socially imposed narratives.

> Identity work involves the mutually constitutive processes whereby people strive to shape a relatively coherent and distinctive notion of personal self-identity and strive to shape various social identities that emerge to others in the various milieu in which they live their lives. (Watson, 2009: 257)

Given the social constructionist orientation of the current research project, the emphasis is on the relational and dialogic aspects of identity construction and thus the position taken is that identity is created by dialogic interaction with others through language (Down, 2010: 69). Subjective identity and meaning are both self-perceived and context-dependent, and in keeping with my epistemological standpoint, the

relational dynamic of identity performance and construction is a prioritised area of focus.

One of the most fascinating aspects of studying entrepreneurs is the extent to which entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial activity are so immensely varied. The character of the billionaire maverick, whose entrepreneurial journey might be summarised as a brilliant idea hatched in the garage of some marginalised genius that evolves into a multi-billion-dollar empire, only tells an infinitesimally small part of the story (Claire, 2012; Tomassini et al; 2020). Entrepreneurs come in all shapes and sizes, and while characters like Elon Musk and Jeff Bezos obviously do exist, their stories are best viewed as exceptional rather than typical. The idea that entrepreneurs are somehow 'special' lends the practice exclusivity and may both inhibit 'ordinary' people from engaging in entrepreneurial activity, or set nascent entrepreneurs up for failure and disappointment (not to mention psychological distress) if they fail to gain membership of that exclusive club. In the context of broadening discourse regarding the variety of entrepreneurial actors, Saravasthy, Ramesh and Forster (2014) usefully review the literature regarding entrepreneurial 'specialness' in order to then direct their focus to what they term 'ordinary entrepreneurs'.

The focus on ordinary entrepreneurs seeks to challenge the idea of 'specialness' as well as the emphasis on 'wealth creation' as the primary measure of what constitutes both success and entrepreneurship itself (Wach, 2016). When viewed as simply the starting and running of a new venture, a perspective emerges of much less prescriptive entrepreneurial identities. The millions of female entrepreneurs to emerge in Bangladesh thanks to initiatives by the Grameen Bank is a pertinent example of this.

With the almost endless multiplicity of entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial identities in mind (Gill, 2014), I was keenly aware of the need to avoid the potential pitfall of creating an entrepreneurial 'character'. While the specific participant group I interviewed did demonstrate some of the individualistic tendencies of a particular kind of entrepreneurial identity, I avoided misguided generalisation by considering the specifics of their family background, childhood, schooling, business experience, age and social class.

While research has demonstrated that instances of suicide are higher among male entrepreneurs than the average population (Kameyama *et al.*, 2011; De Vogli, Marmot

and Stuckler, 2013), the risks of suicide among nurses, for example, or low-skilled workers (Windsor-Shellard, B., & Gunnell, 2019) is proportionately much higher. I do not wish, therefore, to present suicide among entrepreneurs as an epidemic, merely to recognise the recent spate of high profile suicides in the entrepreneurial community such as those of Anthony Bourdain and Kate Spade, or the young tech entrepreneurs, Ilya Zhitomirskiy and Aaron Swartz, and the urgency for those working in or around this community to address the possible causes of this distressing phenomenon.

Entrepreneurs face high levels of stress and risk, as well as frequent demands to perform many roles at once along the course of the entrepreneurial journey. The stories which the participants tell themselves and others about who they are, and the manner in which these are told, can act as both protective and destructive factors, liable to have a significant effect on wellbeing (Berzonsky and Luyckx, 2008).

1.1.5 Identity construction and the life-course

Ontologically, I come at the research from the perspective that, while there exists an external and changing reality that is independent of mind, that knowledge and identity are constructed by individuals in their negotiation of their own place within it (Bruner, 1991).

Given the social constructionist approach of this research thesis, my epistemological standpoint is that identity is constructed through social and interpersonal processes, by absorbing, inheriting, exchanging, internalising, interpreting, enacting and transmitting narratives.

> Identity is a phenomenon that emerges from the dialectic between individual and society (Berger and Luckmann, 1991: 194).

Through interpersonal interaction, identity is constructed in relation to the dominant norms and standards endorsed and embodied by individuals belonging to a given culture and society (Berger and Luckmann, 1991). In more recent research, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165) have emphasised the processual nature of identity work as resting on the ways in which individuals are actively ‘engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness.’ Creed and Scully (2000) focus on the performative nature of identity construction and the role of performance

to ‘announce and enact who they are’ (2000: 391). The perspectives mentioned above all highlight the interactional nature of identity work, and thus on collaborative construction of identity through relational interaction, be it with an individual or with a broader cultural context.

Exploring how entrepreneurs construct and perform identity from a narrative perspective offers a focus on self-concept and thereafter, the relationship between self-concept, self-knowledge and mental health. This informs understanding of the kinds of coping strategies men employ in their performance of identity. Dan McAdams explores the development of identity through key life stages. His life story view of human identity and personality is rooted in empirical evidence, readings and interpretations of more popular cultural figures and phenomena. Central to McAdams’ conception of male identity across the life-course is the question of masculine narratives: both developmentally and in the formation of personality. Identity construction, which McAdams (2019: 1) refers to as ‘the internalised and evolving story a person invents to explain how he or she has become the person he or she is becoming’ both determines and is determined by our attitudes and beliefs, behaviours and actions.

In his very recent historical review of conceptual issues in narrative identity, McAdams (2019) explores questions of stability and change. He categorises the former as either continuity or stagnation, the latter as either growth or flux. Both professional and psychological wellbeing are fundamentally determined by the individual’s capacity to establish equilibrium and foster growth while honing their ability to tolerate uncertainty. While the emphasis here is on the ability to tolerate uncertainty from the perspective of psychological wellbeing, there is significant evidence that the avoidance of uncertainty in an entrepreneurial business context is a barrier to success, both in material and personal terms (Hofstede, 2001; Singh, Chernikov and Singh, 2017).

Constructing a meaningful life story is a process through which to establish a coherent, more integrated sense of identity and self (Stephens, 2011; Maynes, Pierce and Laslett, 2012; Kim, 2015). Agency is therefore key: the act of choosing and deciding relates closely to identarian issues of resilience and autonomy, ambition and success. For the entrepreneur, the drive to succeed may also constitute a narrative drive not only to give meaning to their own story but to construct a story for public consumption.

As I explore below, the pursuit of success as a means of constructing a meaningful personal self, thereafter as a form of 'identity management', is fraught with dangers.

1.1.6 Psychotherapy and wellbeing

Narratives of self help to regulate how we position ourselves in our external and internal interactions. The collaborative interaction between researcher and participant in this study echoed aspects of the therapeutic relationship: the participant is the holder of truth; the therapist accompanies them in making connections and interpretations. When Craib (2000: 174) asserts that 'life stories are designed as much to conceal as they are to reveal', he points towards the importance of interpretation. Stories were thus collected and analysed through interpretation. As a researcher, I approach identity from a constructionist perspective and as a practitioner, I approach therapeutic identity work from a psychodynamic one. Thus three relationships are at work in the presentation, construction and evaluation of narrative: (1) between participant and researcher; (2) between the researcher's conscious and unconscious epistemological/ontological standpoint; and (3) between the participant and his conscious and unconscious perceptions of the world and his place in it. These three relationships reflect the central aspects of psychodynamic psychotherapy: transference, counter-transference and the collaborative making of connections in formulating a meaningful (and workable) narrative.

The content of stories is as valuable as the mode of narrating, selection of detail, language and metaphors employed, form and tone of delivery. The complex interaction of different facets of narrating combine to produce rich data that, once analysed and interpreted, gives rise to new narratives that can then form the basis for therapeutic change (Murray, 2014). Similarly, understanding the attitudes towards psychotherapy at play in the performance of identity affords insight into the institutional work necessary to foster access to and engagement with psychological support. I hope that this study might contribute to the literature that encourages a less gender-blind approach to psychotherapy and better integrates gender work, and awareness of the heterogeneity of gender-specific identarian issues within clinical practice.

Numerous recent papers have focused on the devastating consequences of under-reporting psychological illness amongst men and have thus addressed the urgent need to re-evaluate how psychological treatment can cater to the male population

(Liang and Molenaar, 2016; Englar-Carlson, Evans and Duffey, 2014; Nahon and Lander, 2016). To do this effectively, a thorough appraisal of how men represent their masculinity and its relation to help-seeking is key (Brooks, 2017; Padgett, 2017).

In the context of counselling psychology, the construction of narrative may be viewed as the principal way in which a patient begins to establish self-reflection; what Illouz (2008: 171) views as a 'therapeutic narrative of selfhood'. The nature of stories is that they hinge on a problem or conflict, much like the therapeutic process. Thus establishing connections between a patient's narrative of selfhood, the means of communication of it, and the origins and evolution of conflict is a central part of providing effective therapy. Issues of identity narrative are also proposed as integral to the re-acquisition of self-worth, in great part by improving the empathic understanding of others (Montesano, Oliveira and Gonçalves, 2017). In their conceptualisation of a 'dialogic reconstruction of self-identity', Konopka, Neimeyer and Jacobs-Lentz (2018: 2) propose that by re-authoring narratives collaboratively, it may be possible to recompose self-identity and enhance agency.

Other research has focused on accentuating positive masculinities and turning from 'unhealthy negative' to 'healthy adaptive' masculinities. For example, Kiselica, Benton-Wright and Englar-Carlson (2016) propose a therapeutic model that combines positive psychology with positive masculinity (PPPM). They identify 10 areas of positive masculinity: male self-reliance; the worker–provider tradition of men; male respect for women; male courage; daring; risk-taking; the group orientation of men and boys; male forms of service; men's use of humour; and male heroism. PPPM thus lays the groundwork for implementing alternative narrative constructs in both research and clinical settings. Other approaches have focused on countering dominant narratives and normalising mental health conditions amongst men to reduce stigma. Syzdek *et al.* (2014) devised a system called gender-based motivational interviewing (GBMI): while the study is grounded in a Cognitive Behavioural model, its techniques emphasise narrative reconceptualising in an attempt to reduce stigma and encourage engagement.

As part of a concerted drive to incorporate positive developments in masculine attitudes into debate and research, Padgett (2017) underlines the need to consider the idea of 'progressive masculinities' able to exhibit and work with personal vulnerability.

By distinguishing between ‘conservative’ and ‘progressive’ narratives of masculinity, Ana Jordan offers a framework for diverging male voices to untangle the many obsolete messages of outmoded masculine ideologies (Jordan, 2019).

Therapy that attempts to ignore gender differences, was identified by Brooks (2017) as having a detrimental effect on men and a key factor in men’s unwillingness to seek and persevere with psychotherapeutic work. He argues that gaining a deeper understanding of male socialisation and masculine ideologies from first-person accounts of identity and masculinity is the first step towards developing therapeutic interventions that best respond to male-specific needs (Brooks, 2017). Men are in no way a homogenous group, however, so it is essential to consider cultural and sociodemographic context and background to understand and work with different masculinity narratives and identities (Hay *et al.*, 2019; Brooks, 2017).

An important caveat is necessary, though. While it is very positive that a host of new therapies are being developed, the likelihood of determining any conclusive empirical measure regarding the comparative efficacy of these specific treatments is limited. Worse, it might leave therapists feeling inadequately trained to work with complex intersecting sociocultural identities (Strokoff, Halford and Owen, 2016). This brings into focus the central issue of the therapeutic relationship or alliance; and the critical relational factor in effective psychotherapy (Fonagy and Allison, 2014): the quality of the patient-therapist relationship. Perhaps the question of what kind of therapy works best might be complemented by asking what quality of relationship, attunement, alliance or attachment is most effective in creating a solid bond and basis for effective intervention.

It is hoped that an improved understanding of the relationship of male identity narratives, mental health and help-seeking behaviours to constructions of entrepreneurial ‘success’ and ‘failure’ might help safeguard emerging and future entrepreneurs from the risk of psychological pain or burnout.

I must acknowledge some important areas that have not been addressed in this research. My focus on a specifically male gender identity could suggest that I espouse an essentialist conviction that the experiences of different gender identities are categorically dissimilar. This is not my position; I am fully aware of the wide-ranging research suggesting a considerable overlap in the psychological challenges faced by

entrepreneurs of all genders and their various configurations of self-concept (Chand and Ghorbani, 2011; Essers *et al.*, 2017). My decision to focus on males originates principally in the well-documented difficulty which men demonstrate in asking for help for psychological ailments (Liang and Molenaar, 2016; Englar-Carlson, Evans and Duffey, 2014; Nahon and Lander, 2016) as well as the associated risks. I hope that my study might stand usefully alongside similar future work regarding the narratives of selfhood of other gender identities. Another significant area insufficiently engaged with is the extent to which identity narratives, masculine ideologies and approaches to entrepreneurship differ across cultures. Although differences in cultural origin, educational background and age are addressed, the overwhelming homogeneity of my participant group has meant that investigations into this area were notably limited in the analysis.

1.2 Personal reflexivity

The current research project – from data collection to write-up – represents one of the most challenging experiences of my life. Both exhilarating at times and anxiety-provoking at others, it has given me true insight into some of the experiences of my participants. Much like an entrepreneurial venture, writing this thesis has been marked by an inner voice or super-ego telling me that failure is not an option. Much like the daunting feeling many entrepreneurs experience regarding their own ventures, I have been driven by the conviction that my future depends on successfully passing my doctorate. Thus, questions of failure and success have not only been at the forefront of my research but also personally, as I have been confronted with questions of fragmentation in my own identity and in how I tell myself and others my own story of working towards qualifying as a counselling psychologist. I fully acknowledge that I have been guilty at times of projection and over-identification with my research subject. I have had personal realisations during the course of writing this thesis, that I have demonstrated behaviours and experienced feelings that have inhibited asking for help, challenging isolation and engaging in dialogue. The process has been very lonely at times, and shame and self-doubt have been regular obstacles to effective work and perspective. I feel that the journey I have been on has given me both insight into, as well as empathy for the struggles and doubts many of my participants have experienced during the course of their professional careers.

When I studied filmmaking many years ago, one of my professors recommended, if we were in need of inspiration, that we should dig around in that imaginary draw where we keep our most secret feelings and build stories from there. When it came to selecting a research topic for this thesis, I realised with increasing clarity that I had dug around in the imaginary drawer that my film professor had described. I knew that exploring male identity and help-seeking behaviours, specifically from a narrative perspective, were subjects that were close to my heart, but when I ended up selecting entrepreneurs for my participant group, I had no idea how much of a parallel the process of writing the thesis itself would mirror aspects of the entrepreneurial journey. I came to entrepreneurship late on and somewhat accidentally in the process of deciding on my thesis topic. I had been searching for a more or less homogenous group of men to study and when my brother (himself an entrepreneur) suggested entrepreneurs, it seemed to fit the bill. The selection of entrepreneurs dramatically changed the course of my research; from initially wanting to focus my research on barriers to help-seeking, the study was reoriented towards considering what we can learn from accounts of the interaction between professional and personal identity in relation to emotional wellbeing. Attempting to understand what factors are at play when one presents oneself as either thriving or struggling, led to considering the extent to which the form of telling impacts the content of the telling. Getting from a struggling position to a thriving position for me hinged on personal agency, by changing the message I gave myself from 'I have to' to 'I want to'. As it happens, this clarity became available when I reached out to friends, colleagues as well as my own therapist to read my work and engage with me in dialogue. This led me to think about the value of establishing the origins of a narrative position in order to consider how a new and perhaps more positive narrative position of self might be reached.

1.3 Relevance to counselling psychology

The integration of self-concept and augmentation of self-worth is central to the counselling psychologist's work. It is hoped that the present research may contribute to increasing an academic understanding of how the construction and performance of identity narratives can impact psychological wellbeing and shed light on why some entrepreneurs might fare better than others at different times during their entrepreneurial trajectory. It is also hoped that the study's findings may ultimately contribute to supporting clinicians in working with men more generally to identify the

dangers of isolation and loneliness and internalise the idea of relational connection as an opportunity for growth rather than a source of shame. Richard G. Erskine's comprehensive proposal for developing integrative relationally focused psychotherapeutic models, for example, centres on meaningfully improving psychological health by honing in on the core concepts of vulnerability, authenticity and intersubjective contact (Erskine, 2013). By considering the personal alongside the professional, it is hoped that the current research might have useful insight to offer clinicians in helping patients untangle personal self-worth from professional success.

Chapter 2. **Literature Review**

2.1 Introduction

The key areas of focus for the current research project are entrepreneurship, identity, narratives, masculinity, and mental health. These areas will constitute the principal headings of this chapter. Given the focus on entrepreneurs, all areas of research are contextualised within the entrepreneurship literature. Additionally, I will consider some research areas pertinent to the subject but not explicitly explored in this study, given the demographic limitations of my participant group.

2.2 Entrepreneurship research and the European tradition

Since the early 2000s, entrepreneurship has grown exponentially as a field of study. This is in great part due to widespread conviction that entrepreneurship is an increasingly central driver of economic development and industrial growth (Baker and Welter, 2017; Venkataraman, 2019). Down (2013), however, focusing on more mundane and day-to-day entrepreneurial individuals, contests the widespread assumption of entrepreneurship's central role in economics and industry, preferring to view entrepreneurship as a set of activities that many engage with, rather than a work sector that they ascribe to. Down demystifies the heroic notion of 'the entrepreneur' and focused his attention on the *process* of entrepreneurship. These concepts and approaches are further considered below.

At the intersection of psychology and entrepreneurship research, much attention has been paid to the personality of entrepreneurs, to entrepreneurial intention (Frese & Gielnik, 2014), to organisational and occupational perspectives (Stephan & Roesler, 2010), but until quite recently there has been a dearth of studies that specifically focus on entrepreneurial identity and its relationship to psychological wellbeing, particularly from a narrative analytic perspective.

While sociology, social psychology and organisational studies have long approached identity in a way that engages with individual experience, entrepreneurship studies have lagged behind in this area. As mentioned in the introduction, one of the features of studying entrepreneurs is the sheer variety of entrepreneurial identities but much research in the field of entrepreneurship has conceived of the entrepreneur as an archetype or character whose identity can be assessed through measurement and

categorisation. The over-reliance on what Yvette Lewis refers to as the 'individualistic-objectivist' cognitive view of self and individual behaviour (Lewis, 2003: 228) has stood in the way of methodological approaches that focus on the individual's real life and socially contextualised practices (Down, 2013).

Following a workshop arranged by Simon Down in 2010 bringing together a number of researchers in the field of entrepreneurship, an initiative was conceived that sought to define a type of distinctive research tradition that emphasised the role of research methods that drew specifically from the social sciences and humanities. These workshops evolved into a special issue of *Entrepreneurship and Regional Development* (Vol. 25, Issue 1-2). The umbrella name given to these distinctive research approaches was *The European Tradition in Entrepreneurship Research*. Given the qualitative and constructionist approach taken here, and the extent to which my own research approach is informed by social scientific methods, this study aligns itself alongside this *tradition*.

While celebrating plurality in entrepreneurship research and aiming to engage with rather than reject mainstream theoretical and methodological approaches, the *European Tradition*, as defined by Down (2013), proposes a concerted re-evaluation of scientific universalism and positivism. The conception of a *European* tradition inevitably begs the question of whom they are contrasting their positions with. The broad distinction being made is with what Down and others consider to be the mainstream of entrepreneurship literature that has focused on economics and psychology in what Watson (2013) describes as 'a "scientistic" and individualistic' methodological framework. While not the exclusive domain of North American researchers, the trend was principally observed there and it was felt by those interested in defining an alternative *European Tradition* that a challenge was needed to counter a 'reductionist and populist concern with particular types of people called "entrepreneurs"' (Watson, 2013: 16) as well as to provide alternative philosophical and methodological approaches (Hjorth, 2012).

2.2.1 Entrepreneurship and wellbeing

In their 2019 article entitled *Entrepreneurship and wellbeing: Past, present, and future*, Shir *et al.* explore entrepreneurial wellbeing without a single reference to identity, sociology or the social sciences. Also notable is the fact that not a single article in the

entire issue of Journal of Business Venturing, (which Shir *et al.'*s article appears in), specifically devoted to entrepreneurship and wellbeing, uses a qualitative methodology to explore the subject (Journal of Business Venturing, Volume 34, Issue 4: 579-752). The trend observed above highlights the extent to which positivistic ontological methodologies have been preferred over interpretive analytic approaches in this field.

Wellbeing is a broad term as is the notion of mental health more generally, so a definition of entrepreneurial 'wellbeing' is perhaps helpful here, given the later focus on psychosocial thriving and struggling.

> We define entrepreneurial wellbeing as the experience of satisfaction, positive affect, infrequent negative affect, and psychological functioning in relation to developing, starting, growing, and running an entrepreneurial venture. (Wiklund *et al.* 2016: 1)

By establishing personal satisfaction and psychological functioning as being of equal desirability to conceptions of success that emphasise financial gain and business performance, this definition is of significance because it invites individual voices to express what 'success' might mean to them. A recent review of the literature on entrepreneur mental health and wellbeing by Ute Stephan (2018) gives reason for optimism for entrepreneurship researchers interested in the possibilities afforded by qualitative methodologies. Stephan demonstrates the extent to which research in the fields of organisational psychology, occupational health and economics has yielded insights into entrepreneur mental health and wellbeing, both from a quantitative and qualitative methodological perspective. She also decries, however, the lack of meaningful interaction between the disciplines stating that it has made achieving dedicated theories regarding the antecedents and consequences of entrepreneurial psychological health very difficult (Stephan, 2018) not to mention the possibility of generalisability. She champions the need for a greater plurality of approaches and introduces a variety of studies exploring aspects of wellbeing and mental health from a qualitative perspective.

Research by Anderson and Hughes (2010), for example, explores customer feedback as positively impacting entrepreneur wellbeing; an older study by Begley (1996) considers the relationship between entrepreneur wellbeing and responsibility for employees. Lechat and Torrès, (2017), investigate interpersonal conflict (with

employees and customers) and its impact on wellbeing. Gelderen (2016) focuses on entrepreneurs' negotiation with choice and autonomy and Gudmundsson's paper on the wellbeing of children and families in immigrant entrepreneurs (Gudmundsson, 2013) offers a window into a more culturally-embedded aspect of wellbeing. While studies on entrepreneurial wellbeing are increasingly asserting themselves in the qualitative entrepreneurship literature, research concerning entrepreneur identity constructs and wellbeing remains scarce.

2.2.2 Entrepreneurial identities

The literature concerning the psychology of entrepreneurial identity has traditionally focused heavily on personality traits, (Viinikainen *et al.*, 2017; Zhao and Siebert, 2006), but recent years have yielded a shift in theoretical focus and begun to consider the relational and dialogic aspects of identity construction in this field. While there has been important work conducted on entrepreneurial identity (Down and Giazitzoglu, 2014; Brändle, Berger, Golla, and Kuckertz, 2018; Mathias and Williams, 2014), very little research has appeared that is specifically concerned with entrepreneurial wellbeing and mental health from a qualitative methodological perspective. Considering the mental health and wellbeing of entrepreneurs through the framework of entrepreneurial identity invites consideration of the subjective experiences of the individual, and in so doing, offers a window through which to consider what Gill (2014: 51) refers to as 'the multiplicity and simultaneity of entrepreneurial realities'. Individuals are by definition unique, and by emphasising the relational and intersubjective aspects of identity construction, research in this area offers an in-depth exploration of the distinct contexts in which identity construction takes place.

Research that engages in *identity work* gives primacy to socially contextual personal agency (Downing, 2005; Watson, 2009; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). The focus in Watson's conception of *identity work* is to emphasise the extent to which entrepreneurs are more actively involved in 'self-shaping' than previous literature had acknowledged. This was emphasised by Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003: 1165) in their use of active verbs to describe the construction of identity: 'forming, strengthening, revising'. By denoting entrepreneurs as 'actors', both Watson and Sveningsson and Alvesson underline questions of agency paving the way for a challenge to those restrictive concepts of, for example, 'enterprise culture' (Burrows,

2015; Keat and Abercrombie, 1991) as often being highjacked by state or corporate institutions to promote a shift in economic behaviour and impose a hegemonic narrative on enterprise (Jack and Anderson, 1999). By speaking of dominant cultural discourse, Watson demonstrates the extent to which a shift in focus to individual *self-identities* has put into stark relief the inadequacies of assuming the universality of broad societal discourses.

As touched on above, what has been termed *The European Tradition of Entrepreneurship Research* has brought renewed vigour to entrepreneurship literature that prioritises the ways in which 'individuals construct their social world' (Down and Reveley, 2004: 236). Here the emphasis is on meaning-making and the unique and different aspects of social, cultural and historical discourses that individual entrepreneurs contend with. In focusing on class, for example, Gill (2014) identifies the extent to which so many entrepreneurial identities are overlooked in the reproduction of 'taken for granted' conceptions of the entrepreneur. Central to the *European Traditions* project is to broaden the concept of 'the entrepreneur' and entrepreneurial identity as fixed entities, to include a deeper critical appreciation of the distinctions and interactions between *self-identity* and *social-identity* (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003).

In his study of process theories in entrepreneurial identity research, Steyaert (2007) identifies the concept of 'entrepreneuring', rather than the more static 'entrepreneurship' as a way of emphasising the active role played by individuals. He underlines the fact that both the practical reality of entrepreneurial ventures and internal development of personal identity are organic, evolving processes. However, he cautions against the dangers of 'giving ontological priority to the individual instead of understanding how action is formed within a culturally-embedded context.' (Steyaert, 2007: 460) With ontological perspectives in mind, Steyaert invokes Robert Chia's distinction between an 'ontology of becoming' rather than an 'ontology of being' to reorient the focus to the dual processes involved in entrepreneurial action – the personal, identarian 'becoming' as well as the evolving nature of entrepreneurship itself. The question of 'becoming' challenges the popular objectivist perspective that opportunities or ideas are somehow already out there, simply waiting to be discovered or found. Steyaert proposes a third ontological category, an 'ontology of relatedness' which acknowledges the need to incorporate thinking regarding institutional, social,

historical and cultural contexts, while also paying emphatic attention to the personal stories and narratives that constitute the core data for the study of identity (Steyaert, 2007: 456).

Only recently has the area of entrepreneurship research which focuses on the 'habitual entrepreneur' turned its attention to the emotional ramifications of failure and to deepening an understanding of why some entrepreneurs are able to bounce back from failure while others are not (Madsen and Desai, 2010; Shepherd, 2003; Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2010). The focus in the literature on habitual or serial entrepreneurs has tended to be on learning and skills acquisition, it has not however considered in great depth questions relating to how the identity constructions of entrepreneurs might contribute to their willingness and ability to either start new ventures that add to their entrepreneurial portfolio or bounce back from the experience of failed ventures. While attention is being given to individual differences in entrepreneurs' ability to recover from failure, the trend is on measurable phycological traits such as optimism (Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2010) or confidence (Hayward *et al.*, 2010), rather than on those identity constructs that might impede or promote recovery.

2.2.3 Narrating entrepreneurial identity

Although sociologist Paul Ricoeur's work on narrative identity and the basis of tradition (1992) evolved in the context of philosophy, its application in tracing the historical origins of constructed life narratives sheds important light on the formulation of belief systems and consequent behaviours.

Narratives, in the context of entrepreneurship, are viewed from a number of perspectives. Dodd (2002), for example, conceives of narratives as reproductions of cultural metaphors, while Perren and Jennings (2005) view narratives from the perspective of political discourses. Maclean, Harvey and Chia (2012), however, focus on how narration of entrepreneurial identity is a form of self-representation that, through self-legitimisation supports the maintenance of a socially desirable identity construct. This final perspective touches on Goffman's idea of social encounters as being where, through narration individuals perform identity in the words 'to announce and enact who they are' (Creed and Scully, 2000: 391). Thus the act of narrating is almost a form of 'live' identity construction, in which the individual is 'announcing and enacting' their *self*, while also adapting that performance to a particular setting and

audience. Building on Goffman, a body of literature is growing that focuses on the relational, the interpersonal and the idea of identity as co-construction more than individual accomplishment (Fivush and Graci, 2017; McAdams, 2019b). The core idea is that storytelling is itself a process of sense-making. Ibarra and Barbulescu, (2010) for example discuss the extent to which self-narration can lead to changes in self-perception, and indeed as a stage on which to 'try out' new or different aspects of their personal and professional identities.

While questions of agency in the way scholarship in the entrepreneurship field views the individual actor and their negotiation of identity have been explored above, it is to the question of identity performance that I now turn. In their 2006 study exploring the use of clichés in constructing entrepreneurial self-identity, Down and Warren challenged the static view of entrepreneurial identity, describing entrepreneurs of all colours as 'skilled cultural operators manipulating perceptions of the entrepreneurial self' (Down and Warren, 2008: 2). This suggests that the narrative expression of identity is not only a construction, but also a performance that may serve a purpose. Down and Warren assert the extent to which entrepreneurs may use cliché to construct a 'weak' attachment to certain identities in order to maintain flexibility and the freedom to dispose of certain identity tropes should they no longer prove useful or relevant. They demonstrate here the extent to which a narrative is being crafted and re-crafted and is never a definitive script. The narratives evoked by particular participants, at a particular time and place may be seen as a temporally situated snapshot of the ongoing construction of both self and social identity.

A perspective that has gained increasing credence in recent entrepreneurship research is on the recognition and integration of 'micro-identities' (Leitch and Harrison, 2016; Abbas, Byrne, Galloway and Jackman, 2019), precisely to encourage the entrepreneur to reorient their identification with the success of the venture and broaden their perspective on their other social and personal identities. When Shepherd and Patzelt (2018) propose 'optimal equilibrium' between competing identities, the emphasis is on fulfilment of the twin needs for high distinctiveness and belonging, what Shepherd and Haynie (2009a: 327) refer to as 'identity synergy'. This theory proposes that equilibrium is principally attained by integrating micro-identities while establishing firm but flexible boundaries between personal and professional life and self. Entrepreneurs are also, for example, spouses, parents, friends, sons and daughters.

Within the organisational structure, they may wear many hats. Nuances of personal and domestic life also confer ever-more subtle features of identity. The key proposition is that there is choice involved in the stories we tell about ourselves and about which self or selves we choose to prioritise and nurture (Guo *et al.*, 2019). If the individual identifies that choices exist, it is possible that secondary considerations may come to light such as questioning what version of themselves they might be choosing to present (to themselves and others) in any given context, and why.

Goffman's concept of 'performance' continues to hold a central position in thinking about the construction and presentation of identity. It is thus defined as:

> all the activity of an individual which occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers and which has some influence on the observers. (Goffman, 1959: 32)

Goffman offers definitions of a number of tools individuals use in their performance of identity, namely: 'dramaturgical principles', 'impression management' and 'mystification' (Goffman, 1959: 68). Performance is thus a valuable construct for engaging not only with how an identity is presented, but also, as I have mentioned above, *why* (Down and Giazitzoglu, 2015). The question of what aspects of identity, or what *identities* are being performed is at the same time dependent on social, institutional, organisational and individual contexts. With the focus on masculine identity(ies) the following section considers how gender stereotypes play into the construction of entrepreneurial identity.

2.3 Entrepreneurial masculinities

Definitions in Western society of masculine identities are highly prescriptive (McGraw, 2018; McGraw, Russell-Bennett and White, 2019). Characteristics typically identified as 'male' such as independence, toughness, self-reliance, stoicism and strength (to name some of the most obvious) are strongly endorsed (Messerschmidt, 2019) and understood as having both negative and positive impacts on men's beliefs and behaviours in relation to health. As mentioned above, a dominant strand of research into entrepreneurship has focused heavily on personality and traits specifically desirable to those embarking on an entrepreneurial career, identifying opportunities, and the likelihood of creating successful ventures. Much of this work has been blind to unacknowledged prejudices and preconceptions regarding what constitutes an entrepreneur. The role of masculinity in the individual's construction of an

entrepreneurial self challenges these perspectives. A social constructionist approach thus rejects the essentialist perspective regarding the homogeneity of men, masculinities and manhood (Addis *et al.*, 2016).

Eleanor Hamilton (2013) argues that entrepreneurship itself is conceived of both academically and in the media as a masculine construct perpetuating stereotypes often associated with white, middle-class, educated males. I acknowledge here that my own participant cohort very much conforms to this stereotype. It is my hope that my exploration of both the similarities as well as the *differences* between participants' experiences, characteristics and identity constructs goes some way towards challenging some essentialist notions of what specifically constitutes a male entrepreneur but also affords space for considering not only how identity is formed but also *masculinity* itself. Giazitzoglu and Down, (2015) concisely describe what is meant by the performance of masculine identity performance while challenging the static idea of masculinity as simply an indisputable monolithic condition:

> …men consciously perform radically different masculine roles in order to comply with the expectations and conventions imposed upon them by the social stages they inhabit and the different audiences they face. Masculinity is not a natural, intrinsic state. Rather, it is a relative, socially constructed, performed and learned identity enactment. (Giazitzoglu and Down, 2015: 3)

In his paper on the gendered construction of entrepreneurial identities, Smith (2010) reaffirms that 'entrepreneurship is ideologically skewed towards masculine ideology' (Smith, 2010: 6), he also aims to consider how constructions of masculinity influence entrepreneurial identity. By calling for a more nuanced and collaborative consideration of gender in entrepreneurship studies rather than what he calls 'interdisciplinary gender warfare', Smith represents a rich vein in the literature that seeks to unfetter both female and male genders from the restrictions of monolithic and obsolete constructions of masculine entrepreneurial identity.

The gender blindness so prevalent in entrepreneurship studies (Christofi *et al.*, 2009), not to mention in the media more broadly, while ignoring female entrepreneurial identities, may also contribute to restricting debate regarding different entrepreneurial masculinities. What Casson, refers to as 'the swashbuckling business adventurer' (Casson, 1982: 1), based on the 'folklore of entrepreneurship', may be as restrictive to males as it is to female entrepreneurs. If desirable professional qualities typically

associated with masculine identity such as 'rational thinking, competitiveness and self-control' are the benchmark for entrepreneurial identity, how ill-served are men when their ability to identify with stereotypically female identities is hampered – qualities such as sensitivity, intuition and altruism for example (Hamilton, 2013: 94). I specifically refer to these male stereotypes because of the dangers associated with subscribing to those oft-perpetuated traits for men.

In '*Take it like a Man'*, Berke *et al.* (2017: 1) focus on 'a unique gender-shaped phenomenon': pain tolerance amongst men. They identify the destructive psychological impact of men attempting to embody outmoded incarnations of 'manhood'. The question of enduring suffering is central to the hero narratives so prevalent in the literature on entrepreneurial identity (Nicholson and Anderson, 2005; Welter *et al.*, 2017). This phenomenon has been widely explored, however, little research has been devoted to the struggling entrepreneur (Smith and McElwee, 2011), with shame, failure and psychic distress pointedly overlooked. In their wide-ranging exploration of entrepreneurial narratives, Smith and McElwee (2011) detect the construction of a 'man's world', in which shame, suffering and weakness are conceived as penance to be endured in silence.

The myth of the 'self-made man', the entrepreneurial hero, operates within a broad sociocultural narrative. This is turn incorporates acknowledged 'laws' (conscious endorsement of traditional masculine attitudes and behaviours) and 'myths', unconsciously performed and reproduced, through the absorption of cultural, social and psychological meanings that shape (often restrictive) conceptions of success (Wach, Stephan and Gorgievski, 2016).

Important entrepreneurial qualities may indeed be developed through difficult childhood experiences (Drennan *et al.*, 2005; Gladwell, 2008). Many of these, such as 'risk and bravery, ambition and growth, and self-sufficiency and autonomy' (Down and Warren, 2008: 5), constitute stereotypical masculine identity markers. The intersection of difficult childhoods and the challenges of an entrepreneurial career, combined with attitudes and behaviours associated with typical masculine identities, actually provoke some of the problematic 'dark sides' of the entrepreneurial experience that frequently lead to psychic distress, risky behaviour, poor decision-making and isolation (Blazina and Marks, 2001; Addis and Mahalik, 2003). The enactment of typical masculine

behaviour inhibits seeking help for psychological suffering (Berke, Reidy, Miller and Zeichner, 2017). It has therefore been proposed that effective psychotherapy for men needs to account for the various ways in which men conceive of and enact obsolete masculine narratives and explore those restrictive social gender norms that maintain corrosive attitudes to self (Brooks, 2010; Brooks, 2017; Strokoff, Halford and Owen, 2016).

Literature that negotiates the question of consensus in Western societies regarding typical gender constructs by exploring agency in individuals' constructions of gender identity (Jensen, 2011; Chang and Wildman, 2017; Jones, 2019) provides a useful basis for challenging dominant norms, exploring alternative masculinities and understanding the different ways in which men experience masculine paradigms (Messerschmidt, 2018).

2.4 The mental health of entrepreneurs

Entrepreneurs have long been seen as different or unique, that is to say, having distinctive and unusual personality types, being somehow 'touched with fire', having particular character quirks, skills or experiences, while all the while being lionised (and sometimes demonised) for their successes, what Warren and Smith refer to as 'mavericks, hero figures and lone wolves' (Warren and Smith, 2009: 48).

A large body of work has been devoted to the mental health conditions of entrepreneurs as being advantageous to, or predictive of, entrepreneurial action. Work on the effective harnessing of ADHD traits by entrepreneurs suggests that apparently negative circumstances can be transformed into positive virtues (Wiklund, Patzelt and Dimov, 2016). In a similar vein, research has shown how experiences related to dyslexia may have fostered social and cognitive independence as well as the questioning of authority (Miller, 2011; Logan, 2013; Louie, 2016). Additionally, Alexander-Passe (2016: 87) explores how children develop resilience as a result of negative experiences at school, which then plays a role in shaping a belief that 'what doesn't kill you makes you stronger'.

Drennan *et al.* (2005) offer insight into the role played by a) frequent relocation and b) difficult childhood experiences in both entrepreneurial intention and behaviour. Gladwell (2008) suggests that successful entrepreneurs might have developed qualities such as amplified persistence and ruthlessness as a result of painful

childhood experiences. While this may be the case, a vast body of literature identifies the immensely negative impact on the psychological health of childhood emotional trauma (for example, Herrenkohl *et al.*, 2013; Horwitz *et al.*, 2001; Merick *et al.*, 2017).

While it exists and is evolving, literature concerning the considerable threats to mental health that an entrepreneurial career might have remains scarce (Omrane *et al.,* 2018; Shepherd *et al.*, 2010; Ward, 2014; Torres and Kinowski-Moysan, 2019). This has been viewed as resulting in great part because of a fascination with the positive aspects of entrepreneurial personality (Tahar, 2012). The risk of loneliness and isolation, combined with a reluctance to seek help (Farrimond, 2012), exposes the 'lone' entrepreneur to the very real threat of depression, burnout and breakdown (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). Alongside the risks posed by isolation in entrepreneurs' resolute (and sometimes reckless) pursuit of success, over-identification with the success or failure of their venture has been established as a leading cause of psychic distress (Michel and Jehn, 2003) and loss of individual identity (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009a).

Researchers seeking to understand the various threats posed to entrepreneurs' mental health have variously sought to identify the antecedents to burnout or decline in the psychological wellbeing of entrepreneurs (Stephan, 2018) proposed solutions for averting burnout by close exploration of factors such as skills deficit or lack of key resources (Filion, Borges and Simard, 2006) or focused on the fear of failure as central to driving stress (Patzeltz and Shepherd, 2011). Few studies, however, have relied on a process view of entrepreneurial activity and identity to explore how experiences of imposter syndrome, stress, conflict or failure either reinforce or threaten both entrepreneurial and masculine identity constructions.

As regards the mental health of entrepreneurs, studies of this kind would usefully complement the development of new therapeutic models, specifically informed by understanding traditional masculine narratives and their possible negative impact on male help-seeking patterns, as well as their mental health more broadly (Kiselica *et al.*, 2017; Kivari *et al.*, 2018; Richards and Bedi, 2015; McAdams, 1999). A thorough exploration of the origins of these narratives provides both psychotherapist and patient with the tools to identify and interpret negative inherited narratives; and hence, to rewrite them (McAdams, 2019).

2.4.1 Entrepreneurs and therapeutic engagement

The literature on entrepreneurs and therapeutic engagement is scarce. While there is a growing trend of literature on the subject of occupational therapy in both small and larger businesses (Anderson and Nelson, 2011; McClure, 2011; Smith, 2011), the impact of entrepreneurial activity on personal identity is less frequently engaged with. Identity work and construction and in-depth engagement in therapeutic treatment is thus insufficiently considered in the available literature.

A rare research study from an interpretive phenomenological perspective by Jason Cope (2011) usefully explores the phenomenon of 'failure' and recovery from the process of losing a business. The findings here contribute to the literature on entrepreneurial learning and help identify what the author refers to as 'pressure points' – that is to say the specific aspects of 'failure' that aggravate a deteriorated mental state. The central conclusion is that a better understanding of some specific psychological dangers of a failed business can both avert its likelihood as well as support the individual in the grieving process of loss and disappointment. The change of emphasis from business success to failure affords a focus on the personal emotional and identarian fallout of professional disappointment and even humiliation.

There seems, however, to be a reluctance to truly engage with emotional turmoil, perhaps for fear of putting budding entrepreneurs off taking the risk of such a career choice. Timmons (2004), for example, encourages the view that failure is what motivates entrepreneurs to develop 'steel and savvy'. Here, the author commits the error of overlooking the suffering that individuals experience precisely because of the difficulty of separating business from self. This perspective also reinforces the cliché of the entrepreneur as a heroic adventurer, one who is galvanised by failure. This is clearly not always the case, as this study demonstrates. Learning is of course a key feature of the 'habitual' entrepreneur's ability to bounce back, but not all entrepreneurs do.

The perspective often favoured is that incorporating an understanding of risk into entrepreneur education equips students with skills that focus on the venture, but not on the individual. The idea of a prophylactic to future burnout, while useful and necessary, does not directly engage with how to support entrepreneurs who are actually struggling (Ihuoma, 2013; Kakouris and Georgiadis, 2016; Smith, 2011).

An article considering the psychological impact of economic crisis on national identity by Mentinis (2013) offers valuable insight into questions of selfhood and the need for therapeutic thinking that incorporates both productivity and wellbeing. While this is on a macro-national level, the insights into self-construction and the need to redress personal identity in order to rethink entrepreneurial identity are valuable. This focus on individual identity (albeit within the frame of national 'crisis') points towards the existential crisis of the individual.

Pareek and Rao's 1995 article on counselling and supporting entrepreneurs calls for a form of psychological understanding and support that does focus on the loneliness of entrepreneurial activity and the need for engaging individuals in an empathic relational dialogue that offers an understanding of specific individual needs. The attention paid to differences in types of entrepreneur also offers an important degree of nuance (Pareek and Rao, 1995). One significant aspect of this article is the use of the word 'helper'. Pareek and Rao offer a general term that relates to individual support, which acknowledges the breadth of different kinds of help an entrepreneur might receive. This underlines the relationship with another person as the key feature of empathic support.

While not specifically concerned with entrepreneurs, Doherty *et al.* (2017) offer compelling insight into the possible decision-making factors that lie behind men's reasons for entering, engaging with or exiting psychotherapy. The narrative, social constructionist approach here allowed for men to express their identarian negotiations with therapeutic engagement and I found that the issue of control was central. This meant that control over which kind of therapy, which therapist, and the direction and process of the therapy itself were of concern. The question of confidentiality was also central because of the fear of being *outed* as vulnerable and needing help. Dismissiveness of the effectiveness of treatment and the threat posed by the possible intimacy of a therapeutic relationship were also viewed as factors challenging the ability of the participant group to engage meaningfully with treatment.

Research focusing on the specific aspects of entrepreneurs' therapeutic engagement with therapy or 'help' would clearly be of value as it would offer a deeper understanding of why relational engagement so frequently appears to propose a threat to identity. This understanding could lead to improving issues of mental health in entrepreneurial

education as well as provide health services and psychotherapists alike with a keener understanding of the threats posed by identarian conflict in order to support entrepreneurs at different times during their entrepreneurial journey.

2.4.2 Other perspectives

Until recently, much of the research into entrepreneurship has focused on a very narrow group: generally male, white, middle-class and heterosexual. Recent work has emerged that challenges ethnocentric perspectives and offers a much broader, richer perspective of entrepreneurial experience across cultures, contexts, genders, racial and sexual identities (Wong, Liu and Klann, 2017; Essers *et al.*, 2017; Gottzén, Mellström and Shefer, 2019).

Similarly, reconceptualising entrepreneurial activity and success not only from an economic growth perspective, but also that of social, personal, and societal gain, (Steyaert and Katz, 2004) opens the way to exploring how the entrepreneurship discourses of different sub-groups question and re-evaluate narrow definitions of success. Zahra and Wright (2016) explore success through a societal rather than personal enrichment prism, and encourage the development of new theories and measurements of it, particularly in terms of social entrepreneurship ventures.

Romero and Valdez (2016) challenge one-dimensional perspectives on 'ethnic entrepreneurship' and propose an intersectional approach that emphasises understanding the interactions of multiple identities at an individual, community and societal level. Class, gender, race, nativity and legal status are considered alongside ethnicity as impacting the entrepreneurial experience; which challenges the erroneous conviction that effective ventures automatically lead to social inclusion (Ram *et al.*, 2017).

Recent developments in feminist and gender research on entrepreneurship question the findings from the 1980s and 1990s that focused on comparing male and female entrepreneurs, highlighting risk aversion, conservative growth expectation, self-confidence, and attention paid to personal and societal fulfilment rather than purely economic gain (Stead, 2017; Henry, Foss and Ahl, 2016). Anggadwita *et al.* (2017) consider culture and country-specific female entrepreneurial experiences through exploring differences between developed and developing countries. New research trends increasingly focus on the multitude of context-specific challenges, definitions

of, and pathways to entrepreneurial intention and activity (Davis and Shaver, 2012; Jones *et al.*, 2019).

New conceptions of success and failure, as well as the breadth of differences in entrepreneurial identity within and between cultures, are considered in some depth by Benjamin Artz (2017). His work contends that concepts such as 'success' need to be explored in a much more pluralistic and holistic way to go beyond mere economic success and consider success not only in terms of individual gain but also in terms of societal, community, familial contexts as well as representation and empowerment.

It is surprising to note that research papers on sexual minorities and entrepreneurship are scarce. In a rare paper, however, Laura Galloway (2007) considers the question of diversity vs homogeneity in queer identities, the culture-specific complexity of defining 'gayness', and the problematic tendency to situate queer entrepreneurship within an ill-defined 'gay market'. The lack of research here suggests that queer entrepreneurship continues to be located at the margins of socioeconomic life. A few keys voices in this research area, (most saliently, Susan Marlow and Helene Ahl) shed critical light on how gender bias continues to preclude useful learning regarding the diversity of entrepreneurial practices and identities, and how discriminatory attitudes in the entrepreneurial community are perpetuated (Ahl, 2005; Marlow, 2014; Foss, Henry, Ahl and Mikalsen, 2019).

While lack of diversity was a feature of the participant group in the current study, it is hoped that the following piece of research offers a unique perspective on the moderating role of identity construction and performance on self-concept and psychological wellbeing of male entrepreneurs, specifically against the backdrop of restrictive, hegemonic, masculine entrepreneurial identities.

The following chapter implements the narrative analytic framework to explore the thematic content and narrative performance of participants' identity constructions in order to then consider the moderating role of participants' identity constructions and narrative performances on their psychological wellbeing across the life-course. As stated previously, the current study's objective was to gain insight into what factors might influence the ability of some male entrepreneurs to thrive, both professionally and personally, and conversely what factors might lead others to struggle both professionally and personally.

Chapter 3. Research Methods

3.1 Overview

This chapter provides a comprehensive description and evaluation of both the research process and methodological procedure employed for the analysis of the collected data. I begin by outlining my aims in conducting this study and the epistemological standpoint within the context of my particular research ambitions: both regarding the kind of data I wished to elicit from interviews, and how I interpreted it. Then I describe and rationalise NA as my preferred research methodology, as well as establishing the specific version I chose to employ in my analysis of interview material. I then outline the methodological procedures of the data collection and analysis and provide an account of my own working practices during the transcription, reflection and analysis phases. The chapter concludes with a reflexive consideration of the methodology, including questions of validity and ethics as well as critical evaluation and consideration of any methodological limitations or drawbacks.

3.2 Research aims

The following research aims to gain insight into what factors might influence the ability of some male entrepreneurs to thrive, both professionally and personally, and conversely what factors might lead others to struggle both professionally and personally. By taking a social constructionist approach, I hoped to gain insight into better understanding the above factors by exploring how male entrepreneurs construct identity narratives and thereafter to consider the role played by these constructed narratives on psychological wellbeing.

The approach was threefold: firstly, to explore the thematic content of male entrepreneurs' identity constructions; secondly to explore the narrative performance of male entrepreneurs' identity constructions; and thirdly to consider the moderating role played by participants' identity constructions and narrative performances on their psychological wellbeing across the life-course.

Using a qualitative, narrative analytical methodology, I invited participants to share their life stories in the context of a semi-structured interview. NA allowed me to consider both the 'what' (thematic content) and the 'how' (construction and performance) of participants' narratives. Given the interpretive nature of NA, I was able

thereafter to explore the 'why' (function and purpose) of the narrations and to propose some cautious conclusions regarding the risks posed by an entrepreneurial career to psychological health.

It is hoped that insights gleaned from this study might provide psychotherapists, educators, researchers and policymakers with additional perspectives on supporting future and current entrepreneurs, as well as safeguarding them from the dangers and pitfalls so common in this risky career choice. The study also hopes to provide insight into the help-seeking behaviour of men and how it might be improved.

The first central concern is with entrepreneurship and the psychological threats faced by male entrepreneurs. The second is to better understand how certain identity narratives might negatively impact psychological wellbeing, and conversely how other identity constructions might nurture wellbeing. Deepening such an understanding might offer a perspective from which to consider how to improve engagement in psychological support. More broadly, these findings may generate useful debate regarding the development of psychotherapeutic approaches that might best address specifically 'male' perceptions of self.

3.3 Theoretical perspective

Social constructionism challenges the idea of a single objective reality, contending that the individual constructs their own reality. The perspective I espouse here accounts for objective reality; a real world exists outside the individual's experiences. Environment, whether familial, social, cultural, historical, institutional or discursive, represents the context in which identity is constructed. But how the individual negotiates their relationship to their environment determines the identity and self they construct (Lindgren and Packendorff, 2009). The individual develops identity through interpreting and giving meaning to the world they inhabit and their relationship to it. Perhaps most importantly, the dynamic interaction of human relationships is the fundamental stage on which identity is performed (Aceros, 2012).

My approach to identity construction positions narrative as the principal relational vehicle. Narrative is co-constructed through dialogue, with meaning co-produced between teller and listener. This applies, of course, to the researcher/participant relationship and therefore requires a high degree of reflexivity from the former, so that their own beliefs and assumptions can be viewed as active factors in every stage of

the research from data collection to analysis and discussion (McAdams, 2013; Holstein and Gubrium, 2000; Giuliani, Monti and Barberio, 2017).

Much like the participants involved, the researcher is engaged in an active process of constructing meaning. The perspective that dialogic utterance is motivated by purpose (consciously and unconsciously) introduces the interpretive element central to my methodological approach. Identities are constructed, and concurrently performed and the researcher's ambition to understand how, what and why identity narratives are constructed necessarily involves a high level of subjectivity (Crossley, 2007; Chakraborty, 2017).

3.4 A qualitative approach

In the last 15 years, a broad array of quantitative studies have been conducted regarding attitudes and behaviours associated with traditional masculinity and how they interact with entrepreneurial intention and effectiveness (Zhao and Seibert, 2006; Smith, Bell and Watts, 2014; Gomezelj and Kušce, 2013; Schnitzer and Gross, 2018). Little qualitative research, however, has focused on men's own accounts of their journey towards, and experience of, psychological distress in the context of their entrepreneurial careers.

A quantitative paradigm was considered inappropriate in eliciting subjective accounts of personal experiences that could shed light on the individual's own meaning-making processes, while also considering the numerous social, cultural, personal, political and domestic contexts within which the interviewee exists, and the interview itself is conducted. A qualitative paradigm was therefore chosen, enabling in-depth exploration of a number of interacting dimensions: the subject's construction of identity over the life-course, the relationship between identity and career choice, the impact of career choice on psychological wellbeing and help-seeking, and the intersubjective experiences of research participant and researcher. A qualitative methodology was considered the most suitable way of gathering rich data through the communication of – and reflection on – the storied construction of identities in the context of entrepreneurial experience and psychic distress (Riessman, 2002).

> Presentation of and reliance on detailed transcripts of interview excerpts; attention to the structural features of discourse; analysis of the co-production of narratives through the dialogic exchange between interviewer and participant; a comparative approach to interpreting

> similarities and differences among participants' life stories. (Riessman, 2002: 701)

Taking its cue from the *European Tradition* discussed above, this study, by considering the accounts of participants as reflecting either 'thriving' or 'struggling' creates an opportunity to explore both the external realities of individuals' lives in the 'real world', while relating this to the impact of identarian processes that develop over the life-course. Social constructionism thus affords a useful bridge between the more realist and interpretive approaches (Watson, 2013).

3.5 Methodology

3.5.1 Narratives and narrative analysis

Narrative is an essential method through which individuals make sense of and attribute meaning to their own experiences (Holstein and Gubrium, 2002; McAdams, 1993). Similarly, how an individual narrates their own story is very responsive to dominant cultural, discursive and relational influences (Holloway and Freshwater, 2007). The construction of narrative is a fundamental human drive; the telling of stories is known to have existed since the earliest records of human existence: visually, orally or through written records. The 17,000-year-old murals discovered in 1940 at the Lascaux Caves in the French Pyrenees are the earliest representation we have of the events, experiences and practices of a human community. The telling and sharing of stories are intimately linked to the evolutionary development of language, human social formations and the historical construction of individuality and identity (Bamberg & Cooper, 2012).

Murray (2003) defines narrative as: '[a]n organised interpretation of a sequence of events which involves attributing agency to the characters in the narrative and inferring causal links between the events' (Murray, 2003: 103). This statement, however, is by no means a neutral one within the narrative and identity fields, specifically regarding the question of how to conceive of 'time' when considering both story and identity development. Elliot Mishler's theory on the 'double arrow of time' makes the important distinction between 'clock/chronological' vs. 'narrative/experiential' models of time (Mischler, 2006). The distinction Mischler makes is essentially between two different levels of narration: presentation of a sequence of connected episodes (clock or chronological time); and interpretation and configuration of disparate episodes and

events into a meaningful story that informs the construction of identity. Mischler (2006: 36) elegantly summarises his theory as 'the contrast between the physical world and the world of human consciousness and experience'.

In narrative interviewing, the interviewee narrates events and experiences; but also makes links between them, interprets their significance and, consciously or unconsciously, omits details or events that might not suit the greater identity narrative being projected. It is perhaps because of the unpredictability of what an interview will produce in the tensions between these two contrasting, interacting levels of narration that Riessman (2008) promotes the need for the individual researcher to adapt existing research methods to suit the specific needs of their study.

Stories are where objective and subjective realities meet. Thus, narratives might be conceived of as the explicit and implicit stories that individuals tell both to and about themselves. Squire (2008) suggests that transforming the bric-a-brac of daily experience into narrative form offers a way for the individual or group to make sense of significant life events, transitions and trajectories, as well as the processes (both internal and external) at work in their lives. As stories are shared, the performative aspect is ever-present: the story functions as a means of imparting, exciting, inspiring, intimidating, educating, warning or simply entertaining (McAdams, 2015).

> Narrative identity is a person's internalised and evolving life story, integrating the reconstructed past and imagined future to provide life with some degree of unity and purpose. (McAdams and McLean, 2013: 233)

While stories serve innumerable purposes, at the core of the human drive to narrate is the desire to make meaning out of an individual's or group's existence, and perhaps also to leave a record of a life or lives lived. This may occur through the construction of national identity and reconceptualisation of national history (Burkhanov, 2017): through transmitting founder values and identities to preserve organisational identity (Walsh and Glynn, 2008), or the personal desire to pass on a legacy to the next generation (Hunter and Rowles, 2005). The need to carry the values, myths and legacy of one epoch, generation or transition on to the next is prevalent across cultures and contexts.

The performative nature of narrative also reflects the desire to impose order on the life-course, and perhaps to present a coherence to experience that supports the idea

of individual agency. As Kristin Langellier, a key contributor to the exploration of performance in storytelling and narrative, puts it: '[p]erformance implies the transgressive desire of agency and action' (Langellier, 1999: 129). Crucially, stories are told to others, so the interaction between teller and listener is central to the narrative experience. The sharing of stories is interactive, and thus a collaborative process of meaning-making. When the philosopher Paul Ricœur states: '[e]very hermeneutics is thus, explicitly or implicitly, self-understanding by means of understanding others' (Ricœur, Reagan and Stewart, 1978: 101), he touches on a key aspect of the sharing of experience through narrative: the relational construction of identity. We make sense of ourselves relationally, not only to the individual, but also the sociocultural contexts from and within which our narratives of self evolve. Down and Reveley (2004: 241) refer to this as the 'cultural and socio-technical aspects of [a] community's shared repertoire' to emphasise the central role of this in shaping entrepreneurial intention and decision-making.

3.5.2 Narrative analysis

The subset of research methodologies that consider narrative as their principal means of gathering rich data maintain that stories are 'the main portal into individual and communal sense-making, experience, and subjectivity' (Bamberg, 2012: 84). When a narrator tells a story, they are giving 'narrative form' to experience. This means the study is preoccupied with lived, subjective experience and how individuals make sense of the world around them and their place in it. NA explores how stories are used as active components in unconscious meaning-making and identity performance (McLeod, 2011). The manner and purpose of telling are given equal significance to the plot or individual events, as is the relational and contextual dynamic between interviewer and interviewee.

The version of NA proposed by Riessman (2008) was preferred because of my specific interest in exploring participants' experiences through the triple-lens of the what, how and why of narrated experience: what is narrated, how it is narrated, and the possible functions and purposes of both the choice of narratives communicated and manner of their communication. Within the context of her broad conception of NA, Catherine Kohler Riessman proposes three technical approaches: thematic (TNA), structural (SNA) and dialogic/performance narrative analysis (DPNA). Simply put, TNA

considers the *what*, SNA focuses on the structural and formal aspects of the *how*, and DPNA interrogates the broader performative aspects of the how while relating it to the complex questions of *why* a particular narrative is told in a particular way. Given the scope of this study, TNA and DPNA were my favoured overall technical approaches. These two combined aspects of Riessman's methodological suggestions were viewed as being both flexible and adaptable in the central exploration of narrative and performative function.

I have taken my cue from Riessman herself in adapting my methodology to the needs and scope of this study by selecting only TNA and DPNA and omitting SNA from my analysis. Riessman states in *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences* the need for scholars to adapt methodological frameworks to best suit their aims and research questions and draw from approaches within the 'family' of NA (Riessman, 2008: 183). With this in mind, I felt that SNA's focus on the detailed linguistic structure of the narrator's utterances (the exploration of narrative form, of verbal clauses, of story *grammar* and units of discourse for example) was too granular an approach to the analysis. This was partially due to restrictions of space – I felt that this degree of detail would take up valuable space, which I preferred to devote to the broader construction of identity through considering the main chapters of participants' narratives. I also made this choice because of the sheer volume of material in my transcripts – there were over 200 pages of transcripts and I felt that immersing myself in an SNA analysis of the transcripts would take me down a rabbit-hole that detracted from my principal purpose of considering the relationship between thematic content and performative function. From a more personal perspective, having studied literature as an undergraduate, I was wary of applying what felt dangerously close to critical analytical techniques for fear of distancing myself from the transcripts and treating them more as literary, perhaps even written sets of data, rather than the spoken accounts of individuals' actual lives.

Following Riessman's application of NA, I located myself as an active participant 'in the construction of narratives, [and] as audience for their performance' (Riessman, 2003: 5). This in turn became a central feature of my interpretive process. My notes throughout the transcription, analytic and interpretive phases, covered both observations about the participants as well as observations about myself and about the dynamic between us. Because the transcripts contained my own comments and

utterances, I was able to identify those areas where I was invited to participate in meaning-making, in answering questions posed by participants, or in clarifying what I had understood from a comment or statement.

Of course, my own meaning-making process was strongly influenced by my ontological and epistemological approaches. Using NA in the context of social constructionism meant that the analytic and interpretive stages were already grounded in a particular view of experience and narrative. Centrally, I approached identity as an organic, subjective social construct that was prone to change and evolution and that was determined by context. My participant portraits in Chapter 4 demonstrate the extent to which my interpretation was influenced by the actual experience of the participant at the time of interview and by my methodological position and preferences.

My interviews were obviously also shaped by my research aims and therefore already tuned to eliciting certain kinds of data. As it happens, a central expectation of mine, that help-seeking would emerge from the interviews as a significant barrier to rebalancing wellbeing, was contradicted by the data gathered. This may also have been because one of my research criteria had been that participants had already experienced therapy of some kind and had therefore already had experience of overcoming some of those typical obstacles that inhibit men from seeking help.

Another obvious feature of my influence on the process was my choice of interview questions. I asked few questions but each was sufficiently open-ended to elicit story and reflection rather than factual answers. When a participant seemed to run out of steam in their response to a particular question, I would follow up with an invitation to consider a specific moment, detail, turning point or emotional response to experiences. This not only kept (or rebooted) the flow of narration but also allowed for a slowing down of the journey through the life-course to reflect.

Riessman (2008: 23) views the interview itself as ‘narrative occasion’, as a dialogic exchange in which everyday rules of conversational turn-taking apply, but in which longer turns of talk are encouraged of the interviewee. As such, the stage is set for the participant to narrate their story dependent on how they interpret my questions and on the degree of reflexivity they choose to engage within the telling and sharing. The analytic process was heavily reliant on both the general shape of narrated experience

and life-course, as well as the specific experiences and feelings expressed regarding events, relationships, challenges and achievements.

3.6 Method and design

3.6.1 Recruitment

During the process of selecting a group of participants, I researched a number of options. My intention here was to consider groups of individuals in professions characterised by risk-taking, such as financial traders, venture capitalists, or indeed artists and cage-fighters. Having decided to explore masculinity and help-seeking behaviour, I went about considering what kinds of 'homogenous' groups of men might make for interesting research. The question of homogeneity was to do with narrowing the focus as much as possible for the sake of comparison, coherence and consistency. I put 'homogenous' in inverted commas because of course within any group there is considerable divergence between each individual. This being a qualitative research study, the question also of individual differences was likely to be of key significance too. Apfelbaum *et al.,* (2014) offer a compelling exploration of the questions of diversity within apparently homogenous groups.

Participants were recruited through disseminating a link on Twitter and Facebook, allowing potential participants to email me directly; as well as direct email appeals to personal contacts in the entrepreneurial sphere with a request to share the link with their own contacts, colleagues and social media followers. The weblink itself contained an invitation to participate in the study, accompanied by a brief overview of the research's focus and intention, participation requirements and a guarantee of confidentiality and anonymity. Snowball sampling was anticipated, and participants were recruited on a first-come, first-served basis. After potential participants had contacted me, I had a brief telephone conversation with each of them in which I answered any questions or concerns. This first telephone contact was designed to explain the nature of the study, clarify the nature of participants' involvement, the timeframe of data collection, participants' right to withdraw at any time and how confidentiality and anonymity were to be implemented. A date was arranged and choice of venue established. Each participant was invited to attend an interview with the researcher lasting between 60 and 90 minutes, in which they would be invited to answer a small handful of questions that would encourage a life-course exploration of

their family and educational background, their entry into, involvement in, and experiences of entrepreneurship, and decision to seek and engage in individual talking therapy.

3.6.2 Sampling inclusion criteria

As this study is concerned with men's experience of their own masculinity, only male participants were recruited via a purposive sampling method. Purposive sampling was used to draw data from 'information rich' cases (Devers & Frankel, 2000) with a pre-identified interest in entrepreneurship and mental health. All had English as their first language and were men who identified as entrepreneurs currently or previously working in the UK. All had had or were currently having talking therapy of some kind. I chose not to select participants undergoing any specific therapeutic modality as I felt that the decision to get help was most important; and that the experience of talking with a professional about personal or emotional issues was more important than offering a critique of the type of therapy they had undergone. One specification was that the therapy itself had been one-on-one rather than in a group, as the personal relationship with the therapist was considered important. Some participants had experienced group as well as individual therapy. As far as being an entrepreneur was concerned, rather than impose a definition of what I felt to be an entrepreneur, I preferred to interview participants who self-identified as entrepreneurs, as this was already an informative identity position.

3.6.3 Interviewees

In total, nine narrative interviews taking a life-course perspective were conducted (McAdams, 2008). Seven of the interviews were conducted in person, while two took place via video call because, being based abroad, the individuals could not meet in person. The latter interviews were the first two conducted. Ultimately, I decided to discount them and focus on the seven UK-based interviewees. While both of these participants had undertaken some entrepreneurial activities in the UK, their principal ventures were based abroad and I felt that introducing variations in national entrepreneurial and help-seeking culture might dilute homogeneity and give rise to issues that distracted from the research (Robinson, 2014). I also felt that there was some inconsistency as these two interviews were via video call while the others were in person.

Due to happenstance, all participants were Caucasian (with the exception of one, who was mixed race Asian-Caucasian). All were heterosexual; all were partly or fully privately educated. I chose to only interview people aged 17 or above to avoid the need to gain parental consent (BPS Code of Human Research Ethics, 2018). The age range for the participants included in the study was between 23 and 53 years old (see Table 1 below).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Participants	Age	Ethnicity	Sexuality and Relationship Status	Education	Therapy
A	32	Mixed race	Heterosexual Married	Mixed state-private	Previously
S	53	Caucasian	Heterosexual Married	Private	Previously
T	48	Caucasian	Heterosexual Married	Private	Currently
F	31	Caucasian	Heterosexual Married	Private	Currently
B	29	Caucasian	Heterosexual In a relationship	Private	Currently
R	26	Caucasian	Heterosexual Single	Mixed state – private	Seeking
W	23	Caucasian	Heterosexual Single	Mixed state – private	Previously (but attends NA)

3.6.4 Interview locations

As my intention was to make attending interviews as easy as possible, I offered to conduct them at City University, while also asking the participants if they had any preferred location. Three interviews were conducted in private rooms at the participant's place of work; two in private rooms at City University; one (at the request of the participant) was conducted outdoors in a secluded area of a cemetery close to the participant's place of work; and one was conducted in a private room at my own place of work.

3.6.5 Data collection

As McAdams (2008) recommends, I kept my interview questions to a minimum. The protocol itself was significantly informed by McAdams' *The Life Story Interview* (2008). While catering to my specific research interests, it was able to elicit, for the most part, those areas he considers fundamental to grasping some relatively rounded understanding of a person's life story: key scenes, characters, trends and themes (McAdams, 2014). My approach to interviewing was also very much influenced by

Mischler (1991) and Riessman (2008), whose central emphasis is on the interview as a joint construction between two active participants.

As evidenced in the interview protocol itself (see Appendix B), the questions represented a progressive exploration of specific life stages and thus gave the interview a linear thrust. The intention was to encourage participants to reflect on each stage cumulatively, as well as facilitate my understanding of the broader social, cultural and familial contexts in and from which entrepreneurial identities subsequently formed. This also allowed me to consider links between early and later experiences, both with the interviewee during the interview, and later in my analysis of the transcripts (Bamberg, 2012).

The semi-structured and open-ended nature of the interview questions allowed for free-flowing responses from the participants, gave space for dialogue, and elicited storied accounts of participants' lives, from childhood to the present day (Kelly, 2010). Due to the dialogic element of the research, intermittent interjections and follow-up questions from the researcher were features of the interview. Rather than prescriptively imposing my own structure on the interview, my questions (and follow-ups) invited participants to take the lead. My intention was to avoid the dynamic of participant as data generator and researcher as data extractor. This originated in a two-fold desire to create a rapport with the interviewee and facilitate the flow of the participants' narrative accounts; as well as respond congruently to whichever direction interviewees chose to lead the conversation (Crossley, 2007; Kelly, 2010). This gave rise to a number of topics and areas that I had not considered and made for much richer data both in terms of content and exploring interviewees' choice of topics and even reasons for digression.

One occasional limitation was that of available time: there was only one interview with each participant, limited to a maximum of 90 minutes. I did occasionally feel there was a risk that specific areas would not be sufficiently covered. I dealt with this by listening to interviewee responses as carefully as possible and fashioning my responses and interventions in a way that would link them back to those specific areas. While this technique might appear obliquely prescriptive, it preserved conversational flow while ensuring that the most pertinent research topics were covered as far as possible.

As my digital recorder was instantly visible to the interviewees as they arrived, immediately on meeting the participants, I asked permission to record the interview: reminding them that it could be stopped or paused at any time, with the recorder switched off if ever they felt uncomfortable. Once permission was granted, I said we would start the interview after a brief review of the terms of their participation and their rights regarding the research. During the initial contact stage of recruitment, I had provided participants with an information sheet (Appendix H) on the aims of my research and how I wished to collect data. When we met for the interview, I gave them a brief recap of these aims and procedures and asked if they had any questions. I then reiterated the anonymity and confidentiality of the interviews and reminded them they could withdraw at any time. Consent forms were also signed, both by me and the participant. Once the participant had assured me they had no further questions, I told them that the interview would now start and I would turn on the recorder.

3.6.6 Data storage

Interviews were recorded on a handheld digital recording device. I transferred the files to my personal laptop (encrypted and password protected) and from there, to a password-protected external hard drive. This drive was stored at my home in a secure lockbox. The interviews were transcribed verbatim and anonymised using a standard word processing programme. These files were stored on my laptop and the same external hard drive mentioned previously. The files will all be destroyed securely once the study is fully complete.

3.6.7 Data analysis, transcription and formatting

All interview material was transcribed, read and annotated several times, and considered according to Riessman's principles regarding applications of Thematic and Dialogic/Performative Narrative Analysis (Riessman, 2008), as I shall further outline below.

I made hard copies of each transcript and in my initial readings, made notes in the margins of comments that felt particularly significant, passages of rich and structured narrative, ideas I wished to bear in mind when reading other transcripts or links I wanted to make with emergent ideas from transcripts I had already read. During multiple subsequent readings and re-readings of each transcript, I handwrote notes on a sheet (or several sheets) of paper (see Appendix C) regarding each individual

participant and my cumulatively emergent thoughts about themes, modes of communication, performance and the nature of the dialogic dynamics between the interviewer and specific interviewee. I also wrote notes on another document that contained more general ideas regarding features shared by two or more participants, and emergent thoughts about common patterns, themes, behaviours, language and phrasing.

I noted that this document was partly made up of questions addressed to myself: thematic areas, verbal and rhetorical behaviours, narratives and identities I wanted to explore further. These notes brought theory back to the forefront of my thinking, allowing me to consider the raw data within the context of my previous readings: to explore how and when the data confirmed (to greater or lesser extents) and sat coherently within the theoretical perspectives I had explored, as well as where it diverged significantly from theories proposed in the literature.

As my notes accumulated, I began to make handwritten tables for each area of focus, emergent theme, narrative tendency, identity position, childhood experience and so forth. In the first column of each table were the pseudonyms of each participant and next to these, a brief summary of their accounts of each area under scrutiny. This produced a large amount of material and documents which I spread across my living room floor in order to gain some perspective and further distil the lists into broader areas of focus during the course of several further readings.

3.6.8 Narrative analysis of the interviews

The intention in the data analysis phase was to focus on making sense of the events described and their underlying meaning in the context of an individual's expression, interpretation and presentation of autobiographical data in narrative form. The purpose was to explore the 'outer' and 'inner' worlds of the participant and view both content and performance in the context of identities constructed. My intention was also to consider the influence of context on performance.

3.6.9 Thematic narrative analysis

Before applying dialogic/performative narrative analysis (DPNA) to the data, I applied thematic narrative analysis (TNA) in order to assess and make links between participants' experiences and develop an understanding of the data's central focus:

the content. Here, a focus on thematic differences and similarities allowed me to lay the groundwork for the interpretive process to follow. Thematic analysis allowed me to interpret data in light of theoretical principles developed through prior reading and as well as my initial research intentions in collecting the data in the first place. As such, I was already looking to collect data relating, centrally to identity and mental health. I applied TNA by paying close attention to content during the interview itself, and absorbing content initially at face value. I thus felt better able to listen to what the participant was telling me, without the distraction of attempting to analyse their mode of communication or any conscious or unconscious performative aspects. This made for a more open-minded interview, which allowed me to feel somewhat less cluttered by theoretical considerations and freer to follow the story in a more uninflected way. Of course, it was not possible to merely suspend my theoretical and methodological predilections, but to the extent that I could, I attempted to meet the interviewee as authentically present as possible.

During the initial stages of analysis, TNA was at the forefront of my thinking. A process of classification took precedence while I put together handwritten tables of the shared experiences or characteristics of participants, as well as markedly different experiences and characteristics. This process generated a considerable number of documents that became essential tools for cross-referencing during analysis, as well as identifying dominant themes expressed across the interviews as a whole. TNA was ultimately of crucial significance in developing some of my central findings; principally, some factual commonalities and contrasts between participants relating to the kind of interpersonal contact they had or were engaged in. Thematic analysis also allowed me to gain a deeper understanding of the kinds of formative experiences in childhood and adolescence that may have had a bearing on their entrepreneurial identity development.

Employing a TNA framework, I produced a number of handwritten documents listing each participant and drawing out quotes from each of both thematic and other similarities in the use of humour, dramatic narration, confession, intimacy, boundary-setting, evasion, hyperbole and introspection, among others.

While I did collate those utterances by participants that were most pertinently similar, even to the point of linguistic formulation, I approached these linguistic details as

representative of theme. One example was the striking number of times across the dataset that some version of the words 'you just get on with it' was spoken. Another was the casual dismissiveness with which traumatic events were narrated by several participants or the inadequacies regarding Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT) expressed by all participants who had received this treatment. Such observations offered a useful window into considering what attitudes were being demonstrated and how modes of communication might relate to themes.

3.6.10 Dialogic/performance narrative analysis

Having established those similarities and differences of experience between participants, and begun to construct a thematic 'map' of sorts, my attention turned to how the narratives were being presented. In DPNA, the functions or purposes of narration were at the forefront of my analytical process. By combining TNA with DPNA, I was able to ensure that the 'what' and 'how' were consistently borne in mind throughout the project, from conceptualisation to interpretation and exploration of the *why* of particular identity construction and performance.

> Dialogic/Performance Analysis… is a broad and varied interpretive approach to oral narrative that… interrogates how talk amongst speakers is interactively (dialogically) produced and performed as narrative. (Riessman, 2008: 105)

Central to DPNA is the primacy of context. Drawing on the work of literary theorist Mikhail Bahktin (1981), Riessman (2008) considers the ways in which form and meaning emerge between people in social and historical particularity, in a dialogic context. Riessman's position is that, through our relationship to the 'other', our own identity is constructed as well as the specific context in which an exchange takes place, from the macro – national, institutional, societal – to the granular: socio-cultural differences or similarities between interviewer and interviewee, for example.

Shifting my focus during the data analysis towards DPNA led me to consider more keenly that these attitudes and narrative behaviours were being directed at me specifically. At this stage, I put some emphasis on exploring what identities I might be bringing to the interview, or what imagined identities the participant might be projecting onto me, such as: researcher, therapist, male, Caucasian, 'expert', student, doctoral candidate, grateful recipient of data, authority, City University representative, 'mind-reader', etc. The actual analytical work incorporated the handwritten documents

informed by TNA into fresh documents, each representing a theme, with quotations from each participant relevant to each and annotations linking content to mode of telling. This was a stepped distillation process, enabling me to synthesise my thinking in preparation for the in-depth interpretation of how narrative theme combined with performative intentionality could shed light on underlying psychological processes.

3.6.11 Methodological considerations

Because I only interviewed male entrepreneurs – and, as it happened, a fairly homogenous group in demographic terms – the question of limited applicability arises. I have considered why the entrepreneurs who volunteered to participate in the study were such a homogenous group. The advertisement and flyer had, after all, been distributed to many thousands of people online. The original disseminators of my advert and flyer online via Twitter and Facebook were themselves successful male, Caucasian, mostly heterosexual entrepreneurs, which might have influenced people's choice to participate; while some of those who volunteered had come through second- or third-degree contacts of my brother, himself fitting the demographic profile. While the homogeneity of the participant group has some advantages in ensuring a certain degree of consistency and possible generalisability, my principal frustration is that my study could reinforce the cliché of the white, male entrepreneur. Future studies might take a comparative approach by reaching out to entrepreneurs from a variety of specific demographic and socioeconomic groups.

Moreover, my focus on men might inadvertently suggest a position of male 'versus' female, or 'opposed to' other gender identities. There are certainly numerous crossovers in terms of experience, interpretation and narration with other demographic and gender groups, but I chose to focus on men because my study was not a comparative one and thus a certain degree of homogeneity was a desirable control for consistency.

I chose to focus on male entrepreneurs because of a personal interest in masculine narratives, identities and help-seeking, particularly considering current debates regarding 'toxic' masculinity within the context of the #metoo and #howiwillchange movements (PettyJohn *et al.*, 2018). My research comes from genuine concern regarding the corrosive effects of male alexithymia and identifying with or enacting outmoded gender attitudes and behaviours (Feder, Levant and Dean, 2010). I needed,

therefore, to reflect carefully on how my own experiences and beliefs might impact my interpretations and findings by identifying patterns that confirmed my sense of an overwhelming prevalence of alexithymia in the male population.

Another reason for choosing male entrepreneurs was because levels of risk, stress, uncertainty and responsibility are particularly high among that population (Dunkl, Zizek and Jiménez, 2016). Recent research has found that male entrepreneurs also demonstrate significantly higher levels of depression, ADHD, anxiety, substance abuse and bipolar disorder than the average population (Wiklund, Patzelt and Dimov, 2016; Antshel, 2018); as well as personal characteristics frequently associated with traditional masculinity: aggression and risk-taking, codes of silence regarding psychological distress, burnout and stress (Griffin, 2012; Connell and Wood, 2005; Weaver, Liguori, Hebert and Vozikis, 2012).

Entrepreneurship was selected as a field of study not only because of its innately risky and competitive nature, and hence the pressure on entrepreneurs to display strength, confidence and resilience (Louie, 2014), but also because how the emergent generation of entrepreneurs negotiate their emotional wellbeing has potentially widespread socioeconomic implications.

A tangential risk in focusing on the mental health of entrepreneurs relates to the controversial association of creativity with mental illness. While madness and genius have been associated since time immemorial – from Shakespeare to the Romantic Poets, to the contemptible works of Cesare Lombroso (1895) – recent research has identified disproportionate rates of psychopathology in creative and successful individuals (Jamison, 2011; Simonton, 2017). The risk lies in suggesting that psychopathology is the cause of genius, creativity or success because this legitimises psychic distress as an inevitable but somehow desirable cross to bear along the road to success. It is important to consider this point because the madness/genius paradigm can also reinforce the heroic representation of the entrepreneur (Morong, 1992). Any entrepreneurial activity involves risk, but placing higher social status on entrepreneurs as cultural heroes or role models reinforces and legitimises potentially destructive behaviours while also overlooking the myriad of different types of entrepreneurial activities and individuals. Research by Chandy and Narasimhan (2011), for example, identifies and celebrates what the authors term the ‘micro-

entrepreneur', and in so doing debunk some central myths regarding entrepreneurial types and identities. David Pozen (2008), on the other hand, offers a wide-ranging and sometimes comical depiction of the almost endless proliferation of the entrepreneur identifier in order to both democratise the concept of entrepreneurship as well as to offer a more inclusive definition of entrepreneurship (Pozen, 2008).

3.6.12 Narrative analysis and counselling psychology

First-person accounts can be of considerable value in helping psychologists understand the stories we live by (Wilson, 2011). Stories do not take place in a vacuum and, much like psychotherapy, they are principally concerned with how the protagonist manages and negotiates relationships and conflict. The act of telling a story is a process of selecting, organising, connecting and evaluating; presenting a multifaceted perspective on personal narrated experience (Hinchman & Hinchman, 1997). In the context of counselling psychology and psychotherapy, the construction of narrative may be viewed as an essential way in which a patient or client begins to establish self-reflection; Ilouz's (2008) concept of the 'therapeutic narrative of selfhood'. The very nature of stories is that they hinge on problem and conflict, much like the therapeutic process. Establishing connections between a patient's or client's narrative of selfhood, the means of communication of that narrative and the origins and evolution of conflict is a central part of providing effective therapy.

3.7 Ethics

3.7.1 Code of ethics

This project conforms to the BPS and HPC Codes of Ethics and Conduct (2006, 2010). Ethics approval was granted by City University, (see Appendix J). In addition, prior to commencing data collection, written, informed consent (Appendix I) was obtained from each participant interested in getting involved. Following data collection, participants were invited to reflect on the interview process and provide feedback. They were also informed that they were welcome to request information on the study at any time from first contact to thesis submission and at any point thereafter. Confidentiality was guaranteed. All participants will be referred to by pseudonyms and no identifying information will be available to anyone but the individual researcher. No deception was or will be employed.

3.7.2 Ethical considerations in narrative research

By electing to take a life-course approach to interviewing and proposing exploration not only of the experiences of specific topics, but of the familial, relational, domestic, educational, professional, social and cultural contexts in which experiences inform the construction of identity, there is the inevitable risk of past experiences giving rise to strong feelings (Illouz, 2008). 'Telling one's story' (Corrie, 2018) echoes the therapeutic process in many ways. For this reason, it was essential that I not only evaluated risk in my initial contact with participants by asking questions about their current condition, whether they were seeing a therapist and if they had a robust support network, but also by offering each participant information on where to seek help should they need or desire it.

More broadly, the researcher's empathic attunement to the participant was a key feature of developing a safe environment and rapport that facilitated free-flowing dialogue and narration. It was essential, though, that I maintained my stance as a researcher, not as a therapist (Kvale and Brinkmann, 2018). Here, my personal reflexivity and mindfulness regarding the nature of my follow-up questions were key.

The question of interpretation is also a central ethical consideration. The idea, first proposed by Ricoeur (1996) and taken up more recently by Willig (2012) and by Langdridge (2007) of considering approaches to interpretation as either 'suspicious' or 'empathic' offers a useful starting point for valuable self-reflection on the researcher's part. 'Suspicious' interpretation takes the approach that individuals are somehow concealing truths and that the interviewer's job is more akin to detective work, applying external theoretical concepts developed by the researcher through which to interpret data. 'Empathic' interpretation, on the other hand, aims to get close to the participant's experiences: allowing the data to generate insights free from theoretical preconceptions (Willig, 2013).

In my interpretative process, I found that despite having accrued a wealth of theoretical knowledge on the various subjects I was exploring, I was also very much aware of the need for deep empathic reflection on how the participants' experience and feelings manifested and to be open to new ideas and perspectives before considering the purposes or functions of their identity 'performance'. Such was my 'what, how and why' approach and, given the ramifications of a social constructionist epistemological

stance (Sutton and Austin, 2015), the interpretive process needed to take the objective realities and experiences of the participant into account while also considering those unconscious processes which led to how the individual constructed their reality through their own interpretation of both context and experience. I thus needed to maintain a stance that exercised, while not 'suspicion' a desire to understand what might lie beneath a certain statement, or identity position, while also always maintaining an 'empathic' attunement to participants' experiences.

3.7.3 Personal reflexivity: participants' truth and the hazards of interpretation

Given the issues of subjectivity, interpretation and the risks associated with pathologising research participants, it was critical to highlight and prioritise the participants' 'truth' (Noble and Smith, 2015). In this research project, the fundamental 'truth' lay in participants' statements about themselves and their expressed understanding of their own behaviours, feelings and attitudes. The rest was conjecture; albeit, the product of listening, linking and theorising. The theoretical proclivities carried by the researcher are not insignificant here: my personal and professional belief in the primacy of the unconscious means that all utterances, in some sense, are material for interpretation (Johnson and Christensen, 2019).

Crucially for me, the question involved exploring what unconscious behaviours and patterns I observed from a stance that gave credence to what was uttered. I ensured that I avoided holding a knowing stance that mistrusted the participants and somehow 'knew better' than them the reality of their situation (Willig, 2017). In some instances, I did feel that participants might have missed opportunities that could have helped them improve their wellbeing or avoid conflict. But I viewed these more as blind spots, common to all of us, rather than evidence of limited emotional sophistication or avoidance mechanisms (Nestor and Shutte, 2018).

With interpretation, there is the very real risk of the researcher inadvertently assuming a position of superiority or omniscience, particularly when psychoanalytical affinities are acknowledged (Campanario and Yost, 2017). As I approached the interviews and data analysis from a life-course perspective, it would appear that I followed a stereotypically psychoanalytical trajectory of considering unconscious processes regarding the impact of childhood development and experiences on the adult's

configuration of self. I of course maintain that childhood is deeply formative in setting the course for identity construction, as well as the development of coping and defence mechanisms. Marie-Josée Bernard and Saulo Dubard Barbosa (2016) have focused on the 'resilience dynamic sparked by significant life events', with a specific emphasis on childhood trauma. By conceiving resilience as a process of absorbing shock, regaining equilibrium and translating the experience of adversity into practical tools for developing entrepreneurial efficacy and a meaningful life narrative, Bernard and Barbosa (2016) offer insight into the relationship between resilience developed in childhood and the construction of entrepreneurial identity.

In my reflexive practice throughout the research process, from establishing an epistemological stance to developing interview questions, data collection and analysis, the principal safeguard against what one might describe as 'psychoanalysing' (or indeed pathologising) the participants and narratives involved holding myself to what Gadamer and Ricoeur (1982) described as the 'hermeneutics of empathy' as discussed by Andreea Ritivoi (2016) in her essay on empathy, intersubjectivity and narrative understanding. She contends that the conflict between comprehension and explanation is ultimately resolved by an interpretive research process that prioritises the individual's lived experience as they narrate and make sense of it.

I acknowledge that other researchers, faced with the same data, would quite possibly not reach any of the same conclusions as me. Were they to come at the data analysis from a different theoretical orientation, they indeed might not share the overall conviction that identities are constructed or performed at all (see Combs, Crook and Rauch (2019) for a wide-reaching meta-analysis of conflicts in interpretation).

3.7.4 Briefing

Participants were given a detailed information sheet summarising the study's focus structure and timetable, along with a detailed outline of the parameters. They also had an opportunity to ask any questions prior to the data collection. A risk assessment was conducted over the phone before arranging a meeting and interview.

Each participant was invited to provide feedback and ask the researcher any questions that might have arisen during the process. They were also offered the opportunity to read a copy of the research study following submission, although requests for changes would not be possible at that stage.

3.7.5 Researcher-participant dynamic and contextual factors

The analytical process explored what participants narrated along with thematic differences and similarities between participants' accounts. Thereafter, the discussion focused on the functions or purposes of participants' narrative identity constructs, as well as why and how these narratives were shared with me. As interlocutor, I might constitute a moderating factor in the choice of narrative and its performance. If stories are co-constructions, it is important to consider what kind of co-constructor I might be. I approach this not just through how the participants might perceive me, but also in the kinds of meaning I might have been making, driving or eliciting for my own personal (unconscious) reasons.

My exploration of participants' identity constructions is based on subjective interpretation and, to some degree, on my impression of them at the time of interview. I, therefore, focus on the value of sensitising to both verbal and non-verbal inter-relational dynamics and the possible insights this might provide.

It is important to acknowledge that the identities reflected by participants at the time of interview may have been conditioned by the mood in which they found themselves that day, or specific professional or personal issues immediately facing them. I contend, however, that the impression I have depicted and reflected is of value because in sharing their life story with me, the point in the interview where they reached their present circumstances was informed and coloured by a longer-term perspective (Guest, MacQueen and Namey, 2012).

Bauman (1986) describes the process of reflexivity on the interviewee's part. He prefers this term to reflection because it suggests not only the act of narrating, but also that of analysing and reconsidering during the course of the narrative process as a learning and revealing exploration. He thus emphasises a difference between the narrative and the narrating.

Participants' narrative performances might also have been conditioned by the well-documented issue of alexithymia, or emotional inexpressiveness, in men. Affleck, Glass and McDonald (2013) offer a comprehensive review of the challenges faced by qualitative researchers due to a pervasive emotional inexpressiveness in male research subjects. The question of vulnerability and the difficulty many men face in expressing it may have accounted for the tendency to downplay accounts of trauma

or childhood adversity, particularly when addressing a male researcher. Alexithymia itself has been viewed principally as a fixed personality trait (Luminet, Bagby and Taylor, 2018). I conceive of it as a process, much like empathy, that fluctuates in its manifestation and can either increase or diminish, depending on experiences and circumstances (Quilty, Taylor, McBride and Bagby, 2017).

As we shall see below, participants demonstrated varying degrees of sophistication in their ability to reflect both on self and others. But the expressed desire on the part of almost all participants to engage with psychotherapeutic or interpersonal support of some kind suggests a desire to improve emotional vocabulary and therefore a belief that emotional expressiveness is an acquired and desirable skill.

I believe that my experience as a practising clinician helped me attune empathically to the participants and their stories, and provide a safe, supportive interview environment for both reflection and reflexivity. I believe that I fostered a space in which participants could drop their guard and consider both their strengths and successes, as well as their weaknesses and insecurities. By attending closely to their narratives and actively participating in the co-construction of meaning through my attention to narrative detail, the genuine interest that underlined my questions, encouragement, and my empathic responses to their accounts of adversity and suffering, I would like to think that the interviews constituted a genuine relational engagement. Also, by encouraging participants to freely interpret my questions and lead the interview in directions they deemed appropriate, I felt I was able to encourage a sense of agency and authenticity in them.

Widespread research (Blazek and Askins, 2019; Wallerstein and Duran, 2017; Bunnel *et al.*, 2012) demonstrates that individuals offer to participate in research especially when they feel a cultural and personal affinity with the research and researcher or researchers. This may have contributed to the high level of demographic homogeneity I encountered in the participant group, almost all of whom were Caucasian, university-educated males. A Google search of my own name, while providing relatively little data, would confirm that I too am a Caucasian, university-educated male in my forties.

The question of my training as a clinical practitioner might also have been a moderating factor. While participants obviously knew I was engaged in doctoral-level research, I also told participants that I was a practising clinician. That I am both a

researcher and clinician may have influenced participants' motivations to take part in the study. It may also have made some wary of my assessments or interpretations of them personally. The opposite may also have been true: that talking to me might have seemed to some like an opportunity to disclose and to gain insight or support.

3.7.6 Validity, reliability and generalisability

Riessman (2008) provides valuable insights into the risks involved in determining validity. She offers two baseline levels of validity: the validity of the story told by the research participant, and the validity of the story told by the researcher. She cautions against becoming too immersed in what she calls 'paradigm warfare' and recommends situating questions of validity firmly within the epistemological and ontological position of the specific project at hand. She notes, for example, that from a social constructionist perspective, 'verifying the facts was less important than understanding their meanings' Riessman (2008: 20). As such, she underlines the fact that narrative consistency on the part of the narrator is of less relevance than in realist tales, when attempting to gain insight into how an individual constructs meaning through the telling and exploration of their own life story.

Validity thus raises the inevitable question of 'truth' in qualitative research. Recent work on validity, reliability and generalisability by Noble and Smith (2015) has questioned the value of those terms in truly reflecting the purpose and process of qualitative research, as well as the nature of its findings (see Appendix D). They propose 'truth value' instead of validity, 'consistency and confirmability' instead of reliability and 'applicability' instead of generalisability. These updated parameters highlight fundamental philosophical and purposive differences between qualitative and quantitative research and offer an alternative framework for establishing and assessing scientific rigour. The quest for 'truth' is replaced by one for 'trustworthiness'. The alternative terminology supports the qualitative researcher in assessing their work in a way that resists forced confrontation with the requirements and expectations associated with quantitative findings.

This study accounted for 'truth value' by ensuring that researcher reflexivity was constantly part of my working process and note-taking when reading and interpreting the transcriptions. I needed to be continually aware of possible preconceptions while maintaining my epistemological stance and acknowledging its restrictions. One way of

avoiding imposing pre-existing views of my own was to explore and present convergence and divergence in participants' accounts. I acknowledged the incoherent nature of human life and experience and resisted using interpretation to construct and impose a coherent narrative of my own. This helped me prioritise individual participants' accounts as meaning-making processes that draw on disparate fragments of experience to reflect on and make links and sense of the numerous realities that contribute to the construction of identity.

I accounted for 'consistency and confirmability' by developing a system (outlined above) of gathering notes and quotes for each stage of analysis and each participant, as well as maintaining a document full of questions for myself regarding the research, analytical process, my own reflections on my role and risk of preconceptions (see Appendix E). Confirmability was ensured by incorporating critical reflexivity in the Analysis chapter as a way of acknowledging my own philosophical, ontological and epistemological positioning and preferences.

Debate surrounding the issue of generalisability is fraught with contradiction and divergence. Lewis *et al.* (2003) offer a comprehensive assessment of the many conflicting opinions regarding generalisability in qualitative research, but for the purposes of the current study, I have chosen to prefer the term 'applicability'. In order to suggest how it differs from 'generalisability', I have found the definitions proposed by Noble and Smith (2015) to be of use:

1. Generalisability: The transferability of the findings to other settings and applicability in other contexts.
2. Applicability: Consideration is given to whether findings can be applied to other contexts, settings or groups. (Noble and Smith, 2015).

It is perhaps a more cautious approach that characterises applicability. The word 'consideration' aligns well with questions of analytic generalisation and suggests that what is key is the judgement applied by a reader/researcher as to whether one study's findings can usefully inform other research studies, and indeed offer a comparison between studies (Brinkman and Kvale, 2009). In keeping with an interpretivist approach, the desired outcome for the research is that it contributes to theory *building* rather than present itself as theory *testing* (Løkke and Sørensen, 2014). A study of this kind may stand as a meaningful contributor to a community of research, what Løkke, and Sørensen refer to as 'a stream of cumulative research that refines and develops

the knowledge of a field' (2014: 73). The focus is therefore on research findings applying to a theoretical proposition rather than a specific population (Yin, 2014).

Chapter 4. Analysis

4.1 Introduction

In this chapter, I apply the narrative analytical framework to my exploration of seven research interviews conducted with male entrepreneurs who had experienced psychotherapy, either currently or previously. My intention was to encourage participants to tell me the story of how they became entrepreneurs and the challenges they faced, from a life-course perspective. By eliciting these stories, I hoped to gain insight into how these individuals constructed, performed and made sense of their entrepreneurial identities and how these narratives shaped and affected their perceptions of self and their relationship to help-seeking and wellbeing. Interviews took place in particular settings, with a specific researcher and within the context of a variety of sociocultural factors imperceptibly contributing to the process and content of meaning-making (Gielnik, Bledow and Stark, 2019).

I approached the analysis from a thematic and performative/dialogic perspective. Within this framework, I chose to focus on dominant, overarching narratives which I felt were relevant to all participants, as well as subordinate thematic components that comprise the building blocks of these. The analysis considers the development and expression of participants' perception of themselves from childhood and adolescence into adult life, what identity/identities they construct during the course of the entrepreneurial journey, how they construct these, why they have been constructed and for whom. The why and for whom questions then constitute the central focus of the discussion in an effort to consider what purpose/function the performance of specific identities serves in relation to self, time, place and interviewer.

The chapter is broken down into two parts. Section 1 offers a critique of my own subjectivity in order to be transparent with the reader regarding my own relationship to the research and illustrate the framework for the reflexive practice I held throughout the interview and analysis phases. Section 2 contains the analysis and constitutes the body of the chapter. I begin by presenting a portrait of each of the seven participants for the purpose of orienting the reader, as well as a condensed representation of my overall summary of each participant's story. Section 2 is thereafter broken down into three subsections, representing a chronological trajectory through the life-course, from origins to the current situation. Each sub-section focuses on those themes I found

most pertinent, with similarities and differences in how these manifested themselves among the participants' different narrations considered. The choice of this structure is not intended to suggest that I believe identity construction occurs in a purely linear or causal manner, but for the purposes of reference and orientation. The focus is on the evolution of identity across the life-course and in each analytical sub-section, I draw on participants' observations across the life-course and interview. I define the stages as: (1) origins, (2) entrepreneurship and (3) psychotherapy and current situation.

4.2 Critique of my own subjectivity

I begin this chapter with a brief exploration of my own subjectivity and of the possible preconceptions I might have brought to the research. The following personal and biographical details are intended to help contextualise my relationship to the research topics. I am a white, middle-class, heterosexual male. There is a history of mental illness in my family: depression, anxiety and bipolar disorder. I lost a close male family member to a drug overdose, another to suicide and watched others wrestle with addiction problems. I struggled with depression and ADHD from a very young age, until I sought support in my thirties, at the encouragement of a female partner. Growing up, my 'sensitivity' and hyperactivity had been sources of considerable shame and disruptiveness and contributed to a feeling of 'not fitting in'. The threefold process of acknowledging my need for help, seeking psychotherapy and confronting my vulnerabilities challenged my sense of self and masculinity, before eventually becoming a profoundly restorative experience, and thereafter a determinant in my career choice.

I came from a social and familial context in which psychotherapy was viewed with suspicion and success was associated with autonomy and self-employment. I initiated several abortive entrepreneurial ventures in my twenties, and much later identified how closely my sense of self-worth and 'being a man' was associated with the success or failure of those.

In recent times, the term 'crisis of masculinity' (Green and Van Oort, 2016; Jordan and Chandler, 2019) has increasingly entered public discourse. Another term that has entered the mainstream is 'toxic masculinity', which has been associated with male violence and sexual assault (PettyJohn, Muzzey, Maas and McCauley, 2018). The casual sexism of influential public figures, including world leaders, with their

unapologetic dismissal of accusations of sexual assault, has contributed to the normalising and legitimising of toxic male behaviour.

I come to this research inevitably influenced by my personal experiences and awareness of wider social phenomena and discourses. A popular invocation to budding entrepreneurs is to identify and attempt to provide a solution to a problem you have personal experience of. Perhaps this idea might also apply to my choice of research subject.

My experience of my own familial context and wider social phenomena have led me to hypothesise that men act out (against themselves and others) in part due to a deficit in the ability to identify and process complex emotions, reluctance to acknowledge vulnerability and seek help for psychic distress, espousal of maladaptive coping strategies and the perceived threat to masculine identity posed by increasingly vocal, empowered feminist discourses. Thankfully, there is a growing body of research that suggests room for optimism: that men are actively challenging traditional conceptions of gender and masculinity as well as developing and espousing healthier non-traditional masculine identities (Peretz and Lehrer, 2019; Dworkin, Fleming and Colvin, 2015). However, the deeply ingrained edicts of traditional masculinity and what it means to 'be a man' continue to hamper men's ability for empathy and self-awareness and contribute to destructive and self-destructive behaviours (Ragonese and Barker, 2019).

Certainly, my pre-existing concern regarding dysfunctional masculine behaviours was a motivator in my research choice and no doubt influenced my expectations of what I might find in my interviews. Perhaps I expected participants to show signs of lack of emotional intelligence, adherence to traditional masculine attitudes and behaviours, and destructive behaviours. On the other hand, maybe I expected them to relate the account of the epiphany that led them to seek help. All but one was actively dismissive of their experiences of therapy. Did I view them as misguided in their conviction that they had or could somehow resolve their issues by themselves? Did my review of the literature make me think that I somehow knew better than them what their issues were? How did this influence my analysis? All participants knew I was a practising psychotherapist; perhaps this influenced how they divulged or withheld information about themselves: to invite supportive interpretation of their problems or avoid

intrusion. In both the interviews and the analytical phase, I had to be conscious of putting my 'therapist' hat aside, so to speak: ensuring that I avoided pathologising participants and simply remained open to what they said, and the collaborative meaning-making processes at work.

It is also important to address the question of why they chose to participate. Several possibilities were considered as possible motivations: a form of help-seeking in itself; a desire to be a 'voice' for the entrepreneurial community; to help others avoid the pitfalls they themselves have suffered; to educate an outsider; or to boast about their narratives of survival, success or recovery. Underlying all these possible motivations is an important point: I am an outsider to the entrepreneurial 'community', so must consider what I represent to each of them. One way of accessing this was to explore my own emotional response to each participant. After each interview, I took notes, in part about the content and form, but also my emotional experience of the interview, and my sense of the emotional state of each participant. This was an exercise that encouraged me to be reflexive, not only from an analytical perspective but an affective one too.

These thoughts were at the forefront of my mind during the interview process itself and my analytical interpretation of the data. I acknowledge that my analysis is my own, and other researchers would come to different conclusions; so by no means do I claim that this analysis and the subsequent findings represent the only possible interpretation (Tracy, 2019). The analytical framework through which I have chosen to consider the data constitutes my own ontological and epistemological inclination and as such, are moderating factors in the findings and conclusions I reach (Vogl, Schmidt and Zartler, 2019).

4.3 Analysis of participant interviews

4.3.1 Participant portraits

The following portraits emerged from a distillation of my notes on each participant. As new questions, themes and ideas emerged in each phase of analysis, I sketched how each participant expressed or experienced the various thematic phenomena which I progressively identified (see Appendix F for examples of this process). The portraits provide a brief overview of each participant's account of their life-course and are

intended to contextualise the interviews and orient the reader. They are my own subjective summary of each participant's story.

I include them as part of the analysis because my attunement to the participant and relational dynamic in the room was key to helping me understand the nature of the collaboration between me and them in the co-creation of the stories told. By storying their stories and summarising my impression of the participants, I am presenting a key aspect of the interpretive process. The portraits provide a bridge between my reflexive and analytic processes and stand as findings in themselves. The impression made on me by each participant, not only at the time of interview, but also as I read, re-read and annotated the transcripts of the dialogue between us, constitute a synthesised and subjective overall interpretation of each life story; and demonstrate in narrative form my experience of their narrative performance.

Sam

Sam (52) grew up in a 'very dysfunctional'[3] household, where he and his brother shared their home with both their parents and parents' lovers. Sam describes an affectionate relationship with his father, despite him being 'borderline alcoholic', but mentioned that his mother suffered from quite severe depression and attempted suicide when he was seven. His parents were shunned by both sets of grandparents, who disapproved of their marriage and elopement.

Sam went to a private boarding school aged eight and had a 'horrible' time. Coming from a relatively poor background, he felt alienated by the values and expectations imposed by this school for wealthy children. He had undiagnosed dyspraxia and was viewed as lazy and underachieving, but nonetheless identified a strong sense of self:

> Even though I was crap at everything in some way… I never thought I was worthless.

He barely mentioned his university experiences but described how, immediately following graduation, he joined a company which he eventually took control of ('guerrilla warfare') following its collapse due to mismanagement. He describes this takeover process as when he 'really became an entrepreneur'. He described himself as 'mouthy', 'cunning', 'strategic', 'responsible', 'completely unqualified', but 'able to

[3] All comments in quotation marks are participants' own words.

smell things for what they were'. Following the 'hell' of taking over the agency, his spouse suffered a miscarriage and he began to develop physical symptoms, panic attacks and insomnia, which eventually led him to psychotherapy. He described CBT as 'bullshit' but acknowledged some small degree of helpful insight, specifically into identifying the interaction between stress and physical symptoms.

Sam's cavalier attitude to the challenges of his unusual childhood circumstances, conflict and success, and his improvised entrepreneurial activities were the hallmark of his account. The modesty of his light-hearted self-deprecation was counter-balanced by his assertions of a strong sense of self, drive, confidence, competence and, in some respects, ruthlessness. The narrative performance was of haphazard improvisation, but embedded within was the depiction of a wily, savvy, determined leader with unstoppable determination.

David

David (48) grew up bilingual in what he described as an 'autarkist fantasy of self-sufficient life', presided over by an 'Old Testament patriarch' who was deeply traumatised by the Holocaust and the death of his own father in a concentration camp. Both parents were academics; his mother was a former student of his father and 20 years his junior. She appeared to suffer from moderate depression and to exist very much in her husband's shadow. Aged 11, David was uprooted from his rural home and sent to a very formal private school in England, where he felt completely 'foreign' and out of place.

He had to drop out of university for a year following a psychotic episode (he was later diagnosed with bipolar disorder) and went abroad where he fell upon a not-for-profit social centre which had been given some computers. Familiar with *Basic* software, he taught himself to write management software and economic simulators. He finished university, completed a PhD and thereafter developed a career as a freelancing programmer and consultant for major firms, as well as founding and co-founding a number of successful start-ups. At the same time, he also developed a passion for skydiving. Following a second psychotic episode, he sought medical and therapeutic treatment but did not engage in psychotherapy until much later, when he was married with children.

David's engagement with his life story was analytical and philosophical. He took me on a journey from World War Two and post-war Europe, through the death of family members in the Holocaust, to complex familial identity politics, and the impact of his father's own trauma, desire for assimilation and rejection of both his German and his Jewish identities. The origins narrative was one of traumatic inheritance, survival, luck, resourcefulness and eventually, acceptance of a serious mental health condition. In terms of entrepreneurial identity, the narrative to emerge was one of fortuitous happenstance, of being in the right place at the right time and applying his evident intelligence to learning and developing skills. He gave the impression of having found meaningful balance in his personal life, managing his health condition and engaging both with own and his family's needs.

Will

Will (23) grew up with an American father and British mother between the US and UK. His mother was profoundly depressed and had suffered severe abuse as a child, run away from home and become a roadie with a famous rock band before meeting Will's father, a professional ballet dancer who had collaborated with one of the greatest ballet dancers of the twentieth century. An eye injury caused Will's father to change career and reinvent himself as a successful computer engineer, before eventually disappearing from his life before Will reached his teens. Will secured a scholarship to an elite private school but was expelled for drug dealing. During this time, he experienced bouts of insomnia, anorexia and epilepsy and was eventually diagnosed with bipolar disorder, while using a variety of illegal drugs.

He managed to get top A-level results in a remedial college in London and receive a scholarship to university. His drug use then became much more serious; he developed chronic crack cocaine and heroin addiction. While struggling to overcome his addiction, he founded a start-up with his mother and his best friend which took off, and now has an eight-figure investment. At the time of our interview, he was in recovery from his addictions, attending Narcotics Anonymous meetings, as well as regular meetings with a private GP.

The narrative he told was eye-opening. Apart from the content of his narration – trauma, celebrities, resilience and rebellion – Will's telling of it was also hugely informative. His account was frequently offhand, particularly when discussing the most

traumatic aspects of his parents' and his own experiences. Will had asked to conduct the interview in a cemetery near his office, which we did. There was a touch of the 'rock star' about him, particularly as he wore dark glasses and chain-smoked throughout the interview. The identity he conveyed was of a uniquely gifted and resilient rebel-survivor, who had hit rock bottom and pulled himself back up. He elucidated near incredulity from me on a number of fronts; some aspects of the interview felt designed not only to inform but to shock, impress and confound. There was also pride not only in his growing business success, but also in having single-handedly managed his recovery from drug addiction and reached a place of perspective and drive.

Brad

Brad (26) comes from a medical family: his mother is a physio and his father, a GP. He described the very formative childhood experience of living in the US for two years with his parents, who he described as 'the most supportive parents in the world'. Despite unhappy school experiences struggling with anxieties derived from undiagnosed dyslexia and difficulties with mood management, he started a company with a close friend while still at school. The success of this early venture helped build his self-confidence and develop useful entrepreneurial skills.

He went on to found a pair of successful start-ups with the same friend from school, which were thriving at the time of the interview. Brad describes his partnership as 'ying and yang'; his partner is 'Mr Achievement' (strategy and vision), while he is 'Mr Effort' (operations). He describes himself as the company's 'internal therapist' and is very focused on increasing productivity, efficiency and success through nurturing the wellbeing of his team. He has a highly developed system in place to instil a culture of openness and communication because of his conviction that happy staff equals effective staff. He sees a personal therapist on a weekly basis as part of his own wellbeing regime and finds it very helpful to offload his concerns and develop practical solutions to address psychological and practical concerns.

Brad was hugely confident in the narration of his life story and current entrepreneurial activities. At one point, he used the whiteboard to demonstrate his managerial strategies. The impression was that he wanted to educate me. His enthusiasm and assertiveness were very palpable and I was struck by the tightly structured routine he

had in place for maximising personal and professional success through his application of ‘marginal gains theory’.

Stephen

Stephen (26) grew up predominantly in what he described as ‘a pretty desperate, horrible place’. His parents experienced periods of considerable financial precarity, but his enterprising father (‘having the grit to move forward’) was able to recover some financial stability and eventually send Stephen and his siblings to private schools. Having been a proud leader in the Cadet Force, Stephen was keen to follow his brothers to a military academy but was unable to obtain the necessary grades and, humiliatingly, was told in his interview that he had ‘to get more intelligent’. Following a ‘very, very tough’ state school experience, his grandmother died and left enough money for him to go to private school, which he ‘rebelled against’, but gained some confidence and received support for his dyslexia.

He eventually got into university where he started a successful company, ultimately dropping out to run it. Due to personal and then legal conflict with his business partners, the company folded and he moved back home. Despondent and unsure what direction to take, he took on a handful of low-wage jobs before working for an estate agent, where he met someone who would eventually become his business partner in a highly successful property venture. Down the line, however, Stephen was forced to fire his partner, causing enormous conflict and anxiety. At the time of the interview, he had exited the company; but due to what he saw as mismanagement, was unsure if the considerable pay-out he was entitled to would materialise.

While friendly and open during the interview, Stephen’s account was of a continuous struggle between success and failure. The narrative he conveyed was that while he had been able to identify opportunity and work hard to realise a vision, failure was likely to be the inevitable final outcome. Ultimately, my impression was of someone despondent and resigned to being deprived of what he was due. Some days after the interview, he contacted me to ask if I could personally provide him with psychotherapy. I recommended he contact his GP and suggested various resources he could explore. This in itself suggested that part of his motivation for participating in the research was to begin opening up on the issues he was clearly struggling with.

Chris

Chris's (35) father came from an Indian family and had a small business for repairing computers and hi-fis, among other things. He was also a singer and door-to-door salesman. Chris's mother, whom he describes as coming from a 'very repressed English military family', was a teacher. As an interracial couple, they suffered ostracism from both their families. There was, however, financial stability and apparently good relations between parents and children. Chris's school experiences were marked by anxieties and self-doubt derived from undiagnosed dyslexia; but after moving to a more progressive school, this was diagnosed and he was able to achieve the grades necessary to attend university.

At university, he was very successful in student politics and became editor of a failing university newspaper. He vastly increased its scope and readership and viewed this as his first entrepreneurial venture. The experience led him to decide to pursue a career in PR. Following a tough graduate recruitment programme, he rejected the idea of a career in a big agency and joined a start-up. From there, he made useful contacts and established his own start-up: which he had successfully exited a few years prior to the time of interview. Before his exit, there had been considerable conflict within the company, which had led to stress and an ambivalent engagement with psychotherapy. Despite a happy family life and financial stability, a failed new venture and unsuccessful foray into politics had caused him to experience doubts and concerns. He was now considering further psychotherapy.

Chris had recently returned from an apparently life-changing trip with his father to the latter's birthplace in order to trace his origins. The trip felt like it had provoked a major reconsideration of identity and belonging. It was with this experience freshly in mind that Chris shared his story. The fact that Chris was of mixed heritage might also have been significant. He grew up in the UK and had never been to his father's birthplace, the fact that he was only now exploring a part of his identity which had hitherto been unexplored might have contributed to his sense that a revision of identity was needed. Certainly, he was at a crossroads professionally but the identarian question of connecting with his cultural origins might have added to his suggestion that he was feeling more inward-looking than ever before. I came away from the interview feeling that he had narrated a reflexive summary of his life to date and current situation, marked by what he experienced as failure in a business venture and defeat in a

political endeavour. Notes of nostalgia and self-doubt permeated his account, and it felt like he was stuck and reappraising his situation, both in terms of professional and personal identity.

Edward

Edward (37) is a doctor and the fourth generation in his medical family to train in the same hospital. Both parents suffered from moderate depression, but he had close relationships with them both, particularly his father, and experienced his home as 'an incredible platform that most people don't have'. From early on at primary school, he identified as the 'doctor in the playground', with friends and schoolmates consulting him for minor injuries and concerns. Saying he wanted to be a doctor generated positive responses from adults – so given his family background, he decided on this as a career path.

Influenced by his father's own sense of failure, his reservations regarding the NHS, and his father's hopes for Edward to follow a different trajectory to his own, he completed medical school but soon after, began searching for entrepreneurial avenues to improve what he perceived as inadequate doctor-patient communication in the NHS. A steep learning curve followed as he founded and developed his start-up, but slow growth and lack of funds were causing him considerable stress. His spouse told him he was depressed and needed psychotherapy, which he tried but found hard to engage with. At the time of meeting me, he was considering further individual psychotherapy, particularly given profound marital conflict and as his spouse had abandoned couples' psychotherapy.

My impression of Edward was of a man in deep emotional turmoil, struggling to stay afloat personally and professionally. While he engaged with my questions, it felt like there was an urgency to using the interview as a way of making sense of his current situation. Towards the end of the interview, I had to actively contain the discussion, stop the recording and suggest that some of the issues he was raising might perhaps be better dealt with in a therapeutic context. He asked me if I could provide therapy and, as with Stephen, I explained this would not be appropriate and suggested he speak to his GP, as well as recommending resources he could explore.

4.4 Origins

While the participant portraits provide only a snapshot of their childhood environments, there are significant similarities in the narratives that provide rich insight into early identity formation.

4.4.1 Outsider status and the entrepreneurial turn

A common narrative borne out of experiences during childhood and adolescence was evoked by all participants – that of 'outsider' status. With that in mind, and because my interviews invited participants to describe their entrepreneurial narratives and identities from a life-course perspective, I approached analysis on the principle that early experience of being different significantly influences the construction of identity. Early experiences have a central impact, both conscious and unconscious, on the stories we construct about ourselves internally, and therefore on the real world decisions we make. This belief is based on reading from multiple perspectives namely, psychoanalytic (Bowlby, 1978; Ainsworth *et al*; 2015; Fonagy, 2018), developmental (Piaget and Inhelder, 1973, Eriksson, 1946; James, Jenks and Prout, 1998; Burman, 2016), and neuropsychological perspectives (Kuller, 1991; Williams, 2020). This also led me to consider that both the self-perception of being an outsider, or the imposed perception of being designated as different or deficient in some way, may have impacted the development of entrepreneurial identity and the process of becoming an entrepreneur.

Negotiating one's place in the world from a personal perspective has a significant bearing on professional and career choices, and is a significant component of the entrepreneurial drive and shaping of identity (Samuelsson and Lindström, 2017). Outsider status, while an asset because of its apparent role in the drive for autonomy and success, can also be a source of loneliness, anxiety and self-doubt. On the other hand, outsider narratives inevitably pose the question of what being an 'insider' would be like, and therefore touches on a yearning for acceptance and inclusion.

In many cases, participants framed their childhood narratives as already containing the seeds of entrepreneurial identity. A sense of alienation or of not fitting in seemed to encourage characteristics associated with entrepreneurs: a strong desire to challenge the identities they felt to have been imposed on them in childhood, and a

determination to succeed resulting from the resilience and autonomy they had needed to develop in order to cope with difficult childhood experiences.

Participants' narratives of developing resilience and autonomy proved central to their characterisation of identity formation. I explore below the context in which this narrative originates, the articulation of being an outsider and, later, its relationship to early entrepreneurial inclinations.

4.5 Home: Developing resilience

My analysis in this sub-section focuses on the self-reported origins of identity construction at home and at school, and on the early formation of entrepreneurial identity at school and university.

4.5.1 Unstable home life

All the interviews started with the same question: 'How did your parents meet?' This created an opportunity to explore the 'origins narrative' and invite the participants to describe their parents and childhood. Participants' description of family configuration set the stage for what effectively became a search for or need for autonomy.

> **SAM**: My family was very dysfunctional so I think I worked out early on {…} 'No-one's going to look after me'. [11, 554][4]

With the exception of one participant (who spoke least about his family background), unusual, chaotic or challenging home environments were the norm. Parental mental illness was a recurrent commonality. Four of seven participants had mothers who suffered from depression: Will's mother was profoundly traumatised by childhood abuse, David's mother suffered in the shadow of her husband's unprocessed trauma, Edward's mother experienced depression as a result of feeling trapped as a stay-at-home mother and Sam's mother's depression resulted in a suicide attempt. There were significant variations in the accounts of the mother's depression: with some presented matter-of-factly, some dramatically, while others were positioned within a complex web of family dysfunction.

[4] Numbers in square brackets refer to page and starting line number of the quotation from the transcript

4.5.2 Depressed mothers

Sam described his mother as 'quite odd' before going on to describe her suicide attempt when he was very young:

> **SAM**: My mother tried to kill herself when she was, when we were about six and seven. {…}[5] The St X…. Hospital is actually very good if your kids fall over and cut themselves and you can't face going to A & E {…} It's very, very good and it's open until 10 o'clock at night, I would highly recommend it. {…} The au pair and my father then had to bump her downstairs {…} really quite urgently. [5, 234]

His account of the suicide attempt is very matter-of-fact. His aside recommending the hospital she was taken to struck me as astonishingly at odds with the nature of his narration. This question of matter-of-factness while describing a disturbing experience might suggest that he coped with hardship by creating an emotional distance between himself and his experiences in order to survive and move on. In the context of the interview, it felt like he did not want to linger on his childhood hardships but rather to get on with the more compelling story of his entrepreneurial trajectory. This may, of course, also have been a way of demonstrating his resilience or represent an avoidance mechanism, or both.

In contrast, Will's account of family trauma was almost cinematically narrated. Both the narrative form and content were dramatic and shocking, as well as being very colourful.

> **WILL**: She [his mother][6] was born in terrible poverty and ran away when she was 11 years old. {…} It was the '60s, early '70s, and she was a sort of refugee with the G… [world-famous rock band], {...} and the hippies, and the native Americans, and the bikers, and that kind of thing. But her mentality was that, whatever danger she is facing on her own was less dangerous than where she was at home. [1, 10]

He goes on to describe his grandmother's paranoid schizophrenia, how his mother suffered severe physical abuse; and how, aged 11, she realised that she would die if she did not escape. This is followed by a brief summary of her impressive later achievements:

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[5] Curly brackets {…} represent sections of speech that have been removed for the sake of fluidity and brevity.

[6] Square brackets […] are used for researcher's own words, to clarify or contextualise.

> **WILL**: […] My mum [transitioned] from being a model to being a developmental psychologist. She wound up going to Harvard on a full scholarship and then getting a Master's from Boston University as well. [1, 19]

Will's pride in his mother's achievements was palpable, and as he later described his own recovery from overwhelming personal challenges, it felt as though he had followed in her footsteps somehow. The fact that he later partnered with his mother and his best friend in his current business venture seemed significant.

The prevalence of depression in participants' mothers is important because it ties into a later theme of not feeling supported at school. Participants expressed either the need to care for their mothers, or to be independent as a result of lacking support at home, or both.

4.5.3 Fragile fathers

During the course of his narration, David took me on a wide-ranging journey from the complex idiosyncrasies of his upbringing, through much of 20th-century European history, as well as his own journey to date. What was clear was that the person of his father was a very central character in imposing identarian requirements on David. David's account of home and childhood conveyed the sense that a variety of identities were either imposed on or expected of him and that this multiplicity of demands and expectations had the effect of emphasising his outsider status, rather than facilitating his assimilation.

> **DAVID**: My father had an autarchist fantasy of self-sufficient life and we lived on a mountainside. Living out that fantasy. {…} His processing of Holocaust trauma, I think, has a lot to do with that and a lot to do with his desire for autonomy. [2, 75]

His father was German and Jewish, but he rejected both identities and set about very deliberately constructing an alternative identity for himself and for his children.

> **DAVID**: There was also a great desire I think on the part of my father – again, it's a complicated desire – to create an English gentleman. [6, 336]

What David referred to as his father's 'Anglicisation plan' for him, however, was both confusing and contradictory. He describes his arrival at boarding school in England, after a childhood spent in mainland Europe:

> **DAVID**: One of the instructions is: 'Yes, you come along, {…} for the education but you don't do the football, you don't join the cricket'. {…} I had to do well at the education, but I also had to reject the groupness. He's [his father] proud of the otherness as well as rejecting the otherness. [11, 626]

In the end, it appears that his father's plan backfired: and established the foundations of David's profound sense of otherness.

> **DAVID**: I was foreign everywhere. So, my nationality is 'foreign', I think. [6, 357]

Rather than acquiring a coherent and assimilated identity in keeping with his father's expectations, David's outsider status became reinforced and entrenched, and his later negotiations with identity and his place in the world, particularly in the context of his bipolar disorder diagnosis reflected this sharply.

A similar issue, relating to nationality, cultural origins and the lack of a stable identity, was expressed by Chris, while talking about his father and their mutual search for identity.

> **CHRIS**: We began to tease out between us what it meant to be British. {…} He let slip words to the effect of, 'you don't know what it's like not to be from anywhere'. {…} I suppose there's an inbuilt dialogue to where I'm from and where is it that I've come from. [2, 80]… The more I grew into myself [there was] a realisation that… we are a very similar person. [3, 130]

His identification with his father underlines his own sense of displaced identity. This question appeared to forecast later questions of fitting in during the course of his career and the extent to which he conflated personal and professional identity. At the time of interview, the identarian issues with which he was struggling appeared closely associated with his very recent trip to India with his father.

Thus, Chris was experiencing the two-fold challenge of reassessing both personal and professional identity, in the midst of negotiating some conflict at home.

> **CHRIS**: My wife is desperate for me to find a job. We've had a number of arguments about it, and [she] wanted me to go and work for a VC fund or do whatever and I've been much more reluctant… So I put the CV together and sent it out, and I guess had a pang of the old 'literally no-one wants me'. Not one job offer. [11, 676-677].

For Edward, having parents, grandparents and great-grandparents who were doctors, becoming a doctor was almost a given. He took on that identity at a young age, and seems to have been motivated more by the response he had than conscious choice:

> **EDWARD**: I became a doctor because when I was a kid {…} I used to say to people I want to be a doctor and get a good response from it. {…} I was always, that kind of, going to be a doctor person. [1, 38]

The apparent inevitability of the phrase 'always… going to be a doctor person' is interesting, because his later decision to leave the medical profession and set up as an entrepreneur appears in part a search for autonomy and the desire to have a greater impact than just working as a doctor in the NHS. Much like Chris and David, Edward's relationship with his father is an important influence on his career choice. His father's business failures and the mental health issues his father suffered from through the stress of his NHS work seem to have pushed Edward to break with longstanding family tradition and take a different course.

> **EDWARD**: [He] knew that I was going to have a difficult life because I was going to be a doctor in the NHS. So he always hoped for me to be something different. {…} He knew that lots of other people working other jobs, have a better time and earn more money. [2, 80]

Here, the negotiation with identity is two-fold. On the one hand, the identity of 'doctor' was expected of him, and one that garnered positive feedback from adults; on the other, his father's own sense of failure and entreaties to Edward to avoid the same pitfalls influenced Edward to radically shift professional identity. Both, in a sense, were imposed identities and the current crisis he was experiencing at the time of interview may well have been driven by his struggles with finding an autonomous identity.

> **EDWARD**: I think I've literally gone and {… } recreated that environment for myself that my father was in where his wife never really fully respected him. She loved him, but never respected him. And I don't think my wife respects me for what I am and what I'm doing. [11, 663-664].

Stephen's motivation to succeed was in part driven by the discovery late in life of the sacrifices his father had made to give them the best education possible.

> **STEPHEN**: Thinking back – I can only imagine having four children, being at that stage in your life and [his father] losing that [his business], and just having the grit to still move forward. It's pretty cool. [2, 117]

In Brad's case, his identification with his father's desire to help others and the satisfaction which that brought felt like a motivator.

> **BRAD**: He's a doctor because he loves helping people, but he feels so fucking amazing when he helps someone. [7, 398]

In Sam's case, identification with his father was perhaps best reflected in the language he used to describe his conflicts at work. He used the words 'fight' and 'guerrilla warfare' numerous times, which reflected his father's tendency to 'professional fights'. Will credits the absence of his father with the oppositional attitude and impermanence of money:

> **WILL**: I have the standard authority issues that come with not having a Dad, and I don't really believe that anything is permanent. [2, 106]

Paternal models, therefore, seem central to some important attitudes carried over from childhood to the entrepreneurial experience. It is interesting to observe that it was principally in the relationship with fathers that some specifics of participants' cultural differences appeared. While there was considerable homogeneity within the group, there were some differences in background. Chris's father, for example, is Indian, Will's is American and David's was German. Identarian questions, particularly in relation to masculine identity, might have been influenced by the father's sense of otherness, or, in the case of Will, by their absence. The lack of a paternal/masculine model that aligned with the cultural values in which the participants grew up, may have made their own quest for identity that much more complex. Chris and David spoke about the impact of their father's own identarian struggles as being very influential on them in terms of finding their own place in the world. It is clear that among many of the participants, in areas beyond the cultural, the identarian struggles of the father were presented as having an important bearing on their own sense of self and search for identity. Instability at home and coping with the fragile identities of fathers as well as maternal depression felt like significant factors in participants' desire or need to break out on their own and construct independent identities. As I quoted Sam as saying previously:

> **SAM**: My family was very dysfunctional so I think I worked out early on {…} 'No-one's going to look after me'.

4.5.4 School: developing autonomy, ostracism, learning difficulties and nascent entrepreneurial identity

The theme of challenging imposed identity and striving for an autonomous identity was common to several participants. In many cases, the determination was driven by negative school experiences. Participants felt academically or socially inadequate. In

the cases of four out of seven, the former related in part to undiagnosed learning difficulties. In the case of five, it owed to socioeconomic or cultural differences.

Dyslexia was a common theme: four of the participants spoke about their dyslexia or dyspraxia and its social and self-confidence impact on them.

> **BRAD**: They [the teachers] would send me to go and sit with the younger kids [because of low grades related to his undiagnosed dyslexia] as a punishment and yes, you know not the environment I would say that where I felt supported or understood. [1, 52]

Not getting support felt important here. The feeling of being let down or humiliated appeared to foster in participants the messages that they were on their own.

> **STEPHEN**: I really struggled at school. I was heavily dyslexic. I think up until I was about 11, I went to a state school which was really, really tough. {…} I just didn't really get on with most of the children there. But also, the work, I just found really tough and there wasn't the one-to-one support. [1, 30]

Similarly, Sam was told he was lazy and should be achieving better grades than he was. Criticism was offered, but no solution; and thus a feeling of being alone compounded the horror he experienced at being sent to boarding school aged only 8. Added to this, his lack of sporting skills and that he came from a different socioeconomic background to other kids made him feel out of place.

> **SAM**: It [the school] was very upper-class, very country {...} I couldn't do any of the things they valued, I couldn't play any sport. {...} We were also quite poor, when everyone else was quite rich {…} But by the end you get used to it. [7, 341]

If there was no-one to help, for some participants, the initial reaction was to be disheartened and discouraged. Stephen, for example, was certain that he would have a military career; but after failing to get into the military academy three times, he was devastated by harsh feedback.

> **STEPHEN**: I think it was that, 'Shit, they've found me out', kind of thing. They basically said, 'You're physically fine doing it. But mentally, you need to get more intelligent, and go to university, and then come back'. [3, 155]

This setback had a major impact on him. Several years of feeling inadequate and stagnant followed; before he found his way almost accidentally into something that gave him the chance to grow in confidence and persevere. That said, several

participants described their experience of adversity as a galvanising factor that drove them to develop resilience, perseverance and a more autonomous sense of self.

> **BRAD**: I just think I have a mind that allows me to go 'oh OK, this is a little bit uncomfortable', because people are, you know, being horrible to me, or not being particularly nice, or making fun, but actually screw them. [2, 76]

Providing a caveat to the portrait he had painted of his isolation at school, Sam sounded a note of defiance in describing his response to not fitting in and 'being different'.

> **SAM**: I have always had an enormous innate sense of myself {…} I just thought even though I was crap at everything {…} I never thought I was worthless. {…} You just had to soldier on. [9, 461]

In the stoical maturity of this statement, 'you just had to soldier on', it is impossible to tell if this is what he felt as a child, the image he wants to present to me, or a way of tying together adversity with the nascent entrepreneur's developing resilience.

Regardless, the statement displays a determination and self-confidence that plays out in the complex conflicts of his later entrepreneurial life. This question of 'soldiering on' was common to several participants. This related in part to identifying strengths rather than dwelling on weaknesses. The attitudes expressed here felt like determination not to be defeated by the negative identities imposed by the school environment.

> **BRAD**: My approach to life basically is brute force, so, I know I am not going to win necessarily on the strength of my intellectual ability {…} But I can become the hardest worker, I can be the most efficient. [2, 84]

Here, Brad credits his success and frames his strategy in terms of drive, effort and conviction. In so doing, he prepares the ground for what he later tells me about partnering with people with complementary skills, revealing his pragmatic approach to capitalising on other peoples' strengths. This was also expressed by Sam:

> **SAM**: If somebody says to me 'I think you're wrong, I think you should do it like that', I think 'How interesting, how do you want to do it?' I don't think 'Fuck you', whereas most people I think do. [20, 1014]

Identifying strengths and hence, limitations (perhaps informed by these being starkly highlighted in school environments) appeared to influence entrepreneurial success later. The early development of self-knowledge felt important for the later ability to collaborate effectively with others at work.

While still at school, Brad found a partner whose skills and character complemented his own: a policy he has pursued ever since:

> **BRAD**: The thing that we are most lucky for is our relationship, because {…} I am Mr Effort and Stephen is Mr Achievement. [5, 241]

The response to a hostile school environment, as with several participants, fed into entrepreneurial activities for Brad. By the age of 16, he was running a successful company which has now evolved into the thriving companies he currently runs.

Will's account of his school experiences, in which he described experiencing ostracism, mental illness and the onset of drug addiction is one of survival, resilience, determination and achievement. How Will depicts himself feels as though his narrative of self has been processed, analysed, arranged and formulated by his adult self. The question of performing identity is pertinent here, and he states it explicitly:

> **WILL**: And I, as any young adolescent would, clambering for an identity. {…} I was like, fine, these guys think I'm some kind of urchin, all right fine. I'll sell them their drugs and I'll fit that role. [3, 175]

Here Will touches on a key aspect of the construction of identity in reaction to childhood experiences – a sense of determination to either challenge or confound externally imposed identity constructs. The final sentence of the quotation also contains the seeds of his entrepreneurial ability. He challenges the imposed identity by capitalising on it.

4.6 Entrepreneurship beginnings: choice, calling, happenstance

The ways in which participants became entrepreneurs varied greatly. Broadly, though, there were three principal avenues: identifying opportunity and consciously exploiting it; feeling a calling to instigate change; and accidentally identifying skills and building a career around them. Of course, discovering skills and abilities was central to all seven participants' journies into an entrepreneurial career, but the very different personal journeys that led each to enter entrepreneurship offer insight into key questions of identity.

For Edward and Brad, it was a very deliberate decision to pursue an entrepreneurial career; for the others, it was a result of accidental or unanticipated events. Sam's journey began when he felt a responsibility to take on the burden of an impossibly complex work situation. For Will, an incidental conversation with his mother and best

friend led to developing an idea, and his ability to pursue it was similarly based on a sense of personal responsibility.

For Chris, it was the realisation he did not want to pursue a conventional career path as well as a fortuitous encounter with someone who would become his business partner. Stephen's case was very similar to Chris's: feeling stuck and unhappy in his conventional day job, an encounter generated a new venture. For David, the accidental discovery of skills and their marketability set him on an entrepreneurial path.

The decision to pursue an entrepreneurial venture is connected to identity in all participants. Both David and Will described having to overcome severe mental health problems to reach a place where they could acknowledge and exploit unacknowledged skills. Experiencing profound psychological upheaval forced them both to engage in profound self-reflection, assess their options and acquire a sense of agency that would motivate them to find their place in the world. For David, experiencing a psychotic episode at university gave him insight into aspects of his identity that had hitherto been inaccessible to him and led him to discover skills and assets that would later shape his entrepreneurial journey.

> **DAVID**: I live in a world [during psychosis] that makes sense and that my actions and agency can make sense as well. [13, 753]

For Will, the enormous effort of an unassisted 'home detox' to overcome his drug habit offered personal insight into the need to recover a grounded sense of self and was an important motivator in driving his entrepreneurial venture forward.

> **WILL**: I lived this upside-down life, and I needed a moment of clarity to happen… {…} [and] I realised that everything had to change. [11, 669]

Stephen and Chris went through the experience of feeling stifled in a conventional working environment, which led to their identifying a need for autonomous decision-making and self-employment. This touches on the question of being in control and not having to answer to superiors: a feature that led in many cases to conflict and stress later in their careers.

> **CHRIS**: I knew I didn't want to do that [do corporate work] in terms of I guess another shape of that corporatism. {…} What I'd enjoyed [while running the student newspaper at university] was just where there were no rules and there were no bosses {…} and it was 'just you get on'. [5, 256]

Edward needed to re-assess his identity as a fourth generation medical doctor and determine a path for himself that was not simply a repetition of previous generations' experiences. He worked in the NHS and felt compelled to address what he viewed as ineffective management. Edward described his motivation as coming from a sense of responsibility to instigate social change, rather than generating personal wealth.

> **EDWARD**: I left it [the NHS] to fix the issues […] I set out to help people communicate and share knowledge. [5, 297]

Brad's steps into entrepreneurship began very early: his statement regarding 'brute force' and perseverance denote a decision to focus on his strengths, rather than dwell on his weaknesses. Sam, on the other hand, landed in a situation where his innate sense of responsibility and tenacity drove him to take on a seemingly impossible task and make it into a success.

> **SAM**: The point at which really I am an entrepreneur [is when] it is up to me to resolve this absolutely impossible situation. […] I'm then responsible for that company. [10, 489]

David discovered his ability to programme computers and found a way of constructing a freelance lifestyle that safeguarded his mental health, as well as giving him the time he needed to pursue his passion for skydiving.

> **DAVID**: I had picked up enough skills {…} that I ended up picking up a perfectly good freelance lifestyle {…} [which] gave me the freedom to fly. [17, 1002]

Will identified the knowledge he had accrued through his lucrative drug dealing activities and learned how to transform it into astute business skills.

> **WILL**: I sold a lot of pills for a really long time. I know how markets work {…} I understand that business is basically just quantifying other people's concept of value and then giving it to them. [8, 491]

4.7 Establishing a business: Determination, Self-Doubt, Conflict

4.7.1 The 'just do it' mentality

All participants presented a narrative of effort, preserving momentum and a pragmatic response to failure or hardship that was common to all seven participants and appeared to represent the driving force behind ambition and success. As evidenced in the quotations below, all seven participants expressed in some form a powerful, sometimes reckless determination to achieve:

> **DAVID**: You walk into somewhere and you tell them you do something and you do it and people respond. [15, 871]
>
> **SAM**: I don't even think, I just go and do it. [11, 547]
>
> **STEPHEN**: If I want to do something, and really want to do it, then you just do it. [5, 280]
>
> **CHRIS**: You {…} have to strike out and take these risks yourself if you want to do it. [12, 751]
>
> **WILL**: When something for my work needs to happen, a certain set of outputs will result in a certain set of inputs of reactions. I will provide those outputs. [8, 469]
>
> **BRAD**: I am just going to go and do this stuff. Eventually everyone realises that the way you progress in life is to do stuff. [2, 63]
>
> **EDWARD**: Completely insane belief in I can do it {…} I just thought I can do it. I just thought this is right. I'm right. I'm right. I'm right. [8, 470]

I use the term 'reckless' above because, given the participants' self-doubt which I consider later, there is a sense that mere determination is more important than ability or being qualified. All of the above statements are clichés of entrepreneurial identity and are also quite macho. The danger here was that while grit and determination of the 'entrepreneur' mantle might pave the way for establishing a venture, the reality of then managing and growing it confronted participants with their limitations and thus, with self-doubt. As we shall see later, establishing psychological equilibrium was reported by participants as only being truly effective if a system was constructed that could also maintain that equilibrium.

One of the recognised hallmarks of a successful entrepreneur is the ability to identify and then capitalise on opportunity (Hansen *et al.,* 2011; Lehrer and Kanzikas, 2012; George *et al.,* 2016). A business opportunity affords the possibility of financial gain, as well as providing a valuable service. Yet it also provides a vehicle through which to channel determination, take risks and hopefully achieve professional and personal autonomy and satisfaction. I say hopefully, because recklessness can have one of two outcomes and, for several participants', early successes were followed by stress, stagnation and burnout.

Brad responded to the humiliations he suffered as a result of his dyslexia by constructing an identity based on force, will and effort:

> **BRAD**: I think maybe the motivation was to do good but also the motivation is like, challenge. I like challenge. I love work. [4, 205]

Sam credits his innate sense of self and of being able to 'smell things for what they were' with giving him the self-belief and resilience to take his company through a massively complex, tumultuous transformation.

> **SAM**: I'd always been quite cunning. And when I got there I sort of thought 'You guys are soft in the following ways'. {…} I had a strategic brain. [9, 463]

Will's achievement was not only to identify his skills, but also challenge himself on a profound level by embracing opportunity, both entrepreneurial and in terms of holding his life in higher esteem:

> **WILL**: I didn't want to go and get some shitty job at Starbucks. I didn't want to, you know, I figured, 'Fuck it, this is a fantastic idea. This is something I could be good at'. [8, 486]

It felt as though participants wanted to demonstrate how the effort of embarking on an entrepreneurial project provided a conduit through which to challenge negative childhood identities. For all the negative feedback, embarking on an entrepreneurial venture felt like an opportunity to demonstrate determination, resilience and autonomy.

4.7.2 Imposter syndrome and fear of failure

Behind these statements of determination and drive, however, often lay a profound fear of failure. Participants often fell into the trap of conflating the worth of their business venture with their own worth as an individual.

This was perhaps most succinctly expressed by Chris:

> **CHRIS**: I think the pressure and risk-taking associated with starting your own business is so mentally and emotionally bound up with who you are that I think {…} it's a peculiar pressure because failure also means failure of you as an individual. [16, 993]

In this statement, Chris summarises a central danger of the entrepreneurial career: personal over-identification with professional success or failure. The will to succeed was accompanied by the pressing need to avoid failure because of the negative consequences that failure would have on self-worth.

> **STEPHEN**: We can't fail. Like, what is the option here? What do I do? Go home and fail even more? [7, 396]

Stephen's mention of 'home' was interesting here, as it directly links professional and personal failure. The pressure of this conflation felt like a key factor in driving

participants to stress, self-doubt and conflict. Drive, ambition and determination got entrepreneurial projects up and running, but the day-to-day minutiae of running a company often meant that participants' single-minded vision was met with obstacles, diverging opinions or resistance: which invariably led to self-doubt and conflict.

> **EDWARD**: Almost everything you see is a constant stream of negativity pointing out your inadequacies. [10, 564]

For several participants, the threat of failure was accompanied by a gnawing sense of being out of their depth or somehow constantly on the brink of being found out or even of being imposters. This recalled previous self-doubt and appeared influential in their developing stress and fostering a very negative sense of self. These doubts appeared as both the result of and cause for conflict.

> **CHRIS**: I began to realise that these people didn't care about the value that I was bringing to the business. {…} That began to gnaw away at me {…} It bothered me more than I ever really ever experienced {…} It was conflict that was deeply personal and deeply unfair to my mind. [7, 394]

Some participants reported overcoming self-doubt, while in others it led to irresolvable professional conflict.

> **BRAD**: I'm always very conscious that these are not waters that I am qualified to play in. [15, 857]
>
> **WILL**: I developed a very, very severe case of … I guess it's an imposter syndrome. I did not deserve the money, I did not deserve the guidance. [12, 704]
>
> **SAM**: I just had no control over that {…} I was afraid that I was out of my depth, which I was {…} I was afraid that there were certain things that I should have confronted earlier which I did not. [14, 706]

4.7.3 Loss of control: Intra-Personal and Inter-Personal Conflict

Conflict, be it with self or others, was reported by all seven participants. For Will and David, conflict was principally internal and driven by a sense of being somehow defective. Both showed themselves to be dangerous risk-takers, David was obsessed with skydiving and Will's drug use had near-fatal consequences. The determination both expressed, however, to address their conditions, work with them and achieve equilibrium was notable. In order to effectively invest in their own wellbeing, both described going through thorough self-reflection in order to construct a self that had a place in the world as they perceived it.

When assessing his options during the course of recovering from his drug addiction, it became clear to Will that he could choose a place for himself and not experience himself as the victim of a hostile environment.

> **WILL**: I have a part in the world that can either be discord or harmonious. [12, 709]

For the five other participants, conflict related to the collision of diverging visions with business partners. Sam, Chris, Brad, Edward and Stephen were all confronted with the need to fire or oust business colleagues resulting in complex legal battles, irreparable falling outs, toxic work environments and exiting ventures on unfavourable terms. Conflict and the resulting impact on mental state and self-perception was invariably what led participants to psychotherapy or counselling.

In Stephen's case, it was interesting to note how he described the difference between him and his founding partner. When the business began to become successful, the partner insisted on a slick new office and began to strut around like the cliché of a Silicon Valley millionaire. For Stephen, however, self-doubt seeped in and he felt acutely that he was losing control:

> **STEPHEN**: {…} My business partner, he started to change {…} He thought that I was trying to be all-controlling {…} [but I thought] this is my company. This is me. {..} This is what I've done. It was a really weird feeling of – I felt like a cog. I felt a bit out of control. [13, 759]

For Edward, there had been a gradual deterioration of confidence and control both at home and at work.

> **EDWARD**: I am still in a very unhappy marriage which is not working at all {…} and I've been in a bad place with work {…} and for about five years I was in this 'how am I going to do this?' Because when you, for six or seven years with no real success, you question whether you should be doing this. [10, 593-594].

For Brad, the hiring, conflict and subsequent firing of a colleague appeared to be significant factors in spiralling into anxiety. Brad's described his anxiety as manifesting itself as a form of depletion and dissociation.

> **BRAD**: I was super pumped [about hiring the new team member], and it was a car crash {…} I just spent so much time with her trying to make it work… {..} and then, there was a day {…} I remember coming to the office and feeling like I couldn't interact with anything. [10, 541-542]

In Chris's case, much like Stephen's, loss of control was a significant feature. The company which he had set up was now being run by someone whom Chris felt was

incompetent. There was a sense of frustration at his having been side-lined and that his input was no longer valued.

> **CHRIS**: I was looking at my boss and thinking, 'you're doing nothing that I couldn't do and actually I think you're probably making some wrong decisions'. {…} I think it was the judgement {…} that I couldn't get out of because I wasn't the boss, but I was soaking up a lot of the criticism for what was going wrong. [7, 421]

All of the above participants evoked intra-personal or interpersonal conflict in some way as representing the final straw, onset of anxiety and psychic decline that led them to therapy. How they responded to the experience of psychotherapy was telling in relation to the psychological state they conveyed at the time of interview.

4.8 Psychotherapy and current situation

I had anticipated the issue of men finding it difficult to seek help for psychic distress to be far more pronounced than it was in this group. What emerged was that reaching out for help and receiving what amounted to a brief course of treatment, while helpful for some, did not appear to act as long-term protective factors for participants. This is a question I will address in more depth in the discussion chapter.

4.8.1 Addressing symptoms

For many participants, the symptoms that led them to psychotherapy were quite similar, essentially feelings of being detached or disengaged. Thus their decision to get help was actually quite simple: symptoms were identified and they were addressed, (although this was frequently at the behest of a partner or spouse).

> **SAM**: I just, my hands would go cold and I just thought 'What the fuck is this?' {…} I would have a conversation with someone and my brain wouldn't be engaged with it at all. [16, 822]

> **STEPHEN**: I remember {…} just feeling really woolly in the head, can't concentrate. {…} Completely losing a train of thought {…} feeling emotionally detached, and I'm just not connecting with anything or anyone. [15, 898]

> **BRAD**: I remember coming to the office and feeling like I couldn't interact with anything. [10, 548]

While participants did respond to the symptoms they were experiencing, highly demanding working environments and the need to stay on top of constant and

escalating demands meant that therapy was principally approached in quite a mechanistic, solutions-focused way and engaged in for only a brief period.

Brad, in contrast, while focusing very much on maximising performance, was someone who was engaged in long-term therapy as part of his weekly routine. His pragmatism challenges the perception expressed by several participants of long-term or exploratory therapy as being somehow esoteric or overly analytical.

> **BRAD**: If we want to perform at that top level, we need to be thinking about marginal gains {…} performance in work, performance in life, performance in career is no different to as an athlete. [15, 839]

4.8.2 A negative view of seeking help

Despite taking the step to seek therapy, several participants were either wary or dismissive of the possible benefits of treatment. This was true even of those who were actively seeking therapy or were engaged in it at the time of interview. In relation to therapy, participants expressed a variety of concerns or criticisms. For example, Will felt he would be let down or misunderstood:

> **WILL**: I don't like asking for help because I don't really believe I'm going to get it {…} Everyone who had ever promised me support psychiatrically, medically, had either misdiagnosed me, mistreated me, misunderstood me, or just… let me down. [8, 435]

Chris expressed feeling ashamed of seeking help:

> **CHRIS**: Going to see a therapist felt like it was defeat. [16, 961]

Therapy for Stephen reminded him of humiliating childhood experiences:

> **STEPHEN**: It reminded me of, like, the special needs type things at school [15, 888]

David seemed to suggest that he was engaging in therapy for the benefit of others, rather than himself.

> **DAVID**: She's [his wife] the one who insisted on this. {…} 'Yes, well, of course I'm going to do whatever you want and cooperate'. I [had] a strong desire to be the good husband, son, father etc… [22, 1347]

And Edward expressed the conviction that he didn't need help.

> **EDWARD**: I'm not clinically depressed. I don't need treatment. I need to be happy. I need to work out these factors [stresses at work and at home]. [13, 801]

I was curious as to why participants were so dismissive of seeking help, while at the same time, in several cases, asking me for referrals. I wondered if they felt they would appear foolish to be too invested in expectations of change or improved wellbeing, or whether embracing the idea of therapy too explicitly might be experienced as a sign of weakness.

4.9 The experience of therapy

One of the inclusion criteria in my recruitment of participants was that they all needed to have experienced some form of one-to-one therapy. I believed that having had this experience, participants would be able to express not only their prejudices regarding therapy, but also to reflect on what led them there and how the experience had been for them. CBT, was the treatment most commonly experienced by participants. Its specific emphasis on problem-solving, was considered inadequate by several participants.

> **SAM**: The thing itself [CBT] I thought was bullshit. {…} as a mechanism I didn't have much track with it. [18, 918]
>
> **WILL**: He [his therapist] made me try {…} CBT {…} [I] classed [it] in around the same categories as magic crystals and astrology. [3, 151]

Those who acknowledged gaining some insight from therapy gave little credit to the therapy or therapist themselves and more to their own ability to interpret, absorb and get better independently.

> **SAM**: CBT {…} wasn't a tremendous amount of use but the principal thing I discovered after, beyond the bleeding obvious, was that I have an over-developed sense of responsibility. [15, 757]
>
> **EDWARD**: The whole process in a nutshell taught me two things. Firstly, I wasn't clinically depressed. And secondly, that my coping strategies were already very sophisticated. [14, 826]

In Sam and Will's comments above the dismissiveness is emphatic. Sam describes CBT as 'bullshit' and Will classes CBT in the same category as 'magic crystals and astrology'. There is an air of superiority as though the mere idea that this model of therapy could somehow prove to be more effective than their own internal processing, as Sam states:

> **SAM**: I mean as you can tell growing up in an environment of shrinks I'm quite emotionally intelligent about myself. [But] I'm not terribly interested in myself… [19, 941-942].

Edward's comment about receiving CBT was less dismissive than Sam's or Will's, but it did convey a message that all the therapy did was to confirm that there was nothing wrong with him in the first place. This felt like a need on Edward's part to assert his agency. Interestingly, later in the interview he had some very positive things to say both about his therapist and the treatment he had received.

> **EDWARD**: She [the therapist] was lovely, really nice {…} very caring. I found CBT very practical. It gave you tools, things to do rather than… I saw one therapist who gave me a lot of tapping and things to do in stressful moments {…} and we talked a lot of esoteric stuff about you know {…} it just didn't click. {…} talking a lot about relationships… and things but not giving me tools. [14, 860-866]

It felt as though Edward had really connected positively with his therapist and that he had managed to ground his identity in some ways, but the central issue of his failing marriage remained a source of considerable stress.

> **EDWARD**: [After completing his course of therapy] I know who I am and I've got my identity nailed. Business is becoming successful and I know who I am, where I'm going, what I'm doing {…} [but] the relationship remains crap. [15, 900-902]

After a few months of ending therapy, he was back in a situation where he was struggling to assert his identity:

> **EDWARD**: I act at home, this different person. {…} It's all very tiresome because it's not really me. I'm a bit more full-on and straight up. So I have to kind of behave differently to be non-confrontational. [15, 923-924]

During the interview itself, he came across as being in the midst of profound emotional turmoil and this felt at odds with his assertions that he was doing well and that his 'coping strategies are already very sophisticated'. It felt that the equilibrium he had managed to achieve was crumbling and that it was very painful for him to acknowledge the severity of his distress. I decided to end the interview when it felt as though the questions he was asking would be more appropriate for a session with a therapist than in a research interview. Shortly after I switched off the recording he appeared to be on the verge of tears.

Edward's situation made me reflect on the idea that, while he might have gained some insight and stability from the course of therapy he had engaged in, his desire to see himself as 'fixed' somehow meant that when the fruits of his therapeutic work no longer paid off it caused him increased discomfort. Thus the question of not only reaping

rewards from therapy but of *maintaining* equilibrium came to the fore. His request for therapy after the interview had ended might have represented a recognition that further, or deeper therapeutic work was needed.

Acquiring or regaining a sense of agency (and thus autonomy) was important. Will's account of overcoming his heroin addiction alone, for example, felt like an essential feature of his rehabilitation. Sustaining a sense of wellbeing, however, appeared to relate to the kinds of relational connections enjoyed by participants.

4.9.1 Meaningful Interactions and Self-Reflection

Despite Will's dismissiveness of CBT, and David's claim that he was doing therapy for the sake of his family. Both acknowledged the value of having a space in which to connect with the more fragile aspects of their identity.

David spoke of the consulting room as being where he was essentially able to gain a better understanding of his place in the world:

> **DAVID**: That room [the consulting room] was a sort of a laboratory and microscope for an examination of that otherness. And so maybe this is actually the success of it, was a sort of understanding of the otherness, of my otherness, of a place in the world which is irreducibly that, rather than a transformation of that place in the world. [19, 1167]

Will, (who also attends regular Narcotics Anonymous meetings) spoke fondly of the family GP whom he visits sporadically for advice and support.

> **WILL**: It was important to me that I see this particular doctor because he knew me when I was a child, he knew a purer me {…} and it was significant to me {…} that he would have that to remember. [11, 628]

This comment by Will evokes the idea of the family GP as someone able to somehow act as the custodian of Will's memories of a 'purer me', perhaps representing something akin to his authentic self. While not strictly therapy *per se*, Will's visits to his GP obviously provided him with a meaningful relational connection that supported his psychological wellbeing. Will was very expressive regarding his need for internal and external change.

> **WILL**: I think it's important that people start to recognise that talking about pain on an emotional, spiritual and psychological level is no different to talking about an injury they have sustained. {…} I tried to [avoid emotional pain] with drugs, and it damn near killed me. [14, 838]

Much like Will spoke of his GP, Sam, who was not in therapy, and explicitly stated that he had neither time nor inclination to engage in therapy, spoke very warmly of his wife and her supportiveness, as well as the fact that she herself has some psychotherapy training.

> **SAM**: She [his wife] did a psychology degree so she would say 'Well, that is not normal', what you're looking at is this, this, and this so why don't you go and talk to somebody. [19, 891-892].

Sam was notable in that he was the one who spoke most, and most warmly, about his partner. His wife felt like an important protective factor for him in helping him navigate the immense challenges he faced when taking over the company he had worked for. Right at the time that the conflict at work was raging, it is telling that this is how he describes his relationship:

> **SAM**: my relationship with F… was very good, she was very supportive {…} we were just married, we were very happy, there wasn't actually anything else around the side. And the rest of our lives was really quite nice. And we didn't have any kids so we had, looking back at it a lot of capacity. [14, 723-724].

Brad, on the other hand, is engaged in weekly therapy and explicitly extolls its virtues. For him, it is a private space in which to step back from other people's needs and focus on his own.

> **BRAD**: I think that that's the value that I get from therapy, right? Is the ability to articulate ideas and thoughts about myself and think about those things and talk about those things. [8, 435-436].

Although Brad's commitment to therapy was very much driven by a desire to maximise his professional output as well as that of his colleagues and employees, it was informed by an understanding of past experiences and desire to maintain focus on skills rather than weaknesses. Childhood identity was a central focus of his therapeutic work and revealed a significant degree of self-knowledge.

> **BRAD**: My vulnerabilities in my childhood were very obvious. Academically, not good. {…} Traditional sports {…} not good. I guess I've had to maybe, embrace that {..} Maybe there's another way to win. [15, 890]

While only two of the above four participants could be said to be currently engaged in what one traditionally understands therapy to be, it is important to note that they all report having a meaningful relational interaction with another person. This meaningful

dialogue seemed to play an important role in these participants' narrative performances as Will, David, Brad and Sam all gave the impression of thriving and enjoying both professional and personal wellbeing.

On the other hand, while he had previously achieved professional success, at the time of interview, Stephen had left a company he founded with some significant acrimony, was unsure whether he would get the pay-out he deserved and did not know what his professional future looked like. His request for therapeutic help after the interview compounded my view of someone struggling to build a self, capable of summoning the kind of determination he would need if he wanted to embark on a new entrepreneurial venture or conversely choose with confidence a different path altogether. When he says therefore that:

> **STEPHEN**: Stagnation and not doing anything is worse than doing something. {…} You have to get some momentum forward to change things. Standing still is the worst thing you can do. [11, 632]

he is both reflecting what he views as desirable entrepreneurial drive, as well as expressing the fact that he has somehow lost it. In relation to his future desire for therapy, there was on the one hand the desire to gain a better understanding of himself:

> **STEPHEN**: I suppose what I would really like, is to just understand myself a little bit better, and really understand what are the things that drive a lot of my decisions, and just be cognizant of it, and then work on rebuilding those bits up. Like, confidence. [20, 1186-1188].

and on the other a fear that engaging with his emotions might mean losing control or 'power', as he puts it:

> **STEPHEN**: [I'm] worrying that there is just going to be all this other stuff that comes out which is confusing. Maybe losing some kind of power that, at the moment, is powering me in a certain way. [20, 1204-1206].

Chris also struggled with the stigma of receiving therapy but felt that the reflexive capacity he had developed allowed him to gain a better understanding of his own feelings.

> **CHRIS**: It [therapy] helped me greatly in a sense of reflection. I think it began to help me examine why I was feeling and what I was feeling in a way in which I'd never, ever confronted before. [10, 627-628]

His experience of therapy and his wide-ranging reading on the subject also helped him to feel less alone:

> **CHRIS**: When I think about everything that I've learnt and experienced people like us {…} take success and failure on a very thin margin, and you can see why people suffer from mental health problems. [15, 908-910].

But he too was experiencing a period of stagnation and felt that he might need further therapy to gain better insight into what was holding him back.

4.9.2 Learning from others

In the case of Will and Sam, it appeared that the self-knowledge they manifested during the interview may have come from having learned to reflect on themselves specifically through how they learned from observing others. This touches on the question of self-knowledge and its part in the construction of a narrative that conveyed a sense of thriving. It also touches on the idea that understanding oneself is related to understanding others and acknowledging the value of interpersonal interaction.

At the time of interview, Will reported feeling well and motivated to maintain good psychological health. The way in which he articulates the experience of his Narcotics Anonymous meetings outlines the benefits he perceives of relating to others compassionately:

> **WILL**: I think you need to inter-relate to other people. It is so important. Understanding. Yes, [you're] significant but not unique. You know, vulnerable but not insignificant. {…} You stop seeing yourself as outside looking in on this finely tuned machine that excludes you. You start recognising all the other cogs. [13, 770-775]

For Sam, the intense professional conflicts he'd been engaged in were long past, and he reported being in a good place professionally, having learned from the 'hell' of his previous venture. It felt like a quality of his that he prised particularly was his ability to learn from others, which meant also not being afraid of acknowledging his weaknesses:

> **SAM:** although I do have a tremendously strong sense of myself, I'm always interested in whether I'm right or I'm wrong. And I'm always interested in other people who are doing things better than me. {…} I think that is what life is about… And I think what's interesting is learning. [20, 989-994]

For David, the most significant thing that he felt he had acquired from therapy was a space to think and connect thoughts freely, as well as an opportunity to explore his relationship to the therapist and to the context of psychotherapy itself.

> **DAVID:** It was a relationship with the set up [of psychotherapy], as it were. Things happened and it was very rich {…} the interest for me was free association and simply the discipline of doing that. There was also something very interesting about understanding what the relationship to another is. [19, 1163-1164].

David also reported the extent to which the ability to think reflexively was something that grew over time:

> **DAVID:** There are kind of different layers of reflexivity and honesty with oneself that one goes through and I think that as a young man I had very little. [17, 1042-1043].

Much like Sam, Brad's focus was on learning, and on considering the viewpoint of others.

> **BRAD:** the way that we built our businesses over the years has just been through doing as we would want to be done to ourselves. We made decisions based on how would I want to be treated. {…} we never had lots of politics within our organisation. We've always had lots of transparency and honesty and not a lot of hierarchy. [6, 337-339].

For others, acknowledging weaknesses or blind spots was more difficult. In these participants, there appeared to be an anxiety about being right or being in control and when they felt out of their depth, challenged or side-lined, it tended to produce quite strong emotions.

For Edward, bringing in someone to do a job that he had been doing previously for his company involved relinquishing control and it led to conflict, essentially because Edward felt that he could do the job better than the person he had brought in.

> **EDWARD**: [It] was a huge personal challenge for me to do, but I brought a businessperson in to run the business who then tried to, it was a disaster, absolute disaster. He tried to take part of the business… [and we] went through a big legal process at a time when we had no money. We ended up spending £30,000 in legal fees. [7, 398-400].

In the case of Chris, a similar feeling of being side-lined and having control taken away provoked uncharacteristic anger:

> **CHRIS**: So if I'm going to be part of this I want to have a proper say in how it works and it was rejected out of hand. I'm generally a calm person.

> I don't really lose my temper, but I really lost my temper. So from that point on it was pretty sour. [11, 656-658].

Stephen reported arriving at his new offices following the rapid expansion of his business and feeling sick at how unrecognisable the venture now felt to him and how out of place he felt in it.

> **STEPHEN**: I remember the first day walking in there [to the new offices with his new team] {…} I just looked around and I felt sick. {…} I walked in and it wasn't like a 'This is my company. This is me. This is what we've done. This is what I've done.' {…} I felt a bit out of control. I didn't feel that I was owning it. [13, 803-805].

These powerful feelings often led to conflict, as in the case of Edward having legal wrangles with the person he had had to fire. Chris and Stephen had similar experiences, and all seemed related to losing control of some part of the business, or no longer being as influential in the decision-making process as they had previously been. The expansion of businesses, while desirable and objectively a sign of professional success, was often experienced by participants as destabilising. A comment from Sam demonstrates how experience has taught him to prepare for such eventualities:

> **SAM**: If it goes right, {…} you need to predict for that, because that has its own problems. But I think I've pretty much done that. [13, 652-654].

With the benefit of hindsight, Stephen, for example, realised that he had missed an opportunity to learn from someone with more experience than himself but that his anxiety about having to convey a sense of control had held him back.

> **STEPHEN**: If feels like, 'Well, it's my company. I know what I need to get out of it, and we'll do it, and we'll do it my way. If not, go and work somewhere else.' Yes, I want to learn from other people and I want to… [But] you know, I felt this huge, 'I need to up my game. I need to be the person in the room that people are like 'wow. Okay, he's where he should be'.' [17, 1017-20].

What many participants appeared to reflect was that developing self-knowledge through engaging with self-reflection helped them to more harmoniously interact with and learn from others. This appeared to have a bearing on both personal and professional wellbeing. Certainly, different practical pressures also played a part and it is interesting to identify that three of the four participants who reflected a higher level of satisfaction in both life and work were engaged in either solo or small ventures, rather than large corporate-style ones.

It is also positive to acknowledge that all those participants who seemed to be struggling were actively considering or seeking further psychotherapy and thus had the self-awareness to identify that they wanted to deepen their ability for self-reflection to perhaps achieve the foundations for a more robust sense of both personal and professional equilibrium. The implications of this are relevant to questions regarding help-seeking behaviour and male access to psychotherapeutic engagement.

Chapter 5. **Discussion**

5.1 Overview

This chapter is broken down into two sections. The first aims to synthesise the findings of the previous chapter and contextualise them within existing research on the intersecting fields of entrepreneurship, identity narrative construction, masculinity and psychotherapy. The second considers the applicability of the present research to the field of counselling psychology, as well as a critical perspective on the study's limitations and some suggestions for future research.

5.2 Defining narrative identity performance

The gap in the literature addressed by this research project concerned the moderating role of identity construction and performance on the self-concept and psychological wellbeing of male entrepreneurs. My intention, therefore, was to consider the analysis of participants' transcripts within this context and to attempt to gain a better understanding of what factors, both from a thematic and performative perspective, might contribute to the relative wellbeing or lack thereof of participants.

My approach to the data was threefold: narrative content (what), narrative expression (how) and narrative performance (why and to whom). In keeping with my stated epistemological stance – approaching narrative and identity from a social constructionist perspective – my focus is on the function and purpose of presenting the self in different ways, at different times and in different contexts. This constitutes the why and the to whom. As Kristin Langellier, quoting Soyini Madison, explains: '[p]erformance [is] the means by which we "problematize how we categorise who is 'us' and who is 'them', and how we see ourselves with 'other' and different eyes"' (Madison, 2003: 232).

By 'problematising' self-representation, Madison (2003) reflects the pluralistic shift in academic identity research that challenges the notion of identity as either fixed or unitary (Kim, 2007, Urietta and Noblit, 2018, Brown and Capozza, 2016, Meca *et al.*, 2018). By attributing dynamic purpose to narration, Langellier considers identity performance as a shifting process of negotiation, construction and reconstruction. One might consider this resolution an attempt to determine a grounded self-concept and thus a healthy degree of self-worth. By conceiving of personal characteristics as

shifting and evolving processes rather than fixed personality traits, Langellier points towards the agency of participants and the possibility of transformation through re-storying experience.

5.3 Discussion and synthesis of findings

Analysis of thematic content and performance in the previous chapter produced three central and inter-related findings:

1. Participants' constructions of childhood and adolescent self contained the seeds of entrepreneurial identity.
2. Two distinct overarching narratives of either thriving or struggling were observed within the participant group.
3. Meaningful relational support was associated with self-knowledge and integrated self-concept amongst those participants whose narratives suggested they were thriving.

5.3.1 Finding 1: Participants' constructions of childhood and adolescent self contained the seeds of entrepreneurial identity.

Adversity and the Development of Entrepreneurial Skills

In order to best understand where participants had reached at the time of interview, it is useful to go back to their origins and to explore how and what childhood selves they constructed in their life-course narration of entrepreneurial identities.

Many similarities were found across the entire participant group specifically relating to childhood and school experiences. Because both researcher and participant were conscious that the interviews were ultimately concerned with participants' entrepreneurial identities, interpretation of the data could not ignore the fact that participants would be narrating their stories with that in mind. As such, the dual process was at play during the interview of the researcher making links between experiences narrated and the later formation of entrepreneurial identity, and of the participants framing their narratives within the entrepreneurial focus of my research in mind.

Because interviews took a life story approach, participants were invited to narrate the evolution of their entrepreneurial identity from its origins to the present day. This allowed for a degree of linear coherence, as well as inviting participants to make links and connections between experiences across the life-course. The structure of the interview was intended, essentially, to invite participants to describe who they were and where they came from both factually and psychologically.

The interviews' initial focus on childhood and adolescence opened the way for participants to consider their home, childhood and schooling experiences and to make links with their later entrepreneurial selves. It was interesting to reflect on the fact that stories of childhood adversity were common to all participants. I take my cue from developmental science in defining the concept of adversity as being the result of high-risk conditions such as exposure to parental depression, parental addiction, bullying or domestic abuse (Cicchetti, 2013; Luthar *et al.*, 2012; Ungar *et al.*, 2013). There was great variance in the nature and extent of adversity reported, but participants did evoke one or more of the following challenges in childhood or adolescence: family trauma, domestic upheaval, ostracism or bullying at school, or severe mental health problems. I consider how the narration of these experiences represents the early construction of identity.

Regardless of their present situation, all reported having achieved significant business successes and thus the seeds of entrepreneurial ability were already woven into these early narrative constructs. By focusing on adversity, narrators seemed to be constructing narratives of survival and overcoming. As we have seen above, there is an entrenched social narrative that lionises the entrepreneur as someone who defies convention, beats overwhelming odds, and goes from precarity to success through strength of character and will. Overcoming adversity is part of the fabric of the entrepreneurial cliché (Down and Giazitzoglu, 2014), not to mention innumerable masculinity clichés (Leaper, Farkas and Starr, 2018; Isacco, 2015). Participants thus performed an identarian position of overcoming early obstacles such as the lack of support due to maternal depression, or the constricting expectations of the father, or of dyslexia, or mental illness. Concurrent was the underlying message that adversity had contributed to the acquisition of entrepreneurial characteristics. All participants to varying extents appeared to present the adversities they had experienced in childhood as containing the seeds of entrepreneurial identity and ability. Broadly, when the support network is dysfunctional, the young individual has to develop resilience. When they are ostracised by the mainstream, they have to develop autonomy.

Developing a self

Differences in participants' reported experiences of feeling ostracised in early social and familial contexts determined their relationship to 'belonging' as something

desirable or to be rejected or challenged. Where the perception of difference comes from is central. Participants appeared to respond to the 'relational, situational [or] locational' (Anthias, 2002: 492) context in which they found themselves *being identified as* different by *identifying themselves as* being different.

Here, participants reported having to contend with the paradoxical and often conflicting desires to both belong and not belong. Participants' attitudes were variously defiant, resigned, galvanised or deflated (or oscillating combinations of these), but never indifferent. The relationship to being different was unavoidably linked to social context. As such, self-esteem and self-worth appeared to be determined in relation to the value systems of specific social contexts (Strandell, 2016) and for the participants, this was clearly manifest in their accounts of school experiences. Identity formation was reported by many participants as being an active effort. Will reports deciding to capitalise on the cliché of the urchin 'druggie' at school to financially exploit his bullies, for example, while Brad describes his response to negative feedback from peers and teachers at school as a defiant determination to make something of himself. In the context of their later career choices and professional considerations, narratives that presented a combination of resilience and autonomy appeared central to questions of how and why they might have become entrepreneurs, as well as the kind of entrepreneurial identities which they had constructed. Sam, for example, appeared to credit a strong sense of self with his ability to take risks and endure doubt, while Will reported his successful unassisted detox from heroin and cocaine as a vital component of his increased self-worth and self-confidence.

As described above, and in keeping with my epistemological standpoint, this thesis espouses a process view of personality development which contends that identity characteristics grow, change, ebb and flow over time, rather than being fixed attributes. Taking my cue from qualitative research regarding the evolution of entrepreneurs' identarian characteristics (Bernard and Barbosa, 2016; Ben Tahar, 2018; Albert and Couture, 2013), I identified the characteristics of autonomy and resilience as central components of participants' constructions of childhood and adolescent identity.

Resilience

In his metatheoretical exploration of resilience and health promotion, Glenn Richardson (2002:.308) defines resilience as 'the process of coping with stressors, adversity, change or opportunity in a manner that results in the identification, fortification, and enrichment of resilient qualities or protective factors'. In such a conception, the dynamic nature of overcoming is foremost, rather than the stagnating process of endurance. The dynamic nature of the word 'resilience' thus suggests that while it may be a personality attribute, it is also a skill to be deployed as occasion requires.

Autonomy

The etymological structure of the word autonomy (from ancient Greek; *auto* = self and *nomos* = law), points towards the process of self-regulation and stands in opposition to heteronomy, which refers to the law of others. The etymological origins of both 'resilience' and 'autonomy' are helpful in pointing towards adaptation and process. Self-regulation is a helpful concept because it can be equally well adapted to emotional self-regulation or professional self-management. The way in which the manifestation and internalisation of autonomy contributed to the creation of an entrepreneurial identity, as well as psychological wellbeing, was also apparent in participants' accounts of their childhood experiences (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011; Albert and Couture, 2013).

Narrative performances of childhood adversity.

The capacity for resilience and the need for autonomy are well documented as typical of entrepreneurial identity as well as masculine personality more broadly (Wikham and Knights, 2013; Thompson Jr and Bennett, 2015). So, before any entrepreneurial activity is reported, narrators had already framed their identity as possessing desirable entrepreneurial skills (Gielnik, Bledow & Stark, 2019).

Given the qualitative nature of this study and my epistemological stance, I frame resilience and autonomy as identity attributes rather than personality traits (Baumert *et al.*, 2017). Process-based conceptualisations of identity development over the life-course (Geukes *et al.*, 2017; Baumert *et al.*, 2017; Wrzus and Roberts, 2017) afford insight into how certain identarian attributes evolve and change.

The participants all described considerable challenges, both material and emotional. The benefits reaped and lessons learned in the process of developing resilience and autonomy appeared key factors not only in their entrepreneurial intention and identity, but also in early-stage entrepreneurial success (Bulmash, 2016; Fletcher and Sarkar, 2013; Luthar, Crossman and Small, 2015). It seemed that resilience combined with autonomy encouraged or supported participants in managing the stressors and challenges of childhood, but also in developing the ability to strike out on their own.

For some participants, narratives of resilience seemed to come from a need to demonstrate that they possessed a quality of 'grit' and determination that is frequently reported as being a necessary attribute for entrepreneurial success (Hayward *et al.*, 2010). Here it felt that the narration served not only the purpose of convincing me but also themselves. This was particularly true of those participants who seemed to be struggling. Stephen described frequent setbacks at school and the challenges of having to change school and lacking support, Chris described feeling stupid and failing academically as a consequence, Edward described himself as having had to perform an inauthentic self to fit in. Overcoming these early obstacles was presented as a dynamic feature of building an identity that could tolerate adversity and take risks.

Re-storying trauma

Resilience in the face of traumatic experiences was narrated by some participants more lightly through flippant and sometimes dismissive narrative performances that seemed at odds with their content. Here I have in mind the narrative performances of Sam, David, Will and Brad.

A brief overview of what these participants had overcome helps identify what constructions they are actually narrating and how the nature of the narration itself appears to keep the impact of their negative experiences at bay. Sam had had to contend with his mother's depression, his father's alcoholism, a chaotic home life, as well as his own dyslexia and ostracism at school. David had experienced an extreme identity reshaping resulting from his father's Holocaust trauma as well as severe psychosis and depression of his own. Will had effectively been abandoned by his father, had had to look after a mother with severe mental health problems as well as deal with his own anorexia, depression, ostracism and life-threatening crack cocaine and heroin addiction. Despite an apparently balanced home life, Brad had had to

survive bullying and ostracism at school, as well as being singled out as lazy and incompetent by teachers and peers. The narration of these hardships was often at odds with the traumatic nature of their content. The impact on me of Sam, Will and David's accounts of their childhood experiences was of shock, disbelief and admiration, as well as being entertained and engaged. These were good stories and they were well told: not so much too good to be true, but too good to be new. It felt as though these stories had been honed in the mind of the narrators and that the narratives had already been adapted, structured and framed, though not perhaps consciously so.

Sam's flippant description of his mother's head bumping down the stairs following her attempted suicide, or David's enthralling account of his father's Holocaust experiences and escape from Germany, or the casual manner in which Will described his heroin and crack addiction, overdose, near-death and subsequent unassisted detox were compelling, shocking and eye-opening. In my interview with Brad, he was so enthused by sharing his theories of maximising potential, maintaining a constant level of charge in his and his personnel's metaphorical batteries and enhancing performance that he was often on his feet, gesticulating, moving about the room and scribbling charts on a whiteboard. Both Sam's flippancy and the jovial way in which he described it lent the account of his mother's attempted suicide a darkly comical dimension. David's account of his father's wartime experiences felt like a dramatic historical novel about a quest for identity in war-torn Europe, with his father as a picaresque protagonist. Will's riotous account of his parents' origins and his extraordinary journey from the depths of addiction to unassisted detox, to running a successful venture felt like the plot for a blockbuster film in the mould of *Slumdog Millionaire*. Brad's hyper-energised performance almost felt like an evangelical sermon on a fresh, new philosophy of life.

I specifically frame the narratives here in terms of tone or genre to show not only how I experienced them, but to consider what the narrators' purpose might have been in their choice of telling. My sense was that to project the impression of having overcome their early challenges and demonstrate the extent to which they had successfully created emotional distance between themselves and their hardship, they performed their life stories in a manner resembling fiction (Neimeyer *et al.*, 2001). The function seemed to either be to entertain or inspire or offer insight. The distancing process of this type of narration might also have been a protective measure (Pals, 2006). Storying

in the manner described above might have been a way of universalising their own particular form of suffering, or of locating difficult experiences firmly in the past. Goodman presents a wide-ranging study on the storying and re-storying of trauma, finding that it can be an integral part of the 'whole-person approach to health and wellbeing' (Goodman, 2018: 3) because of its ability to support stress moderation and foster resiliency and coping.

Evolving narratives of entrepreneurial identity

With the participant group, there were significant similarities in constructions of self in childhood and adolescence. The principal observation made here was the extent to which their accounts projected those socially desirable personality characteristics that denote them as entrepreneurially competent or perhaps merely as worthy of being recognised as entrepreneurs. Once participants began to narrate embarking on their entrepreneurial journey, however, clearer differences between participants' identity constructions began to come to light. When it came to engaging in entrepreneurial ventures *per* se, participants variously negotiated, questioned, revised and interrogated their identities, specifically when it came to wrangling with issues of imposter syndrome, fear of being 'found out' or the anxiety of being unqualified for their ventures' demands. Identity is shaped and constructed by process, agency and self-concept and thus flexible in nature and configuration (Baumert *et al.*, 2017) and, as we shall see later, the autonomy and resilience reported by participants were not always effectively harnessed or indeed as robust as initially reported. The extent to which participants were able to rely on these qualities later in their careers varied considerably. It was interesting to note that aspects of participants' identity which they reported as being robust and central early on in fact became threatened and depleted when self-doubt, conflict and loss of control emerged during the course of their entrepreneurial ventures.

There was great variance between the different ways in which participants constructed their entrepreneurial identities. Whether they narrated adversity as something to be endured or overcome had a significant bearing on their approach to later professional challenges. It also had a significant bearing on their self-concept and wellbeing (Smith and McElwee 2011; Down and Warren, 2008). Based on the diverging narrative configurations of resilience and autonomy in their identity constructions, I identified a

split between participants, falling into two board categories which I have designated as either 'thriving' or 'struggling'. It was precisely in the relationship to adversity in adult life that these differences were made most explicit. The central difference identified between participants' relationship to the challenges of their entrepreneurial activities is best described as, on the one hand, a position of enduring adversity and on the other a position of overcoming.

5.3.2 Finding 2: Two distinct overarching narratives of either thriving or struggling were observed within the participant group.

While the above finding represents a broad generalisation, it does evoke the core nature of participants' identity performance that I identified at the time of interview. While attempting to find ways of describing the overarching differences I perceived in participants, I chose to use the word 'thriving' because I felt that 'successful' was too limited and too loaded a word, definitions and measures of success being highly contested in the entrepreneurship literature (Angel *et al.*, 2018; Hall and Mirvis, 2013). On the other hand, I preferred 'struggling' over 'failing' because it suggested an active process of attempting to restore equilibrium rather than a freefall that could only have a negative outcome. All three of the participants I identify as 'struggling' were actively considering engaging in therapy to gain perspective and equilibrium.

In the participant portraits in Chapter 4, I relate the overall impression that each participant had on me; that is to say, the dialogic impact of their identity performance with and to me. The nature of their performances, what Anthias refers to as 'the claims and attributions that individuals make about their position in the social order of things' (Anthias, 2002: 499), represents the constructed identity they elected to portray. This conscious and unconscious construction was not only of their entrepreneurial self but also of their current emotional and professional state. My observation was that some presented a narrative of buoyancy and thriving, while others portrayed a narrative of struggling to maintain emotional or professional equilibrium. Of course, there was considerable variation of how thriving and struggling were evoked by participants, but offering a perspective on two broad positions offers a framework with which to explore the central differences and similarities in the narratives of the individuals in and between each group.

I have designated Sam, Will, David and Brad as thriving and Chris, Stephen and Edward as struggling. For the sake of clarity, and as a way of orienting the reader in the discussion that follows, I have broken the participant group down into two groups: Group A consists of Sam, Will, David and Brad, while Group B consists of Chris, Stephen and Edward.

On the most tangible level, Sam, Will, David and Brad were engaged in successful entrepreneurial ventures at the time of interview, while Chris had recently experienced two failed ventures, Stephen had exited a company on unfavourable terms and Edward was struggling to keep his business afloat and attract investment. So, in a very real sense, some were indeed thriving professionally, while others were struggling. On a personal level, however, there was also a distinction between the two groups. Sam reported a happy domestic life and a feeling of personal stability in relation to his work life, Will was proudly maintaining sobriety and enjoying close relationships with his colleagues, David was busy with a number of successful ventures while enjoying good mental health and Brad described feeling enthused by his growing business and by nourishing interpersonal relationships with his colleagues and co-workers.

Given the central focus of this thesis – the relationship between entrepreneurial narrative identity construction and psychological wellbeing – I look beyond the immediate facts of participants' concrete situations and explore the origins and evolution of participants' narratives performance of thriving or struggling.

Overcoming adversity

Participants in Group A appeared to have implemented the skills and qualities developed in childhood to overcome adversity while those in Group B seemed to rely on them in order to endure adversity. I found that differences in how individuals narrated these attributes shed significant light on how they reflected their self-concept at the time of interview. Resilience in the case of Edward, for example, manifested itself as the resigned endurance of pain and self-doubt, and autonomy in Stephen's case as a defiant refusal to challenge his former partners to give him the financial compensation to which he was entitled. These enactments of the identarian characteristics they put so much stock in during the formulation of their childhood selves ultimately felt detrimental to self-concept and indeed psychological health. Resilience appeared to become little more than the endurance of suffering.

In contrast, participants from Group A seemed to have harnessed resilience as a dynamic process that helped them develop their ability to adapt to, overcome and capitalise on challenging circumstances. The key factor here appeared to be self-knowledge, as evidenced for example by Brad who, despite the harsh setbacks experienced at school, was able to clearly assess his skills and limitations which in turn led him to seek out a business partner with a complementary skillset.

> **BRAD**: The thing that we are most lucky for is our relationship, because {…} I am Mr Effort and R… is Mr Achievement. [5, 241]

Despite the extreme professional conflicts that Sam was faced with, his openness to learning from others is also an acknowledgement of his blind spots and limitations.

> **SAM**: If somebody says to me 'I think you're wrong, I think you should do it like that', I think 'How interesting, how do you want to do it?' I don't think 'Fuck you', whereas most people I think do. [20, 1014]

On the other hand, Will and David seemed to have gained considerable personal insight from their struggles with serious mental health issues. The insight that David developed in order to manage his bipolar disorder meant that he developed a meaningful sense of self and a 'place in the world' which was his own, rather than one in which he had to shape his identity to conform.

> **DAVID**: The striking thing about the psychotic episodes are this kind of transformation in the way in which you see the world. {…} As if a switch has flicked and suddenly the world {…} is interpretable, in a completely different way and from a completely different perspective. [13, 744-746].

Similarly, the deep self-reflection that Will had engaged in to overcome his addiction problems afforded him a degree of self-awareness that alerted him to the specific risks of his entrepreneurial career:

> **WILL**: A sudden realisation and it wasn't just me {…} it was my friends, it was my now ex-girlfriend, it was my business. There were jobs on the line and there were livelihoods, there was my home {…} things that I suddenly realised were bigger than me. So {…} in order for me to actually accept that I needed help, I first needed an absolute ego death. I needed to realise that my place in the world is a part of something wider. [12, 724-728]

As we see with the above participants, constructing an identarian narrative of self-knowledge was associated with overcoming and putting aside the fallout of conflict and doubt. This self-knowledge appeared to be closely related to the relational, to an understanding of self-in-relation (Adame, 2020).

Despite having experienced both personal and interpersonal conflict, participants in Group A presented themselves as having overcome adversity, feeling grounded in their sense of self and thriving both personally and professionally. The identity they convey in these narratives of overcoming highlights the importance these participants attribute to a connection with others and with the idea of having 'a place in the world'. It also underlines the extent to which a sense of self-knowledge affords agency and thus self-confidence. Through the experience of overcoming adversity, the entrepreneurial self-constructed by these participants is already grounded in an integrated identity that knows how to cope with conflict and uncertainty.

Enduring adversity

While the identity performances of participants in Group A shared a dynamic energy and appetite for engagement, such energy and appetite felt notably muted in the three participants in Group B, whose accounts reflected a deeper impression of feeling stuck and struggling to stay afloat. This was reflected in what they said and how they came across. The impressions I had of Edward, Chris and Stephen were of tiredness, uncertainty and lack of hope. A feeling of satisfaction was notably absent, and their sense of purpose felt stifled.

These participants presented an entrepreneurial identity that reflected the ongoing endurance of adversity. For Edward, suffering distressing setbacks at work as well as a collapsing marriage; or Stephen, struggling with the fallout of very negative interpersonal business experiences; or Chris, facing the void that followed exiting his company and the renewed vulnerability involved in seeing new start-up ventures fail. Profound existential issues had arisen that ultimately confronted each with the need to question and make meaning of the sheer effort and discomfort involved in their entrepreneurial activities.

Stephen describes stagnation as the worst thing that can happen when you identify as an entrepreneur, and 'stuck' was precisely how he reported himself as being. This felt like an almost intolerable identarian position, deeply anathema to his entrepreneurial self.

There is ample evidence (Mischler, 2006; Riessman, 2008; Rossetti-Ferreira *et al.*, 2007; Missel and Birkelund, 2019) to suggest that the degree of personal meaning which an individual attaches to an endeavour is a significant determinant of both

professional success and wellbeing. For Stephen, the impact of stagnation, isolation and self-doubt seemed closely bound to loss of and the consequent search for meaning. Stephen, Chris and Edward expressed this loss in the following ways:

> **STEPHEN**: Can [I] derive happiness from a much simpler life [?]
>
> **CHRIS**: This is not the world I want to be in
>
> **EDWARD**: This realisation that {…} I need to do a lot of work and learn and become and grow as a person.

The psychological distress and professional uncertainty with which all three were faced suggested that the identity constructs they had enjoyed during their rise to early success were now under threat and their capacity for resilience and autonomy was either lost or no longer serving them effectively. It felt as though there had been a dawning realisation that, in order to reboot a professional identity and trajectory, a grounded reassessment of self would have to be established first.

Looking back at those aspects of their entrepreneurial careers where they had found themselves in conflict with partners or investors shed valuable light on the place of 'struggling' they had reached. The actual nature of their entrepreneurial identities may have laid the groundwork for the place of uncertainty and stagnation they had reached. A feature common to all participants' accounts to varying degrees was the issue of losing control but for those participants designated as being in Group B, the manner in which they responded to or initiated conflict revealed the fragility of their entrepreneurial identity. Imposter syndrome seemed to play a part, but all three of their accounts presented a narrative of being misunderstood, mistreated or victimised. Stephen described losing control as coming about through the sudden growth of his company, the corporatisation of his working practices and the unreasonable behaviour and recriminations of his co-founder whom he ended up firing. For Chris, loss of control appeared when he felt that he was being side-lined at work and that he had become the scapegoat for problems in his company which he felt were not of his making, but due to mismanagement by his colleagues, Edward, on the other hand, reported his feeling of losing control as stemming from the fact that he had been put in a position where he put his needs and career behind his wife's and felt disempowered and belittled when trying to build his venture.

Interpersonal conflict within participants' business ventures seemed to result from the challenges posed by diluted authority and thus diluted autonomy. Amongst the

participants designated as being in Group B, reduced autonomy seemed to act as a threat to their sense of control and seemed to revive insecure feelings regarding imposter syndrome or not being qualified for the post they occupied. This vulnerability threatened participants' perception of themselves as 'resilient', while the need to seek help or support might have threatened their perception of being 'autonomous'.

The question of how participants accounted for regaining control followed similar lines to the overcoming versus enduring paradigm. Those participants from Group A described their ability for self-reflection as helping them assess their situations, identify stressors and make necessary changes, whereas participants in Group B became embroiled in conflict when their entrepreneurial identity and autonomy came under threat. That their attitude regarding situations deemed unfair or hostile should be to react rather than respond, by engaging in conflict, demonstrated the extent to which enduring circumstances that made them unhappy was deeply disturbing to their sense of self. The same was true for participants in Group B when it came to enduring the fallout of conflict; they described putting up with intolerable situations or situations that felt unfair, as though pain tolerance was itself a kind of virtue or at least a way of avoiding a potentially devastating reassessment of self.

Stephen described how he endured hardship, or chose to 'stick it out' when he was forced into a business situation in which he felt both powerless and unhappy. Edward spoke emphatically about being fine, about having established a grounded sense of contentment while all the while describing the painful extent to which he felt that his marriage and home life were causing him to lose his identity.

> **EDWARD**: Both at home and as a husband, the way I behave is not, it's not me. I act at home, this different person.

Seeking connection

The purpose served by narrating the endurance of hardship was confusing. An unexpected impression was that their decision to participate in the research might itself have been an unconscious step towards attempting to gain some clarity or insight into their circumstances. I wondered if participating in the research project itself might have had something to do with needing to make a relational connection, but doing so obliquely.

I considered that performing an identity construction that evoked struggling might be intended to unconsciously elicit sympathy and thus some kind of supportive, nurturing response on my part; perhaps even some momentary relief from their isolation, or the possibility of a connection. Their stated purpose – to contribute to my research – may have mitigated a sense of vulnerability or indeed a threat to the resilience and autonomy narrative I have explored above. It is not unusual for men to take an oblique approach to receiving support (Strokoff, Halford and Owen, 2016; Vogel and Heath, 2016). Participating in the research might have allowed them to uphold a narrative of strength and independence while obtaining insights that might help them assert a degree of control over their own help-seeking narrative.

I would naturally like to think that their experience of the empathy and attunement I hopefully demonstrated in the interview provided the necessary and desired insight that might make re-engaging in therapy possible. In a recent study, Dimov (2018) considers the question of dignity and its relationship to self-worth and success. I felt that the feeling of being downtrodden presented by participants in Category B reflected this loss of dignity. The sharing of their story in a relational context with me and observing my taking their experiences seriously might somehow have legitimised their suffering in their own minds and might have given them something akin to permission to take their wellbeing seriously and exercise agency over its restoration. In their 1994 paper, Hutchinson, Wilson and Wilson explore the potential benefits for individuals in participating in research that may touch on personal vulnerabilities. They propose that participating in research can provide participants with catharsis, with a renewed sense of purpose, empowerment, self-awareness and, ultimately, of healing. In this context regardless of motivation, it is not unthinkable to imagine that the professed desire to seek psychotherapy by those participants in Group B might have had something to do with the experience of participating in the research itself.

Edward and Stephen, for example, asked me if I could personally provide therapeutic support or if I could recommend avenues for engaging with it. The motivation to seek help came from an expressed desire to understand themselves better in order to be able to better cope with their situation and self-regulate. This relates to questions of identity fragmentation and its relationship to stagnation and loss. Help was actively sought by all three participants in Group B and with it, dialogue. The four participants in Group A, however, reported some form of meaningful interpersonal dialogue. In the

context of a narrative that conveyed a thriving personal and professional identity, the extent to which participants reported meaningful dialogue with another as being a safeguarding factor in their psychological wellbeing was significant.

5.3.3 Finding 3: Meaningful relational support was associated with self-knowledge and identity integration amongst participants whose narratives suggested they were thriving.

Self-knowledge and identity integration

The performances of individuals in Group A embodied the sense that they had moved on from traumatic or difficult beginnings and transformed adversity into a dynamic energy that allowed them to put self-doubt aside sufficiently and channel their energy into their work and relationships. This stood in contrast with the feelings of marginalisation and victimisation expressed by those in Group B. Those in Group A appeared to have achieved a certain degree of what Erik Erikson conceived of as 'identity integration'. Erikson (1968) proposed that an integrated identity is present in an individual who has achieved a significant degree of self-knowledge and improved agency or 'agentic functioning'. The achievement of 'agentic functioning' stood as a core feature of these participants' identity constructs and appeared to predict their capacity for managing and maintaining a position of thriving and wellbeing (Leitch and Harrison, 2016).

The construction of an integrated self was associated with the ability to nurture and maintain meaningful relational bonds (Brewer & Sedikides, 2001). This in turn invited consideration of the protective and supportive qualities of such relational bonds (Ryan and Deci, 1995; Deci and Ryan, 2013). In their extensive research on self-determination and wellbeing, Richard Ryan and Edward Deci suggest, that autonomy is closely associated with relatedness. Autonomy and relatedness are intimately interdependent in achieving both professional satisfaction and personal wellbeing. Autonomy here takes on a slightly different quality. Rather than being constructed as a rejection of vulnerability and dependence as discussed in Albert and Couture (2013), autonomy represents an integrated sense of self that is better able to interact with and learn from others.

Much work has been done to update and reframe Erikson's paradigm but at its core, the focus is on self-concept, self-knowledge and the question of agency, control and

wellbeing, (Luyckx *et al.*, 2007; Schwartz *et al.*, 2010; Marraffa and Paternoster, 2016). Participants in Group A described self-knowledge as not only a valuable tool for negotiating the challenges of growth, but also for overcoming the fallout of conflict. The performances of all four participants suggested that they perceived themselves to have developed the necessary self-confidence to pursue their goals, believing they had the capacity to influence the world around them (Zhou *et al.*, 2016). I wondered if the distancing act of storying trauma and effectively externalising it had gone some way towards neutralising its impact. In that vein, Pasupathi *et al.*, (2017) make interesting connections between the distancing effect of storying trauma and the regulation of sadness and anger.

The mode of narration for those I have grouped into Category A suggested self-confidence and professional mastery, but the question of maintenance was also key. Each of the four participants discussed here acknowledged that they had been historically vulnerable to loss of control, threats to resilience and consequent erosion of autonomy; yet they seemed able to tolerate this vulnerability and uncertainty. David, Will and Brad were all involved in some form of therapy and perhaps this commitment to continue exploring and understanding their internal worlds allowed them to be robust and vulnerable at the same time. Sam was not in a therapeutic relationship at the time of the interview, nor keen to be in one. I felt that his almost outsized self-confidence and reduced professional responsibilities were significant factors, but what provided equilibrium and gave meaning to his life was fatherhood and the close relationship he enjoyed with his wife. The fact that Sam was the oldest participant in the study suggests that the breadth of his experience and learning might have played a part in his ability to maintain equilibrium. The same might be said for David who was the second oldest of the participants.

Entrepreneurial identity and learning

This question of Sam's and David's age touches on the growing research area of entrepreneurial learning. Much of this literature focuses on rebounding from failure (Haynie and Shepherd, 2010; Shepherd *et al.*, 2016), but a growing body of literature (Hjorth and Johannisson, 2009; Ucbasaran *et al.*, 2010) focuses on reorienting thinking about entrepreneurship from opportunity recognition and exploitation to opportunity creation. They attend to what they term 'social creativity' (Hjorth and

Johannisson, 2009: 57) and explore the concept of learning in terms of knowledge acquired and knowledge generated by the development of new entrepreneurial ventures by habitual or serial entrepreneurs. Doing so from a process perspective invites a consideration of the fulfilment and stability reported by both Sam and David (the two oldest participants). Having participated in numerous ventures, Sam describes setting up a production company as a far less conflictual or stressful process than the ordeal of his previous professional challenge.

> **SAM**: What I'm describing in fact is two extremes. By the time I'm the entrepreneur setting up C… Pictures I had no {…} skin in the game. I had no exposure, I had nothing to lose, I have only upside. {…} But when I set up [his previous company] the whole thing was a crock of shit. It was just hell. [672-5: 14].

Sam's point is not only that the two ventures were qualitatively very different, but that his personal exposure (both financial and emotional) was far less pronounced. This lack of 'skin in the game' actually afforded him the psychological space to spend more time with his family. Similarly, David found a way of balancing his emotional and financial needs by engaging with entrepreneurial activities while also pursuing his passion for skydiving. David's ability to find equilibrium was to position himself as a consultant in the entrepreneurial ventures he engaged with, thus allowing him a freelance lifestyle that reduced his risk exposure while maintaining his psychological health. Both participants evoke a sense of freedom from financial but also psychological exposure. This identarian position of freedom stands as the opposite of being stuck or struggling. The fact that David narrates his approach to engaging in entrepreneurial ventures as 'entrepreneurialism' (David, 842:14) is a significant point. As we have seen previously, moving away from the fixed notion of 'the entrepreneur' not only has significant ramifications for broadening thinking on the constructions of entrepreneurial identity, but also for offering a significant reconceptualisation of 'the entrepreneur' in the context of wellbeing and psychotherapy. Thus, David's use of the noun entrepreneurialism evokes the previously considered verb 'entrepreneuring' (Steyaert, 2007) and its focus on agency. The proposition here is that self-knowledge and learning afford the entrepreneur with the necessary agency to separate professional from personal identity and to experience more fulfilling and supportive interpersonal relationships. The relationship between personal and professional identity, its conflation or separation, appears a significant determining factor in the

wellbeing of entrepreneurs as they navigate the challenges of the career and associated implications for personal and professional identities (Côté and Levine, 2014; de la Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Down and Warren, 2008).

As we have observed previously, the twin desire to engage in self-reflection and be open to the ideas and opinions of others at work appear foundational in entrepreneurs achieving an identity construction that prioritises collaboration and emotional engagement.

Meaningful relational connection and collaborative meaning-making

Bauer and McAdams (2010) propose that developing emotional expressiveness is key to achieving self-actualisation, reflecting Brewer and Sedikides' (2001) concept of a 'relational self' that can progress from differentiation to assimilation and integration. Brewer and Sedikides posit that attainment of wellbeing is associated with psychosocial integration of self-concept through relational self-representation. We are only able to develop a sense of self and thus a measure of self-worth by making sense of who we are in relation to others and to the society in which we operate.

It has been widely suggested that fundamental threats to entrepreneur wellbeing include isolation and lack of meaningful interaction with others (Grant and Ferris, 2012; Pollack, Vanepps and Hayes, 2012, Evans and Wall, 2019). However, the stress and anxiety experienced by participants were closely linked to interpersonal conflict and the feeling of 'losing control'. On the surface, this might be viewed in practical terms, such as the downgrading of authority over the business, the experience of being side-lined, misunderstood or disparaged, and how this might represent a deeper personal attack. This challenge to self recalls more profound identarian insecurities, provoking re-evaluation of meaning (Nielsen and Lassen, 2012; Gielnik, Bledow, Stark, 2019), or of what one participant described as 'a place in the world'. This is nothing if not a question of how the individual exists in relation to others and the social norms of their particular sociocultural context.

Those participants who engaged in meaningful relational dialogue with another person, what Pareek and Rao (1995) have termed a 'helper', reported being able to tolerate a certain degree of doubt and with it, to acknowledge some vulnerability. As we shall see below, an identarian construct of self that welcomes and engages in relational dialogue appears to be better able to tolerate uncertainty and to work in a

more integrated way with others. Participants ascribed the dialogic relationship with the other (therapist, doctor, members of an NA fellowship or spouse) as the space in which to reflect and improve self-knowledge. Brad, for example, emphatically credited his weekly therapy with allowing him to navigate his day-to-day professional challenges, while attending NA meetings was a source of profound reflection and stabilisation for Will that supported his recovery and his ability to work collaboratively on his business venture. It seemed that the co-construction of their identity narratives reinforced agency and the capacity for reflexivity.

A reason for inviting only participants who had engaged in some form of talking therapy was that I wanted to learn from them about the processes that had led them to seek as well as to gain insight from their experience of therapy and ability to engage in self-reflection. All participants had, at some point, thus identified and acknowledged the need for psychotherapeutic help of some kind. With the exception of David, Will and Brad, all participants demonstrated very ambivalent opinions of their therapeutic experiences. They described the symptoms that alerted them that they needed help, they had committed to receiving treatment, but very quickly they then rejected the therapy once they felt they had gleaned the minimum insight to help them get on with business as usual, and then withdrew. In their narrations to me, participants did acknowledge that the therapy had been of some use, but they tended to ascribe the benefits gained to their own intelligence and sophistication rather than to the therapeutic process and, more importantly, the therapeutic relationship itself.

One explanation for this ambivalence was the possible conflict between participants' stated goals and their level of 'self-concordance' (Kelly, Mansell and Wood, 2015); that is to say, the extent to which how one feels and how one sees oneself are in harmony. It felt that on an unconscious level, seeking help was motivated by the struggle with self-concept and self-concordance, yet participants approached therapy in a very mechanistic way. They wanted skills and tools, whereas perhaps they would have benefitted more from deeper engagement in self-reflection, because underlying causes of distress would continue to exert power and influence attitude, behaviour and emotion (Tamir, and Diener, 2008; Tryon, 2018).

When Will wrote to me saying that 'many entrepreneurs […] mistake mania for inspiration, anxiety for ambition, depression for dissatisfaction and neurosis for

quirkiness'. He pointed towards both the stereotypes men espouse in constructing their entrepreneurial identities, as well as to the deeper underlying threats to the very identity constructs they seemed so keen on preserving. His comment also points to how the solipsistic idiosyncrasies associated with the clichéd identity construct of 'the entrepreneur' might, in fact, serve many entrepreneurs very badly in their ability to work with others and avoid conflict.

The work of rescripting narrative identity in a therapeutic context as a means of rebuilding agency (Singer, 2019) might well serve this specific population well. This therapeutic work would most likely entail working towards regaining authorship and agency over their own narratives (Schwartz, Meca and Petrova, 2017). Having said this, the fact that participants expressed that there had been some insight gained, albeit ambivalently, was a positive sign. As we saw later, all the participants in Group B expressed a desire to engage in deeper self-reflection. Perhaps the relational experience of dialogue with me had afforded them some insight into the possibility of a more engaged relational dialogue which specifically focused on their personal identity and wellbeing.

The process of integrating identity, increasing relational engagement and encouraging psychosocial integration (Belchio and Liñán, 2017; Affum, 2017; Vélez-Moreno, Rojas, Rivera *et al.*, 2017) can only begin when the need for meaningful connection is identified. Thereafter, a new understanding of the attributes of resilience and autonomy might be possible. The therapeutic work consists in learning to view and instrumentalise the identity attributes discussed above, of resilience as 'bouncing back', and 'autonomy' as the ability to be self-governing and self-regulating rather than as the endurance of suffering and isolation (Ryan and Deci, 2000). Another beneficial therapeutic avenue to consider is the rescripting of narrative identities specifically associated with monolithic identarian markers such as 'the entrepreneur' or 'entrepreneurship'. The burden of conforming to socially constructed stereotypes can thus be avoided by finding more nuanced and personal expressions of what it means to the individual to be professionally engaged in entrepreneurial activities.

Resilience, autonomy and gender

As considered previously, the prescriptive social clichés regarding how 'the entrepreneur' is supposed to be and what they are supposed to do stands as a weighty

obstacle to the development of autonomous entrepreneurial identity constructs. Similarly, and in parallel, gender stereotypes regarding how and what males are supposed to do and be reinforce these clichés and add a significant complicating factor to the identity construction of an entrepreneur who is also a male (Bruni *et al.*, 2004). Perhaps through a lack of sufficiently direct engagement with the topic in my interview protocol, none of my participants spoke directly about masculinity in relation to their entrepreneurial selves. Perhaps they had internalised the now much-contested stereotype of entrepreneurial activity and entrepreneurs more generally as being male (and often white, middle-class and heterosexual) and thus masculinity did not need to be mentioned because it was taken for granted. I say this partly as a way of accounting for the lack of specific focus on masculinity in the interviews, but also to draw attention to the restrictive barriers to alternative entrepreneurial identity constructs that this monolithic stereotype represents. This is pertinent in questions of gender as well as culture, class and geographical differences in social discourse and structure.

In this chapter, I chose to focus on the two attributes of resilience and autonomy partly because of widespread research which asserts that these qualities are two cornerstones of masculine identity. These attributes are also identified as playing a critical role in the help-seeking behaviours of men (Vandello, Bosson and Lawler, 2019). This contrasts with wider female help-seeking behaviours, impacted significantly less negatively by the personal stigma associated with mental health ailments and thus by the stoicism associated with resilience and defiance associated with autonomy (Judd, Komiti, and Jackson, 2008; Doherty and Kartalova-O'Doherty, 2010; Cornally and McCarthy, 2011).

I acknowledge, however, the wide-ranging research (Antoncic *et al.*, 2015; Zhao, Seibert and Lumpkin, 2010; Bönte and Jarosch, 2011; Laguía *et al.*, 2019) which suggests that, in the world of entrepreneurship, these traits are often prevalent in both male and female entrepreneurs in contrast to, say, male and female managers, where the prevalence of resilience and autonomy traits is much higher among males. Here, the question of how masculine narratives of entrepreneurial identity might impact female entrepreneurs raises crucial questions. This may suggest that the prevalence of similar attributes the result of a (possibly unconscious) ‘if you can’t beat them, join them’ tendency? Or perhaps that these qualities are developed in childhood and adolescence and performed in entrepreneurial identity regardless of gender. Or indeed

the findings of such studies might result from limitations in positivistic methodologies in the study of identity. Future research that attempts to answer some of these questions would be of considerable value.

The current research project is, of course, not a comparative gender study, but rather an exploration of specifically male experiences in the context of entrepreneurial identity construction. Certainly, this research would benefit enormously from parallel and comparative studies whose focus lies specifically on gender differences in identity narratives, personal identity characteristics and help-seeking behaviour. Research that focuses on the narrative performance and identarian construction of 'the entrepreneur' and 'entrepreneuring' from a gender perspective, on gender performance as a social process, and of their impact on both the production and reproduction of social structures, would also enrich the debate on gender and identity within the field of entrepreneurship research.

5.4 Conclusion

The central question posed by the current study was essentially why do some male entrepreneurs thrive while others struggle? It was found that the ways in which individuals construct their professional and personal identities have a moderating effect on their ability to work collaboratively with others, as well as to engage in meaningful self-reflection through relational dialogue with another person. Self-knowledge and the willingness to learn from others were reported as being a source of increased agency and consequently of wellbeing and professional fulfilment. Relational dialogue with a group, doctor, therapist and in one case a spouse who happened to have had training as a therapist was observed as playing a central role in the externalisation of traumatic and challenging experiences and the re-establishing of a more integrated sense of self. The fundamental finding was therefore the positive role played by the relational co-construction of meaning in the process of psychosocial integration (Belchio and Liñán, 2017; Affum, 2017; Vélez-Moreno, Rojas *et al.,* 2017). Relational engagement was viewed as a key factor in strengthening participants' resilience to uncertainty and to achieving autonomy from ineffective or corrosive identity constructs (McGraw, Russell-Bennett and White, 2019).

In a similar vein, specifically in the context of entrepreneurial identity, constructions of 'thriving' were seen to have a significant bearing on identity, as well as approaches to

risk-taking and wellbeing. In their book focusing on recovery from failed entrepreneurial ventures, Shepherd *et al.* (2016) propose a paradigm for thinking about failure and struggle as well as thriving and fulfilment. They suggest that if personal growth is prioritised over blame and avoidance, the individual dramatically increases the likelihood of experiencing wellbeing. Notions of success are deeply woven into entrepreneurial identity and, as we have seen, success is predominantly conceived of in very limiting and reductive ways. By reframing 'success' as 'thriving' and 'failure' as 'struggling', I have oriented my research towards the wellbeing of the individual rather than on the extent to which they embody narrow definitions of success. This is particularly pertinent given the well-documented threat to identity and wellbeing represented by the conflation of professional success and personal worth (Côté and Levine, 2014; de la Cruz *et al.*, 2018; Down and Warren, 2008). A tentative suggestion is that over-identification with the monolithic character of 'the entrepreneur' and what this character should be and do is a potential threat to wellbeing. I, therefore, propose that an individual's ability to construct an entrepreneurial identity that exists independently of the restrictive edicts of the cultural construct that is 'the entrepreneur' might stand them in good stead both personally and professionally.

It is hoped that the focus on thriving, self-worth and the rich data embedded within the live performance of identity construction can contribute towards minimising the risk of psychological distress among current and future entrepreneurs by informing both future research as well as clinical intervention.

5.5 Applications to counselling psychology

5.5.1 Identity construction and wellbeing

The principal relevance of this research project to the discipline of counselling psychology rests on the value of working with identity constructions to support clients in avoiding the threats to wellbeing that an entrepreneurial career can generate. Its broader applications are to encourage clinicians to improve understanding of the kinds of monolithic identity constructs perpetrated by restrictive social norms and their impact on individuals' sense of self. The research can also inform a deeper consideration of the risks associated with attempting to conform to outmoded and obsolete masculine identity narratives, particularly in relation to engaging in self-reflection. Du, King and Chi (2017) and Sedikides *et al.* (2013) observe that the

collective – how individuals measure their self-worth in comparison to social norms and models – has been the most common focus of research on this subject. The present research's focus on the relational aspects of self-worth development reflects the crucial need for relational connection in maintaining psychological and professional wellbeing.

By reorienting the focus from 'the entrepreneur' to the concept of 'entrepreneuring', alternative identity constructs are made available that can challenge prescriptive and restrictive conceptions of what an entrepreneur is supposed to be and do, and concurrently what a man is supposed to be and do. Therapeutic treatment can support individuals in constructing alternative identity narratives that afford a more personalised conception of 'success' and incorporate a focus on wellbeing in the construction of the professional self. Helping clients separate notions of material success from self-worth is likely to encourage the maintenance of a better work-life balance as well as increased psychological wellbeing. By encouraging the use of a social ontology of becoming, the context and unique nature of the individual can coexist as interactive components of the therapeutic process.

Although far from universally accepted, much of the literature suggests that the modality of a given therapy is a less significant determinant of successful therapeutic outcome than the relationship with the therapist or 'helper' (Norcross, 2010; Fonagy *et al.*, 2017; Coyne *et al.*, 2018; Pareek and Rao, 1995). When another person is aware of and able to hold your vulnerability in mind, there is a sense of a burden shared and of being accompanied, rather than alone, abandoned or rejected. The relationship and internalised knowledge of its value and authenticity is what heals and holds. The sharing of personal narrative is well-documented as a means of achieving objectivity and agency in relation to trauma or psychological suffering. David Stoneham (2019) focuses on the therapeutic benefits of re-authoring and the extent to which 'authorship' represents authority, autonomy and agency. It is also the means by which individuals are able to reconstruct and make positive use of the identarian marker of 'resilience'.

Having said this, there is of course evidence regarding the effectiveness of specific therapeutic modalities. Michael Guilfoyle (2016: 95) suggests a therapeutic model that is 'constructive and generative rather than objective-observational {…} as a vehicle for

the cultivation of ethically infused, but client-led storying activity'. His work points towards the collaborative nature of meaning-making in the therapeutic context. As clients re-author their narratives, Guilfoyle suggests that they are able to put some distance between themselves and their traumatic or corrosive experiences and achieve some objectivity from which to overcome their emotional grip. By creating a distance between themselves and the narrative, an individual can reduce the impact on their psychological wellbeing. In their paper on re-authoring in the context of narrative therapy, Hutto and Gallagher (2017) suggest that new tellings of personal narratives invite what Michael White – considered the founder of narrative therapy – refers to as new 'options for action that would not have otherwise been imaginable' (White, 2011: 5) The question of distancing from traumatic events through narrative performance was well-evidenced by several participants.

To find those 'options for action' effectively, a thorough appraisal of how men represent and experience their own masculinity is key (McAdams, 2008). Identifying the issues and preoccupations that men describe in first-person accounts of identity and masculinity is the first step towards developing therapeutic interventions that best respond to male-specific needs. The current paper considers identity as narratively constructed and performed, and takes a process view of personal characteristics. As such, it contributes to a growing trend in psychotherapeutic theory that takes a social constructionist approach to identity and subjectivity, specifically within the construction of self in the therapeutic setting (McAdams and Janis, 2004; Neimeyer, 2004; Kirmayer 2007; Russel and Cohn, 2012; Adler, 2012).

The current research thus contributes to the development of theoretical models that conceive of psychotherapy as a 'process of restoring an organised polyphony' (Avdi and Georgaca, 2009: 654) from the multiplicity of social, personal, contextual and institutional voices that impact and influence constructions of self. While positioned broadly within the tradition of narrative psychology, such a conceptualisation can effectively help patients to uncover not only the personal origins of defunct identity narratives, but also the extent to which the 'powerful presumptions regarding selfhood and "the good life" provided by specific cultures' impact self-concept and thus wellbeing (Avdi and Georgaca, 2009: 656). The focus on subjective meaning-making also offers insight into the self or selves a patient constructs in their narrative performance in the consulting room itself. In this context, the questions of 'success'

and ‘failure’ explored by this study offer a therapeutic perspective for the counselling psychologist based on the agentic reconstruction of self-worth. By reclaiming the right and developing the techniques to re-author their own constructions of self and success, patients are supported in improving their ability for self-management (Hutto and Gallagher, 2017).

The research confirms that participants who sought a prophylactic fix for their psychological distress with the avowed intention of needing to get back to work reported temporary relief. Their distress of current situation and desire to reengage with therapeutic treatment suggested that there was some understanding that without a deeper self-reflective engagement, they might continue to experience the same symptoms. Those participants motivated to acquire longer-lasting tools for making sense of their suffering by engaging with the more problematic facets of their own self-concept, reported reaping longer-term benefits from engaging in therapy and meaningful relational dialogue. The research offers a reconsideration of the process of ‘identity integration’ and its relationship to constructions of subjective wellbeing. The emphasis on process, self-reflection and narrative performance suggest that an exploratory therapeutic model that specifically challenges corrosive identity constructs and seeks to redress agency might be of benefit to men of this professional demographic.

In their application of Ricœur’s theories of interpretation within health research, Missel and Birklund (2019: 4) emphasise ‘the importance of understanding the patients' lifeworld perspectives and translating this understanding into practice in clinical care’. The approach in this paper was to use a bottom-up exploration of participant narratives to attune to their own meaning-making processes. In their synthesis of the literature comparing person- and patient-centred care, Håkansson *et al.* (2019) conclude that there is a need to bridge the gap between the meaningful and functional. By insisting on the need to conceive of ‘health’ as more than a functional reduction of symptoms, the focus turns to a holistic understanding of the individual patient’s construction of ‘health’, which incorporates internal and external factors: both context and their individual response to context. This holistic understanding would benefit from a specific focus on how constructions of personal ‘health’ are impacted by and interact with constructions of professional ‘success’.

5.5.2 Limitations of the study

Given the narrow demographic homogeneity of the participants, I am acutely aware of the need to acknowledge the limitations of my findings. All seven participants are male, white, heterosexual and either fully or partly privately educated. I have written about masculinities and identities because of the multiplicity of different identities that exist even within and between a participant group of this nature. Although I have touched on the possible impact of father's nationality on Chris, Will and David, as well as on questions of perceived differences of social class for example, the homogeneity of the group does mean that limited engagement was possible with deeper issues of entrepreneurial identity within more diverse sociocultural contexts.

In retrospect, there are other interview questions I would have liked to ask participants in order to elicit more direct answers. One significant area of questioning would relate to feelings of isolation and loneliness. I would also have liked to have delved more deeply into constructions of suffering. One obvious question that I think might have yielded valuable insight would have been to simply ask each participant what they understood by the word 'entrepreneur'. In that vein, it might also have been interesting to simply ask participants what it meant 'to be a man'. I was somewhat disappointed to find that masculinity, a central area of interest for me, was only obliquely evoked by participants. While it was possible to extrapolate identarian issues regarding masculinity from the interviews, I feel this was a significant weakness of my interview protocol that limited my ability to engage more deeply with some key issues. Of course, given the narrative approach, and my desire to encourage the interviews to be participant-led, direct questions of this nature may have interrupted the narrative flow of their accounts.

Although I am aware of the insufficiency of elicited narratives of masculinity in this thesis, the focus on resilience and autonomy has been widely identified as specifically a male attribute in both process-oriented research (Bernard and Barbosa, 2016) as well as quantitative research (Santoro *et al.,* 2020). Similarly, entrepreneurship has been accused of being persistently andro-centric (Ahl, 2004; Gherardi, 2015). While I view this as a weakness of the research in this field in urgent need of rectification, I admit that it does somewhat serve my purposes. Because of the underlying tendency by entrepreneurs to frame, albeit perhaps unconsciously, their entrepreneurial identity within a taken for granted masculine context.

Another possible limitation of the study is the fact that one of my recruitment criteria was that participants had received one-on-one therapy of some kind. While this yielded valuable insight regarding engagement, it may have limited my ability to consider in more depth, the help-seeking behaviour of male entrepreneurs and questions relating to access to therapeutic services. This may, in turn, have shed light on specific concerns regarding perceived threats to identity or vulnerability that engagement in therapeutic work might represent.

Additionally, it might have been interesting to use a mixed-method approach, specifically by using some quantitative research tools measuring and assessing resilience and autonomy. Such data considered alongside the qualitative narrative data gathered might have yielded useful directions for interpretation and perhaps helped to bridge the gap between qualitative and quantitative approaches to entrepreneurial identify. This approach might have afforded the kind of engagement recommended by Watson (2013) with both European' and North American research approaches in the entrepreneurship field.

5.5.3 Suggestions for future research

While there are increased levels of attention being paid in the entrepreneurship literature to diversity and variations in ethnicity, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, sociocultural context and education (Galdas *et al.*, 2005), Valdez (2016) recommends that future research focuses on entrepreneurial intersectionality. This can expand the literature on multiple entrepreneurial identities, as well as challenge the tendency to assume universal applicability of findings.

Considerable attention has been directed towards exploring gender, masculinity and narrative but much of the theoretical literature in this area has struggled to meaningfully interact with and learn from studies in non-Western cultures, developing countries and demographic sub-groups (Desai, *et al.*, 2013; Sanders and Weitzel, 2013). An engagement with the construction of entrepreneurship, success and mental health in developing countries, for example, might offer insightful comparative data.

Volunteer motivation and its relationship to relational connectedness would also be a useful field of study in itself. This research suggests that volunteering in a study of this kind might, in fact, represent a form of help-seeking in itself, disguised as an offer to share knowledge. Taking up the invitation to educate an interlocutor might be a more

appealing prospect than the invitation to be vulnerable and to explore internal processes. Because of what can be gleaned from the relationship between the motivation to contribute to a project and the issue of wellbeing, future studies might consider the relationship between volunteering in psychology research and oblique help-seeking to consider participation as a form of relational engagement.

Research in masculinity studies needs to continue to widen its net to include more research relating to the impact of tradition and stereotype on masculinities of all social, national, cultural and demographic incarnations. Understanding the diversity of masculinity narratives that men absorb, inherit and enact in different cultures and contexts can provide researchers and practitioners with a useful basis for determining the narratives from which individual men may be operating. Not all narratives mean the same thing or have the same effects in different contexts. Depending on context, the same script may have different effects on psychological wellbeing.

While it is not necessarily a limitation, the lack of gender comparison in this project would be usefully remedied by complementary narrative analytical studies that afford insight into gender similarities and differences in the construction of entrepreneurial identity narratives specifically related to mental health, help-seeking and wellbeing.

Despite significant strides in exploring the heterogeneity of entrepreneurial identities, the unfortunate reality of dominant, traditional masculine norms in the conceptualisation of 'the entrepreneur' is widespread. Rebecca Gill (2014) contends that in presenting models of heterogeneous masculinities, research frequently risks denying the very real existence of a corrosive binary essentialism and the social reality of gender inequality. This highlights areas of incoherence and the ways in which gender inequality may be overlooked by researchers in the entrepreneurship literature. It is certainly critical to recognise the existence of multiple masculinities, but also to challenge the reductive entrepreneurial gender constructions that continue to dominate both society generally and academia specifically. The impact of stereotype on entrepreneurs of all genders needs to be considered to counteract the marginalisation of minority groups. Henry *et al.* (2016) urge the research community to expand their methodological repertoire and consider new, especially qualitative, methodological approaches to keep up with emerging trends regarding identity from feminist, queer, post-structuralist and intersectional perspectives.

Narratives of endurance in this study reflected what Smith and McElwee (2011) describe as the construction of a world in which the endurance of suffering is perceived as a particularly masculine form of heroism. In considering how 'heroic hyperbole' within the discourse around the cult of the entrepreneur constitutes a constructed self-concept. Down and Warren (2006) underline the dangers associated with misguided concepts of heroism and suffering being embraced by aspiring entrepreneurs and business students. Research exploring what a 'hero' constitutes in different cultural and social contexts would offer a useful understanding of the nature of entrepreneurial aspiration and of how it relates to gendered notions of self-worth.

The need for a fresh approach to questions of self-worth is reinforced by wide-ranging empirical data supporting theories regarding the direct negative psychological impact of adherence to and enactment of limiting, prescriptive, traditional masculine narratives (Good and Brooks, 2005; Hom *et al.*, 2015; Jordan and Chandler, 2019). It would be useful to conduct further research on what is often dismissively described as men 'acting out', particularly as the evidence points towards the mechanisms which men typically employ to alleviate psychological distress as often having damaging consequences on their own and others' wellbeing.

While social changes in recent decades have certainly offered men and boys the opportunity to consider alternative masculine narratives (Gough, 2013; De Visser, *et al.*, 2009; Griffith, 2012; Gerdes *et al.*, 2018), there remains considerable work to be done to challenge the well-documented suspicion and resistance, not to say aversion, that many men feel towards psychotherapy and mental health support. As McGraw, Russell-Bennett and White (2019) reflect in their exploration of 'value destruction' in men's health, disempowerment, emasculation, loss of agency and the threat of negative feelings to perceptions of self and self-worth were key elements in men's reluctance to meaningfully engage with therapeutic support. An engagement with individual conceptions of wellbeing, contentment and what, for example, thriving might mean, might be of benefit in offering a positive impression of therapeutic engagement and alleviate concerns about therapy representing pain, vulnerability and loss of agency. Further research on hedonic vs eudaimonic narratives of wellbeing, for example, would also encourage the development of new theoretical and methodological approaches to concepts of societal enrichment and the gendering of narrative constructions of 'success'.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Guide for authors

GUIDE FOR AUTHORS

Your Paper Your Way

We now differentiate between the requirements for new and revised submissions. You may choose to submit your manuscript as a single Word or PDF file to be used in the refereeing process. Only when your paper is at the revision stage, will you be requested to put your paper in to a 'correct format' for acceptance and provide the items required for the publication of your article.
To find out more, please visit the Preparation section below.

INTRODUCTION

The editorial policy of the JBV requires that submitted articles contribute increased understanding of entrepreneurial phenomenon. Articles can be either rigorous theoretical contributions or theory-driven empirical contribution. We encourage both multivariate analysis using large samples and qualitative studies using a small number of cases.

JBV represents a multi-discipline voice on entrepreneurship including, in the fields of management, strategy, sociology, psychology, economics, international, finance/accounting, sustainable and social entrepreneurship, and marketing.

Types of Paper

The competition for space in the journal has grown intense. Papers that successfully survive the review process, whether qualitative or quantitative, share several attributes:

- They address an interesting, and often novel, issue - not just a repetition of well-trodden areas.
- They provide a precise description of the research problem, issue, or question
- The literature review is up-to-date on the research question and the current answers to the question
- The core arguments are supported with sound logic, contemporary theory, or persuasive argumentation
- The data are of superior quality, satisfying the essential criteria of state-of-the-art quantitative or qualitative methods
- The methods used are both appropriate and contemporary
- They provide interesting, non-obvious, and non-trivial results
- They conclude with clear and persuasive implications for theory and/or practice

Contact details for submission

Authors who experience difficulties in submitting their paper via EVISE should contact Jeff McMullen Editor-in-Chief (mcmullej@indiana.edu) or Sarasa Subramony (SubramonyS@Darden.virginia.edu)

Submission checklist

You can use this list to carry out a final check of your submission before you send it to the journal for review. Please check the relevant section in this Guide for Authors for more details.

Ensure that the following items are present:

One author has been designated as the corresponding author with contact details:
- E-mail address
- Full postal address

All necessary files have been uploaded:
Manuscript:
- Include keywords
- All figures (include relevant captions)
- All tables (including titles, description, footnotes)
- Ensure all figure and table citations in the text match the files provided
- Indicate clearly if color should be used for any figures in print

Graphical Abstracts / Highlights files (where applicable)
Supplemental files (where applicable)

Further considerations
- Manuscript has been 'spell checked' and 'grammar checked'
- All references mentioned in the Reference List are cited in the text, and vice versa

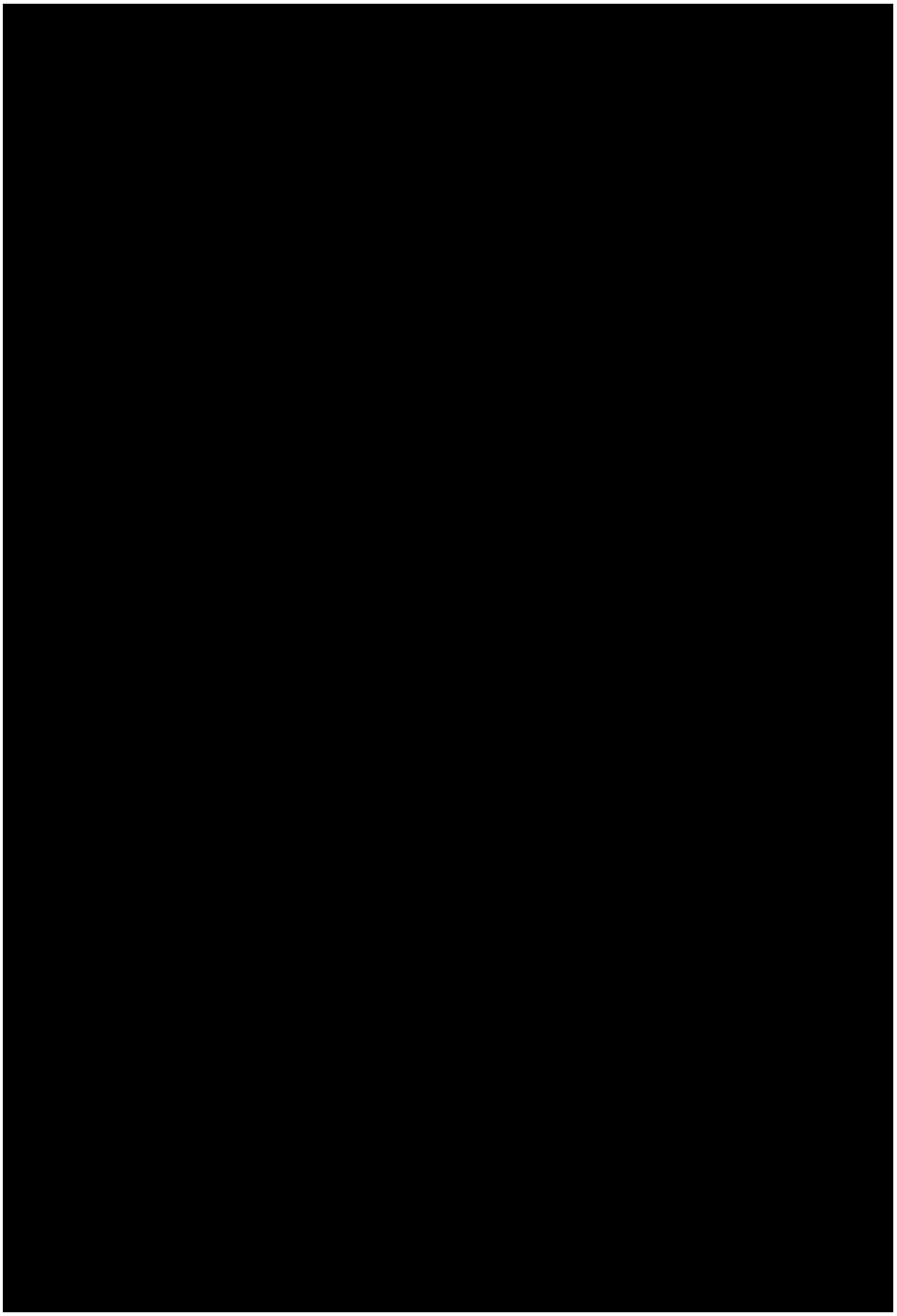
AUTHOR INFORMATION PACK 22 Mar 2020 www.elsevier.com/locate/jbusvent 7

Appendix B: Interview protocol

Interview Protocol

1) How did your parents meet?
2) Can you tell me about your childhood and education?
3) How did you become an entrepreneur?
4) What were the biggest challenges?
5) What led you to seek psychotherapy?
6) Can you tell me about your experience of psychotherapy?
7) How would you describe your life today?

Appendix C: Handwritten notes



Appendix D: **Terminology and criteria used to evaluate the credibility of research findings**

(from: Noble, H., & Smith, J. (2015). Issues of validity and reliability in qualitative research. *Evidence-based nursing*, *18*(2), 34-35.)

Quantitative research terminology & application to qualitative research	**Alternative terminology associated with crdibility of qualitative research**
Validity The precision in which the findings accurately reflect the data.	*Truth value* Recognises that multiple realities exist; the researchers' outline personal experiences and viewpoints that may have resulted in methodological bias; clearly and accurately presents participants' perspectives.
Reliability The consistency of the analytical procedures, including accounting for personal and research method biases that may have influenced the findings.	*Consistency* Relates to the 'trustworthiness' by which the methods have been undertaken and is dependent on the researcher maintaining a 'decision-trail'; i.e. the researcher's decisions are clear and transparent. Ultimately an independent researcher should be able arrive at similar or comparable findings. *Neutrality (or confirmability)* Achieved when truth value, consistency and applicability have been addressed. Centres on acknowledging the complexity of prolonged engagement with participants and that the methods undertaken and findings are intrinsically linked to the researchers' philosophical position, experiences and perspectives. These should be accounted for and differentiated from participants' accounts.
Generalisability The transferability of the findings to other settings and applicability in other contexts.	*Applicability* Consideration is given to whether findings can be applied to other contexts, settings or groups.

Appendix E: **Notes and Questions:**

1. Family Origins/Childhood/School

Types of childhood: Chaotic, nurturing, uprooted, identity. *(look for dyslexia etc…)*

-

How does it shape/reflect identity?

- **Narrative of 'being different' – school, home, abilities, etc…**
- Family identity, parents' professional identity, relationship to parents'
- Being uprooted
- Chaos vs stability, nurture/neglect
- Family/individual mental health issues
- Identifying unique qualities (effort, developing different learning needs/techniques, resilience, perseverance, competitiveness – (early relationship to opportunity too?)

1. **S**: Chaotic, mental illness, different at school, confidence (+ relationship father)
2. **D**: Chaotic, eccentric, heavy family history and identity narratives, difficult at school (mental illness – him and mother?) (+ relationship father)
3. **W**: Chaotic, uprooted, mental illness, terrible school experience, rebellion (+ relationship father/mother?)
4. **ST**: Uprooted, poverty, precarity, school etc… stupid/different (+ relationship to brother/father??)
5. **B**: Happy childhood, safe environment, different at school, competitive
6. **C**: Identity issues at home, precarious, tender with father, school rebellion against mother (+ relationship to father)
7. **E**: Father wanting him to be different, loving, mother depression (+ relationship to father)

2. Early Entrepreneurial Experiences/Major Entrepreneurial Experiences

Types of entrepreneurial activity: Risk, opportunity (accident), necessity, responsibility. Incomprehension, lack of understanding, force of will and singularity of vision

-

How does it shape/reflect identity?

- Opportunity
- Necessity

- Responsibility

1. S: After school, PFD takeover, later setting up production company – opportunity/necessity/responsibility
2. D: After school, discovers he's good at computers, psychotic episode, builds work around mental health needs – hang-gliding (risk taking), internal conflict, opportunity/necessity (nebulous account of entrepreneurial activities)
3. W: Drug dealing, opportunity/accident/necessity/responsibility of start-up with mother, internal conflict
4. ST: Accident, opportunity/necessity, precariousness, conflict
5. B: School parties, segue into start-up with friends, thought-out, planned, structured, regimented, opportunity
6. C: University magazine etc. (events?), identity questions at university, choice to take conventional or risky/different trajectory, necessity (identity)
7. E: After school, dissatisfied with career, father encouragement, need to challenge system and remedy (social responsibility/searching for opportunity)
8. Conflict and Success

Types of conflict and success: internal/external, interpersonal, institutional, poverty/necessity, confidence, imposter syndrome?

How does it shape/reflect identity?

- **Self-doubt**
- Singularity of Vision/Stubbornness (being right)
- Imposter Syndrome
- Fear of losing control

S: Complex legal struggle/battle. Successful takeover.

D: Internal conflict, identity conflict. Settles mental health, confidence, finds opportunity, specific skills

W: Internal and then professional. Successful launch etc… (overcoming mental health issues and drug addiction.)

ST: Conflict with business partner and partner's brother, success and then possible failure?!

B: Conflict resolution at work… ousting one business partner.

C: Conflict with business partner and colleagues, resolution, (failure with Ukrainian project?)

E: Conflict with spouse, (with business partners??).

9. Psychotherapy

Types of psychotherapy experience. Positive and necessary, gained some insight from therapy, dismissive of therapy, disappointed with therapy, seeking support. Masculinity, not needing, being pushed to, it being worthless etc…

How does it shape/reflect identity?

- **Psychotherapy works for other people but not me** (S, A)
- Psychotherapy a necessary part of life (T, B, W)
- Spouse demands/requests it. (S, T, F)
- **In the midst of psychic distress:** (F, R)

S: Tried it – spouse encouraged, unimpressed but some small insight gained

D: Spouse encourages, knows he needs it, reluctant but engages.

W: Disappointed (failed by therapists), NA, relationship with one doctor, managing balance, insight

ST: Tried a couple of times, not convinced (wants it now… can I offer??)

B: Part of regimen, mechanistic view, useful for shedding more than gaining anything, space to vent/release.

C: Tried a couple of times, considering more, not overly impressed

E: Tried a couple of times, spouse encouraged, wants more now, in the midst of psychic distress

10. Reflection on Current Situation

Types of current situation: settled, managed, precarious, crossroads. Losing sight of the personal vision, losing control, starting/starting again

How does it shape/reflect identity?

- Settled (S, C)
- Structured (B)

- Coping (W)
- Managing (D)
- Vulnerable (E, ST)

S: Settled and confident, less risk, less ‘skin in the game’

D: Manages equilibrium

W: Manages equilibrium

ST: In the midst of psychic distress

B: Regimented, structured, successful

C: At a crossroads

E: In the midst of psychic distress

Appendix F**: Participant Sketches**

1. S: Different at school, very unusual and eccentric family life, innate self-confidence bordering on superiority. Very bright. Mothers mental illness.

Standout story for TM: Household with mother father and both lovers all living together. Mothers mental illness.

Chaos

2. D: Very unusual family life – narrative of difference originating in father's almost pathological need to assimilate and conceal his Judaism following traumatic Holocaust experiences, change of name, change of country and school, bipolar etc… Very bright. Standout story for TM: Central account of father's and grandfather's Holocaust experiences. Skydiving and remote working.

Mother young and bored and lonely? But then, eminent academic. Chaos

3. W: Very unusual family life: mother escapee, father ballet dancer turned IT wizz. Father absent, lots of moving around. Drugs, social class, anorexic, mentally ill, very bright. Sounds fictional.

Standout story for TM: Crack to wake, smack to sleep and managing to run business as junkie.

Also: mother escaping aged 11, WP anorexic and drug dealing aged 14, dying from overdose.

Mother mental illness. Chaos

4. ST: Financial insecurity and lots of moving and precarity in childhood. Military ambitions thwarted, told to be *cleverer*, bullied in first jobs, fell into opportunity, conflict with partner, loss of business, hopelessness.

Standout story for TM: Military – learn to get more intelligent. Humiliation at estate agency. Prolonged fight with P.

Feeling *stupid*.

Too much movement and insecurity but no trauma

5. E: Father doctor. Mother ran nursing home. Mother mental illness.

More or less stable home.

Dissonance of relative childhood stability with current situation and entrepreneurial identity struggles

Marriage collapsing, emotionally troubled at time of interview Impression of urgent need for support

6. C: Humble origins – mixed race and associated taboos (mother's family didn't' speak to them). Learning from father. India important, Indian identity important. Name is weird, daily explanation of identity.

Feeling stupid.

Standout story for TM: Father, recent journey to India, identity… What it means to be British. His own name – daily explanation of origin. Identification with father.

Wanting to *please* customers – make people happy – connected to father identity. Feeling *stupid*.

Identity of father race.

7. B: Stable background, (brief move to USA). Father doctor, mother physio.

Most supportive parents n the world. Standout story for TM: Proselytising mission for self-betterment and education of others. Very self-confident, quite disconnected. Fragile equilibrium underneath.

Dyslexic.

Not feeling bright. (Hard work – brute force).

Appendix G: **Recruitment Flyer**

CITY
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Department Of Psychology, City University Of London

Are you a male entrepreneur?

Have you ever had counselling or psychotherapy?

As part of the research for my Doctorate in Counselling Psychology, **I am looking for men currently or recently involved in entrepreneurial work to privately discuss their experiences of counselling or psychotherapy.**

All personal information will be **anonymised** and be entirely **confidential.**

To take part in this study, or for more information, please contact the researcher:

[redacted]

or write your email address in the box below and click submit at the bottom of the page:

*

name@example.com

Additionally you may contact my research supervisor, Professor [redacted]

- - - -

Information for Participants

THE HELP-SEEKING NARRATIVES OF MALE ENTREPRENEURS

Tobias Munthe

DPsych in Counselling Psychology

The current study focuses on the challenges faced by male entrepreneurs in their search for help for psychological distress. Recent research on entrepreneurship has focused on exploring the psychological traits most common to entrepreneurs in order to help develop these qualities in future generations of entrepreneurs. Characterised as having high levels of motivation, endurance, leadership, agility, creativity, and innovation, the 'winning' (and sometimes extreme) traits of entrepreneurs have been not only lionised, but dissected and parsed. So far however, little research has been conducted on the psychological impact of pursuing a career that often involves considerable risk, stress, uncertainty and individual responsibility.

My research is concerned with how the immediate stressors associated with starting, building and running an independent business, might interact with questions of identity, purpose and meaning. I'm also interested in the psychological ramifications of selling or exiting a business, and in the challenges men face in seeking help for psychological distress.

We are at a pivotal moment in the exploration of gender identities, roles and behaviours, and the current climate is an opportunity to better understand what has been broadly described as the 'crisis of masculinity'. Central to this complex phenomenon is the question of identity and gender role in particular. 'Traditional masculinity', with its narratives of toughness, self-reliance, stoicism and strength, is increasingly viewed as a phenomenon that hampers male wellbeing, rather than supporting it, particularly with regards to seeking help for both physical and psychological suffering.

The longer-term goal of researching men's lived experience of seeking therapeutic support, is to better understand what conditions might be conducive to men seeking help, what obstacles might inhibit help-seeking and to consider how to improve access to psychological support. This is particularly pertinent to men working in environments

where the very qualities most celebrated might be those most threatening to their psychological health.

It is hoped that these findings might also make a useful contribution to the development of psychotherapeutic approaches that might best address specifically 'male' issues and encourage engagement in psychological treatments.

Participant involvement:
I am looking for male entrepreneurs to participate in my doctoral research who have received psychotherapy treatment.

- Participants will be invited to have a 10-minute telephone briefing regarding the project.
- Those participants who choose to be involved in the study will be requested to attend a 60-90 minute, one-on-one, audio recorded interview with the researcher.
- Interviews will take place in a quiet location most convenient for the participant or in a private room at one of the City University campuses.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

- Personal identifying details will be accessible by no-one other than the researcher.
- All texts, notes, audio recordings and interview transcripts will be anonymised before any data analysis takes place and kept in a secure location only accessible to the researcher.
- Confidentiality will be strictly observed.
- All participants are free to withdraw from the study without an explanation or penalty at any time.

The results of the research study will be submitted as part of the DPsych in Counselling Psychology. External publication of the thesis is often a desirable outcome, but as yet, no publications have been approached. Regardless of publication, the final written study will have no personal identifying information and anonymity will be maintained. Should participants be interested in reading the final research study following submission, they are more than welcome to contact the researcher.

Research Methodology:

The research method being used is NA. NA maintains that stories are an essential portal into individual and communal sense-making, experience, and subjectivity. As such, when a narrator tells a story, they are giving narrative form to experience. The study is thus preoccupied with lived, subjective experience and how individuals make

sense of the world around them and their place in it through the ways in which they narrate their own life stories.

This study has been reviewed by, and received ethics clearance through the Research Ethics Committee, City University London PSYETH (P/F) 15/16 19. If you would like to complain about any aspect of the study, please contact the Secretary to the University's Senate Research Ethics Committee [redacted]

Appendix H: **Participation Information Sheet**

Title of study: 'Male entrepreneurs and their experience of seeking help.'

We would like to invite you to take part in a research study. Before you decide whether you would like to take part it is important that you understand why the research is being done and what it would involve for you. Please take time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The current study focuses on the challenges faced by male entrepreneurs in their search for help for psychological distress.

Much has been written and spoken about in recent months concerning 'toxic masculinity'. While the immediate issue to be addressed and tackled is the predatory and exploitative behaviour of some men, this pivotal moment in the exploration of gender identities, roles and behaviours, is also an opportunity to better understand what has been broadly described as the 'crisis of masculinity'. Central to this widespread phenomenon is the question of identity and gender role in particular. 'Traditional masculinity', with its narratives of toughness, self-reliance, stoicism and strength, is increasingly viewed as a phenomenon that hampers male wellbeing, rather than supporting it, particularly with regards to seeking help for both physical and psychological suffering.

This study is concerned with the ways in which conceptions of masculinity might influence how male entrepreneurs respond to adversity and the challenges they face in seeking help for psychological distress. The longer-term goal of researching mens' lived experience of seeking therapeutic support more broadly, is to better understand what obstacles might hamper help-seeking and to consider how to improve access to psychological support. It is hoped that these findings might also generate useful debate regarding the development of psychotherapeutic approaches that might best address specifically 'male' issues and encourage engagement in psychological treatment.

This study is being conducted for a doctoral thesis (DPsych in Counselling Psychology).

Why have I been invited?

Recent research on entrepreneurship has focused considerably on exploring the psychological traits most common to entrepreneurs in order, in part, to develop these qualities in future generations of entrepreneurs. Characterised as having high levels of motivation, endurance, resiliency, confidence, intelligence, leadership, agility, creativity, and innovation, individuals like Elon Musk and Mark Zukerberg are celebrated to the point of hero status, but so far very

little research has been conducted on the psychological impact of pursuing a career that often involves considerable risk, stress and uncertainty and individual responsibility.

Do I have to take part?

Participation in the project is voluntary, and you can choose not to participate in part or all of the project. You can withdraw at any stage of the project without being penalised or disadvantaged in any way.

It is up to you to decide whether or not to take part. If you do decide to take part you will be asked to sign a consent form. If you decide to take part you are still free to withdraw at any time and without giving a reason.

What will happen if I take part?

All participants who choose to be involved in the study will be requested to attend 1 hour-long, one-on-one interview with the researcher.

Participants will be invited to have a 10 minute telephone briefing regarding the project. Thereafter, participants will meet once more with the researcher for an individual interview lasting 60-90 minutes. Interviews will be audio recorded.

The research method being used is NA. NA maintains that stories are the main portal into individual and communal sense-making, experience, and subjectivity. As such, when a narrator tells a story, they are giving 'narrative form' to experience. This means that the study is preoccupied with lived, subjective experience and how individuals

make sense of the world around them and their place in it through the ways in which they narrate their own life stories.

Interviews will take place in a location most convenient for the participant or in a private room at one of the City University campuses.

Expenses and Payments

All travel expenses will be paid

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part?

No possible disadvantages are foreseen. All personal information will be anonymised and any personal or sensitive material that arises will be redacted.

What are the possible benefits of taking part?

Participation in the study has valuable potential benefits in helping psychologists to respond to rising rates of critical mental health issues amongst the UK male population and male populations further afield. The study is also an opportunity for participants to reflect on the possible interactions between gender indentity and the experience of seeking help. There are no financial benefits to the study.

What will happen when the research study stops?

If the study were to be concluded prematurely for any reason, all information would be stored securely at City University, with access restricted exclusively to the individual researcher for a period of no more than 3 months. The reason for this is as a provision for any possible changes in circumstances and the study being reinitiated within that timeframe.

Will my taking part in the study be kept confidential?

Yes. Personal identifying details will be accessible by no-one other than the individual researcher. All personal identifying details will be stored securely at in a locked safe, protected by a numbered code in the researcher's home access will be restricted exclusively to the individual researcher. All texts, notes, audio recordings and interview transcripts will be anonymised before any data analysis takes place.

Confidentiality will be strictly observed. The only instances in which confidentiality would be broken are if the researcher identifies a genuine risk of self-inflicted harm or harm to others.

What will happen to the results of the research study?

The results of the research study will be submitted as part of the DPsych in Counselling Psychology. External publication of the thesis is often a desirable outcome, but as yet, no publications have been approached. Regardless of publication, the final written study will have no personal identifying information and anonymity will be maintained. Should participants be interested in reading the final research study following submission, they are more than welcome to contact the researcher at [redacted]

What will happen if I don't want to carry on with the study?

All participants are free to withdraw from the study without an explanation or penalty at any time.

What if there is a problem?

If you have any problems, concerns or questions about this study, you should ask to speak to a member of the research team. If you remain unhappy and wish to complain formally, you can do this through the University complaints procedure. To complain about the study, you need to phone [redacted] You can then ask to speak to the Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee and inform them that the name of the project is: **'Male entrepreneurs and their experience of seeking help.'**

You could also write to the Secretary at:

[redacted]

Secretary to Senate Research Ethics Committee Research Office, E214

City University London Northampton Square London

EC1V 0HB

[redacted]

City University London holds insurance policies, which apply to this study. If you feel you have been harmed or injured by taking part in this study you may be eligible to

claim compensation. This does not affect your legal rights to seek compensation. If you are harmed due to someone's negligence, then you may have grounds for legal action.

Who has reviewed the study?

This study has been approved by City University London [insert which committee here] Research Ethics Committee, [insert ethics approval code here].

Further information and contact details

For further information please contact: The researcher's DPsych Supervisor, Prof. Geroge Berguno [redacted] or the researcher, Tobias Munthe [redacted]

Thank you for taking the time to read this information sheet.

Appendix I: **Participant Consent Form**

Department Of Psychology, City University Of London

CONSENT FORM

I have read and understood the PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET, and have had the opportunity to ask questions. Based on this, I understand the nature of the study and my role in it, and I agree to participate in this research. I understand that my participation is completely voluntary, that I am free to withdraw at any time. I consent to the interview being recorded, and understand that my confidentiality will be protected throughout the research, and that if I withdraw from the study the recording of my interview will be destroyed. I understand that this form will at all times be kept separate from all other research documents and at no point will I be identifiable by name in any part of the findings.

I understand that the researcher conducting this study is abiding by the Ethical Principles of conducting Research with Human Subjects set out by the British Psychological Society (2004).

By signing below I am agreeing that I am over 16 years of age, and consent to participate in this research

Name (print): _____

Signature:___

Date of Interview:

Researcher signature: ____

For further information please contact: The researcher's DPsych Supervisor, Prof. Geroge Berguno [redacted] or the researcher, Tobias Munthe [redacted]

Appendix J: Ethics Approval Reference

14 May 2018

Dear Tobias and George

Psychology Research Ethics Committee School of Arts and Social Sciences

City University London London EC1R 0JD

Reference: PSYETH (P/L) 17/18 121

Project title: The Help-seeking Narratives of Male Entrepreneurs

I am writing to confirm that the research proposal detailed above has been granted approval by the City University London Psychology Department Research Ethics Committee.

Period of approval

Approval is valid for a period of three years from the date of this letter. If data collection runs beyond this period you will need to apply for an extension using the Amendments Form.

Project amendments

You will also need to submit an Amendments Form if you want to make any of the following changes to your research:

Recruit a new category of participants

Change, or add to, the research method employed

Collect additional types of data

Change the researchers involved in the project

Adverse events

You will need to submit an Adverse Events Form, copied to the Secretary of the Senate Research Ethics Committee [redacted] in the event of any of the following:

Adverse events

Breaches of confidentiality

Safeguarding issues relating to children and vulnerable adults

Incidents that affect the personal safety of a participant or researcher

Issues (a) and (b) should be reported as soon as possible and no later than 5 days after the event. Issues (c) and (d) should be reported immediately. Where appropriate the researcher should also report adverse events to other relevant institutions such as the police or social services.

Should you have any further queries then please do not hesitate to get in touch. Kind regards

[redacted]

Ethics committee Secretary Chair

[redacted] [redacted]

PART TWO: PROFESSIONAL PRACTICE: CLIENT STUDY/PROCESS REPORT

THIS PART OF THIS THESIS HAS BEEN REMOVED FOR DATA PROTECTION REASONS

PART THREE: PUBLISHABLE PAPER

THIS PART OF THIS THESIS HAS BEEN REMOVED FOR COPYWRIGHT REASONS