DEVELOPING HEALTHY MASCULINITIES AT THE MEN'S TABLE

A Mixed-Methods Analysis
of the 2024-2025
Have Your Say surveys

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THE MEN'S TABLE
Strength To Care

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Developing Healthy Masculinities at The Men's Table

Abstract

This paper examines how The Men's Table (TMT), an Australian peer-to-peer initiative centred on men's wellbeing and social connection, may be understood as supporting the development of what participants describe as healthy masculinities through ordinary conversation and communal belonging. The study adopts an eclectic Mixed Methods approach, drawing on the 2024 (N = 994) and 2025 (N = 1,062) national *Have Your Say* surveys, which integrate quantitative indicators with qualitative reflections from men across Australia.

The quantitative analysis was informed by Putnam's (1994; 2000) theory of social capital, exploring how participation, reciprocity, and trust within Tables may nurture belonging and civic-minded engagement. The qualitative material was examined through a narrative-psychological framework inspired by White's (2007) narrative practice and analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) reflexive thematic analysis. This dual lens enabled an interpretive account of how men negotiate and re-author their experiences of self, relationship, and responsibility within the shifting cultural conditions of contemporary Australia.

The findings may be interpreted as indicating a movement away from inherited, restrictive narratives of stoicism and toward more plural, relational, and reflexive ways of understanding and enacting healthy masculinities. This interpretive framework is organised around six interrelated themes: *The Burden of the Silent Past: Rejecting a Traditional Legacy*; *Emotional Literacy as a New Strength*; *The Quest for*

Authenticity and Self-Acceptance; *Recasting Relational Rules: From Dominance to Deep Connection*; *Care as a Relational Practice of Masculinities*; and *The Intergenerational Call: Mentorship, Navigation and Societal Contribution*. Quantitative trends appear to reinforce these qualitative insights, suggesting associations between Table participation, perceived belonging, and indicators of relational wellbeing.

Taken together, the findings suggest that healthy masculinities within this community may be understood as supported and sustained through relational presence, shared emotional responsibility, and reflexive self-awareness. The study illustrates how men at TMT may co-create environments of openness, recognition, and care through ongoing participation and narrative engagement. These findings should be interpreted within the contextual boundaries of a non-clinical, self-selected community sample.

Part 1: Framework of the Paper

1. Introduction and Context

The contemporary lives of many men can be understood as increasingly marked by challenges related to social isolation, loneliness, and help-seeking. Although public attention to men's mental health has grown in recent years (Seidler et al., 2016; World Health Organization [WHO], 2022), men continue to be over-represented in suicide statistics and in other indicators of distress such as substance use and violence (Australian Bureau of Statistics [ABS], 2023; Courtenay, 2000). These patterns may be interpreted as connected to enduring cultural expectations that associate being a man with self-reliance, emotional control, and the minimisation of vulnerability (Connell, 2005; Mahalik et al., 2003; Addis & Mahalik, 2003). While such expectations have historically been linked to ideas of strength and responsibility (Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010), they can also inhibit the formation of deeper relational networks and make it more difficult for men to reach out when facing crises (Oliffe et al., 2019a; Vogel et al., 2014). In this way, isolation is not only an individual experience but may be seen as the outcome of cultural narratives that discourage disclosure and mutual dependence (Lomas et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2015).

Against this background, organisations such as *The Men's Table* (TMT) have emerged in the Australian context as structured attempts to create safe, ongoing spaces where men can meet, talk, and be heard. Peer-to-peer initiatives have increasingly been recognised as promising approaches for improving men's mental health outcomes because they build trust through shared experience and reduce the perceived stigma of help-seeking (Seidler et al., 2021; Wilkins, 2019). TMT offers a deliberately simple community model centred on peer support and non-judgmental listening, organised around its five *Fundamentals*, which set out the behavioural and

relational conditions for psychological safety: *Go Beyond Banter, Commitment to Community, Safe & Confidential, Membership Matters,* and *Everyone Leads* (The Men's Table, n.d.-b). These principles can be interpreted as counter-practices to restrictive masculine norms, because they make emotional honesty, care, and help-seeking acceptable in a male space (Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013).

Crucially, TMT does not promote a single, prescriptive version of masculinity but is dedicated to the exploration and development of *masculinities* in the plural (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In doing so, it moves away from the "one-size-fits-all" mentality that many men in the data describe as limiting and instead invites an ongoing process of self-definition. This pluralistic orientation aligns with contemporary research that highlights men's capacity for reflexivity and relational agency (Lomas et al., 2021; Creighton & Oliffe, 2010), encouraging participants to articulate what a meaningful, healthy, and contextually grounded way of being masculine might look like in their own lives.

Supported by extensive quantitative and qualitative data from the organisation's *Have Your Say* surveys, this report can therefore be read as an attempt to document, interpret, and cautiously generalise how participation in *The Men's Table* may foster healthier masculinities. The main research question guiding the report is: *How does participation in The Men's Table support the development of healthy masculinities in an individualised society?* This overarching question is explored through three interlinked sub-questions:

1. How can White's (2007) Narrative Practice and Putnam's (1994; 2000) Social Capital Theory be used to explain the psychological, relational, and social mechanisms that appear to support men's development within The Men's Table?

2. How do the *Have Your Say* survey responses (2024–2025) demonstrate both measurable and lived transformations in men's well-being, connection, and care?
3. How can TMT be understood as both a structural and a narrative model that contributes to men's health and contemporary masculinities in Australia?

Together, these questions make it possible to connect men's individual stories of change with the broader social architecture that supports them. This chapter therefore establishes the definitional and theoretical foundation necessary for interpreting the report's findings. It links the organisational context of TMT to the study's mixed-methods design and scientific foundation and specifies how key terms such as *masculinities* and *healthy* are operationalised within the TMT model. Such clarification is essential for methodological rigour and academic transparency, particularly given the paper's emphasis on plurality, inclusion, and reflexivity.

1.1 Purpose and Structure of the Paper

The purpose of this paper is to provide an evidence-based assessment of the impact of *The Men's Table* (TMT), with particular attention to how men who participate in Tables describe, negotiate, and enact *healthy masculinities*. By combining quantitative scope with qualitative depth, the paper seeks to demonstrate not only that men report development, but also *how* they articulate that development and which organisational conditions appear to make it possible. In doing so, the study integrates sociological and psychological perspectives to illuminate both collective patterns and personal meaning-making.

The structure of the paper is designed to guide the reader from this foundational framing through the theoretical and methodological rationale to an integrated analysis and discussion. Each section contributes to a cumulative understanding of how relational practices, narrative identity, and civic belonging intersect in the ongoing development of *healthy masculinities* within TMT.

1.2 Word definitions

The following definitions represent the author's interpretive understanding of key terms as they are applied throughout this paper. They are not official or organisational definitions from *The Men's Table*, but reflect how these concepts are understood and operationalised analytically in this research context (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

1.2.1 The Men's Table

This definition of *The Men's Table* is based on the author's reading of the organisation's vision, stated as "*Healthy Men, Healthy Masculinities, Healthy Communities*" (The Men's Table, n.d.-a) and mission, stated as *"To make caring connection a universal male behaviour"* (The Men's Table, 2023). It reflects the interpreted conviction of the organisation that men's well-being and the health of their communities are interdependent outcomes of everyday relational engagement.

Established as a national not-for-profit organisation in 2019, which emerged from the lived experience over 7.5 year of the first community based Men's Table, TMT provides a non-clinical, community-based model designed to address men's social isolation, mental ill-health, suicide, and limited help-seeking (Seidler et al., 2016; Wilkins, 2019). Its *logic model* is anchored by five *Fundamentals*: *Go Beyond Banter,*

Commitment to Community, Safe & Confidential, Membership Matters, and *Everyone Leads*, understood not merely as guidelines, articulated in TMT's *Kitchen Pantry* resource, but as psychological and relational prerequisites for safety and meaningful connection (The Men's Table, n.d.-b).

TMT's operational process follows a three-step framework: *Activate, Build,* and *Care* which ensures a consistent foundation while allowing local autonomy. The organisation's *Ripple Effect Report* (The Men's Table, 2023) demonstrates how these mechanisms produce wider community outcomes through expanding networks of belonging and mutual support. Each Table functions autonomously, supported but not directed by the central organisation. The Tables are self-governing groups of men who commit to long-term participation and mutual accountability. TMT's national team provides facilitation, training, and risk-management structures (e.g., Table Carers, Monthly Table Health Checks, and Complex Situation support) to sustain group well-being. This balance between autonomy and support is integral to maintaining trust and safety while encouraging ownership and diversity across contexts.

As interpreted in this paper, TMT's primary contribution lies in creating conditions where *caring connection* becomes both culturally legitimate and personally meaningful. While the organisation itself emphasises connection as the pathway to health, the author places additional analytical focus on the plurality of masculinities that emerge within this environment. By fostering stable, long-term peer communities, TMT provides the relational infrastructure through which men can explore diverse, evolving, and contextually situated masculinities. The Table program is therefore examined not as fixed doctrines but as living practices that enable men to enact care, authenticity, and accountability in ways that resonate with their individual and collective experiences (de Visser & McDonnell, 2013; Oliffe et al., 2019b).

1.2.2 Men

In this paper, men refers to individuals who self-identified as men and participated in The Men's Table, including those who completed one or both Have Your Say surveys (2024; 2025). Membership at The Men's Table is open exclusively to men; thus, the term is used descriptively to denote this participant group. Gender, however, is understood as a socially constructed and relationally performed category (Connell, 2005; Butler, 1990). While the study empirically focuses on men within this context, masculinities are interpreted as socially enacted practices rather than biologically determined traits. This distinction allows for an analysis attentive to diversity, intersectionality, and situational expression (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Seidler et al., 2021).

1.2.3 Masculinities

Throughout this paper, *masculinities* are understood in the plural as dynamic, context-dependent, and socially negotiated expressions of gendered identity (Connell, 2005; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). Within *The Men's Table*, masculinities are enacted through everyday practices of communication, humour, care, and emotional openness. Using the plural form resists reproducing a singular hegemonic ideal and instead affirms the diversity of relational and cultural expressions available to men (Lomas et al., 2021; Kiselica & Englar-Carlson, 2010). Masculinities are therefore seen as living practices that evolve through interaction, mutual recognition, and self-reflexive engagement with others. Within this frame, what it means to "*be masculine*" is not pre-given but continuously shaped and re-shaped in dialogue with community, culture, and context.

1.2.4 Healthy

In this paper, *healthy* is understood holistically, encompassing physical, psychological, relational, and existential dimensions of well-being. It is conceptualised as an individually defined and contextually situated state, aligning with the World Health Organization's (2022) inclusive definition of health as complete physical, mental, and social well-being. Within this framework, health is seen not as the absence of illness but as an ongoing, reflexive process, an evolving capacity to sustain balance, meaning, and connection within one's environment (Lomas et al., 2016; Robertson et al., 2015). This interpretation underscores the view that health is not a static condition but a relational phenomenon co-constructed in everyday life.

1.2.5 Healthy Masculinities

The term *healthy masculinities* combines the preceding concepts to describe plural, evolving, and relational ways of being masculine that prioritise authenticity, care, and connection. Within this analysis, *healthy masculinities* are interpreted as ongoing developments rather than fixed endpoints processes continually negotiated between personal meaning and social context (Courtenay, 2000). This understanding recognises that what is "*healthy*" cannot be defined solely by individual traits or external standards but emerges through the relational, cultural, and ethical conditions that support men's well-being. In the context of *The Men's Table*, *healthy masculinities* are therefore understood as collective achievements: lived and practised within communities that legitimise vulnerability, empathy, and accountability as integral dimensions of strength.

1.3 Reading Guide of the Paper

To ensure a comprehensive and methodologically transparent reading, the paper is structured in a way that guides the reader from conceptual framing to empirical analysis and final reflection.

The first section, Foundational Framing, establishes conceptual clarity and analytical rigour by defining the key terminology used throughout the study. It also introduces the paper's scientific foundation and methodological orientation, reflecting the study's stance against a singular, universal model of masculinity and its commitment to plural, context-dependent understandings.

The second section situates the study within the broader academic landscape through a literature review and theoretical rationale. Here, the dual theoretical foundation is introduced, integrating White's (2007) narrative practice, which explores how identity is co-constructed through stories and relationships, and Putnam's (1994) social capital theory, which examines how networks, trust, and reciprocity foster belonging and collective well-being. Together, these perspectives form the interpretive lens that informs both the quantitative and qualitative analyses, linking individual meaning-making with the social structures that support it.

The third section presents the Data Analysis and Findings from the 2024 and 2025 Have Your Say surveys, divided into two complementary parts. The quantitative analysis focuses on statistical indicators to illustrate organisational scope, participation, and long-term trends among participants, thereby mapping the measurable development of belonging and well-being. The qualitative analysis applies a narrative and thematic approach to participants' written reflections, identifying and interpreting six core themes that describe the lived experience and development of healthy masculinities at The Men's Table.

The fourth section offers an Integrated Discussion and Evaluation of the findings, synthesising the results through the dual theoretical frameworks of White

and Putnam and situating them within the broader sociocultural context. It also includes a critical evaluation of the methodological opportunities and limitations of the study.

The final section provides a Conclusion and Outlook for Future Research, summarising the study's main contributions and implications for practice, policy, and further inquiry. In doing so, the paper aims to present a coherent and empirically grounded account of how The Men's Table fosters the development of healthy masculinities through relational, narrative, and community-based engagement.

1.4 Literature Review

The literature informing this study was identified through an iterative, concept-driven process shaped by the research questions and by preliminary impressions from the Have Your Say (HYS) data. Rather than aiming to provide an exhaustive review of all scholarship on masculinities or men's mental health, the selection prioritises works that appeared particularly resonant with the subjects expressed by participants. The approach was therefore purposive and interpretive, drawing on literature that offers conceptual tools for understanding meaning-making, relational life, and the broader cultural conditions that may shape men's experiences.

1.4.1 Men's Wellbeing and Cultural Expectations

Research on men's mental health has expanded significantly over recent decades and suggests recurring patterns of emotional isolation, limited engagement with formal help-seeking, and the cultural expectation that men adopt ideals of self-reliance and emotional restraint (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Courtenay, 2000; Connell, 2005; Oliffe et al., 2019b). While these contributions have been essential for identifying disparities in

wellbeing, some scholars argue that such work may inadvertently foreground risk and deficiency, leaving less room for understanding the contextual, narrative, and relational environments in which masculinities are lived (Lomas et al., 2016; Seidler et al., 2021). This critique has encouraged a gradual shift toward more plural, relational, and strengths-oriented perspectives on men's emotional lives.

Emerging scholarship highlights that masculinities are not fixed attributes but contextually shaped practices that evolve through interaction, language, and cultural expectations (Englar-Carlson & Kiselica, 2013; Lomas et al., 2021). Within this landscape, community-based and peer-led initiatives are increasingly recognised as potential spaces where connection, accountability, and emotional expression can be explored in ways that feel more culturally congruent for many men than conventional therapeutic settings (Creighton & Oliffe, 2010; Seidler et al., 2021). These contributions point to the importance of settings that allow men to engage relationally without requiring a departure from their everyday identities.

1.4.2 Australian Contextual Perspectives

Sociological literature further suggests that men's experiences of connection and emotional life may be shaped by broader cultural and structural conditions. Processes associated with late modernity, including individualisation, shifting relational norms, and declining communal participation, have been interpreted as creating new pressures and uncertainties around identity, intimacy, and responsibility (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). In the Australian context, these dynamics intersect with historical narratives of stoicism, endurance, and mateship (Dempsey, 1990; Pease, 2019), as well as with ongoing concerns about men's wellbeing and the high prevalence of male suicide (ABS, 2023).

Although much scholarship on Australian masculinities has centred on settler-colonial norms, it is important to acknowledge that Australia also contains long-standing relational epistemologies grounded in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander ways of knowing. These perspectives emphasise kinship, reciprocity, collective responsibility, and deep relational connection to Country, principles that have supported social and emotional wellbeing across generations (Dudgeon et al., 2014).

While this study does not attempt to draw direct equivalence between these traditions and the relational practices observed at The Men's Table, recognising their presence underscores that relational life in Australia is culturally plural rather than uniform. This plurality complicates any single account of men's relational challenges and highlights that many of the difficulties described in the literature, especially around individualism, emotional restraint, and isolation, are linked specifically to dominant settler-colonial narratives and not to all cultural contexts. At the same time, scholarship from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities foregrounds relationality, kinship, and connection to Country as central to wellbeing (Dudgeon et al., 2014), reminding us that multiple relational epistemologies coexist within the broader cultural landscape.

1.4.3 Healthy Masculinities in Contemporary Scholarship

Across these strands of literature, a small but growing body of scholarship gestures toward what is often termed *healthy masculinities*. This concept is used in varied and evolving ways, yet it is frequently interpreted as referring to the relational, cultural, and contextual conditions that make certain ways of being recognisable, viable, or legitimate for men. Australian research in particular suggests that men's wellbeing appears closely connected to the availability of relational environments that render

practices such as openness, reciprocity, and shared responsibility culturally intelligible (Fogarty et al., 2017; King et al., 2020). Rather than representing a singular ideal, healthy masculinities may be understood as emerging through participation, context, and shared meaning. This interpretive framing provides a conceptual backdrop for considering how men at The Men's Table describe and negotiate their lives within communal settings.

1.4.4 Positioning the Present Study

Across these diverse strands of literature, a recurring observation is that understandings of men's wellbeing may require conceptual frameworks capable of attending simultaneously to personal meaning-making and the relational and structural environments in which such meanings take shape. Several scholars note that existing approaches can, at times, foreground either individual experience or social context without fully considering how cultural discourse, everyday interaction, and communal practices intersect in shaping men's possibilities for care, belonging, and identity (Lomas et al., 2016; Seidler et al., 2021). This suggests an interpretive space for frameworks that can hold these dimensions in dialogue.

It is within this broader conceptual landscape that two complementary perspectives, White's (2007) Narrative Practice and Putnam's (1994; 2000) Social Capital Theory, were selected to guide the study. These frameworks are not presented as definitive explanations but as sensitising concepts that appeared particularly relevant for the kinds of questions this project set out to explore. Narrative practice offers a way of attending to how identity, meaning, and agency may be shaped through language, discourse, and relational dialogue, while social capital theory highlights the possible importance of participation, trust, and shared rhythms of

interaction for relational life. Together, they provide the conceptual scaffolding through which the men's accounts are interpreted.

Taken collectively, the literature reviewed suggests that healthy masculinities may be understood as emerging through an interplay of cultural narratives, relational practices, and structural conditions. The following sections therefore outline the theoretical principles from Narrative Practice and Social Capital Theory that inform the analysis, offering a foundation for exploring how men at The Men's Table describe and negotiate their experiences within a shared, communal setting.

Part 2: Theoretical and Scientific Foundations

This part introduces the conceptual frameworks and scientific assumptions that guide the study's interpretation of healthy masculinities at The Men's Table. Because the broader research question concerns how participation may support men's development within an individualised society, it is necessary to clarify the theoretical lenses, key concepts, and terminologies through which the analysis approaches men's experiences, relationships, and meaning-making processes.

The section presents two complementary theoretical perspectives: White's (2007) Narrative Practice and Putnam's (1994; 2000) Social Capital Theory. These frameworks do not aim to offer a unified account but rather illuminate different psychological, relational, and social mechanisms that appear relevant in the Have Your Say (HYS) material. Narrative Practice provides concepts for understanding how individuals interpret and re-author their lived experiences through culturally shaped storylines, while Social Capital Theory foregrounds the patterned relational environments that may support or constrain participation, trust, and belonging. Each

theory is introduced through its ontological and epistemological assumptions, its view of the individual and agency, and the specific conceptual vocabulary that becomes relevant for the later interpretation of the data. To maintain conceptual clarity, each framework is followed by its own subsection outlining how healthy masculinities may be understood within that particular paradigm. This structure makes it possible to see how differing theoretical commitments generate distinct, and sometimes overlapping, ways of conceptualising men's development at TMT. These understandings are not presented as prescriptive or exhaustive but as interpretive orientations that help contextualise themes emerging from the empirical material.

Following the theoretical exposition, the chapter turns to the scientific and methodological foundations of the study, including the design and purpose of the HYS surveys, the mixed-methods orientation, and the author's reflexive positioning. These considerations are essential for understanding how empirical insights are shaped by both the organisational context and the methodological choices underpinning the study.

Together, the theoretical and scientific foundations presented here establish the conceptual scaffolding for Part 3, where the HYS material is analysed through the dual lenses of narrative meaning-making and relational structure.

2.1 White's Narrative Perspective: Stories, Identity, and Relational Meaning-Making

White's (2007) Narrative Practice may be understood as offering an interpretive orientation for examining how individuals make sense of their lives within culturally patterned storylines. Rather than conceptualising identity as the expression of inner

traits or stable psychological categories, Narrative Practice interprets experience as emerging through the stories people come to inhabit, negotiate, and re-author over time. This approach appears particularly relevant for understanding men's participation in The Men's Table (TMT), where the HYS material suggests ongoing shifts in how men articulate their emotional lives, relational commitments, and understandings of masculinities. Narrative Practice therefore provides a conceptual vocabulary for exploring how these forms of development may be occurring in dialogue with broader cultural narratives surrounding gender, care, responsibility, and connection.

2.1.1 Ontological Positioning: Narrative Reality, Cultural Discourses and Relational Being

Ontologically, Narrative Practice can be understood as beginning from the premise that lived experience is socially and relationally constituted. Identity, meaning, and self-understanding are approached not as inner attributes or psychological entities but as interpretive constructions shaped through language, interaction, and culturally patterned expectations (White, 2007; Guba & Lincoln, 1994). Within this orientation, the realities people inhabit may be interpreted as emerging from shared meaning-making processes rather than from isolated internal states. Experience becomes intelligible through the stories and interpretive frameworks that are made available in one's relational and cultural environment.

From this perspective, the stories individuals tell about their lives arise through participation in broader cultural narratives and through the interpersonal responses that confirm, challenge, or expand those narratives. Over time, these meaning-making practices may take on a degree of coherence and continuity, guiding how individuals

position themselves and relate to others. Storylines are not simply reflections of internal experience but can be understood as culturally mediated constructions that shape what appears possible, permissible, or meaningful in a person's emotional and relational life.

A constructionist ontology, in this sense, does not assume that narratives possess an objective existence independent of human activity. Rather, it suggests that repeated interpretive practices crystallise into storylines that behave as if they possess stability. These narrative configurations gain durability through their continual enactment across social contexts, making them available for reflection, revision, and shared understanding (White, 2007). Through this process, narratives come to function as the taken-for-granted structures through which individuals interpret themselves and others.

Within this ontological frame, narrative becomes a way of conceptualising how interpretive practices and relational dialogues coalesce into the storylines people inhabit. These storylines can be understood as emergent from but also partially enduring beyond individual moments of interaction, allowing them to be examined as meaningful units of analysis for understanding identity, relationality, and psychological wellbeing. Identity is therefore approached as a relational and discursive accomplishment, continually shaped by the cultural meanings and relational contexts within which stories are told and retold.

2.1.2 Epistemological Positioning: Interpretation, Reflexivity and Situated Knowledge

Epistemologically, Narrative Practice may be understood as grounded in interpretive and reflexive modes of inquiry. Knowledge, within this orientation, is regarded not as

a mirror of an underlying psychological essence but as something co-created through language, dialogue, and culturally shaped interpretive processes (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Finlay, 2002). Understanding becomes possible through attention to how individuals articulate experiences, draw on cultural discourses, and negotiate meaning in relational settings. The focus is not on identifying objective facts but on examining how certain meanings become intelligible, taken up, or resisted within particular narrative contexts.

This epistemological stance assumes that narratives do not merely describe experience but participate in shaping it. As people tell stories, they actively organise events, mark significance, and delineate what is possible or desirable. The task of inquiry therefore involves interpreting the cultural logics embedded in these narratives, considering how they reflect broader discursive patterns and how they position individuals in relation to themselves and others (White, 2007; Burr, 2015). Knowledge is thus approached as contextual, historically situated, and open to reinterpretation rather than as fixed or universal.

Reflexivity constitutes another central epistemic commitment. Because meaning-making is understood as relational and interpretive, the researcher's own assumptions, cultural positioning, and theoretical commitments inevitably shape what becomes visible in the analysis. A reflexive stance acknowledges that interpretations emerge through a dialogue between researcher and material rather than through a neutral act of observation (Finlay, 2002). This orientation aligns with a broader constructionist sensibility in which the credibility of knowledge rests not on replicability but on transparency, coherence, and interpretive resonance (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Overall, this epistemological framework positions narrative inquiry as a method of exploring how people understand their lives through culturally and relationally shaped interpretive practices. It invites analytical attention to the nuances of language, the implicit assumptions woven into stories, and the broader cultural discourses that inform how masculinities are narrated and inhabited. Understanding, in this sense, becomes an interpretive act, an engagement with the ways meaning is produced, negotiated, and transformed through story.

2.1.3 The Individual and Agency: Meaning-Making Selves, Positioning, and the Possibility of Re-Authoring

Within Narrative Practice, the individual may be understood as a meaning-making subject whose sense of self is shaped through ongoing engagement with cultural discourses and relational contexts. The person is conceptualised not as a bounded psychological entity but as someone continually positioned within, and participating in, the interpretive landscapes that constitute lived experience (White, 2007). Identity is therefore approached as something authored and re-authored through the stories individuals tell about themselves and the responses those stories receive.

This orientation assumes that identities do not originate from inner structures but emerge from interpretive activity. Individuals navigate a terrain of available storylines, some inherited, some contested, some newly imagined, and come to inhabit particular positions within these narratives. These acts of positioning may be subtle or overt, relationally negotiated or silently absorbed, yet they participate in shaping how individuals understand their possibilities for action, connection, and emotional expression (Davies & Harré, 1990; White, 2007). In this sense, the individual is both constituted by and agentive within the discursive worlds they inhabit.

Agency, within this framework, is interpreted not as a stable internal trait but as the capacity to engage with and re-position oneself in relation to dominant or constraining narratives. It becomes visible when individuals recognise the interpretive nature of the stories they inhabit and begin to explore alternative meanings that resonate more closely with their preferred values or commitments. This form of agency is relational, dialogical, and interpretive: it emerges through conversations that open space for reflection, recognition, and the co-authoring of more generative meanings (White, 2007; Shotter, 1993).

Such an understanding suggests that agency is enabled by relational conditions that support the articulation of alternative narratives. When individuals encounter contexts in which their stories are met with curiosity, acknowledgment, or resonance, they may experience increased scope to re-interpret experiences that had previously been shaped by more restrictive cultural discourses. Agency thus becomes an inherently relational phenomenon, enacted through the interplay of meaning, dialogue, and recognition.

Within this conceptualisation, development can be understood as an unfolding process in which individuals gradually expand the narratives available to them. The individual is not imagined as the origin of meaning but as a participant in its ongoing negotiation. The capacity to re-author one's stories, and thereby re-shape one's sense of self, depends on access to relational and discursive resources that make alternative meanings thinkable, speakable, and sharable. Through this lens, agency is seen as a movement within narrative possibility, a continual process of responding to, revising, and re-imagining the stories through which life is lived.

2.1.4 Core Narrative Mechanisms and Cultural Forces

Narrative Practice provides a conceptual vocabulary for examining how lived experience may be shaped through culturally patterned meanings, relational dynamics, and interpretive habits (White, 2007). The following subsections introduce key mechanisms that will later serve as analytic lenses. These concepts are not treated as causal explanations but as interpretive possibilities that sensitise the reader to how masculinities may be culturally and relationally shaped.

2.1.4.1 The Dominant Problem Story and Internalisation

The Dominant Problem Story may be understood as a culturally familiar storyline that frames difficulties in ways aligned with socially circulating expectations (White, 2007). These narratives become dominant not through accuracy but through repetition: they are embedded in cultural discourse in ways that render them almost self-evident. White describes such storylines as becoming *"(…) invisible and unavailable to critical reflection* (…)" (2007, p. 6), highlighting how individuals may come to inhabit them without conscious awareness.

Internalisation can be interpreted as the gradual incorporation of these external discourses into one's own meaning-making practices (White, 2007). Through repeated exposure, the narrative forms offered by culture, such as expectations of emotional control, independence, or stoicism, may be taken up as personal truths. This internalisation does not indicate pathology; rather, it reflects the interpretive effects of living within cultural landscapes where particular masculinities are positioned as normative or superior. In this sense, the Dominant Problem Story may be seen as shaping the interpretive boundaries within which men understand emotional struggle, relational uncertainty, or perceived inadequacy (White, 2007). Through this lens, the Dominant Problem Story functions as a narrative habit: an

interpretive frame that quietly limits the imaginative possibilities available for understanding oneself.

2.1.4.2 Normalising Judgement and Self-Surveillance

Normalising Judgement, as outlined by White (2007), refers to the interpretive activity through which individuals evaluate themselves and others according to implicit cultural norms. White explains that such practices "(...) *incite people to measure their own and each other's actions and thoughts against norms about life and development* (...)" (2007, p. 25). These evaluations are often subtle, appearing as internal comparisons rather than explicit rules.

Within this conceptualisation, these judgements can give rise to forms of self-surveillance. This does not suggest deliberate self-policing but rather a habitual attunement to whether one is acting in accordance with socially recognisable standards. For men, such standards may revolve around ideals of emotional toughness, self-sufficiency, or productivity. These standards can become internalised as personal expectations, even when they are culturally produced. Normalising Judgement therefore illuminates how men may come to monitor themselves through interpretive habits shaped by dominant narratives of masculinities.

2.1.4.3 Spoiled Identity and the Interpretive Experience of Falling Short

Spoiled identity may be interpreted as the lived effect of experiencing oneself as failing to meet culturally valued expectations. This concept draws on White's (2007) description of how classificatory practices position individuals as "*deficient or failing*" (p. 25) when they do not align with dominant norms. Spoiled identity is not

understood as an inherent personal flaw; rather, it arises through the interpretive tension between lived experience and internalised ideals.

In the domain of masculinities, men may come to experience shame, frustration, or perceived inadequacy when emotional vulnerability, relational uncertainty, or help-seeking appear incompatible with dominant scripts (White, 2007). The sense of falling short may therefore reflect narrative effects rather than objective characteristics. Spoiled identity can be understood as illustrating how cultural expectations can shape emotional life by rendering certain experiences incongruent with internalised masculine ideals (White, 2007).

2.1.4.4 Objectification and the Linguistic Materialisation of Discourse

Objectification can be understood as the process through which culturally produced descriptions begin to feel as though they reside within the person. White describes these practices as those that "(...) *locate, and classify, disorders within these bodies* (...)" (2007, p. 25), making discursively generated ideas appear as intrinsic personal qualities rather than socially shaped meanings.

Through this mechanism, cultural descriptions, such as being "too emotional," "not strong enough," or even labelled through contemporary terms like "toxic" in everyday discourse, may gradually be experienced as statements about one's identity rather than as reflections of broader social narratives. These labels are mentioned here simply as examples of how circulating cultural language can become internalised. The interpretive dynamics of these descriptions are examined further in the analysis.

In this sense, objectification highlights how the boundary between discourse and identity may become blurred, making culturally inherited meanings feel ontologically real and obscuring the relational and cultural forces that shaped them.

2.1.4.5 Dividing Practices: Lines of Inclusion and Exclusion

Dividing Practices, as discussed by White (2007), refer to the processes through which cultural norms differentiate between those who appear to conform to valued expectations and those who do not. These practices subtly "separate people" (p. 26) through classificatory distinctions that structure belonging and recognition. This separation rarely takes the form of overt marginalisation; instead, it arises through conversational cues, social assumptions, and implicit expectations.

Within masculinities, dividing practices may render certain expressions more legitimate than others. Emotional restraint may be affirmed as aligning with masculine ideals, while vulnerability or relational dependence may be interpreted as less acceptable. These distinctions can shape men's experiences of recognition, belonging, and legitimacy within social contexts (White, 2007). Dividing Practices thus provide a lens for understanding how cultural narratives structure social inclusion and exclusion.

2.1.4.6 Externalisation: Separating the Person From the Problem

Externalisation can be understood as a narrative practice through which individuals are invited to distinguish their identities from the difficulties, pressures, or expectations that shape their experience. White (2007) summarises this movement through the formulation that "(...) *the problem becomes the problem, not the person.*" (p.

9). This shift does not deny lived experience; rather, it offers an interpretive repositioning that makes it possible to view concerns, tensions, or relational strains as influenced by broader cultural and contextual forces rather than as expressions of personal essence.

Within this conceptualisation, externalisation functions as a counter-movement to internalisation. Instead of viewing experiences through the lens of the Dominant Problem Story, externalisation invites individuals to regard what they are facing as something that acts upon them. When difficulties are named as phenomena, such as a particular pressure, expectation, or internalised voice, they become available for observation, reflection, and dialogue. White (2007) often illustrates this by referring to practices where experiences are named metaphorically (e.g., "*The Inner Critic*," "*The Isolation Barrier*"), not to dramatise them, but to create interpretive distance that allows for curiosity rather than self-blame.

This separation can be understood as generating interpretive room. When the difficulty is placed outside the person, even tentatively, it becomes possible to ask different questions about its origins, its effects, and the cultural narratives that may be guiding its meaning. Externalisation thus offers a way of recognising that many experiences, whether they concern emotional strain, uncertainty, or relational complexity, are shaped by social discourses, not by deficiencies within individuals. It highlights that navigating life's challenges is a shared and recognisable human endeavour, rather than a sign of personal inadequacy.

In communal settings, externalisation can be especially meaningful. When individuals articulate their experiences in ways that separate the self from the pressures acting upon them, others may recognise their own experiences in these descriptions. This shared recognition can cultivate what White (2007) described as a

"*community of concern*" (p. 184), in which people witness and respond to one another's emerging understandings with respect and curiosity. Externalisation, then, is not simply a technique but a relational practice: a way of speaking that makes space for compassion, mutual recognition, and more generous interpretations of experience.

Externalisation therefore becomes a foundational mechanism for loosening the hold of internalised narratives. It provides an interpretive bridge between cultural discourse and personal meaning, enabling individuals to approach their experiences with greater flexibility. This conceptual orientation later becomes relevant when considering how men may articulate new, more resonant understandings of themselves within supportive relational environments.

2.1.4.7 Re-authoring: Thickening Preferred Storylines

Re-authoring may be understood as the process through which individuals gradually cultivate alternative storylines that resonate more closely with their intentions, values, or preferred ways of being. White (2007) describes re-authoring as a movement through which people explore "(...) *the many diverse avenues that are available to preferred destinations* (...)" (p. 5), emphasising that identity is not fixed but continually shaped through interpretation and relational engagement.

This process begins with what White terms "*unique outcomes*" (2007, p. 5), moments, however subtle, that fall outside the influence of the Dominant Problem Story. These moments need not be dramatic; they may appear as fleeting exceptions, quiet acts of care, small decisions that reflect integrity, or understated forms of emotional presence. Their significance lies not in their size but in their divergence from the narrative patterns that previously shaped meaning.

Re-authoring involves tracing these moments, noticing their contours, and elaborating them through reflection and relational dialogue. As these alternative accounts are named, connected, and gradually thickened, they begin to form a more coherent storyline, one that feels inhabitable and aligned with the individual's preferred identity conclusions. This does not displace earlier stories in a binary sense; instead, it expands the interpretive landscape, offering more generative possibilities for understanding oneself.

In contexts where masculinities are shaped by cultural expectations of strength, restraint, or independence, re-authoring may gently foreground alternative expressions that emphasise relational presence, integrity, care, or emotional attentiveness. These narrative developments do not necessarily reject dominant cultural narratives; rather, they make visible the plurality of ways men can live meaningfully and responsibly within their relationships and communities.

In this sense, re-authoring is not a technique but an interpretive orientation, an invitation to notice the small, often overlooked moments that reveal preferred ways of being and to give them narrative room to grow.

2.1.4.8 Witnessing, Resonance, and the Social Ecology of Meaning

Witnessing is a central relational process through which preferred narratives gain social, emotional, and interpretive legitimacy. White (2007) describes witnessing as the act in which others "(...) *acknowledge and respond to the preferred stories that people are shaping for their lives* (...)" (p. 181), highlighting its fundamentally relational character. Witnessing does not require agreement or correction; it requires presence, attentiveness, and recognition.

Through witnessing, individuals receive indications that their emerging storylines are intelligible and resonant within a shared relational world. This recognition may be subtle, an expression of empathy, a reflective comment, a sense of being understood, or it may take more structured forms. Regardless of form, witnessing supports individuals in feeling that their alternative understandings are both plausible and socially situated. This process contributes to what can be understood as a social ecology of meaning. Narrative shifts are not solely individual acts but relational achievements sustained through interaction. When preferred stories are met with acknowledgement, curiosity, or resonance, their emotional and social viability increases. They become not only private interpretations but shared understandings, enabling individuals to inhabit these narratives with greater confidence and coherence.

In contexts where people reflect on masculinities, witnessing can support the emergence of storylines that broaden relational possibilities. Recognition from others can help individuals experience alternative ways of being as legitimate, not because they have replaced dominant expectations, but because they have been affirmed within a relational community. Witnessing therefore plays a key role in how narrative transformations take root. It provides the relational grounding through which preferred identities become more stable, meaningful, and socially supported.

2.1.5 Healthy Masculinities through Narrative Practice

Within the framework of Narrative Practice, healthy masculinities may be understood not as fixed traits or stable categories but as relationally negotiated and continually evolving storylines (White, 2007). Masculinities, in this orientation, are approached as narrative landscapes shaped through cultural meaning-making, interpersonal

recognition, and ongoing interpretation rather than as inherent psychological entities (White, 2007). Healthy masculinities therefore refer to the ways men interpret themselves through stories that align with their preferred values, relational commitments, and intentions for living.

Rather than being defined in advance, healthy masculinities emerge when individuals gain interpretive space to articulate narratives that feel more resonant and less constrained by dominant cultural expectations. White (2007) emphasises that preferred storylines are developed through "(...) *reflective and intentional re-authoring of one's lived experience* (...) " (p. 5), suggesting that such developments take shape gradually and relationally. These storylines may foreground care, responsibility, integrity, mutuality, relational presence, or emotional attentiveness, not as prescriptive ideals but as expressions of what men find meaningful within the contexts of their own lives.

Externalisation can contribute to this process by loosening the grip of internalised narratives that have become taken-for-granted (White, 2007). Re-authoring further supports individuals in identifying and elaborating moments that fall outside restricting storylines, what White calls "*unique outcomes*" (2007, p. 5). Witnessing provides the social grounding through which these emerging narratives gain coherence and emotional viability, as others "(...) *acknowledge and respond to the preferred stories people are shaping* (...)" (White, 2007, p. 181).

Taken together, these interpretive processes suggest that healthy masculinities can be understood as fluid, plural, and context-dependent. Such masculinities are performed through relational practices, shaped through dialogue, and co-authored within communities that invite reflection, resonance, and recognition (White, 2007). Rather than describing a singular form of masculinity, this narrative orientation

emphasises the multiplicity of ways men may inhabit their lives meaningfully when supported by relational contexts that affirm diverse possibilities for being.

2.2 Putnam's Social Capital Perspective

Putnam's (1994; 2000) Social Capital Theory offers a structural and relational orientation for understanding how networks, trust, and shared participation support cooperative life. Unlike psychological frameworks that locate wellbeing within individual traits or capacities, Social Capital Theory interprets relational life as a pattern of meaningful interactions sustained by shared norms, expectations, and practices. In this orientation, communities flourish not simply because individuals possess goodwill, but because relational environments are organised in ways that make cooperation, reliability, and care possible.

Within the context of this study, Social Capital Theory provides a conceptual vocabulary for exploring the relational conditions that may support the development of healthy masculinities within The Men's Table (TMT). It illuminates how routine practices, arriving consistently, listening attentively, respecting confidentiality, sharing meals, may gradually form the relational infrastructure through which belonging, trust, and mutual responsibility become possible. This section introduces the ontological and epistemological commitments that underpin Social Capital Theory, followed by an elaboration of its view of the individual and agency. It then outlines key mechanisms that will later inform the interpretation of the empirical material, concluding with an understanding of healthy masculinities grounded in Putnam's theoretical perspective.

2.2.1 Ontological Positioning: Relational Patterns, Emerging Structures, and Durability

Ontologically, Social Capital Theory may be understood as beginning from the premise that relational life is socially constituted. Trust, reciprocity, and civic norms are described not as inner dispositions but as patterns that emerge through shared practices and expectations (Fine, 2010). In this sense, the theory can be interpreted as incorporating elements of social constructionism by assuming that relational forms arise through collective meaning-making rather than individual psychology.

At the same time, Social Capital Theory may be read as adopting a form of structural realism. The relational patterns it describes, such as trust networks, reciprocal norms, or participation routines, are treated as sufficiently stable and recurring to be observed, interpreted, and compared across settings (Putnam, 1994; 2000). This does not imply that such structures exist independently of human activity. Rather, it suggests that repeated social practices crystallise into patterns that behave as if they possess a degree of durability, making them available for examination and interpretation (Blaikie, 2007).

These patterned configurations may be understood as exerting influence by shaping the opportunities individuals have for cooperation, belonging, and participation. Through consistent relational practices, social expectations begin to solidify into communal norms that guide how people interact, what they anticipate from others, and how they interpret their own place within the collective.

Within this ontological frame, social capital becomes a way of conceptualising how shared expectations and relational routines coalesce into broader social structures. These structures can be seen as emergent from, yet partially enduring

beyond, individual moments of interaction, allowing them to be treated as meaningful units of analysis for understanding community life and collective wellbeing.

2.2.2 Epistemological Positioning: Indicators, Patterns, and the Pragmatics of Observation

Epistemologically, Social Capital Theory may be understood as grounded in a pragmatically positivistic orientation in which systematic observation and empirical indicators serve as approximations of relational life. Trust, belonging, or participation are translated into measurable proxies that allow patterns to be examined across groups and contexts (Putnam, 1994; 2000). This approach does not assume that indicators capture reality in any absolute sense. Rather, they function as practical tools that illuminate tendencies within the relational fabric of a community.

Within this epistemic stance, constructs are interpreted not as definitive representations but as analytic devices that approximate broader social processes. Indicators such as participation rates, perceived reciprocity, or levels of trust are used to trace how relational patterns manifest at a collective level. The epistemological task becomes one of discerning regularities that shed light on variation in cooperation, engagement, or collective wellbeing.

Social Capital Theory also distinguishes between structural and cognitive dimensions of relational life. The structural dimension refers to visible networks, patterns of participation, and routine practices, while the cognitive dimension refers to shared expectations, perceived trust, and normative orientations (Putnam, 1994; 2000). These dimensions may be understood as offering complementary vantage points for examining relational life. Structural indicators reveal how people are

connected; cognitive indicators illuminate the meanings and expectations that sustain these connections.

Knowledge within this orientation is approached through methodological rigour, clarity in operationalisation, and careful interpretation of observed patterns. At the same time, these patterns are understood as embedded in broader social and cultural contexts (Bryman, 2016; Blaikie, 2007). Validity therefore resides not in objective truth but in the coherence and contextual sensitivity of the interpretations drawn from these indicators.

2.2.3 The Individual and Agency: Embedded Participation and Relational Possibility

Within Social Capital Theory, the individual may be conceptualised as embedded within networks of trust, reciprocity, and shared norms rather than as an isolated agent. The person is understood as participating in relational configurations that shape their opportunities for connection, cooperation, and engagement (Putnam, 1994). In this orientation, wellbeing and social participation become inseparable from the relational structures within which individuals are situated.

Agency, from this perspective, is interpreted as the capacity to act meaningfully within relational environments. It becomes visible through behaviours such as contributing to shared activities, engaging in reciprocal exchanges, or upholding communal expectations that sustain trust and cooperation. These acts are not seen merely as personal decisions but as relational contributions that reinforce the wider social fabric.

This framing suggests that development becomes possible when individuals have access to stable relational environments that support participation, reliability, and mutual care. Agency is strengthened through repeated practices of engagement, small acts that deepen relational ties, affirm shared norms, and contribute to the maintenance of social capital.

Within this conceptual horizon, the individual becomes someone whose capacity for action is shaped by the density, durability, and reciprocity of the networks they inhabit. Agency is therefore enacted through participation in relational configurations that support cooperation, belonging, and community wellbeing.

2.2.4 Core Social Capital Mechanisms and Structural Forces

The following conceptual mechanisms may be understood as unfolding central aspects of Social Capital Theory. Each mechanism offers interpretive resources for considering how relational life is shaped within social environments. Rather than functioning as causal explanations, these mechanisms can be viewed as sensitising concepts that illuminate how participation, trust, reciprocity, and shared expectations gradually take on patterned forms. Together, they may be interpreted as sketching a structural and cultural horizon through which contemporary experiences of connection, belonging, and care can be approached. These mechanisms may also be understood as interdependent: trust supports participation, participation reinforces norms, and reciprocity strengthens networks, gradually creating what Putnam (1994) describes as a self-reinforcing relational ecology (p. 10).

2.2.4.1 Trust as an Emergent Relational Expectation

Trust may be understood as a foundational relational expectation that arises gradually through repeated experiences of reliability, care, and mutual recognition. Putnam (1994) describes trust not as a fixed psychological trait but as something that takes shape within social networks over time, emerging from patterns of behaviour that signal dependability and respect. When individuals repeatedly encounter situations in which others keep their word, uphold confidentiality, or act with goodwill, a form of anticipatory confidence develops. This expectation can be interpreted as lowering the social and emotional cost of engagement, allowing participation to feel less risky and more meaningful.

Through this lens, trust becomes a slowly sedimented expectation embedded in communal routines rather than an attribute located within any individual. It can be read as a cultural and relational product, shaped by broader social contexts and reinforced through stable patterns of interaction. As trust accumulates, it subtly transforms the relational landscape, making certain forms of openness, cooperation, and connection feel increasingly legitimate and possible. In this sense, trust operates as a kind of background condition that enables communal life to unfold with greater depth and continuity.

2.2.4.2 Reciprocity as a Cooperative Rhythm of Mutual Contribution

Reciprocity may be interpreted as the relational rhythm through which social life is sustained. Putnam (1994) emphasises that reciprocal behaviour emerges not from formal agreement but from the tacit expectation that acts of goodwill will, in some form, be returned. This expectation can be understood as infusing everyday

interactions with a sense of mutual responsibility. Over time, small gestures of support, attentiveness, or reliability accumulate and create a shared moral ecology in which people come to understand themselves as part of a network of mutual contribution.

This rhythm of giving and receiving is not transactional; it is relational. It reflects a broader interpretive framework in which cooperation is experienced as natural, meaningful, and aligned with shared norms. Through this ongoing exchange, individuals may come to experience a degree of relational accountability: a sense that their actions matter to others and that they, in turn, can rely on the care and consideration of those around them. Reciprocity thus functions as one of the central mechanisms through which social cohesion is enacted and sustained.

2.2.4.3 Networks, Bonding, and Bridging as Relational Configurations

Networks may be understood as the patterned relationships through which people become connected to one another. Putnam (1994; 2000) interprets networks as the structural backbone of social capital, the conduits through which trust, norms, and reciprocity circulate. These networks are not static; they are continually shaped and reshaped by participation.

Within this framework, two relational configurations become particularly salient: bonding and bridging (Putnam, 2000). Bonding ties may be understood as inward-facing connections characterised by familiarity, emotional depth, and a sense of shared identity. They often provide strong forms of belonging, continuity, and support. Bridging ties, by contrast, connect individuals across lines of difference (Putnam, 2000). They expand the relational reach of a community, enabling cooperation across diverse social, cultural, or demographic boundaries.

These distinctions can be interpreted as highlighting the relational textures that shape communal life. Bonding provides stability and cohesion, while bridging fosters openness and adaptability (Putnam, 2000). Together, they form a relational ecology in which individuals have access to both the comfort of familiarity and the generative possibilities of broader connection. Networks, in this orientation, are not simply collections of relationships but dynamic relational structures that influence how participation, trust, and cooperation are enacted within a community.

2.2.4.4 Norms as Cultural Expectations Guiding Relational Life

Putnam (1994) can be understood as emphasising that norms, shared expectations about behaviour, form a crucial component of social capital. Norms may be understood as providing a cultural scaffold that guides how people participate in relational life. They signal what forms of engagement are appropriate, valued, or expected within a community.

These norms are rarely codified. Instead, they are learned informally through observation and participation. Putnam (2000) suggests that when norms supportive of cooperation prevail, they make collective action more likely by providing predictability and moral grounding. Norms thus create the interpretive frame within which social life is organised, shaping how individuals approach responsibility, cooperation, and care.

Norms are dynamic rather than fixed. They evolve as social conditions shift, and they can widen or narrow the emotional and relational possibilities available to individuals. Through this interpretive lens, norms help illuminate how relational life

takes shape in specific cultural contexts and why cooperation may thrive in some environments while declining in others.

2.2.4.5 Accumulation and Erosion as Structural Dynamics of Relational Life

Putnam (1994) suggests that "(…) *stocks of social capital, such as trust, norms, and networks, tend to be self-reinforcing and cumulative* (…)" (p. 10). Cooperative behaviour, once established, generates virtuous cycles: trust supports participation, participation strengthens norms, and norms reinforce trust. This cumulative dynamic may be interpreted as forming an ecology of connection, a relational environment in which cooperation becomes increasingly natural, expected, and valued.

Conversely, Putnam (2000) documents how late-modern social conditions, rising mobility, individualisation, time scarcity, and declining community involvement, can contribute to erosion (pp. 27–28). He describes this as a thinning of relational fabric in which trust wanes and participation fragments. This erosion can be understood as creating what might be termed a relational paradox: individuals may experience a longing for closeness alongside discomfort with dependence. Loneliness, in this view, is not merely an individual feeling but a structural symptom of weakened relational infrastructures. He describes this as a thinning of relational fabric in which trust declines, norms weaken, and participation becomes less stable. Erosion may be understood not as the absence of goodwill but as the structural weakening of the conditions that typically sustain it.

Accumulation and erosion can thus be understood as offering interpretive frames for considering how relational environments are strengthened or destabilised over time (Putnam, 1994; 2000). These dynamics are not deterministic but highlight

the structural fragility of social life and the conditions that support or hinder communal wellbeing.

2.2.4.6 Participation as Relational Practice and Structural Contribution

Participation is repeatedly emphasised by Putnam (1994; 2000) as a defining component of social capital. It may be understood as the relational practice through which networks are created, sustained, and renewed. Participation involves more than being physically present. Participation involves more than physical presence: it encompasses reliability, engagement, and attentiveness to shared expectations. Putnam (1994) argues that participation expresses and reinforces communal norms, signalling commitment to the group and strengthening the relational structures that enable cooperation.

Over time, patterned acts of participation accumulate into a stable relational rhythm, shaping how individuals understand themselves in relation to others. Participation can be interpreted not merely as behaviour but as a form of civic virtue, a habitual practice through which individuals contribute to the maintenance of communal life (Putnam, 2000, pp. 335–336). Through this lens, participation becomes a relational act of responsibility and care, a way of inhabiting social life by supporting the networks that sustain it.

2.2.5 Healthy Masculinities through Putnam's Social Capital Perspective

Within the horizon of Social Capital Theory, healthy masculinities may be understood as relational enactments that contribute to the stability and flourishing of networks grounded in trust, reciprocity, and shared responsibility (Putnam, 1994). Masculinities,

in this perspective, can be understood as being performed through patterns of engagement rather than through inner traits or psychological attributes. They emerge through the structural conditions that make cooperation, reliability, and care possible.

Putnam's work (1994; 2000) suggests that relational environments characterised by predictable routines, mutual recognition, and cooperative norms create fertile conditions for the development of such masculinities. Healthy masculinities may therefore be understood as plural, context-dependent, and cumulatively shaped through participation in relational practices that reinforce communal wellbeing. These practices may include consistency, attentiveness, confidentiality, and the willingness to contribute to shared life.

From this interpretive vantage point, the development of healthy masculinities is gradual. It emerges through ongoing participation in networks that encourage responsibility, reciprocity, and care. Over time, such participation becomes embodied as a relational habit, allowing masculinities to be expressed not as adherence to fixed ideals but as contributions to the social fabric that make communal life possible. Healthy masculinities thus become visible as relational achievements shaped through repeated engagement in supportive environments that sustain trust, belonging, and mutual care.

2.3 Developing Healthy Masculinities: A Mixed Methods Analysis: The Men's Table Perspective (2024;2025)

This section outlines the methodological foundation guiding the study and clarifies how the empirical material from the Have Your Say (HYS) surveys are brought into dialogue with the theoretical perspectives introduced in Sections 2.1–2.2. Because healthy masculinities are approached here as relational, interpretive, and context-dependent practices, the methodological design similarly seeks to attend to both meaning-making and structural tendencies. The material may be understood as drawn from two consecutive HYS surveys conducted by The Men's Table (TMT) in 2024 and 2025. Owing to changes in survey structure between the two years, the study adopts a repeated cross-sectional design (Bryman, 2016; Field, 2018), allowing two snapshots of the same organisational environment to be interpreted in continuity.

2.3.1 Ethical and Data Use Considerations

This study is based on secondary analysis of anonymised organisational survey data generated through The Men's Table's annual *Have Your Say* surveys (2024; 2025). The author did not collect the data and received only de-identified datasets for analysis as part of a Master's internship placement. All procedures adhered to The Men's Table's data-governance framework, under which participants provided informed consent for their anonymised responses to be used for research, evaluation, and organisational communication purposes. No clinical, therapeutic, or interventional activities were conducted. Administrative or incomplete responses were excluded prior to analysis. A more detailed ethics and data statement is provided in Section 6.3. To ensure transparency, data are cited as (HYS, 2024) or (HYS, 2025) for single-year material and (HYS, 2024; 2025) when findings are drawn on both datasets. The following

subsections describe the author's positionality, the empirical corpus, and the methodological orientation guiding the analysis.

2.3.2 Author Context and Perspective: A Situated Interpretation

The author's position may be understood as both involved and interpretively distanced. As a Danish Master's student in Psychology undertaking a research placement with TMT in Sydney, the author brings a European academic background, a non-native English voice, and a gendered standpoint distinct from the men represented in the dataset. This positionality aligns with reflexive methodological traditions (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Finlay, 2002), which emphasise that interpretation is shaped by the researcher's cultural, linguistic, and disciplinary context.

This vantage point may be regarded as both enriching and limiting. Cultural distance can render certain relational dynamics more visible, while non-membership introduces interpretive constraints. The analysis is therefore approached as a dialogue between insider familiarity, developed through immersion in the organisation, and outsider perspective grounded in social-constructionist sensibilities (Burr, 2015; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The findings presented later are thus understood as situated interpretations shaped by the author, the participants, and the organisational environment in which the HYS material was produced.

2.3.3 Empirical Foundation

The empirical foundation of this study may be understood as emerging from The Men's Table's annual *Have Your Say* (HYS) surveys, which function primarily as

evaluation and feedback instruments. Their purpose is to invite members' reflections on belonging, connection, well-being, and the perceived impact of participation within and beyond the Tables. Although not originally designed as academic research tools, the surveys' openness, breadth, and narrative richness render them particularly suitable for interpretive scholarly analysis. In this sense, the material can be viewed as an example of participatory evaluation, where data collection simultaneously forms part of the organisation's ongoing reflective practice (Patton, 2015; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

Across 2024 and 2025, the dataset comprises 2,056 respondents (N = 994; N = 1,062). The surveys combine structured quantitative items with extensive open-text responses, enabling attention both to patterned tendencies and to the lived meanings men attribute to their experiences within TMT. Quantitative items span nominal, ordinal, and ratio scales, capturing indicators such as trust, belonging, participation, and perceived well-being, while qualitative responses provide insight into identity, relational life, and shifting constructions of masculinity. Administrative responses (e.g., contact information and consent) were excluded to maintain analytic focus on participants' experiential accounts.

Because the survey instruments evolved between years, the material is approached as a repeated cross-sectional corpus (Bryman, 2016; Field, 2018). This design allows interpretations of temporal tendencies without presuming the stability of individual trajectories. Taken together, the two surveys provide a substantial evidence base for mixed-methods analysis within a non-clinical community context, offering complementary perspectives on how men make sense of connection, relational practice, and healthy masculinities within The Men's Table.

2.3.4 Research Design and the Evolving Have Your Say Instrument (2024-2025)

2.3.4.1 2024 Survey Overview

The 2024 survey comprised 25 items: 17 structured quantitative questions (Likert-type, Yes/No, and categorical multi-select formats) and 8 open-ended prompts. The central qualitative question "*What is healthy masculinity for you?*" elicited 819 responses and became the cornerstone of this analysis. Responses addressed topics such as well-being, communication, relationships, and help-seeking, providing an interpretive window into how men understood and performed masculinity within the Table context. Demographic information, including age, cultural background, and membership duration, was collected via open-text input fields, allowing for contextual interpretation and attention to diversity.

2.3.4.2 2025 Survey Revisions and Expansions

The 2025 survey expanded to 39 items and was methodologically refined to enhance coherence and comparability. The ordering of questions was altered to improve flow, and several previously open-ended questions were converted to structured formats to enable quantitative trend analysis (Dillman et al., 2014). New demographic categories were added to capture men's participation in multiple Tables or community groups, reflecting TMT's broader interest in how social networks contribute to well-being. A central innovation was the mixed-methods validation statement developed through the analysis of responses to the 2024 central qualitative question:

> *"A healthy version of what it means to be a man includes men being able to openly express care for themselves, other men, their families and their communities."*

Respondents rated their agreement on a Likert scale and then elaborated through two follow-up questions. Together, these produced approximately 1,400 narrative responses (810 to the first follow-up and 607 to the second, with some participants responding to both), thereby linking quantitative consensus with interpretive depth. Additional quantitative items were introduced to measure care, loneliness, role modelling, and community impact, while demographic questions were standardised into categorical bins (e.g., age ranges, ethnicity options).

Taken together, the 2024 and 2025 surveys may be understood as an evolving corpus reflecting both organisational learning and cultural change. The first survey provided an exploratory mapping of how men within TMT described healthy masculinities; the second served as a confirmatory and expansive iteration, validating and deepening those insights. Viewed in continuity, these surveys document a movement toward greater reflexivity, inclusion, and relational awareness within TMT, illustrating how evaluation itself can function as a mechanism of shared learning and cultural transformation (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

2.3.5 Mixed Methods Eclecticism: A Theory-Driven Approach

A mixed-methods design was selected not to triangulate toward a singular truth but because the research questions concern both meaning and structure. Healthy masculinities, as approached in this study, may be understood as involving interpretive processes, identity, narrative, and reflexivity alongside relational and structural conditions such as participation, belonging, and reciprocity. A mixed-methods orientation therefore offers a way of engaging this complexity without reducing one dimension to the other, allowing qualitative meaning-making and

quantitative tendencies to be interpreted as complementary expressions of the same phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2014).

2.3.5.1 Methodological Orientation

The methodological foundation of this study may be understood as eclectic in design and theory-driven (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018; Morgan, 2014). Rather than positioning qualitative and quantitative approaches in a hierarchical relation, each is treated as illuminating different dimensions of the phenomenon. Quantitative material provides an overview of patterned tendencies in trust, belonging, and participation, while qualitative analysis offers insight into how men articulate, interpret, and negotiate these experiences in their own terms (Braun & Clarke, 2006; White, 2007; Putnam, 1994).

This orientation proceeds from the assumption that findings necessarily remain situated and partial. The aim is not to reconcile divergent epistemological traditions but to hold them in constructive dialogue, allowing the phenomenon to be examined from multiple, compatible angles. Mixed methods are thus understood as offering a layered perspective in which structural tendencies and interpretive accounts can be read alongside one another without reducing one to the other.

2.3.5.2 Methodological Eclecticism and Integration

The integration of these paradigms is not intended to fuse their ontologies or resolve their epistemological differences. Rather, it reflects an explicitly interpretive choice by the author to use each framework for what it can illuminate. Narrative Practice offers a lens for examining how men make sense of their experiences and narrate change,

while Social Capital Theory highlights the relational structures that make such meaning-making possible.

While grounded in different assumptions, both perspectives attend to relational processes that appeared central within the HYS material. Each provides conceptual resources for understanding how men describe emotional, relational, and identity-related change within communal settings. The decision to use them together is therefore pragmatic and hermeneutic: the author's reasoning is that healthy masculinities at The Men's Table cannot be understood adequately through either structural patterns alone or narrative meaning alone.

Quantitative findings are interpreted through the structural lens of social capital, participation, trust, belonging, while qualitative findings are read through the narrative–constructionist lens to explore how men articulate, negotiate, and re-author these experiences in situ. The two strands are held in dialogue, informing and expanding each other, without aiming for synthesis. This methodological eclecticism acknowledges that healthy masculinities emerge at the intersection of story and structure, and that both perspectives are needed to appreciate the relational subtleties present in the men's accounts.

2.3.6 Thematic Analysis Process

2.3.6.1 Analytic Orientation

The qualitative analysis employed a Reflexive Thematic Analysis approach (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2017), which allows for flexibility and depth in interpreting complex meanings. The process is understood here as iterative, interpretive, and situated rather than mechanical, recognising that the researcher

plays an active role in constructing themes (Finlay, 2002; Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017). This aligns with the social constructionist orientation of the study, where meaning is regarded as co-created through language, context, and reflexive engagement rather than objectively discovered.

2.3.6.2 Data Foundation

The data analysed stem from open-ended responses in the *Have Your Say* surveys conducted by *The Men's Table*. The 2024 dataset included 819 responses to the prompt, "*What is healthy masculinity for you?*", while the 2025 dataset, with 1,062 respondents, expanded this with mixed-methods validation items, such as "*A healthy version of what it means to be a man includes men being able to openly express care for themselves, other men, their families and their communities*." Participants' reflections, such as "*Being honest when I'm low helps others feel they can too*" (HYS, 2024) or "*It's about being able to talk without judgement*" (HYS, 2025) illustrate both individual transformation and shared social negotiation of what *healthy masculinities* can mean.

2.3.6.3 Semantic and Latent Levels of Interpretation

The analytic process moved fluidly between semantic and latent levels of interpretation (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At the *semantic level*, attention was directed toward the explicit content of participants' language, what was directly said and how ideas were expressed. For instance, statements like "*showing up for each other*" (HYS, 2025) were understood as descriptions of dependable action and interpersonal care. At the *latent level*, attention turned to the underlying assumptions and cultural discourses shaping those expressions. This deeper reading asked what these accounts reveal about broader constructions of masculinities, such as the gradual

redefinition of strength away from stoicism toward relational accountability, care, and emotional literacy. Together, these two levels allowed the analysis to move between surface meaning and underlying cultural logic, thereby capturing both what men say and how they reproduce or resist dominant masculine discourses in their meaning-making.

In approaching the qualitative material, particular attention was given to diversity and inclusion rather than frequency or majority consensus. The analysis was guided by the assumption that less common accounts are not deviations but meaningful variations that contribute to the collective interpretive landscape (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Silverman, 2020). This orientation may be understood as aligning both with TMT's ethos and with qualitative traditions that treat diversity as a marker of analytic richness and authenticity (Nowell et al., 2017; Terry et al., 2017). Accordingly, the thematic development privileged nuance, plurality, and divergence, recognising that healthy masculinities are expressed in multiple, context-dependent ways.

2.3.6.4 Recursive Analytic Process

The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six recursive phases. Familiarisation involved repeatedly reading the data to grasp tone, emphasis, and relational positioning, paying attention not only to content but also to how participants situated themselves in relation to others (White, 2007). Coding was conducted inductively, attending to both manifest and latent meaning. For example, "*being honest when I'm low*" (HYS, 2024) was coded as *emotional disclosure*, while "*my father never said 'I love you'*" (HYS, 2024) was coded as *legacy of silence*, reflecting inherited scripts of restraint. During Theme Generation, related codes were conceptually clustered into potential thematic domains, such as *emotional strength*, *authentic connection*, and *care through*

community. These clusters were not treated as static categories but as interpretive tools for exploring meaning.

Review and Refinement involved returning to the dataset to assess whether the developing themes coherently represented participants' voices and the theoretical framework. Definition and Naming required analytic depth: each theme was rearticulated to reflect its conceptual essence. For instance, "*emotional strength*" evolved into *Emotional Literacy as a New Strength* to indicate a shift from traditional endurance toward emotional competence as a valued practice. Finally, during Interpretive Synthesis, the qualitative insights were woven together with the quantitative findings (HYS, 2025) to develop a multidimensional understanding of *healthy masculinities*, one that connects lived experience with measurable tendencies such as trust, belonging, and care.

2.3.6.5 Created Themes and Interpretation

Through this process, six interrelated themes were developed: The Burden of the Silent Past: Rejecting a Traditional Legacy; Emotional Literacy as a New Strength; The Quest for Authenticity and Self-Acceptance; Recasting Relational Rules: From Dominance to Deep Connection; Care as a Relational Practice of Masculinities; and The Intergenerational Call: Mentorship and Societal Contribution. These themes collectively trace how men at The Men's Table re-narrate their experiences and co-create plural, context-dependent understandings of masculinities grounded in care, connection, and accountability. Thematic analysis thus served not only as a descriptive tool but as a reflective framework for understanding meaning-making. It illuminated how narratives of masculinities are performed, re-negotiated, and

re-valued within a communal setting where care and authenticity become socially legitimate practices (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025; White, 2007).

2.3.7 Quantitative Data Analysis

2.3.7.1 Analytic Orientation and Theoretical Grounding

The quantitative component of this study was guided by Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1994) and conducted as a descriptive and interpretive exploration rather than a predictive or inferential exercise. This approach aligns with the study's pluralistic methodological orientation, where numerical patterns are treated as contextual indicators rather than as objective truths (Bryman, 2016; Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The aim was to illustrate tendencies and structures of connection, trust, and belonging among participants of The Men's Table, recognising that such data reflect social dynamics rather than fixed psychological states.

2.3.7.2 Data Sources and Structure

The data derive from the 2024 (N = 994) and 2025 (N = 1,062) Have Your Say surveys. Quantitative items were primarily Likert-type and categorical questions exploring well-being, care, and community participation. In 2025, the statement "A healthy version of what it means to be a man includes men being able to openly express care for themselves, other men, their families and their communities" served as a central indicator of participants' endorsement of care and emotional expression. Men rated their agreement on a five-point scale, producing a quantifiable snapshot of attitudes toward healthy masculinities (HYS, 2025).

2.3.7.3 Descriptive Statistical Approach

Descriptive statistics were used to summarise overall tendencies and variation in responses. Central tendency (mean, X¯X¯) and variability (variance, s2s2, and standard deviation, ss) were calculated to capture general distributions while recognising that the meaning of such distributions remains context-dependent. The organisational team provided cleaned response counts and percentages, which were interpreted here as illustrative tendencies within the community rather than as definitive population estimates.

2.3.7.4 Quantitative Analysis as Structural Context

Three types of measurement scales structured the analysis. *Nominal scales* captured demographic composition (e.g., age group, cultural background, sexual orientation). *Ordinal scales*, such as five-point Likert statements, measured attitudes toward care, trust, and help-seeking, including key items like "*I feel a sense of belonging at my Table*" and "*I am comfortable showing care to other men*" (HYS, 2025). *Ratio scales* were applied to continuous data such as membership duration or age, allowing observation of proportional patterns within the sample.

The quantitative findings may be interpreted as suggesting an overall strengthening of social capital between 2024 and 2025. Agreement with statements related to care, authenticity, and belonging increased modestly across surveys, while self-reported comfort in expressing emotions also rose (HYS, 2025). In light of *Social Capital Theory*, these tendencies can be read as reflections of both structural cohesion (the durability of Tables and participation) and cognitive trust (shared norms of reciprocity and reliability). Such regularities may be seen as signalling the gradual

embedding of what Putnam (1994) calls "*networks of civic virtue*," recontextualised here within a gendered and relational domain.

In the broader mixed-methods design, the quantitative data serve as a *structural counterpart* to the narrative findings. While the thematic analysis (Section 1.4.6) examined how men *describe* and *reimagine* masculinities, the quantitative analysis helps visualise how these transformations manifest across the wider organisational landscape. The numbers therefore function as contextual signposts, indicating where and how shared norms of care, connection, and belonging have become embedded in the community's collective life (Putnam, 1994; HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). Taken together, the descriptive patterns provide empirical grounding for the interpretive claim that *The Men's Table* fosters environments in which men can reconfigure masculinities through participation, trust, and mutual care. Rather than evidencing universal truths, these numerical tendencies may be interpreted as markers of evolving social cohesion and of *healthy masculinities* performed in and through relational practice.

2.3.8 Trustworthiness and Rigour

Given the interpretive nature of the study and the author's declared positionality (Section 1.4.1), trustworthiness was prioritised over traditional notions of validity (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The purpose was not to claim objectivity but to ensure transparency, coherence, and reflexive accountability throughout the research process (Alvesson & Sköldberg, 2017; Finlay, 2002). Credibility was enhanced through immersion in the data, systematic coding, and iterative comparison across the two survey years. Dependability and confirmability were supported through detailed audit trails and alignment between theoretical orientation and analytical choices.

Triangulation within the mixed-methods design further supported interpretive robustness, allowing patterns emerging from quantitative data to be examined in light of participants' lived narratives. In this sense, *rigour* is understood as relational and interpretive: it resides not in replication but in the integrity of interpretation and the faithfulness with which participants' meanings are represented within the theoretical frameworks guiding the study (White, 2007; Crotty, 1998).

Part 3: Analysis

This part presents the empirical analysis of The Men's Table (TMT) data collected through the *Have Your Say* (HYS) surveys in 2024 and 2025. The analysis is organised into two complementary sections that reflect the study's mixed-methods and theoretically eclectic orientation. Section 3.1 examines the *quantitative* data, focusing on measurable indicators of participation, belonging, and trust, guided by *Putnam's* (1994) *Social Capital Theory*. Section 3.2 turns to the *qualitative* material, analysed through *White's* (2007) *Narrative Practice* focusing on how men interpret, articulate, and re-author their experiences of care, vulnerability, and connection. Together, these two analytic perspectives reveal both the *architecture* and the *texture* of change within The Men's Table: the structural conditions that make transformation possible, and the narrative processes through which men come to recognise and inhabit those possibilities.

3.1 Quantitative Analysis: Participation, Trust, and the Regeneration of Social Capital

The following section interprets the quantitative data from the HYS surveys (2024; 2025) through the lens of Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 1994, 2000). Here, numerical patterns are not treated as neutral facts but as indicators of broader relational currents within an individualised cultural landscape. From this theoretical standpoint, the descriptive statistics can be read as traces of how men build bonding capital (close, trust-based ties), bridging capital (connections across meaningful differences), and, tentatively, linking capital (relationships that connect individuals to institutions or formal support systems). The purpose of the analysis is therefore not to generalise to populations but to interpret the emerging distributions as expressions of civic and

relational life within TMT, and as contextual conditions that shape how healthy masculinities may be practiced.

3.1.1 Membership Profile: The Social Architecture of Connection

The demographic patterns across the 2024 and 2025 HYS surveys offer a tentative indication of the social landscape from which men enter The Men's Table. From a Putnamian perspective (1994, 2000), such patterns can be read not as deterministic predictors of behaviour but as contextual markers that shape the possibilities for how relational ties may be built, sustained, or reconfigured within a contemporary associational setting. Rather than treating demographic variables as fixed attributes, this analysis interprets them as elements of a broader social architecture that conditions the forms of social capital men are able to mobilise or regenerate.

3.1.1.1 Age Distribution and Life-Course Patterns

Across both datasets, The Men's Table (TMT) presents a remarkably stable age profile. In 2024, the mean age was 57.06 years (SD = 13.06, Variance = 170.69), spanning men aged 23 to 90 (HYS, 2024). The 2025 distribution consolidates this tendency, with 81.26% of members positioned between ages 46 and 75 (HYS, 2025). Younger members remain sparse, with only 1.26% aged 26–35 and 0.11% aged 18–25.

From a theoretically interpretive standpoint, such an age distribution may be read as reflecting a particular moment in the life course when established relational routines, family responsibilities, workplace communities, civic clubs, may be undergoing change or loosening. Putnam (2000) suggests that later adulthood can be accompanied by shifts in habitual associational life, potentially creating openings for new relational forms. In this light, the Tables may function as a contemporary

communal structure that resonates with men seeking renewed forms of connection during periods characterised by re-orientation rather than expansion.

The relatively low variability in the 2025 categorical distribution (with older age brackets consistently dominating) suggests a stable demographic pattern rather than a short-term fluctuation. Interpreted cautiously, this demographic profile may reflect a desire among older men for renewed relational embeddedness at a life stage where individualisation is often experienced most acutely.

The minimal representation of younger men could be understood as reflecting broader generational shifts in participation, echoing Putnam's (2000) observation that younger cohorts tend to rely less on in-person associational life. This makes the Tables' ability to retain older participants particularly notable, as it may indicate a form of civic re-engagement emerging later in adulthood. Putnam's (1994) notion of embeddedness is relevant here: networks are most generative when individuals feel securely located within a stable relational environment. The Tables appear to provide such embeddedness by offering routine, predictable meetings in which obligations and expectations of mutual support gradually take shape. These expectations function not as demands but as informal social norms that help sustain participation and trust over time.

3.1.1.2 Education and Employment Status

The 2025 survey reveals a highly educated cohort, with 25.37% holding postgraduate qualifications and 24.21% holding bachelor's degrees (HYS, 2025). Employment patterns further point toward demographic stability: 43.26% work full-time, while 30.53% are retired.

While education is often associated with civic engagement (Putnam, 1994), it does not necessarily guarantee relational embeddedness. Several qualitative

reflections, such as "*successful but disconnected*," and "*lonely despite achievement*" (HYS, 2024), suggest that formal competence and lived connection do not always develop in parallel. Within this framework, TMT may be interpreted as offering a space where human capital is accompanied by opportunities to cultivate relational capital, understood here as trust-based ties, shared norms, and emotional reciprocity.

Rather than drawing firm conclusions, it may be more appropriate to view the educational and occupational patterns as indicators of a group that possesses the skills to participate in collective life yet may be seeking more stable, emotionally resonant forms of association. Participation in TMT could thus be understood as a tentative shift from instrumental to expressive forms of social engagement, where connection is pursued for meaning rather than function.

3.1.1.3 Ethnic and Cultural Composition

Quantitatively, the 2025 sample appears relatively homogeneous: 83.03% of members identify as Caucasian, 4.53% as Asian, and 0.95% as Indigenous Australian (HYS, 2025). However, qualitative self-descriptions in 2024 reveal a more complex interpretive landscape, including identifiers such as "*Italian-Australian,*" "*White Privileged Male*," "*Indian*," "*Human*," and "*Homo Sapiens*" (HYS, 2024). This juxtaposition suggests that while the demographic composition is statistically concentrated, members articulate their identities in ways that reflect a diverse awareness of culture, history, and positionality.

Within Putnam's (1994) typology, this pattern could be understood as indicating strong bonding capital, trust built through shared demographic characteristics, but also the emergence of bridging capital, visible in the reflexive and sometimes critical ways participants describe their identities. The presence of self-reflexive identifiers

(e.g., "*White Privileged Male*") may signal a form of growing civic consciousness, consistent with Putnam's (1994) suggestion that awareness of one's social position can support broader participatory engagement. The combination of demographic homogeneity and cognitive heterogeneity suggests that TMT may be fostering a relational environment in which cultural similarity coexists with increasing moral and interpretive openness.

3.1.1.4 Sexual Orientation and Inclusive Belonging

In 2024, 87.59% of respondents identified as heterosexual, with 7.86% identifying as bisexual, gay, another identity, or preferring not to say (HYS, 2024). While this reflects a predominantly heterosexual community, the presence of LGBTQIA+ members is both symbolically and relationally significant. One participant noted that "(...) *being accepted by other men as an open gay man was healing*" (HYS, 2024), suggesting that sexual-minority members experience TMT as a trustworthy space. From a social-capital perspective, this may reflect the cultivation of thin trust, confidence extended across meaningful differences, alongside the thick trust that emerges from shared norms of confidentiality and respect (Putnam, 1994). Inclusive belonging may thus represent an early form of bridging capital, indicating that the Table environment enables men to participate relationally without requiring conformity to traditional masculine scripts.

3.1.1.5 Identification with Groups and Isolation Indicators

Patterns of group identification show both consistency and expansion. In 2024, responses clustered around a mean of 5.58 categories (SD = 1.74); in 2025, this increased to a mean of 6.81 (SD = 2.83) (HYS, 2024; 2025). This rise in mean and

widening variance likely reflects the broader set of categories introduced in 2025 (e.g., CALD, Disability, LGBTQIA+).

Two categories remain stable across both years: Divorced/Separated men (~25%) and Regional/Rural men (~20%). These recurring identifications may indicate that both relational disruption and geographical distance contribute to men's desire for renewed social connection. Putnam's (1994) work suggests that social participation often emerges where social capital has been weakened; in this context, TMT may serve as a compensatory structure for rebuilding reciprocity and trust. Of particular interpretive interest, 41.10% of respondents in 2025 selected "*None of the Above*," implying that many men join not due to externally identifiable hardship but for reasons more closely tied to meaning-making, belonging, or introspection. Putnam (1994) highlights that voluntary participation grounded in intrinsic motivation is a key mechanism through which generalised reciprocity develops, as individuals act not from obligation but from a sense of shared ethical orientation.

3.1.1.6 Summary: The Social Landscape Shaping the Conditions for Connection

Taken together, the demographic patterns across both HYS surveys suggest that men arrive at The Men's Table from a social landscape marked by high human capital but uneven relational anchoring. The concentration of members in later adulthood may reflect a life-course in which earlier relational structures loosen, creating openings for new forms of connection. Educational and occupational profiles indicate capacity for civic participation, yet qualitative reflections hint at a disconnect between competence and lived relational embeddedness.

The predominantly homogeneous cultural composition, paired with reflexive identity descriptions, suggests a coexistence of bonding tendencies and emerging forms of interpretive openness. Patterns of group identification further imply that

many men seek not categorical belonging but a relational environment capable of supporting meaning-making amid individualised life conditions.

Through a Putnamian (1994: 2000) lens, these demographic tendencies may be understood as creating the conditions in which TMT functions as a micro-civic space where bonding capital can be regenerated and tentative bridging orientations can develop. The stability of these patterns across two survey years strengthens the interpretation that the Tables offer a relational infrastructure suited to men navigating shifting social, relational, and cultural landscapes.

3.1.2 Stress, Vulnerability, and the Reconstruction of Reciprocity

3.1.2.1 The Distribution of Stressors: Fragmented Lives in an Individualized Society

The quantitative and qualitative data from the HYS surveys (2024; 2025) reveal that members of The Men's Table (TMT) experience a wide constellation of stressors, many of which reflect individual challenges as well as the broader societal fragmentation described by Putnam (1994, 2000). These stressors intersect and accumulate rather than occur in isolation. In 2024, participants selected an average of 4.6 stressors (Median = 5), with a Standard Deviation of 2.27 and a Variance of 5.13, indicating substantial heterogeneity and the presence of layered adversity rather than a single dominant problem (HYS, 2024). The 2025 data show continuity and expansion, with Life Purpose and Meaning remaining the most frequently cited stressor (26.13%), now closely followed by Family or Relationship Breakdown (21.81%), Employment Stress (21.71%), Past or Current Trauma (20.86%), and Mental Health Challenges (20.13%) (HYS, 2025).

This wide dispersion of stressors may be interpreted as reflecting the dissolution of stable social anchors. Men described pressures that resonate with

Putnam's (2000) observation of declining institutional trust and social coordination, including being "*underfunded for retirement,*" experiencing "*the sad decline of society and the natural environment*," or "*being tired of balancing all responsibilities and goals in life*" (HYS, 2025). These expressions signal not only private strain but also what Putnam conceptualised as a withdrawal of communal meaning and a weakened sense of shared moral direction.

3.1.2.2 Existential and Social Dislocation: Qualitative Signatures of Eroding Reciprocity

The qualitative narratives further illustrate how personal distress often maps onto broader civic dislocation. Comments such as "*Loneliness - even in a crowd*" or "*I moved and lost all my social contacts*" (HYS, 2024) suggest that the dissolution of communal networks is experienced as emotional disorientation. In Putnam's terms, these accounts represent the privatisation of suffering that emerges when the networks that once mediated hardship, neighbourhoods, workplaces, extended families, lose integrative force. The Men's Table appears to function as a counterweight to this erosion, providing alternative spaces where emotional and civic reciprocity can be reactivated.

3.1.2.3 Relational Breakdown and the Fragmentation of Bonding Capital

Family and intimate relationships emerge consistently as major stressors across both years. Approximately one in four men reported Family or Relationship Breakdown in 2024 and 2025. The narratives describe toxic separations, estrangement from children, the emotional labour of caring for ageing parents, and the long-term effects of dysfunctional marriages (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). Men recalled "*nonfunctioning*

marriages," "*toxic ex-partners,*" and "*adult children who haven't launched,*" alongside grief, childhood trauma, and cumulative relational wounds.

Within Putnam's (1994) social capital framework, such patterns can be interpreted as the fragmentation of bonding capital, the close-knit trust networks that enable emotional support and reciprocity. When these familial structures weaken, individuals experience both psychological and civic disconnection. The Men's Table may thus be functioning as a compensatory trust system, offering alternative relational settings where reciprocity and reliability can be re-established. One man captured this shift: "*When I talk about feeling lost, I realise half the room feels the same*" (HYS, 2024), illustrating the shift from privatised distress to shared understanding.

3.1.2.4 Loneliness and Suicide: The Civic Implications of Emotional Precarity

Loneliness remains a significant issue. In 2025, the Mean loneliness score was 2.99 (Median = 3), with 9.45% reporting frequent loneliness and 21.53% reporting loneliness "*some of the time*" (HYS, 2025). The Standard Deviation of approximately 1.0 suggests a moderate spread, indicating that loneliness remains present even within a supportive structure. This aligns with Putnam's (1994) argument that social capital does not eliminate hardship but moderates its impact by embedding individuals in networks of trust.

The most profound finding concerns suicide exposure. In 2024, 47.17% of respondents reported a Lived or Living Experience of Suicide; in 2025 this remained almost identical at 46.11% (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). The descriptive statistics are remarkably stable, with both years producing a Mean of approximately 1.55, SD of 0.58, and Variance of 0.34. Such tight clustering suggests that suicide-related distress

is not episodic but structurally characteristic of the membership. In Putnam's (2000) terms, such patterns reflect a collapse of social connectedness, the erosion of the relational buffers that historically mitigated despair.

Yet the qualitative accounts show how TMT helps transform this vulnerability into collective resilience: "*Being able to talk about suicide openly here makes it less of a secret and less of a threat*" (HYS, 2025). This transformation reflects what Putnam described as the growth of moral resources through use: trust becomes protective when practiced repeatedly in safe environments.

3.1.2.5 Substance Use, Relational Strain, and the Informal Regulation of Behaviour

The 2025 data on alcohol indicate a mean drinking frequency of 3.2 (Median = 3), SD 1.32 and Variance 1.74 (HYS, 2025). While most men drink moderately, 18% reported drinking four or more times weekly. Meanwhile, 16.1% experienced relational strain due to alcohol or drug use, and 10.3% reported associated physical or mental health effects. The low variability in relational impact (SD = 0.4; Variance = 0.16) suggests that while not widespread, the consequences are concentrated and acute. Within Putnam's framework, these findings may indicate a weakening of social norms that traditionally regulated behaviour within cohesive communities. Yet the willingness to disclose substance-related challenges suggests the opposite dynamic within TMT: the presence of strong bonding capital that enables moral transparency rather than concealment.

3.1.2.6 Resilience and Well-being: The Protective Effects of Social Capital

Despite high levels of distress, members report notably positive self-assessments of well-being. In 2025, 78.36% rated their physical health as good or strongly good, and 74.63% rated their mental health similarly (HYS, 2025). The mean mental health score (3.87) and low SD (0.86) suggest a consistent position between "*agree*" and "*strongly agree*" across members. The contrast between objective hardship and subjective resilience aligns with Putnam's (2000) description of the "*protective effect*" of social capital: networks of trust can buffer the psychological effects of crisis. Qualitative reflections reinforce this interpretation: "*Even with chronic illness, I feel stronger because of the men around me*" (HYS, 2025). Such accounts suggest that TMT is not only a forum for expression but a relational infrastructure that redistributes emotional burden across trusted connections.

3.1.2.7 Summary: Stress as an Entry Point into Relational and Civic Regeneration

The distribution of stressors across the HYS datasets highlights not only personal hardship but also the erosion of the social structures that historically mitigated distress. Layered adversities, particularly around meaning, relationships, trauma, and work, indicate a fragmented civic and relational world consistent with Putnam's (1994, 2000) observations about weakened communal buffers.

Yet the qualitative material reveals that once within TMT, men begin transforming private vulnerability into shared reflection. Experiences of loneliness, relational breakdown, and suicide exposure become sites for reconstituting reciprocity and trust. Patterns of disclosure suggest that the group offers a corrective to the privatisation of suffering produced by individualised life.

Substance-related concerns and health challenges further illustrate how weakened social norms in broader society contrast with the stabilising relational norms cultivated at the Tables. Despite high distress, men's self-assessed wellbeing remains strong, suggesting a buffering effect that Putnam associates with dense, trust-based networks. Overall, the findings suggest that TMT helps convert stress into an opportunity for civic and relational renewal, supporting men in reconstructing bonding capital and expanding their relational repertoires through steady, reliable contact.

3.1.3 Stability, Duration, and Civic Continuity

3.1.3.1 Temporal Patterns of Participation: The Emergence of a Mature Associational Community

The longitudinal comparison between HYS 2024 and HYS 2025 reveals a striking pattern: The Men's Table (TMT) has begun to consolidate into a stable civic community sustained through repeated participation. In 2024, only 44.8% of members had participated for more than one year, while 55.2% were new (under twelve months) (HYS, 2024). By 2025, this distribution had inverted. Now 68% of members had been part of their Table for over a year, with 35% participating for one to two years, 21.3% for two to three years, and 11.6% for three years or more (HYS, 2025).

Although these variables are categorical rather than continuous, the expansion of longer-duration categories can be tentatively interpreted as a broadening "*variance of commitment.*" That is, the temporal spread of engagement widens as more men occupy long-duration categories, reflecting a stabilising associational structure. Within Putnam's (1994) framework, this pattern is significant: durable participation is a key

marker of social capital regeneration, as stable relational networks foster norms of reciprocity that accumulate through repeated practice.

The narrative data reinforce this interpretation. One participant described the shift as an identity transformation: *"It's not something I do because I have to - it's become part of who I am."* (HYS, 2025). This language suggests that participation is no longer episodic or instrumental but internalised as a moral habit, something Putnam (2000) associated with the "*virtuous circle*" of civic engagement, where trust produces continuity, and continuity strengthens trust.

3.1.3.2 Regular Contact as Social Practice: The Reproduction of Trust

For Putnam, face-to-face interaction is the generative mechanism through which trust evolves from fragile acquaintance to stable expectation. The temporal structure of TMT membership indicates precisely this pattern. Men who attend for longer periods are exposed to more cycles of disclosure, listening, witnessing, and reciprocal care, the processes that collectively form bonding capital. The qualitative reflections provide insight into why continuity may take hold. Several men described the predictability of monthly meetings as an antidote to the unpredictability or instability in other areas of life: *"Whatever else is going on, the Table is steady."* (HYS, 2024). Such statements suggest that the Tables are functioning as micro-institutions of reliability in an otherwise fragmented social environment, a pattern Putnam (2000) describes as increasingly rare in individualised societies. The stability of the Tables may therefore be interpreted not only as retention but as the reconstruction of civic routine. This development may also be read through Putnam's (2000) distinction between thick and thin trust. Thick trust emerges within close, ongoing relationships such as long-term Tables, whereas thin trust extends beyond the group and shapes how men relate to workplaces, families, and broader communities. Several men indicated that increased

trust within the Table made it easier to communicate openly outside it, suggesting a form of generalised reciprocity, a willingness to extend care and openness beyond one's immediate circle, consistent with Putnam's framework.

3.1.3.3 Formal and Informal Support: The Ecology of Connection

The HYS 2024 data illustrate the diverse support ecosystems surrounding TMT members and highlight the organisation's role as a connector between formal and informal care. Quantitatively, 28.7% of men reported receiving support from a psychologist, counsellor, or other clinical professional; 27.8% cited "other" informal support; and 36.8% reported receiving none of the listed forms of support (HYS, 2024). Because support categories in the HYS surveys were multi-select variables, the descriptive statistics provide insight not only into prevalence but also into the *distributional texture* of help-seeking. In 2024, the mean number of formal supports selected (e.g., psychologist, counsellor, GP, crisis line) was 0.84, with an SD of 1.03 and Variance of 1.06. This relatively high variability reflects a fragmented landscape of professional engagement, some men rely heavily on formal services, while others abstain entirely. This distribution reveals a cohort that is neither uniformly help-seeking nor uniformly self-managing but distributed across a spectrum of care orientations.

In Putnam's (1994) terms, TMT occupies a position of "*linking social capital*" bridging the gap between individuals and the institutional structures they may or may not feel comfortable approaching. For some, the Tables supplement professional care "T*he Table gives me what I can't get elsewhere - honest mateship - but I still see my counsellor. It all connects*" (HYS, 2024). For others, especially the 36.8% who receive no other support, the Tables appear to function as the primary relational infrastructure

through which vulnerability can be expressed. Several described themselves as "*well informed and connected,*" or as "*getting what I need from the men I meet each month*" (HYS, 2024), suggesting a relational self-sufficiency that is nevertheless embedded in communal belonging.

In contrast, informal support categories displayed a mean of 1.72, SD 1.31, and Variance 1.71, indicating a broader and more diverse pattern of non-professional engagement. The higher mean and relatively wide spread suggest that informal affiliations, sporting clubs, spiritual groups, hobby circles, and peer communities, function as a rich reservoir of associational life. Responses such as "*I go to church even though I'm not really religious*" (HYS, 2024) or "*sitting on 2 tables*" (HYS, 2024) speak to the fluidity of such networks, where belonging is not tied to doctrinal fit but to relational resonance.

The qualitative material shows the breadth of men's informal support networks: sporting clubs, vintage car groups, knitting circles, meditation practices, church communities, Rites of Passage programs, Men's Sheds, Facebook groups for fathers, and structured health-specific supports such as prostate cancer groups. Others described relying on self-directed learning through podcasts, YouTube, or broad reading. One man noted that he "(...) *gave up on seeing professionals, now I just rely on medication*" (HYS, 2024), illustrating that informal and formal care systems do not always align neatly. These complex support pathways highlight TMT's function as an integrative social space. Rather than replacing external support or prescribing a singular model of help-seeking, the Tables appear to expand the moral and emotional vocabulary through which men recognise their needs and options.

This diversification aligns with Putnam's (2000) observation that "(...) *the more we connect, the more we are inclined to connect*." In other words, participation in one

trust-based community increases the likelihood of engaging with others. TMT thus functions as a relational hinge between personal autonomy and collective care, a site where self-reliance and interdependence are not seen as oppositional but mutually reinforcing. The relative dispersion of the informal support variable (SD 1.31) reflects an interpretive looseness of norms, consistent with late-modern individualised help-seeking, while still showing a central gravitational pull toward communal forms of connection. As Putnam (2000) describes, civic engagement tends to "*cluster*," meaning individuals involved in one associative setting are more likely to be engaged in others.

Ultimately, the coexistence of formal and informal supports reflects a broader ecology of care. Members engage with TMT not as a replacement for other systems but as part of a layered network of relational, psychological, and civic resources. This multiplicity underscores the Tables' unique contribution: they create a relational climate in which men can integrate disparate forms of support into a coherent life-practice. As one participant reflected, "*Everything in my life works better because I sit at a Table*" (HYS, 2024). Such statements highlight the subtle yet pervasive influence of relational trust in reshaping men's engagement with themselves, others, and the broader community.

3.1.3.4 Summary: Continuity as the Foundation for Emerging Civic Routines

Taken together, the descriptive statistics and qualitative narratives present a picture of an organisation that stabilises, diversifies, and deepens men's relational worlds. The rising proportion of long-term members (from 44.9% to 68%) reflects a consolidation of stable, trust-based networks; the dispersion in formal and informal support categories (SDs over 1.0) signals an increasingly pluralised civic landscape in

which TMT acts as a coordinating anchor. Through Putnam's social capital lens, the Tables function as sites where bonding capital is regenerated, bridging capital is incrementally cultivated, and linking capital is strengthened through increased readiness to engage with professional support. One member summarised this relational transformation succinctly: "*Everything in my life works better because I sit at a Table*" (HYS, 2024). In this sense, TMT can be understood as a mechanism through which the moral resources of trust, reciprocity, and care, diminished across contemporary individualised life, are slowly reconstituted through the ordinary act of gathering and TMT functioning as a contemporary civic routine, reintroducing coherence and reliability into fragmented social worlds.

3.1.4 Trust, Reciprocity, and Civic Virtue

3.1.4.1 Emotional Safety as a Normative Expectation

Across both HYS datasets, one of the most stable and striking findings is the exceptionally high level of perceived safety, trust, and emotional openness at The Men's Table (TMT). In 2025, 95.7% of members agreed or strongly agreed that their Table was a safe place to share feelings, while 93.8% found the conversations meaningful and honest (HYS, 2025). These proportions are almost identical to those reported in 2024, suggesting that emotional safety is not a contingent outcome but a deeply institutionalised norm of the TMT model (HYS, 2024). In Putnam's (1994) conceptualisation, such stability reflects the consolidation of "*thick trust*", dense, habitualised confidence in the goodwill and reliability of others that forms the basis of durable social capital.

The descriptive statistics reinforce this interpretation. In both years, responses to the "*Table is a safe place*" item showed an extremely narrow distribution, with the

2025 data clustering tightly around the upper end of the scale (Mean ≈ 4.6; SD < 0.7), indicating minimal variability in perceived trust. Such low dispersion suggests a normative consensus that emotional safety is not merely present but deeply expected. When a variable intended to measure subjective perception shows almost no variability, it often signals that the underlying norm is so widely shared that it has become a defining feature of the setting. Putnam (2000) described this form of moral convergence as the "*infrastructure of reciprocity,*" a social condition in which trust becomes self-reinforcing through repeated use.

A similar pattern is evident in the behavioural transformation indicators. In 2025, 88.4% of members reported becoming better listeners, a result nearly identical to 2024 (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). The distribution of this item showed another tight clustering (Mean ≈ 4.4; SD < 0.8), reflecting minimal disagreement. From a social-capital perspective, such results can be interpreted as the enactment of "*micro-reciprocity,*" the everyday behaviours that build cumulative civic capacity. Listening, understood not as a skill but as a relational ethic, creates the conditions for generalised reciprocity, the willingness to act for others without expectation of immediate return (Putnam, 2000). Several members described this shift narratively: "*I'm starting to listen without planning what to say back,*" "*I hear people now, not just their problems,*" and "*It's changing how I speak to my family*" (HYS, 2025). In this sense, behavioural change at the Tables is not a therapeutic intervention but an emergent moral practice grounded in relational norms.

3.1.4.2 Crisis Support and the Recalibration of Care

The data on crisis support further illustrates the deepening of trust networks. In 2024, 76.5% agreed or strongly agreed that they could contact someone from their Table during a difficult time; in 2025, this increased to 81.6% (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025).

Although the increase is modest, the shift indicates a strengthening of bonding capital, the close-knit ties that provide emotional support in times of vulnerability. The relatively narrow Standard Deviation (SD ≈ 0.9) suggests a stable norm of availability and reliability. Yet, alongside this increase, a decline occurred in members' confidence in helping others seek suicide-related support, from 70.4% in 2024 to 63.3% in 2025. This divergence, rising help-seeking confidence but declining crisis-intervention confidence, may signal an emerging awareness of personal limits. It may also reflect, as some qualitative responses indicated, a shift away from the "fixing" orientation of traditional masculine scripts. As one member explained, "*I know I can call, but I also know I'm not trained to fix someone else's crisis*" (HYS, 2025). In Putnam's terms, this could be interpreted as a recalibration of social capital: trust remains strong, but members are renegotiating their boundaries within it.

This atmosphere of trust appears to translate directly into mental-health-related benefits. In 2025, 84.6% of members reported that their Table positively supported their mental health, and 75.1% reported feeling less lonely (HYS, 2025). Loneliness scores demonstrate a pattern of moderate central tendency (Mean = 2.99, Median = 3), but with a distinctly long tail: 9.45% reported feeling lonely "*often/always*," and 21.53% reported "*some of the time*." The relatively low Standard Deviation in loneliness (SD ≈ 1.0 across items) suggests that while loneliness remains a widespread issue, it is moderated rather than eliminated by participation. This moderation aligns with Putnam's (1994) argument that social capital does not erase individual hardship but buffers its effects by embedding individuals in networks of reciprocal care. As one respondent reflected, "*I feel lonely sometimes, but never on Table night*" (HYS, 2024), illustrating how contextual belonging can mitigate, though not fully eradicate, the internalised forms of isolation characteristic of late-modern individualised life.

The longitudinal descriptives of well-being and emotional competence parallel these relational shifts. In 2025, 66.2% reported being better able to cope with the highs and lows of life, 63.3% felt more in control, and 59.6% reported improved problem-solving (HYS, 2025). The Means for these variables were consistently above 3.8 on a 5-point scale, with SDs below 1.0, suggesting a fairly unified pattern of perceived personal development. This pattern reflects what Putnam (1994) called the "*spillover effect*" of social capital: improvements in personal and relational functioning that arise not from direct instruction but from participation in networks that model reciprocity, care, and accountability. One member captured this insight succinctly: "*Being around men who talk honestly makes me behave differently without trying*" (HYS, 2024).

3.1.4.3 Civic Expansion: From Relational Growth to Collective Orientation

Perhaps the most socially significant transformation lies in the indicators of outward orientation. In 2025, 54.7% reported greater motivation to contribute to their community, and 67.5% felt more able to model a healthier version of being a man (HYS, 2025). These shifts, moderate in magnitude but consistent across years, suggest the emergence of bridging capital, the form of social capital that extends beyond immediate bonds to influence broader social spheres. Putnam (2000) argued that civic virtue grows when individuals repeatedly experience trust and cooperation in small groups, leading to a gradual expansion of moral concern. The Men's Table appears to mirror this dynamic: what begins as intimate vulnerability becomes a template for relational accountability in families, workplaces, and communities. Several men expressed this explicitly: "*I show up differently at home*," "*I'm more patient at work,*" "*My kids see me owning my feelings*" (HYS, 2025).

Taken together, the descriptive statistics and qualitative reflections illustrate a coherent and layered process of transformation. High trust (Mean ≈ 4.6, SD < 0.7), stable emotional safety (>95%), moderate but consistent reductions in loneliness, strengthened coping capacities, and increased civic orientation together depict an organisation that cultivates the moral and relational conditions that Putnam (1994, 2000) associates with flourishing social capital. Such outward-flowing effects, sometimes described as "*spillover reciprocity*", occur when relational norms cultivated in small settings begin to influence broader interpersonal behaviour.These shifts are not uniform or universal, but their clustering across two consecutive surveys suggests that The Men's Table may be understood as a contemporary civic institution, one that rebuilds connection not through ideology or obligation but through regularised acts of mutual presence. The behavioural transformations observed here therefore function as both psychological and civic phenomena. They signal that participation at The Men's Table does more than alleviate private loneliness; it appears to regenerate the ordinary, quiet forms of social cooperation, listening, care, reliability, mutual concern, that sustain communal life in an increasingly fragmented society.

3.1.4.4 Summary: Trust as the Moral Infrastructure of Connection

Taken together, the descriptive statistics and narrative insights reveal a deeply layered process of relational and civic transformation. Emotional safety is nearly universal (95.7%), listening behaviours are widely strengthened (88.4%), crisis support networks are stabilising, and personal coping capacities cluster toward the upper end of the scale (Means > 3.8). These patterns, interpreted through Putnam (1994, 2000), suggest that The Men's Table is cultivating the core moral resources of social capital: trust, reciprocity, accountability, and civic orientation. These findings indicate that TMT is more than a psychosocial support model. It appears to function as a contemporary

civic institution, a space where men re-learn the relational skills and moral dispositions necessary for flourishing communal life. By practising trust, care, and mutual witnessing, participants regenerate the quiet, often invisible civic virtues that an individualised society tends to erode.

The low variability in these measures suggests a deeply embedded relational norm, what Putnam (1994) calls "*thick trust*." This trust appears to translate into behavioural shifts, such as strengthened listening capacities and increased help-seeking, which together form the micro-practices through which generalised reciprocity is fostered. Crisis-related dynamics show both increased willingness to seek support and more cautious attitudes toward supporting others in suicide-related contexts. This may reflect an emerging relational maturity in which men recognise both their capacities and their limits.

Patterns of improved coping, reduced loneliness, and heightened community orientation suggest that the internal transformations cultivated at the Tables may ripple outward into broader relational and civic spheres, aligning with Putnam's notion of spillover effects. Overall, these findings illustrate that trust functions not only as an emotional experience but as the normative infrastructure through which men reconfigure their relational and civic selves.

3.1.5 Summary: Rebuilding Social Capital Through Predictable, Trusted Connection

Taken together, the quantitative findings from the HYS surveys (2024; 2025) suggest that The Men's Table functions as a contemporary site for rebuilding social capital among men navigating relational strain, late-life transitions, and broader individualisation. While interpretations remain tentative, the stability of patterns

across both years provides a coherent picture of relational renewal. Across demographic, stress, and behavioural indicators, men appear to enter TMT with substantial human capital but often diminished relational capital. High educational attainment and professional histories sit alongside significant levels of loneliness (Mean = 2.99 in 2025), layered stressors (Mean = 4.6 in 2024), and a strikingly stable prevalence of suicide exposure (47.17% in 2024; 46.11% in 2025). Yet despite this vulnerability profile, members consistently report positive self-assessments of well-being and a sense of strengthened coping, suggesting the possible buffering effects of participation.

The most robust findings concern trust: emotional safety exceeds 95% in both years, with extremely low variability, and listening behaviours remain uniformly high (≈88%). Membership stability increases markedly, with 68% participating for over a year in 2025. These patterns align with Putnam's notion of "*thick trust,*" formed through repeated, reliable interaction. Help-seeking data further suggest that TMT sits within a broader ecology of care, complementing rather than replacing formal and informal supports. Finally, early signs of civic orientation, over half reporting increased motivation to contribute to their community, and two-thirds feeling more able to model healthier masculinities, indicate that relational gains may extend beyond the group itself. In sum, the quantitative evidence cautiously supports the interpretation that The Men's Table helps regenerate bonding, bridging, and linking social capital by providing a stable, trusted environment in which men can practise care, reciprocity, and shared vulnerability, key foundations for healthy masculinities in an individualised society.

3.2 Thematic Analysis focusing on perspectives on Healthy Masculinities

The following analysis draws on qualitative material from the Have Your Say surveys and was conducted using Reflexive Thematic Analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). Guided by White's (2007) narrative practice analysis interprets men's accounts not as neutral descriptions but as meaning-making acts in which participants articulate, negotiate, and re-author their understandings of healthy masculinities. Rather than assuming a stable or universal definition, the themes presented here reflect a plurality of emerging stories shaped by relational context, generational inheritance, and the shared conversational environment of The Men's Table (TMT). The six themes should therefore be read as interpretive patterns that illuminate how men collectively reposition themselves in relation to dominant cultural narratives and toward preferred ways of being.

3.2.1 The Burden of the Silent Past: Rejecting a Traditional Legacy

This theme examines how participants describe their early experiences of masculinities within historically and culturally specific contexts. The semantic content of their accounts highlights memories of stoicism, emotional scarcity, and role-bound expectations, while a latent reading (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2021) suggests that these stories may be understood as articulations of what White (2007) conceptualises as *Dominant Problem Stories*: inherited cultural narratives that become so taken-for-granted that they shape identity without necessarily reflecting personal choice. Rather than condemning earlier generations, the men often contextualise their fathers' and grandfathers' ways of being within the demands of their time, post-war pressures, economic precarity, rigid labour roles, and strong expectations

that men survive through endurance rather than expression. At the same time, many participants articulate an internal desire to explore alternative masculinities that feel more meaningful for the lives they want to lead today.

3.2.1.1 Describing the Earlier Cultural Script: Stoicism, Silence, and Scarcity of Expression

Across HYS 2024 and 2025, participants describe growing up in environments where male emotional expression was rare, discouraged, or overshadowed by the demands of duty and provision. One participant wrote that men of his childhood were "competitive, absent of feeling, tough and mostly disconnected from themselves and others" (HYS, 2024). Others described the broader atmosphere as shaped by "strict militaristic and class-based upbringing" or "old school authority… Fear ruled," suggesting that earlier masculinities were embedded in social worlds in which emotional containment served practical and cultural functions.

A recurring motif concerns the *Provider* storyline, with fathers depicted as "*the sole breadwinner,*" often physically or emotionally absent due to work. Several participants also highlight the role of alcohol as a culturally accepted coping mechanism: "*Men learned to drink to cope, suppress problems, and slap on the back saying chin up… the answer was going and getting on the piss*" (HYS, 2024). These accounts may be interpreted as describing masculinities shaped by scarcity, scarcity of emotional language, scarcity of safe relational spaces, and scarcity of alternatives. Within a narrative-analytic frame, such descriptions can be seen as reflections of historically adaptive practices rather than individual shortcomings.

These accounts reflect what White (2007) describes as normalising judgement, an inherited, taken-for-granted story about what masculinities should look like,

reinforced by economic pressures, war legacies, religious institutions, and class-based expectations. Behaviours such as *fixing, providing, taking charge, and leading from the front* were often rehearsed not as expressions of dominance but as the acceptable, and perhaps only imaginable, performance of masculinity at the time. From this narrative standpoint, the earlier script can be interpreted not as morally wrong but as contextually meaningful within its historical landscape, while simultaneously constraining the emotional and relational possibilities available to men who grew up under its influence.

Within White's (2007) narrative framework, such descriptions may be understood as part of a broader landscape of action, where men's behaviours were shaped by historically dominant stories about duty, control, and emotional containment. These dominant stories operated as normalising judgements, offering limited narrative possibilities for what masculine life could legitimately include. In this sense, participants' reflections are not merely personal memories but identity conclusions shaped within culturally sanctioned scripts that rendered alternative emotional expressions largely unintelligible at the time.

3.2.1.2 Externalizing the Legacy: Naming the Story Rather Than the Self

A notable pattern across the data is the use of language that positions restrictive masculinities as a cultural inheritance rather than a personal flaw. Many participants explicitly name the story they wish to move away from, using terms such as "*the opposite of toxic masculinity*" or describing past norms as "*excessive bravado, violence, bottling-up of troublesome feelings and emotions*" (HYS, 2024). In White's (2007) terms, these acts of naming may be interpreted as *externalisation*, the process of locating the problem in the cultural script, not in the man himself.

This distinction is analytically significant. By treating earlier masculinities as something shaped by time, culture, and circumstance, men create narrative space to explore alternative possibilities. Rather than rejecting their fathers, they appear to be disentangling themselves from expectations that feel constraining or misaligned with the emotional awareness they now value. Several participants emphasise that "*the times have changed*" but also that *their own* needs and aspirations have changed, indicating not only external pressure but genuine internal motivation to develop new forms of relational life.

3.2.1.3 Positive Exceptions: Quiet Counter-Narratives Within the Past

While many reflections describe restrictive environments, participants frequently identify figures who represent alternative ways of being. These "*positive exceptions*" include uncles, grandfathers, teachers, community leaders, or neighbours who modelled warmth, fairness, or emotional steadiness. One participant described a role model who "(...) *showed respect for others* (...) *saw everyone as equal* (...) *and believed that speaking up was brave and masculine*" (HYS, 2024). In narrative practice, such remembered moments could be interpreted as *unique outcomes* (White, 2007), instances in which men experienced more expansive or relational masculinities, even if these were culturally overshadowed. The fact that these exceptions remain salient decades later suggests that men have always recognised alternative masculine possibilities, even when the dominant discourse made them difficult to inhabit. These recollections provide the raw material for constructing Preferred Narrative directions in the present.

3.2.1.4 Exploring New Possibilities: Changing Contexts, Changing Needs

Participants often position their movement away from the Silent Past not solely as a response to external social change but as an internally felt desire for lives richer in connection, authenticity, and emotional presence. One man described wanting "*to understand what it means to be a man in modern Australian society*," noting both the "*positive and negative effects of male instincts*" (HYS, 2025). This suggests that the motivation for change may lie as much in personal meaning as in structural shifts.

Within a Whitean framework, this can be interpreted as a process of re-authoring: men experimenting with new narrative threads, emotional literacy, mutual care, vulnerability, that were not widely available in their earlier environments. The Men's Table appears to function as a space where such re-authoring becomes socially legitimate and collectively witnessed. Men articulate that they are "*choosing not to reproduce the norms of the past*" and instead exploring "*more meaningful directions for our authentic lives*" (HYS, 2025), signalling that intentionality and preference are central to their narrative transformations.

3.2.1.5 Summary: The Burden of the Silent Past

Participants describe navigating an inherited landscape of restrictive, historically situated masculinities characterised by stoicism, emotional scarcity, and role-bound expectations. Rather than condemning these earlier scripts, men contextualise them as products of their time while simultaneously externalising their limiting effects. Through identifying both constraints and positive exceptions, participants create narrative space for alternative directions grounded in emotional presence and relational authenticity. In White's (2007) terms, the Silent Past becomes a background

story against which men begin to re-author more flexible, personally resonant masculinities.

3.2.2 Emotional Literacy as a New Strength

This theme explores how participants describe a shift away from emotional stoicism toward a more expansive emotional repertoire. At a semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006), men speak about recognising, naming, and expressing emotions more openly; at a latent level, these accounts may be understood as a re-authoring of earlier masculine narratives in ways that align with White's (2007) emphasis on preferred stories of identity. Rather than simply reacting to external social change, many men articulate an internal motivation to cultivate forms of emotional life that feel more aligned with their values and contemporary relational contexts. Within this frame, emotional literacy emerges not as a rejection of masculinity, but as a meaningful expansion of the masculinities available to them.

3.2.2.1 Cultivating Self-Awareness: From Containment to Conscious Experience

Across both survey years, participants describe a gradual shift toward acknowledging their inner emotional worlds. One man noted that "*it is very easy to be isolated in one's own emotion,*" and that the Table "*provides a platform to explore inner feelings more openly*" (HYS, 2024). This may be interpreted as a form of narrative *externalisation* (White, 2007), where emotional isolation is described as a shared human condition rather than a personal flaw. Several men articulate a desire to develop a more intentional and conscious relationship with their emotions: "*Real men are aware of their own emotions and their impact* (...) *and want to adjust to improve health and wellbeing*" (HYS, 2025). The phrasing suggests not only awareness but reflexivity, what

White (2007) describes as the capacity to step back from dominant storylines and examine their effects.

This shift does not imply abandonment of older masculine influences but rather a reinterpretation of them. Whereas the Silent Past (Theme 3.2.1) elevated stoicism as necessary for survival or social function, many participants now describe emotional presence as a contemporary form of resilience. One man reflected that being able to "*be 'in' my emotions… including when I need help*" has become central to his sense of strength (HYS, 2024). This suggests that emotional expression is not perceived as antithetical to masculinity but as a personally meaningful evolution of it.

3.2.2.2 Expanding the Emotional Repertoire: Skill-Building and Narrative Re-authoring

Participants frequently describe emotional literacy as something learned, practised, or intentionally cultivated, rather than something one simply "*has*." One man wrote, "*I have achieved this through actively managing a thoughts diary* (…*) and working with a good psychologist,*" indicating that emotional awareness is experienced as a skill requiring guidance and reflection (HYS, 2025). These small shifts can be interpreted through White's (2007) concept of unique outcomes, moments in which men act outside the limits of the dominant story and thereby create the conditions for new meanings. As men describe experimenting with vulnerability, reflection, or emotional naming, they engage in a process of re-authoring, gradually expanding the stories available to them. Such re-authoring is often scaffolded through practices that strengthen narrative agency, journaling, therapeutic reflection, or the mirroring offered by peers, which collectively help men articulate emotional lives that previously lacked cultural legitimacy.

This aligns with White's (2007) description of *re-authoring conversations*, where people develop new skills and meanings by noticing small alternative steps, what he calls "*unique outcomes*." For many, the fundamental re-authoring seems to involve reinterpreting vulnerability from a sign of weakness into a sign of courage or integrity. One participant observed: "*Men who can express their feelings are so much more healthy and approachable*" (HYS, 2024). This shift from avoidance to approach represents a redefinition of strength grounded in relational presence rather than emotional withdrawal. Notably, participants do not describe emotional literacy as a universal obligation but as something they personally find valuable or liberating. The language "*vital for men to have inner as well as outer strengths*" (HYS, 2025) can be read as an articulation of what feels psychologically sustaining rather than as a prescriptive model. This nuance maintains alignment with the broader plurality of masculinities rather than proposing a singular ideal.

3.2.2.3 Emotional Awareness as Relational Practice

Emotional literacy is not described solely as an inward transformation. Many men link their internal awareness to improved relational functioning, suggesting an interpretive shift from self-contained autonomy toward interdependence. For example: "*Being honest when I'm low helps others feel they can too*" (HYS, 2024). This framing reveals a certain narrative reciprocity: emotional disclosure becomes both a personal act and a social gesture, inviting others into shared humanity. From a latent perspective, this may reflect a movement toward what White (2007) conceptualises as *communities of concern*, where shared recognition and witnessing reinforce preferred identities. As men express their emotions in ways that feel safe and reciprocated, they appear to reconfigure the boundaries of masculine interaction, expanding what can be spoken, felt, and shared.

3.2.2.4 Repositioning Strength: Vulnerability as Courage

A consistent interpretive thread across the data is the reframing of emotional expression as a form of courage. "*Dropping your guard*" and "*breaking the stoic mould*" (HYS, 2025) are described not as losses but as intentional acts aligned with integrity, honesty, and personal growth. Within a narrative-analytic lens, this suggests that vulnerability is being repositioned as an *agentic* act, something chosen rather than something endured. This repositioning appears grounded in both internal desires for authenticity and relational needs for connection. Participants frequently describe emotional literacy as enabling better relationships, healthier coping, and reduced isolation. These accounts collectively suggest that many men are not simply responding to external expectations but are actively cultivating identities that feel more sustainable, meaningful, and connected.

3.2.2.5 Summary: Emotional Literacy as a New Strength

Emotional literacy can be understood as emerging as a central resource through which men reinterpret strength and expand the emotional repertoires available to them. Participants describe learning to name, express, and regulate emotions as intentional practices that counter earlier narratives of containment. These developments are portrayed as both personally meaningful and relationally consequential, supporting deeper connection and shared vulnerability. Within White's (2007) narrative framework, such shifts represent unique outcomes that enable re-authoring processes in which emotional presence becomes a preferred identity position rather than a deviation from masculine norms.

3.2.3 The Quest for Authenticity and Self-Acceptance

This theme focuses on how participants describe showing up "*as themselves*" as a meaningful and often necessary part of their preferred masculinities. At a semantic level (Braun & Clarke, 2006), men speak explicitly about dropping façades, rejecting performance, and cultivating honesty. At a latent level, these expressions may be understood through White's (2007) narrative lens as re-authoring identity in ways that move away from compliance toward agency, allowing the emergence of plural, personally chosen masculinities rather than adherence to inherited scripts. What appears central is not what a man "*should*" be, but the freedom to inhabit a version of masculinity that resonates with his values, history, and relational context.

3.2.3.1 Authenticity as Relief from Performance: Showing Up Unmasked

Across both datasets, participants describe a kind of tiredness or strain associated with "*acting a role*" or maintaining what several call the "*bloke façade.*" One participant captured this succinctly: "*Men need to drop the bloke façade*" (HYS, 2024). Others describe the emotional costs of performing toughness: "*The issue is when it's not spoken about and when it's not heard it internalises and that turns into depression - it goes dark and that is when it becomes a problem.*" (HYS, 2025). In narrative-theoretical terms, such façades can be read as forms of *internalised dominant storylines*, scripts that were once functional in older contexts but now restrict identity expression. White (2007) suggests that when individuals begin to see these storylines as external rather than internal ("*the façade is the problem, not me*"), space is created for alternative narratives. The men's descriptions appear to reflect such a movement: "*Being able to show up just as I am* (...) *not have to put on a brave face*" (HYS, 2024). This resonates with a desire not simply to be emotionally expressive but to be *genuine* and can be seen as

reflecting a shift toward living by one's own story rather than inhabiting roles imposed by the Traditional Legacy.

Crucially, this authenticity is not framed as universally required; rather, many participants describe it as personally meaningful, an approach to life that feels more congruent with who they are becoming. It is also often described as emotionally relieving: "*Then I can be more relaxed and comfortable in my own skin*" (HYS, 2024). Such accounts suggest that authenticity functions as a kind of narrative coherence, aligning one's inner world with outer behaviour in ways experienced as healthier and more sustainable.

When men describe "*dropping the façade*," this can be seen as a form of externalising, where the façade is located as a cultural imposition rather than an inherent personal deficiency (White, 2007). This shift also initiates a process of identity thickening, in which men increasingly draw on personal values, relational commitments, and moments of preferred behaviour to construct more coherent and self-authored narratives. Some participants' accounts further resemble re-membering conversations, where aspects of themselves that were previously marginalised, sensitivity, emotional responsiveness, relational openness, are invited back into a valued sense of identity.

3.2.3.2 Self-Acceptance, Integrity, and Internal Grounding

Authenticity is closely intertwined with self-acceptance. Men frequently emphasise the importance of acknowledging all parts of themselves, including sensitivity, fear, tenderness, doubt, or emotional intensity. As one participant reflected, "*I am a strong person* (…) *but I am also a very sensitive person. Being able to show my emotions is crucial*" (HYS, 2024). Such statements semantically emphasise the multiplicity within the self, while latently pointing to the undoing of dividing practices (White, 2007), which had

previously sorted emotions into categories of "*acceptable*" (control, rationality) and "*unacceptable*" (vulnerability, sadness).

Self-acceptance is described as producing a grounded sense of integrity: "We have to have a reasonable self-esteem and be comfortable with our lot in life" (HYS, 2025). For some, this grounding is supported by professional help or reflective tools, indicating that authenticity is not simply "found" but cultivated: "*Working with a good psychologist has been essential to this growth*" (HYS, 2024). This represents a re-authoring of emotional experience where self-care is reframed not as indulgence but as the foundation for ethical relational presence. For men who belong to groups historically marginalized within mainstream masculine norms, such as LGBTQIA+ men, authenticity is described not only as personal relief but as relational recognition: "*Being accepted as an open gay man was healing*" (HYS, 2024). Acceptance becomes a counter-practice to identity-based objectification or spoiled identity (White, 2007), enabling dignity and belonging.

Participants frequently describe authenticity as deeply tied to self-acceptance and internal steadiness. Many emphasise the importance of "*reasonable self-esteem*," "*respecting myself,*" and "*being comfortable with who I am*" (HYS, 2025). These statements point to what White (2007) calls *identity conclusions*: broader self-evaluations that shape ongoing choices. When men develop stories of themselves as worthy or competent, they appear more able to participate in relationships with openness rather than defensiveness.

For some participants, authenticity includes acknowledging sexual identity in ways that contrast earlier eras of silence or stigma. One gay participant wrote: "*Being an open gay man, it is comforting to be accepted by other men and not seen as a freak*" (HYS, 2024). This suggests that authenticity is not only an internal process but a relational one, a meaning that becomes safer to inhabit when witnessed without judgement. In a latent sense, these accounts point to masculinities that make space

for diversity, rather than enforcing a singular ideal. Integrity emerges as a recurring anchor: "*How I present, hold and respect myself is reflected to those around me*" (HYS, 2025). This suggests that authenticity is tied not only to personal preference but also to relational ethics, an orientation toward consistency, honesty, and humility.

3.2.3.3 From Dominance to Personal Leadership: Repositioning Agency

A defining latent thread within this theme is the reconfiguration of leadership. Participants speak adamantly against traditional hierarchies: "*No ALPHAs, know-it-alls or self-proclaimed gurus*" (HYS, 2025). Men frequently contrast earlier expectations of masculinity, "*taking care of and providing and fixing and taking the lead*" with a contemporary emphasis on internal responsibility and ethical presence (HYS, 2024). This marks a meaningful shift from leadership as dominance or direction to leadership as self-mastery. Participants describe a form of leadership grounded in accountability rather than authority: "*It's about taking responsibility for one's actions and growth; using strength to protect, not control; uplifting others, not competing destructively*" (HYS, 2025). Another man offered a striking metaphor: "*Stronger men are those who can own their behaviours - ability to hold the trigger when they can shoot*" (HYS, 2025).

Narratively, this can be understood as a transition from externally defined competence to internally authored meaning. Men increasingly position success as an internal measure: "*Success is individual (…) learn what is actually important to you and do that*" (HYS, 2025). This reorientation indicates a loosening of dividing practices that once equated worth with dominance, certainty, or emotional restriction. Instead, agency is located in the ongoing, reflective work of aligning one's life with personally meaningful values.

3.2.3.4 Authenticity in Connection: Humility, Care and Mutual Regard

The men's descriptions consistently frame authenticity not only as an internal experience but as a relational practice. Across the HYS datasets, participants emphasise that authenticity becomes meaningful when it is enacted in connection with others. This often takes the form of humility, curiosity, and a deliberate respect for difference. As one participant expressed, healthy interaction requires "*being able to understand different perspectives and show compassion*" (HYS, 2025). Semantically, such statements foreground an ethic of care; latently, they indicate a shift away from earlier masculine scripts interpreted as rooted more in evaluation, correction, or control.

Importantly, authenticity is not described as unfiltered emotional disclosure or boundaryless expression. Rather, men portray it as a form of intentional presence, a grounded way of engaging that balances clarity about one's own experience with receptivity toward the experience of others. This relational stance reflects what White (2007) conceptualised as *co-authorship*: the understanding that one's identity is continually shaped through interaction, negotiation, and mutual recognition. The act of "*showing up just as I am*" (HYS, 2025) thus becomes inseparable from the parallel act of meeting others with openness and respect. Several men articulate this interplay between self-definition and interdependence through a heightened awareness of relational impact. One participant noted, "*How I hold myself is reflected to others*" (HYS, 2025), a formulation that acknowledges the reflexive, circular nature of social influence. Others highlight the shift from directing others to accompanying them, reflecting: "*When I drop the façade, I can actually listen,*" and "*Respecting boundaries is part of being honest*" (HYS, 2024). These descriptions can be interpreted as undoing earlier objectifying or fixing practices, where interaction centred on offering solutions rather than witnessing experience.

Taken together, these accounts suggest that authenticity becomes a relational ethic defined by humility, care, and mutual regard. It affirms that authenticity is not solely a personal achievement but a shared practice, one that fosters psychological safety, supports interdependence, and creates the conditions for co-authoring more meaningful, responsive masculinities.

3.2.3.5 Summary: Authenticity and Self-Acceptance

Theme 3.2.3 shows authenticity as both a personal and relational re-authoring of masculine identity. As men externalise inherited expectations such as the "*bloke façade*," stoic self-sufficiency, and the impulse to fix or lead, they create space for more grounded, self-accepting, and relationally responsive masculinities. Authenticity is described not as unfiltered expression but as intentional presence shaped through humility, reflexive awareness, and mutual regard. In White's (2007) terms, it functions as a preferred identity position co-authored in relationship rather than dictated by older norms. Latently, this shift marks a movement from dominance toward responsibility and care. This emerging identity strengthens integrity and connection and forms the foundation for the relational and ethical practices explored in the following themes.

3.2.4 Recasting Relational Rules: Interdependence Over Dominance

This theme examines how men at The Men's Table describe a relational shift away from traditional scripts of dominance, fixing, and self-sufficiency toward a model of connection grounded in listening, humility, reciprocity, and shared vulnerability. Interpreted through White's (2007) narrative perspective, these reflections illustrate a re-authoring of the relational chapter of masculine identity: moving from inherited

norms of control to a more flexible, relationally attuned form of agency. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) analytic distinction, both semantic descriptors (what men explicitly say) and latent meanings (the assumptions and discourses underpinning their statements) are interpreted to understand how relational expectations are being renegotiated within the TMT community.

3.2.4.1 Relational Strength Beyond Dominance: Moving from Control to Connection

Across both HYS datasets (2024; 2025), many men reflect on earlier masculinities that prioritised direction, command, and self-reliance, patterns tied to cultural expectations that men should *fix, provide, take charge,* and "take the lead." At a semantic level, participants describe these roles as inherited norms: "*taking care of and providing and fixing and taking the lead*" (HYS, 2024). Latently, these reflections gesture toward what White (2007) terms dividing practices, discursive structures that separate "*strong*" men from those who ask for help or express emotional need.

Against this backdrop, men increasingly narrate a relational ideal that centres interdependence. Instead of proving strength through dominance, many now express a desire to "*not be concerned with being an Alpha male*" and to "*serve others by being an effective listener*" (HYS, 2025). These descriptions suggest a meaningful reorientation of masculinity, not the rejection of strength, but the repositioning of strength as relational presence rather than unilateral control. One participant captures this shift succinctly: "*Realising that life is not a contest to be the best*" (HYS, 2025). What emerges can be interpreted as a relational ethic where cooperation is valued over competition, and mutuality over mastery. In narrative-theoretical terms, this reflects movement away from a problem-saturated story of competition and toward a preferred storyline in which connection becomes a legitimate, even expected, masculine performance.

3.2.4.2 The Shift Away from "Fixing": Listening as a Practice of Care and Respect

A dominant motif in the qualitative material concerns the renunciation of the older masculine script that equated care with *doing*, solving, advising, or instructing. Many men describe how this historical tendency to "*fix*" may have functioned as a well-intended but ultimately distancing practice, shaped by cultural expectations rather than personal failing. Now, however, participants express a desire to cultivate what one man describes as "*listening with a view to hear* (...) *rather than formulating an answer to show how clever I am*" (HYS, 2024). Within narrative practice, this relational repositioning may be understood as a deconstruction of problem-saturated stories that equated care with solutions, advice, or control (White, 2007). As men collectively resist these older assumptions, they begin to engage in co-authoring, shaping relational meanings in dialogue rather than through hierarchical roles. Such shifts allow alternative masculinities, grounded in reciprocity, humility, and presence, to take narrative form.

Furthermore, from a narrative perspective, this shift signals a dismantling of objectification (White, 2007): the idea that emotional discomfort should be treated as a problem-object to be solved rather than an experience to be witnessed. Semantically, statements emphasise restraint and presence, "*no advice giving*," "*no know-it-alls,*" "*listen first, talk second*" (HYS, 2025). Latently, these reflections articulate a new relational positioning where the man steps out of the expert role and into collaborative meaning-making.

Such listening practices also counter what White (2007) calls spoiled identities, the idea that expressing distress marks a man as weak or deficient. By collectively rejecting unsolicited advice as the default mode, men at TMT create relational spaces where vulnerability does not risk identity loss but can instead be safely acknowledged.

3.2.4.3 Interdependence as the Antidote to Isolation

Many participants explicitly identify isolation as harmful, "*isolation can be a killer*", and describe interdependence as both a personal resource and a community obligation (HYS, 2024). The shift from lone self-sufficiency to mutual support appears to be one of the most significant relational transformations described in the material. Men speak of the importance of "walking with others on their journey," "being held," and experiencing connection as a corrective to emotional fragmentation. This emphasis on interdependence also reflects a deeper narrative process. When men articulate that they "work better when supported by others" (HYS, 2025), they are not merely describing preference; they are redefining what it means to function well as a man. Latently, this suggests a clear departure from the internalised pressure to cope alone, pressure reinforced by decades of normative judgement ("chin up," "don't talk about it") that discouraged collaborative coping. Interdependence thus becomes a relational counter-story. Rather than signalling weakness, it is framed as an intentional and skilled way of living, a practice that requires awareness, humility, and reciprocity.

Rejecting the Relational Performance of the "Alpha": Humility and Shared Humanity

The rejection of the "Alpha" model is one of the most explicit discursive shifts across the qualitative data. Men describe avoiding "Alpha behaviour," "no gurus," and "no Mr. Fix-It" attitudes (HYS, 2025). At a semantic level, these statements reflect dissatisfaction with hierarchical or dominating relational patterns. At a latent level, many comments reveal a desire to loosen the dividing practices that once defined some men as leaders and others as followers, a relational binary that White (2007) suggests constrains agency for everyone involved. Instead of seeking authority, men articulate a relational ideal grounded in humility, self-awareness, and shared humanity: "Set ego aside and focus on your own humanity and the humanity of others" (HYS, 2024). By reframing connection as a collective rather than competitive endeavour, these men begin to inhabit masculinities that value presence over

performance and curiosity over control. This marks a significant narrative expansion, broadening the relational repertoire available to men beyond the narrow scripts of dominance.

3.2.4.4 The Non-Judgmental Sanctuary: A Context for Re-authoring Relational Possibilities

Participants repeatedly describe their Tables as safe, non-judgmental spaces where they can experiment with alternative relational behaviours. Such environments function, in White's (2007) terms, as contexts of re-authoring, where relational practices can be witnessed, affirmed, and gradually integrated into one's preferred identity. Men emphasize experiencing the group as a "*sanctuary,*" "*free room*," and "*place where I can talk without being fixed*" (HYS, 2024). These descriptions highlight the importance of a predictable relational container, a space where new forms of masculinities can be practised without the risk of ridicule, judgement, or loss of status. At a latent level, this suggests a renegotiation of emotional safety. Where past environments may have reinforced performance, the Table offers a context where missteps are met with compassion rather than evaluation. This scaffolding appears essential for enabling men to dismantle deeply internalised norms around self-reliance, dominance, or emotional restraint.

The Table environment itself appears to provide a form of narrative scaffolding, where men can rehearse preferred relational practices in the presence of others who witness and affirm these developments (White, 2007). This witnessing can play a crucial role in stabilising new identity positions, allowing men to inhabit relational roles that differ markedly from earlier expectations without fear of judgement or loss of status.

3.2.4.5 Summary: Recasting Relational Rules

Theme 3.2.4 can be interpreted as illustrating a significant relational re-authoring among men at The Men's Table (White, 2007). Through shifting away from dominance, fixing, and the "*Alpha*" script, and toward humility, attentive listening, and mutual support, participants articulate a relational model grounded in interdependence. These practices counter earlier narratives of isolation and control and enable the development of relational masculinities that value collaboration, shared humanity, and emotional presence. These alternative relational performances challenge dividing practices that previously equated masculinity with control or emotional restraint. The Table environment itself acts as a non-judgmental sanctuary where these alternative relational practices can be rehearsed and affirmed, supporting men in constructing broader, more meaningful stories about how they relate to others and to themselves.

3.2.5 Care as a Relational Practice of Masculinities

This theme examines how care becomes the central ethical and relational orientation through which men at The Men's Table articulate their preferred masculinities. Interpreted through White's (2007) narrative lens, care appears not only as an action but as a preferred identity position, an organising principle that reorients men away from inherited scripts of emotional restraint, self-sacrifice, or hierarchical authority. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) dual interpretive frame, semantic descriptions of care are analysed alongside latent meanings that point to deeper shifts in how men understand responsibility, reciprocity, and relational presence.

3.2.5.1 Care as a Core Ethical Principle: Beyond Gendered Traits

Across the HYS datasets (2024; 2025), a striking consensus emerges around the centrality of care. The Men's Table's definition, "*A healthy version of what it means to be a man includes men being able to openly express care for themselves, other men, their families and their communities*", received 94.6% agreement in 2025. Semantically, this suggests strong resonance with care as a desirable masculine quality. Latently, it may indicate that men are re-authoring masculinities away from narrow, gendered expectations toward values that feel universally human. Many participants explicitly resist the idea that such qualities belong only to men: "*This could apply to any person or gender, not just men*" (HYS, 2025). This broadening aligns with White's (2007) argument that preferred stories often transcend the limiting categories embedded in dominant cultural discourses. Care emerges as an overarching ethical stance through statements such as "*This is what men are supposed to be doing, this is very important for a healthy society*" (HYS, 2025). Men here appear to be articulating a narrative shift in which care becomes a legitimate, even expected, masculine performance rather than a deviation from tradition.

3.2.5.2 Care as Self-Preservation: Reclaiming Internal Ground

Across both HYS datasets, participants consistently describe care as beginning with the self. Semantically, men emphasise that self-care is not indulgence but necessity: *"Care has to start inside self, otherwise it becomes obligation, not a gift*" (HYS, 2025). Others acknowledge the difficulty of this shift, noting that many men "*never learned to receive care,*" which leaves them "*out of balance*" when attempting to practise it (HYS, 2025). These reflections can be interpreted as attempts to reorient away from the earlier masculine script in which value was tied to service, sacrifice, and self-neglect. Latently, such statements may be understood as challenging what White (2007) calls

objectification, discourses that position men primarily as instruments of utility, productivity, or emotional endurance.

Reclaiming self-care becomes a way of loosening the dividing practices that once classified self-attention as weakness and self-sacrifice as virtue. Instead, men narrate care as a grounded form of agency, a deliberate and responsible way of maintaining internal equilibrium. Several participants invoke the familiar airplane metaphor, "*look after yourself so you can look after your family, friends and community*", illustrating a culturally recognisable justification for why self-preservation is relationally consequential (HYS, 2025). In narrative terms, this metaphor provides a linguistic scaffold for re-authoring identity: wellbeing becomes a prerequisite for relational integrity rather than a reward for performance.

A subtle pattern across the data suggests that some men prefer the term self-preservation over self-care, perhaps because the former carries connotations of responsibility, steadiness, and grounded agency. Tentatively, this may reflect broader cultural discourses where the language of "care" has historically been associated with feminised roles or expectations of others rather than oneself. Reframing self-care as self-preservation may therefore help some men inhabit a vocabulary that feels more congruent with their identities while still opening space for gentleness, maintenance, and internal attention. This linguistic shift also underscores the relational consequences when men's wellbeing deteriorates, a reminder that caring for oneself supports not only personal thriving but the stability of families, workplaces, and communities.

This reorientation aligns with White's (2007) idea of preferred identity conclusions, where small acts of self-attention reinforce a sense of competence and relational capacity. As one participant notes, *"A healthy version of myself helps me help others"* (HYS, 2025). Another adds, "*Without that understanding, caring becomes sacrifice,*

and sacrifice leads to imbalance" (HYS, 2025). Together, these reflections suggest an emerging storyline in which self-preservation becomes a responsible, ethical, and sustainable foundation for engaging with others.

3.2.5.3 Outward Care: Expanding the Circle of Responsibility

From this internal ground, care extends outward. Participants describe caring for partners, families, friends, and broader communities: "*A man must look after himself so he can care for his family, friends and community*" (HYS, 2025). This outward extension often carries a moral dimension, described as "a positive contribution to the world" or "*a responsibility to be supportive where I can*." Care becomes both a relational ethic and a civic gesture. Latently, these accounts point toward a subtle renegotiation of the older "*provider-protector*" discourse. While some traditional elements remain, such as a desire to safeguard others, these responsibilities are reframed in non-hierarchical ways. Protection is no longer described as physical dominance but as emotional steadiness, "*using your brains not your fists*" (HYS, 2025). This suggests an interpretive shift toward relational competence as a form of strength.

A minority of participants reference broader structural considerations in their reflections on care and responsibility. One notes the importance of being "*cognizant of the benefits we have enjoyed growing up as men in a patriarchal society*" (HYS, 2025). This can be interpreted not as self-critique but as a contextualisation of earlier norms, an externalisation of the structural narratives that shaped prior masculinities and a recognition that care may include awareness of one's positionality.

In narrative terms, care may be viewed as a preferred identity position that reorganises how men understand agency, responsibility, and relational life (White, 2007). As participants describe moving toward practices of tenderness, mutual regard,

and emotional availability, they enact what could be considered counter-stories to earlier norms of stoicism or emotional reserve. These counter-stories acquire meaning not only through internal commitment but through relational embodiment, the repeated enactment of care in everyday interactions, where it becomes both witnessed and reinforced.

3.2.5.4 Care as Generational Imperative: Breaking the Silence

For many men, care is articulated as essential to intergenerational wellbeing. They express concern that younger men lack relational models grounded in openness and empathy: "*If we cannot express care, how are our sons supposed to learn?*" (HYS, 2024). This becomes a form of narrative repair, countering what White (2007) would describe as the transgenerational transmission of problem-saturated stories. By modelling care, participants aim to end the silence and emotional distance many associated with the past. This commitment is amplified by a perceived societal drift toward individualism or self-focus: "*It's disappointing that the world seems to be going the other way*" (HYS, 2025). Within this interpretive frame, care becomes both an act of resistance and of renewal.

3.2.5.5 Summary: Care Orientation

Theme 3.2.5 illustrates how care becomes the central ethical, relational, and identity-shaping practice through which men at The Men's Table re-author their masculinities. Semantically, participants describe healthy masculinities through practices of care for self, others, and community; latently, these reflections may be interpreted as signalling a gentle reorientation away from inherited narratives of sacrifice, emotional restraint, and dominance. Through White's (2007) narrative lens,

care appears to function as a preferred identity position, an organising storyline that gathers together emotional literacy, authenticity, humility, and relational responsibility. When grounded in both internal stability and outward contribution, care becomes a flexible ethical anchor through which men articulate plural and context-sensitive masculinities. This emerging narrative foundation provides the conditions for the broader societal and intergenerational commitments explored in the following theme, suggesting that care is not merely interpersonal but also a potential site of civic and cultural renewal.

3.2.6 The Intergenerational Call: Mentorship, Navigation and Societal Contribution

This theme brings the narrative trajectory full circle by examining how the men's emerging preferred identities extend outward into a broader social orientation. Rather than positioning themselves as custodians of a "*new masculine ideal*," participants describe a gentler, more provisional contribution: offering presence, modelling groundedness, and serving as steady points of orientation in a world saturated with competing voices about what masculinities should be. Interpreted through White's (2007) narrative framework, these reflections demonstrate how preferred stories can ripple beyond the individual, influencing the relational, cultural, and intergenerational landscapes in which masculinities are continually renegotiated.

3.2.6.1 Cultural Change as an Ongoing Narrative: Why the Story Cannot Stay the Same

A consistent thread across HYS 2024 and 2025 is the recognition that masculinities are not static but historically shaped and continually evolving. Men reflect that their

fathers' and grandfathers' roles, often centred on survival, work, duty, or post-war stoicism, reflected a different set of social conditions, not personal failure. Today's context, however, requires navigation of emotional complexity, shifting relationships, new social norms, and unprecedented digital influences. As one participant puts it, "*We are all first of all people*" (HYS, 2025), signalling a desire for a more expansive relational vocabulary. Latently, these reflections acknowledge that what counted as strength in the past may no longer provide adequate guidance today. This does not involve judging the past but recognising that *the narrative now requires different skills*. In White's (2007) terms, the men are responding to a new "*landscape of action*," in which old scripts no longer map neatly onto contemporary life. In this sense, the intergenerational theme is not about fixing history but keeping pace with it.

3.2.6.2 Offering a Compass, Not a Map: Supporting Young Men's Orientation While Leaving Their Destination As Their Own

Participants describe younger men as navigating a cultural environment characterised by overwhelming narrative multiplicity. While older generations may have had minimal role models, young men now face what several respondents call "*a million voices,*" including the influence of the manosphere and other polarised online environments offering rigid, high-intensity scripts of dominance or emotional disengagement (HYS, 2025).

Against this backdrop, men at The Men's Table emphasise that their role is not to prescribe the "*right*" way to be a man but to offer orientation without controlling the path. The compass metaphor reflects their desire to embody steadiness, authenticity, vulnerability, and relational presence, while avoiding the prescriptive rigidity they themselves found constraining. As one man writes, "*Young guys need real-life men who walk the talk,*" while another emphasises, "*I don't want to tell them*

what to do - I want to be someone they can look to when they're unsure" (HYS, 2024). This aligns closely with White's (2007) emphasis on supporting agency and narrative self-authorship rather than imposing dominant stories.

This orientation resembles what White (2007) refers to as narrative accompaniment, a stance in which individuals support others' identity development without imposing prescriptive storylines. By offering presence rather than instruction, men at The Men's Table adopt a form of decentred yet influential positioning, allowing younger men to chart their own landscape of identity while drawing on the steadiness of relational models that are grounded rather than directive. In this sense, intergenerational care becomes a narrative practice that honours agency, plurality, and contextual responsiveness.

3.2.6.3 Navigating Narrative Saturation: Helping Younger Men Discern Amid Competing Messages

Men frequently describe the modern digital environment as a narrative battleground. Latently, their reflections suggest that the challenge facing young men is not a lack of discourse around masculinities but a surplus of prescriptive, polarising discourses that compete for authority. Some respondents explicitly reference "*the crap coming out of the manosphere*," or the sense that "*young men get lost in unrealistic expectations*" (HYS, 2025). In this context, older men at TMT see themselves as offering counter-saturation: grounded, human-scale stories that model emotional honesty, care, and humility. This is not described as an attempt to correct or override digital narratives, but to provide one steady relational alternative among many. White's (2007) notion of "counter-stories" is helpful here: participants appear to understand that they cannot silence conflicting cultural voices, but they can live out stories that offer credible, humane, and internally consistent alternatives.

3.2.6.4 Navigational Hesitations: Internal and External Barriers to Intergenerational Contribution

Alongside this wish to offer orientation, several participants describe the obstacles that complicate stepping into this intergenerational role. Some articulate internal hesitations "*I'm still learning myself*" or "*I don't feel like a good enough role model yet*" (HYS, 2024) which may be understood, through White's (2007) lens, as moments where earlier spoiled identities resurface and momentarily narrow one's sense of competence. Others note contextual constraints such as time scarcity, generational distance, or social norms that make engaging with younger men outside family contexts feel uncertain or inappropriate. These hesitations are not framed as failures but as natural tensions within a shifting cultural landscape. Men emphasise that contribution can occur incrementally and locally: "*Even if it's just showing up differently in my own family, it matters*" (HYS, 2024). This reinforces that intergenerational masculinities are enacted not as perfected ideals but as ongoing, adaptive practices.

3.2.6.5 Summary: Intergenerational Orientation and Social Contribution

Theme 3.2.6 brings the analysis to a wider horizon by showing how men's preferred identities extend beyond the personal and relational into a broader social orientation. Rather than prescribing new norms, participants emphasize offering grounded, authentic presence, "*a compass, not a map*", that may help younger men navigate an overcrowded landscape of cultural messages about masculinities. Through White's (2007) framework, this can be interpreted as a form of narrative accompaniment that supports agency, plurality, and self-authorship. The men's reflections underscore that masculinities are dynamic, shaped by shifting contexts, and continually re-authored across generations. Their contribution is not to determine what masculinities should

be, but to model relational steadiness, care, humility, and thoughtful presence, enabling others to chart their own meaningful paths.

3.2.8 Summary of Thematic Findings: Defining Healthy Masculinities

This thematic analysis may be interpreted as illustrating how participants at The Men's Table articulate, negotiate, and gradually re-author their understandings of healthy masculinities across personal, relational, and societal domains. Drawing on White's (2007) narrative practice and Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis, the findings can be read as a set of emerging storylines through which men position themselves in relation to, and sometimes in contrast with, dominant cultural narratives of masculinities. Building on White's (2007) emphasis on identity as constituted through story and sustained through communal recognition, the qualitative material shows how men begin to move from historically inherited, problem-saturated narratives toward preferred identity positions anchored in care, emotional literacy, and authenticity. Rather than producing a single, definitive model, the analysis highlights a plurality of evolving, context-dependent meanings that men describe as resonant within their contemporary lives.

The first thematic movement concerns the distancing from the Dominant Problem Story of the Silent Past (Theme 1). Participants do not frame earlier generations' practices as failures but as responses to the historical and material conditions of their time. Within this interpretive frame, the men's reflections can be understood not as judgements but as recognition that scripts shaped by stoicism, duty, self-reliance, and performance-based worth may no longer support the emotional, relational, and social complexity they face today. This narrative shift forms the precondition for exploring alternatives. In White's (2007) terms, this loosening of

inherited plots reflects an early stage of re-authoring in which taken-for-granted meanings become visible and available for reinterpretation.

The subsequent themes (Themes 2 and 3) suggest that healthy masculinities are intimately linked to emotional literacy, reflective awareness, and a sense of internal coherence. Participants describe emotional recognition, regulation, and expression as capacities that allow them to live in closer alignment with their values. These accounts may be understood as tentative movements toward self-authored masculinities rather than adherence to inherited norms. Authenticity, self-acceptance, and internal grounding thus function as key narrative resources through which healthy masculinities take shape. These developments can also be read as early "unique outcomes" (White, 2007), small departures from dominant stories that enable men to experiment with alternative identity positions.

Relationally, healthy masculinities appear to be associated with practices of interdependence, humility, attentive listening, and mutual regard (Theme 4). Participants describe moving away from patterns of fixing, directing, or competing, and toward relational encounters experienced as attuned and reciprocal. These descriptions may be interpreted as signalling a broader reconfiguration of relational expectations, one in which presence replaces performance, and connection replaces control. Such practices illustrate the co-authoring of identity, where relational witnessing and predictable conversational structure gradually "*thicken*" preferred ways of being.

Care emerges as a central organising orientation (Theme 5), described both as a form of self-preservation and as a relational practice that extends outward to others and the community. Rather than reproducing gendered assumptions about who "*should*" care, participants frame care as a grounded, intentional stance that sustains

wellbeing and fosters relational stability. In this sense, care can be read as a preferred identity position that integrates emotional, relational, and social dimensions of healthy masculinities. This expansion of care beyond the self echoes White's (2007) notion of identity enrichment through contribution and commitment to broader communities of concern.

Finally, healthy masculinities are narrated as extending into intergenerational and societal contexts (Theme 6). Participants describe a wish to offer guidance, steadiness, and presence to younger men without imposing prescriptive norms, "*a compass, not a map.*" This suggests that healthy masculinities may be understood as adaptive, future-oriented practices that acknowledge shifting cultural landscapes and respond through authenticity, relational attentiveness, and care. These outward-facing commitments may be interpreted as the widening of the narrative horizon, where preferred stories extend beyond the individual and become part of collective meaning-making.

Taken together, the six themes illustrate that healthy masculinities, as described by participants at The Men's Table, are plural, intentional, emotionally attuned, relationally grounded, and oriented toward care and social responsibility. Rather than fixed roles or universal traits, they emerge as flexible, evolving, and context-sensitive ways of living that men continually negotiate in relation to both past inheritances and present conditions. In this sense, the thematic findings can be understood as showing a gradual narrative re-authoring supported by the relational scaffolding of the Table environment, a process in which identities are not replaced but re-aligned with values, preferences, and contemporary relational realities.

3.3 Integrated Interpretation: How Men at TMT Construct Healthy Masculinities

The combined analysis of the Have Your Say surveys (2024; 2025) can be understood as showing how The Men's Table provides both the relational conditions and the narrative scaffolding through which men articulate and develop their understandings of healthy masculinities. In relation to the research question, the quantitative findings contextualise the stakes of this meaning-making: a membership characterised by heightened vulnerability (e.g., 46.1% reporting a Lived or Living Experience of Suicide) and unusually strong perceptions of relational safety (over 95% describe their Table as a safe space). These conditions may be interpreted as enabling the reflective and relational processes through which men reconsider and reconfigure their masculine identities. The combination of high emotional safety and high vulnerability reflects what White (2007) describes as a context supportive of narrative re-authoring, while simultaneously aligning with Putnam's (1994; 2000) view that dense trust networks ('thick trust') create the structural preconditions for renewed civic and relational engagement.

The qualitative themes then elaborate how participants describe healthy masculinities as unfolding across internal, relational, and societal dimensions. They appear to distance themselves from restrictive or inherited norms (Theme 1), cultivate emotional literacy and reflexive awareness (Theme 2), develop authenticity and grounded self-acceptance (Theme 3), practise relational presence and interdependence (Theme 4), orient themselves through care as both a personal and communal stance (Theme 5), and extend these commitments into broader social and intergenerational contexts (Theme 6). Rather than representing discrete categories, these themes collectively form an interconnected narrative system through which men articulate preferred ways of being. These shifts reflect what White (2007)

conceptualises as a progressive loosening of Dominant Problem Stories and the emergence of Preferred Identity Conclusions supported by relational witnessing within the group.

This synthesis suggests that participants understand healthy masculinities less as stable traits or prescriptive ideals and more as evolving, self-authored, and contextually responsive practices. Masculinities are described as shaped through ongoing negotiation, contingent on relational safety, and sustained by emotional literacy, authenticity, and care. The findings therefore indicate that: *Healthy masculinities, as understood by participants at The Men's Table, may be seen as dynamic, plural, relationally grounded, and anchored in practices that foster connection, responsibility, and personal integrity.* These practices also mirror Putnam's (1994; 2000) distinction between bonding and bridging social capital, with men strengthening inward trust and beginning to extend ethical concern outward into families, communities, and intergenerational relationships.

This integrated understanding naturally leads into the Discussion, where the findings are situated within broader sociocultural, psychological, and theoretical debates. From an integrated perspective, the Tables may be understood as sites where structural social capital (Putnam) and narrative identity practices (White) mutually reinforce one another: trust enables re-authoring, and re-authoring deepens relational reciprocity. The upcoming analysis examines how these men's narrative practices intersect with wider processes of individualisation, shifting gendered expectations, contemporary pressures on emotional life, and the cultural renegotiation of masculinities in late-modern societies.

Part 4: Discussion: The Men's Table as a Structural and Narrative Response to Individualized Masculinities

This Discussion offers an interpretive reading of how participation in The Men's Table (TMT) may support the development of healthy masculinities within contemporary Australia. Rather than presenting definitive causal claims, the analysis draws on two complementary theoretical anchors: White's (2007) narrative practice and Putnam's (1994; 2000) social capital theory. These frameworks were introduced earlier in the paper and are revisited here to interpret how the relational, structural, and cultural conditions reflected in the findings shape men's possibilities for developing healthier, more connected ways of being. In doing so, this section addresses the guiding research questions concerning how TMT supports the development of healthy masculinities in an individualised society, and how TMT may be understood as both a structural and a narrative model with contemporary relevance in Australia.

Across the HYS datasets (2024; 2025), men described navigating emotional life in ways that reflect tensions between personal agency, cultural expectations, and relational infrastructures. Their accounts suggest that healthy masculinities are not purely individual achievements but relationally co-constructed, narratively rehearsed, and structurally supported within specific environments. The following sections situate these insights within the socio-cultural dynamics shaping men's relational possibilities today.

In this analysis, TMT is interpreted simultaneously as a structural environment and a narrative environment. Structurally, its continuity, participation rhythms, and shared norms resemble the forms of trust-building emphasised by Putnam (1994). In Putnam's terms, TMT can be understood as a contemporary "*micro-infrastructure of civic life*," a small-scale associational form that cultivates the networks, trust, and

norms of reciprocity required for cooperation and wellbeing. Narratively, its conversational practices and relational witnessing reflect the meaning-making processes described by White (2007). More specifically, TMT appears to offer what White (2007) terms a "*dual landscape*": a landscape of action in which new practices can be tried out, and a landscape of identity in which these practices can be interpreted, storied, and made meaningful. This dual reading allows the analysis to trace how men's experiences at TMT are shaped both by the stories available to them and by the relational conditions that sustain those stories.

4.1 Individualisation, Agency, and Contemporary Masculinities

4.1.1 The Pressure to Self-Author in Late Modernity

A central backdrop for understanding men's development at TMT is the sociological condition of individualisation, a process through which previously stable, collectively anchored life scripts lose their organising force and individuals become increasingly responsible for navigating emotional and relational life alone. As widely described in late-modernity scholarship (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002; Bauman, 2001), individualisation expands possibilities for self-determination while shifting responsibility for managing uncertainty, relational complexity, and identity work onto the individual. This tension was evident throughout the HYS responses, where men repeatedly described a sense of having to "*figure things out alone,*" often across many years or decades (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025).

Participants commonly articulated that before joining TMT they had "*felt alone with my problems*" (HYS, 2024) or "*never really had anyone to talk to about this stuff*" (HYS, 2025). These descriptions reflect not only personal experiences but a broader structural pattern: when communal infrastructures weaken (Putnam, 2000) and when emotional life becomes a solitary responsibility, the relational preconditions for

practising care, reflection, or vulnerability become increasingly scarce. From a narrative perspective, White (2007) emphasises that individuals act through the stories and interpretive resources available to them. Where dominant narratives uphold self-reliance and emotional minimisation as moral expectations, these interpretive resources can become "*thin descriptions*" that narrow identity possibilities and limit the imaginative space for alternative masculinities. When men internalise dominant narratives of self-reliance, emotional minimisation, or the imperative not to burden others, they may interpret their struggles as private inadequacies rather than as understandable responses to broader socio-cultural pressures. From a structural perspective, weakened communal participation (Putnam, 2000) limits the opportunities through which alternative relational practices could be enacted or supported. Putnam argues that when civic structures erode, individuals lose access not only to companionship but also to the "*habitual cooperation*" and shared moral expectations that anchor relational life. In this sense, men's accounts of isolation may be read as symptoms of declining social capital rather than purely personal circumstances.

Taken together, these insights highlight how individualisation creates both the necessity and the difficulty of developing healthy masculinities. As several scholars of late modernity observe, heightened personal freedom is accompanied by new forms of relational precarity, in which individuals must manage emotional life without the buffering support of stable communal structures (Bauman, 2001; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). Within this context, contemporary norms increasingly expect men to be emotionally open, relationally responsive, and communicatively competent, yet the social and interpretive conditions required to cultivate such capacities are often unevenly available. This tension is reflected in the HYS data, where men consistently described wanting to engage differently but lacking the contexts in which such engagement felt possible. The paradox is therefore not merely psychological but

relational and structural: men are expected to practise relational skills in environments that may offer limited opportunities for doing so, a dynamic consistent with both narrative and social-capital perspectives (White, 2007; Putnam, 2000).

It is within this broader relational and structural tension that the significance of community-based contexts such as The Men's Table becomes increasingly apparent. Although TMT does not position itself as a clinical or therapeutic intervention, the Tables appear to provide a form of continuity, steadiness, and relational presence that individualised life often renders less accessible. Participants frequently described the Table as one of the few places where they could speak openly, be listened to without judgement, and experience a kind of mutual recognition that had been largely absent elsewhere. From a narrative perspective, these contexts may function as what White (2007) refers to as "*scaffolding conversations*,". Such scaffolding expands interpretive repertoires, enabling men to move from thin, problem-saturated identity conclusions toward thicker, more plural identity possibilities. From a structural perspective, they resemble the small-scale, trust-based networks emphasised by Putnam (1994; 2000) as essential for restoring social embeddedness. Specifically, TMT reproduces the core dimensions of bonding social capital, repeated contact, shared norms, mutual commitment, which Putnam identifies as necessary for generating the forms of thick trust that allow vulnerability to feel safe.

While such shifts cannot be attributed solely to TMT, the findings suggest that the Tables may help reintroduce some of the relational and interpretive conditions required for cultivating healthier, more connected masculinities. Men's descriptions of gradually "*finding the words,*" "*getting used to being heard,*" or "*making caring a habit*" indicate that development may occur at the intersection of structural opportunity and narrative possibility. In this sense, the Tables do not create change in a linear or prescriptive way; rather, they appear to offer a context in which men can practise

relational patterns that individualisation has made more difficult to initiate or sustain in everyday life. These emerging patterns, greater ease in expressing care, increased relational awareness, and a sense of shared responsibility, are interpreted as aligning with TMT's broader aspiration to contribute to "*healthy men, healthy masculinities, and healthy communities*," (The Men's Table, 2024) although further research is needed to understand how these developments extend beyond the immediate Table context.

4.1.2 Comparing Agency in White (2007) and Putnam (1994): Relational Preconditions for Development

Although their orientations differ, White (2007) and Putnam (1994) together illuminate how agency is shaped by both narrative and structural conditions. White (2007) locates agency in meaning-making and relational dialogue: individuals require interpretive resources and relational witnessing to imagine and enact preferred identities. In this view, agency is not a private trait but a narrative accomplishment, co-authored through conversations that allow preferred identities to be named, elaborated, and validated.

Putnam (1994) locates agency in participation and the density of social networks: individuals require trustworthy, reciprocal environments to support cooperative and prosocial action. Where social capital is depleted, individuals are structurally disembedded, making both emotional expression and collective responsibility more difficult to sustain.

Seen from Putnam's (1994) vantage point, White's (2007) focus on language may appear limited, emphasising what people *say* over what they *do*. Men may enact care or reciprocity long before they have the vocabulary to articulate these shifts. Seen from White's (2007) vantage point, Putnam's (1994) focus on networks may appear

incomplete, as it risks overlooking how meaning-making sustains behavioural change; without shared language, emerging practices may remain fragile or unintelligible.

Despite these theoretical tensions, both converge on the insight that agency is relationally produced. Putnam's work makes clear that agency is strengthened when individuals are embedded in reciprocal networks where contribution is expected and valued; in such contexts, people experience themselves as having social significance, which reinforces motivation and civic confidence. This helps explain why many TMT participants reported feeling "*more steady*," "*more useful*," or "*more connected*" as part of the group, experiences that can be interpreted as emergent forms of social capital becoming personally meaningful. This shared relational ontology, though framed differently, provides the conceptual rationale for analysing TMT simultaneously as a structural and narrative intervention. Development therefore occurs not in isolation but within supportive relational environments, an insight strongly reflected in the HYS data, where men consistently described lacking both interpretive language and relational opportunity prior to joining TMT.

Through this combined lens, healthy masculinities require both narrative possibility (the ability to name, imagine, and articulate alternative identities) and structural opportunity (the relational conditions that make such identities enactable). When either dimension is missing, development becomes challenging to obtain and sustain.

4.1.3 Gender Transformations, Power, and Shifting Relational Expectations
Shifting Gender Orders and the Impact of Feminist Movements

The pressures associated with individualisation unfold within broader cultural transformations in gender relations, shaped by decades of feminist critique, shifts in relational norms, and the gradual destabilisation of traditional patriarchal arrangements. Feminist movements have expanded possibilities for equality, agency, and relational autonomy, but they have also altered the expectations placed on men in everyday life (Connell, 1995; hooks, 2004). Many men in the HYS datasets described feeling "*behind,*" "*uncertain,*" or lacking an emotional vocabulary adequate for contemporary expectations around intimacy and communication (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). These reflections do not signal deficiencies in feminist progress; instead, they suggest a transitional moment in which inherited masculine socialisation no longer aligns neatly with emerging relational norms.

4.1.3.1 Redistribution of Power and the Destabilisation of Traditional Roles

From a structural perspective, gender equality has disrupted the traditional bases of masculine authority, economic provision, decision-making power, and role-based identity (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005). As relationships have become more negotiated and less role-determined, the forms of social entitlement that men, especially older heterosexual men, could once rely on have become less stable. Several HYS participants hinted at this shift, noting difficulties around "*not being the provider anymore,*" navigating retirement, or questioning "*what men are supposed to be now*" (HYS, 2025). While these shifts are widely valued as part of broader gender equality, they also require men to relinquish forms of power that previously structured masculine identity, often without clearly articulated alternative roles.

4.1.3.2 Narrative Disorientation and the Loss of Familiar Masculine Scripts

From a narrative perspective, men may still rely on older internalised stories centred on stoicism, self-reliance, and emotional minimisation, stories that once offered socially endorsed identities but can be interpreted as misaligned with modern relational expectations. White's (2007) concept of Dominant Problem Stories highlights how these inherited narratives can restrict interpretive flexibility, leaving men without a coherent story for inhabiting contemporary masculinities. This narrative disorientation was reflected in Theme 6 of the analysis, where men noted the value of the men wanting to offer the younger generation "*a compass, not a map*", a metaphor signalling the need for guidance in navigating unfamiliar relational landscapes without prescriptive formulas. White's notion of "unique outcomes" is also relevant here: moments in which men act or feel differently from the dominant story but lack a context in which those moments can be recognised or built upon. Several accounts in the HYS material, such as men expressing care for peers, reflecting on emotional habits, or offering guidance to younger men, may be interpreted as unique outcomes that gain significance only when they are witnessed, named, and linked to emerging preferred identities within the Table setting.

4.1.3.3 Structural Fragmentation and the Decline of Relational Anchors

Putnam's (1994; 2000) social capital framework illuminates the structural dimensions of this disorientation. As traditional community networks weaken and civic participation declines, the social environments that once anchored identity, belonging, and contribution have eroded. Putnam (2000) emphasises that declining civic participation diminishes both formal and informal relational support, leaving individuals with fewer opportunities to practise reciprocity, shared responsibility, and

mutual witnessing. The HYS data reflect precisely this pattern: men described losing workplace ties, sporting clubs, or community networks, all of which traditionally generated bonding capital for earlier generations. Men may find themselves positioned between diminishing structural supports and rising emotional expectations, leaving them with fewer relational contexts in which to practise newly emerging relational norms. In this way, patriarchy's decline removes certain privileges, while individualisation removes communal anchors, producing a unique form of relational precarity.

4.1.3.4 Contested Cultural Narratives and the Absence of Clear Relational Alternatives

Contemporary public discourse often identifies harmful or restrictive masculine behaviours as problematic, yet it offers comparatively fewer resources for articulating what healthier or more relationally grounded masculinities might look like (Messner, 2016; McCormack, 2021). This normative asymmetry mirrors what White (2007) describes as a culture rich in problem-saturated descriptions but comparatively poor in "*alternative storylines*" that support preferred identities. Many men expressed support for gender equality but nonetheless described uncertainty about how to engage relationally within shifting expectations without losing valued aspects of identity or overcorrecting in ways that felt inauthentic. In this sense, cultural narratives may more clearly indicate what men should move away from than what they might move toward, leaving a gap between critique and constructive alternative scripts.

4.1.3.5 TMT as a Relational Landing Zone in a Changing Gender Order

It is in this complex cultural terrain that TMT becomes particularly relevant. The Tables appear to offer a "*landing zone*" where men can reflect on shifting relational expectations, acknowledge changes in power and privilege, and experiment with new forms of relational engagement rooted in care, reciprocity, and accountability. In particular, the Tables cultivate a form of "*generalised reciprocity*", a willingness to act generously without expecting direct repayment, which Putnam identifies as a cornerstone of healthy civic life. Men's descriptions of supporting each other, checking in outside meetings, and sharing relational responsibilities illustrate this dynamic in practice. Through Putnam's (1994) lens, TMT provides the structural continuity, trust, predictability, participation, required for these shifts to be enacted. Through White's (2007) lens, it provides the narrative scaffolding, language, witnessing, interpretive flexibility needed to make emerging identities meaningful and sustainable.

4.1.3.6 Navigating Change with a Compass, Not a Map

Across the qualitative data, several men expressed a desire to support younger generations in navigating contemporary relational and emotional challenges, often emphasising the importance of guidance that is flexible rather than prescriptive. While no participant explicitly used the metaphor of "a compass rather than a map," this phrasing reflects an interpretive synthesis of how men described wanting to offer direction without imposing fixed pathways. As the analysis indicates, many men were acutely aware that gender relations are continually evolving and that rigid scripts are unlikely to meet the complexity of modern relational life.

In this sense, TMT can be understood as providing a context in which men themselves are practising this form of reflexive orientation. The Tables function less

as a source of definitive answers and more as a space in which men can explore, negotiate, and recalibrate their relational bearings alongside others who are similarly situated in a shifting cultural landscape. From this perspective, TMT supports the cultivation of healthier, plural masculinities not by prescribing identity positions but by offering the structural and narrative resources required to navigate ongoing social change with greater clarity and relational integrity.

4.1.4 The Australian Cultural Context

Understanding these findings also requires situating masculinities within the specific cultural, historical, and social landscape of Australia. Australian masculinities have been shaped historically by settler-colonial narratives emphasising endurance, mateship, and stoic self-reliance, cultural themes that remain pervasive across generations (Dempsey, 1990; Pease, 2019). Such cultural narratives operate as what White (2007) calls "*discursive templates*": taken-for-granted storylines that shape what can be spoken, felt, or expected of oneself. While the ethos of mateship fosters loyalty and mutual support, its emotional vocabulary has traditionally centred on humour, banter, action, and solidarity rather than explicit vulnerability or reflective dialogue. Many participants, particularly within the mid-to-late adulthood demographic, described growing up in environments where emotional restraint was expected and where relational intimacy between men occurred indirectly rather than through open expression (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025).

At the same time, Australia contains multiple relational epistemologies. The relational traditions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, rooted in kinship, interdependence, collective responsibility, and deep connection to Country, represent longstanding forms of relationality that predate and challenge

settler-colonial norms (Dudgeon et al., 2014). While these traditions must not be appropriated, acknowledging their presence highlights the plurality of relational knowledge in Australia and underscores how settler masculinity has historically narrowed the emotional repertoires available to many men.

Contemporary Australia is also characterised by widespread geographic mobility, demographic dispersion, and changing institutional participation. High internal migration, FIFO/DIDO work patterns, dispersed families, declining religious involvement, and reduced participation in civic organisations reflect a broader shift from obligation-based communal life toward individually chosen networks (ABS, 2023; Pini & Mayes, 2012). These dynamics mean that many of the informal relational anchors that historically supported men, workplaces, sporting clubs, extended families, neighbourhood communities, are less stable or less accessible than in previous generations. Several participants described losing such inherited networks through retirement, relocation, divorce, or changes in family structure, leaving them unsure how to rebuild connection "*from scratch*."

These structural shifts intersect with well-documented patterns in Australian men's wellbeing. Rigid adherence to traditional masculine norms, emotional suppression, self-reliance, avoidance of help-seeking, has consistently been associated with distress, isolation, and poorer mental health outcomes (Courtenay, 2000; Seidler et al., 2016). Australia's disproportionately high male suicide rates, especially among middle-aged men (AIHW, 2023), reflect these intersecting pressures: increased expectations for emotional reflexivity combined with fewer communal structures through which to practise it.

Through White's (2007) narrative lens, these cultural conditions shape the stories men inherit about emotional life and relational responsibility, often privileging

restraint over expression. Through Putnam's (2000) structural lens, they shape the availability of trust-based networks that support belonging, reciprocity, and continuity. Together, they help explain why many participants described TMT as one of the only predictable, emotionally safe relational settings available to them. Several demographic behaviors specific to Australia, internal migration, FIFO/DIDO work patterns, dispersed families, reduce opportunities for consistent participation in stable networks. Putnam could interpret these mobility patterns as weakening both bonding and bridging capital, making it more difficult for men to sustain long-term, trust-rich relationships.

Against this backdrop, TMT can be understood as a form of relocalised relational infrastructure. In a cultural environment where many traditional gathering places have weakened or become optional, the predictability and confidentiality of the Tables provide a rare context in which men can practise care, openness, and relational presence. By resonating with familiar cultural values (such as loyalty and shared responsibility) while also expanding emotional and narrative possibilities, TMT appears uniquely positioned within the Australian landscape to support the cultivation of healthier, more connected, and plural masculinities. In Putnam's terms, the Tables reintroduce "*dense horizontal networks*," which are characterised by equality, mutual regard, and shared norms rather than hierarchy. These networks are precisely the conditions under which trust develops and under which civic and emotional engagement become more sustainable.

4.2 The Men's Table: Structural Mechanisms, Narrative Possibilities, and Contemporary Significance

This section integrates what were previously two separate analytic strands, mechanisms (The Fundamentals) and wider implications, into one cohesive analysis of how TMT functions as both structural infrastructure and narrative environment.

4.2.1 A Culturally Congruent Entry Point into Help-Seeking

Research consistently shows that men underutilise formal mental health services and tend to favour instrumental, informal, or avoidant coping strategies (Addis & Mahalik, 2003). More recent evidence, however, confirms that this pattern remains persistent, despite shifts in public discourse. Contemporary reviews highlight that many men still delay help-seeking, prefer self-management, or rely on informal support, especially when distress is framed through masculine norms of stoicism, autonomy, or emotional control (Seidler et al., 2016; Oliffe et al., 2019b). An updated evidence synthesis similarly notes that while some gains have been made in mental-health literacy among men, structural, cultural, and identity-based barriers continue to shape help-seeking reluctance (Ogrodniczuk, Rice, & Kealy, 2021). Many TMT participants echoed this pattern, noting they "*would never have gone to therapy*," yet nonetheless described feeling safe, connected, and emotionally supported at their Table (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). This does not imply that the Tables function *instead* of other forms of help-seeking. The HYS data indicates that men draw on a range of supports, family members, close friends, GPs, online resources, and, in almost one-third of cases, professional counsellors (28.7% in 2025). Rather than replacing these avenues, TMT appears to operate alongside them, providing a relational environment that feels culturally congruent and less psychologically threatening than formal services. In

narrative terms, TMT allows men to express difficulty without taking up an identity of deficiency, a distinction central to externalising conversations, which separate the person from the problem and make emotional expression compatible with integrity rather than shame. This aligns with contemporary research showing that men are more likely to seek support when it is embedded in community settings, framed through shared activity, or encountered within trusted relational networks rather than institutional contexts (Thorpe, Seidler, & Rice, 2022).

The qualitative findings suggest that for many men, community-based support feels easier to access because it aligns more closely with their existing narratives of relational legitimacy, self-reliance, and everyday participation. Sharing "*as one of the guys*," in a familiar conversational rhythm, requires less identity shift than entering a formal help-seeking role. Through Putnam's (1994; 2000) lens, this reflects the importance of low-threshold, trust-based participation: men often enter supportive interactions more readily when embedded in routine, predictable networks rather than institutionalised settings. Putnam (1994) argues that participation which is voluntary, predictable, and routine is particularly effective in generating trust because repetition normalises cooperation. The Tables' monthly rhythm appears to serve this function: regular participation helps transform strangers into acquaintances, and acquaintances into reliable relational partners. Through White's (2007) narrative perspective, TMT offers discursive conditions in which emotional expression can be woven into men's preferred identities, framed not as help-seeking failure but as relational contribution and mutual support.

The data suggests that TMT may therefore serve as a complementary form of support, one that meets men where they already are. For men who are reluctant to identify as "*in need of help,*" the Tables provide a legitimate relational space in which emotional difficulties can be expressed indirectly, gradually, or through shared

storytelling rather than diagnostic language. This may help explain why men described TMT as "*a place I can talk about things I wouldn't talk about anywhere else*" (HYS, 2025) despite also accessing support through partners, friends, or therapists. From a narrative perspective, this process reflects what White (2007) terms "*re-authoring conversations,*" in which individuals gradually develop alternative accounts of themselves through repeated relational dialogue. These conversations do not replace existing masculine narratives but offer men opportunities to reposition themselves in relation to care, vulnerability, and responsibility in ways that are narratively and culturally sustainable. TMT does not aim to replace these relationships but may enhance them by strengthening men's emotional vocabulary, reflexivity, and comfort with relational openness.

In this sense, the Tables can be understood as an accessible entry point into broader help-seeking ecosystems, supportive enough to stand alone for some men, and complementary enough to work alongside other professional and personal support for others. By aligning with men's existing relational practices while providing structured opportunities for emotional expansion, TMT appears to bridge the gap between informal community support and more formalised pathways into care.

4.2.2 The Fundamentals as Relational Scaffolding

TMT's five Fundamentals, Go Beyond Banter, Commitment to Community, Safe & Confidential, Membership Matters, and Everyone Leads, can be understood as a light-touch framework that shapes the relational environment of the Tables. While not central to the theoretical focus of this paper, the Fundamentals appear to play an important enabling role by providing the structural and narrative conditions through which many of the observed developments become possible.

From Putnam's (1994; 2000) perspective, the Fundamentals function as mechanisms that cultivate bonding social capital (trust, psychological safety, continuity) while also creating limited yet meaningful opportunities for bridging capital, particularly through respectful curiosity, mutual accountability, and the shared commitment to community. More precisely, "*Safe & Confidentia*l" and "*Membership Matters*" reinforce bonding capital by promoting psychological safety, reliability, and commitment, all prerequisites for thick trust. "*Go Beyond Banter*," meanwhile, introduces a norm of reflective engagement that increases bridging tendencies by encouraging curiosity across differences, even within relatively homogeneous groups. The high levels of reported safety (95.2% in 2025) suggest that the Tables offer a form of predictable, low-risk participation that many men lack elsewhere.

From White's (2007) narrative standpoint, the Fundamentals create a conversational field in which alternative identity positions can be articulated and sustained. These practices also support externalising conversations, a key narrative technique that separates the person from the problem. Although TMT does not use narrative therapy explicitly, men frequently framed their difficulties, stress, anger, isolation, not as personal failings but as experiences shaped by work, culture, or family histories. This form of externalisation allows participants to speak about challenges without becoming subsumed by them, thereby strengthening the emergence of preferred identity positions grounded in agency rather than deficit. Practices such as turn-taking, confidentiality, uninterrupted speaking time, and the encouragement to "*go beyond banter*" help expand men's interpretive repertoires and support the emergence of preferred identity narratives. Importantly, the Fundamentals do not prescribe a specific model of masculinity; rather, they create space in which plural masculinities can be explored without fear of judgement or correction. These practices help maintain what White (2007) terms a 'non-blaming,

non-hierarchical' relational posture, which opens space for plural identity expressions while reducing the risk of evaluative or corrective dynamics.

Overall, the Fundamentals may be interpreted as a form of relational scaffolding: not directives for how men should behave, but orienting principles that make the relational depth, trust, and mutual recognition described in the findings more likely to occur. Their value appears to lie less in their content than in the stable, predictable interpersonal environment they help generate, a point consistently reflected in both survey years.

4.2.3 Structural–Narrative Synergy: Habit Formation and Contribution

Across the HYS datasets, many men described gradual shifts in how they relate to others, noting that they had "*made caring a habit*" or had become more consistent in listening, checking in, or communicating openly (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). These descriptions suggest that the developments observed in TMT are neither purely emotional nor purely behavioural but occur at the intersection of narrative meaning-making and repeated relational practice.

Through repetition, these identity claims shift from tentative possibilities to what White (2007) calls 'preferred identity conclusions', stable storylines about the kind of man one is becoming. With White's (2007) narrative lens, the Tables offer a discursive space in which alternative identity positions, such as "*a man who is open,*" "*a man who listens*," or "*a man who cares*", can be articulated, witnessed, and stabilised over time. Through Putnam's (2000) structural lens, the continuity and predictability of the Tables create the conditions in which these emerging identities can be enacted repeatedly enough to become personally and relationally meaningful. Putnam describes this as the "*virtuous circle of social capital*": repeated relational actions build

trust, which in turn encourages further cooperation, which then reinforces trust again. Many men's accounts, "*I check in more,*" "*I listen more*," "*I'm more present with my family*", closely mirror this dynamic of mutually reinforcing relational behaviour.

This synergy between structure and narrative appears central to TMT's impact. Men described gaining confidence not only in expressing vulnerability but in offering it: supporting others, initiating conversations, or modelling relational openness in family and community settings. This offering can be interpreted as a movement from bonding capital (relational closeness within the Table) toward civic forms of bridging capital, where relational competencies developed in small networks are carried outward into wider social fields such as families, workplaces, and communities (Putnam, 1994). These patterns may be understood as forms of contribution-oriented masculinity, where care and presence are understood as social acts rather than private sentiments. Putnam (1994) argues that habits of contribution emerge in environments characterised by network closure, where members feel mutually accountable and where relational commitments are reinforced through repeated interaction. The Tables appear to exemplify this dynamic: predictable contact, shared norms, and collective responsibility create a closed yet permeable relational structure in which contribution becomes an ordinary rather than exceptional practice. The Tables provide the environment in which these orientations can be practised regularly enough to take shape as habits, recurring forms of relational engagement that extend beyond the Table and into men's wider lives.

While causality cannot be inferred, the consistency with which men highlighted the role of repetition, continuity, and communal witnessing indicates that TMT supports development not through individual transformation alone, but through the relational ecosystems that make new practices livable, repeatable, and socially recognised.

4.2.4 The Men's Table as a Contemporary Response to Late-Modern Masculinities

Situated within the broader landscape of late-modern life, marked by individualisation, shifting gender relations, and the erosion of inherited social networks, TMT can be understood as a contemporary relational response to the challenges men face in constructing meaningful connection. Through Putnam's (1994; 2000) social capital framework, the Tables function as micro-communities that rebuild trust, reciprocity, and belonging in a context where many traditional communal institutions have weakened. Importantly, the kind of trust cultivated appears to be both thick (built through repeated, intimate sharing) and thin (expressed through increased openness to differences, acceptance of diverse perspectives, and a readiness to support others beyond the immediate group). This combination is central to Putnam's account of thriving civic cultures. Through White's (2007) narrative practice, they offer a space where men can revise and expand the stories available for understanding themselves and their relationships. In this sense, TMT may be understood as a micro-context in which men can renegotiate the relationship between their narrative resources and their structural realities, allowing for masculinities that are simultaneously authentic, relational, and socially embedded.

Rather than prescribing new norms for how men ought to be, TMT provides a relational container in which plural, flexible, and care-oriented masculinities can emerge organically. In Putnam's (2000) terms, the Tables may therefore be interpreted as micro-infrastructures of generalised reciprocity, rebuilding forms of civic participation that late-modern individualisation has weakened. They do so not through formal volunteering or activism but through everyday relational practices that foster mutual trust, shared responsibility, and a sense of belonging, conditions that Putnam identifies as foundational for both personal wellbeing and community cohesion. The model resonates with existing cultural values, such as loyalty,

responsibility, and commitment, while widening the interpretive space for emotional presence, relational openness, and mutual support. Men reported that TMT helped them navigate contemporary relational expectations without requiring them to abandon valued aspects of identity, enabling a movement toward healthier, more integrated masculinities that feel both authentic and socially relevant. This capacity can reflect what Putnam calls the "*adaptive function*" of social capital: dense networks provide emotional and cognitive resources that help individuals respond more flexibly to social change.

This responsiveness to the relational conditions of late-modern life appears key to why the model is experienced as meaningful. In a world where many men feel disconnected, uncertain, or insufficiently guided, TMT offers neither a rigid script nor a passive space, but a structured, ongoing relational practice through which men can develop capacities that contemporary relational contexts increasingly demand. These developments remain tentative and relationally situated, but they indicate the potential of TMT to support forms of masculinity grounded in care, reciprocity, and intentional presence.

Taken together, the interpretive insights presented in Part 4 suggest that TMT operates at the intersection of structural support and narrative expansion, offering conditions that many men find difficult to access elsewhere. Through predictable relational continuity, shared norms of care, and opportunities for reflective storytelling, the Tables appear to support the development of habits, identities, and relational skills that align with contemporary expectations for healthier masculinities. These insights set the stage for Part 5, which consolidates the interpretive findings, reflects on the methodological parameters of the study, and outlines potential directions for organisational curiosity and future research.

Part 5: Findings, Quality of the Research and Future Work

5.1 Conclusion

The integrated findings of this study may be interpreted as suggesting that The Men's Table (TMT) provides a distinctive relational and narrative environment through which men begin to articulate and practise what they understand as healthy masculinities. Viewed through White's (2007) narrative practice, the men's reflections appear to show a movement away from historically inherited, problem-saturated stories, centred on stoicism, emotional restriction, and solitary coping, toward identity positions characterised by emotional literacy, relational openness, and self-authorship. This aligns with White's (2007) argument that preferred identity conclusions emerge when individuals encounter relational witnessing that enables them to reinterpret earlier storylines.

At the same time, drawing on Putnam's (1994; 2000) social capital theory, the relational structure of the Tables can be understood as supporting the rebuilding of bonding capital (trust, cohesion, emotional safety) alongside selective elements of bridging capital (curiosity, reflexive awareness, acceptance of difference). These relational assets appear to create conditions in which alternative masculine narratives can be explored, practised, and gradually consolidated. Such trust-laden environments reflect Putnam's observation that durable, voluntary associations foster the micro-norms of reciprocity that make identity experimentation and relational risk-taking possible.

Across the thematic analysis, participants framed earlier masculine experiences in ways consistent with White's notion of Dominant Problem Stories, emphasising duty, self-sufficiency, and emotional minimisation. These were generally contextualised rather than criticised, described as products of specific familial,

cultural, or historical circumstances rather than personal inadequacy. Within the TMT environment, however, men reported increased orientation toward practices of care, authenticity, and relational responsibility. Although these shifts cannot be causally attributed to Table participation alone, the qualitative findings suggest that the structured, predictable, and confidential relational setting may function as a scaffold that enables identity transitions to emerge and be relationally witnessed. This relational witnessing resembles what White (2007) conceptualises as a re-authoring context, where preferred ways of being are rehearsed, affirmed, and gradually stabilised. In addition, these narrative shifts may be interpreted through White's (2007) distinction between thin and thick descriptions. Many men arrived at TMT with "*thin*" self-descriptions, brief, problem-saturated accounts shaped by dominant masculine norms of stoicism or self-reliance. Within the Table environment, these accounts often expanded into "*thicker*" identity descriptions that included intentionality, care, relational responsibility, and emotional presence. Such developments align with White's view that preferred identities emerge when individuals are provided with relational scaffolding and opportunities to articulate alternative storylines that would otherwise remain unnoticed.

Taken together, the findings tentatively indicate that many participants are redefining strength in ways aligned with contemporary relational expectations, moving from notions of invulnerability and control toward integrity, reflexivity, emotional presence, and the capacity to stay open in a relationship. These developments may reflect broader sociocultural transitions in which older masculine scripts hold less functional value in modern relational, familial, and emotional landscapes. TMT may therefore be understood as offering a collective context in which such transitions can be explored intentionally rather than navigated in isolation. The Tables' stability and continuity, echoing key criteria of associational life in

Putnam's account, appear to provide a relational infrastructure that supports such sustained renegotiations of identity.

The reflections shared by participants also extend beyond the personal. Many described healthy masculinities as relational and societal in scope, expressing a desire to support younger men by offering guidance that is flexible rather than prescriptive, captured analytically in the metaphor of being "*a compass, not a map.*" This orientation aligns with White's (2007) emphasis on supporting agency and with Putnam's (1994) insight that interpersonal trust and civic contribution reinforce one another. While questions remain about the extent to which these intentions translate into broader societal influence, the narratives nonetheless gesture toward an emerging form of civic masculinity characterised by care, presence, and relational responsibility. These outward-facing intentions may also be understood as early expressions of bridging capital, where relational gains extend beyond the immediate group toward wider social participation (Putnam, 2000).

Acknowledging the methodological constraints described in the following section, these findings may be interpreted as suggesting that healthy masculinities, as conceptualised within this community, are plural, evolving, relationally grounded, and oriented toward care and contribution. They appear less as fixed identity categories than as ongoing narrative and relational practices shaped through mutual witnessing, shared commitment, and the availability of a stable, supportive communal structure. In this sense, TMT can be tentatively viewed as both a container for narrative re-authoring and a mechanism for rebuilding social capital within an increasingly individualised cultural landscape. Taken together, the narrative and structural dynamics suggest that healthy masculinities at TMT arise through the interplay between meaning-making processes (White, 2007) and the regeneration of trust-based relational infrastructures (Putnam, 1994; 2000).

5.2 Quality of the Research: Opportunities and Limitations

This section addresses the methodological strengths and constraints arising directly from the survey data and research design, providing the necessary context for interpreting the findings.

5.2.1 Opportunities and Strengths

A central strength of this study may be understood as lying in its mixed-methods design and large sample size (N > 2,000 across two years), which together provide a broad descriptive foundation and a rich qualitative dataset for interpretive analysis (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). While these features do not guarantee representativeness or causal clarity, they offer conditions in which recurring patterns can be observed with a reasonable degree of stability. The convergence of qualitative and quantitative trends across both years can tentatively be interpreted as supporting elements of credibility and dependability within the descriptive findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

The thematic analysis was conducted inductively and reflexively, grounded closely in the men's own language. This approach aligns with Braun and Clarke's (2006; 2021) principles of reflexive thematic analysis and with the narrative orientation adopted in this paper. Although no analytic method is without limitation, building themes from participants' phrasing and meaning-making may be understood as supporting content validity, insofar as the analytic categories reflect how the men themselves describe their emotional and relational experiences (Maxwell, 2013).

The quality of the study can also be understood in light of its eclectic orientation. Following Alvesson and Sköldberg (2017) and Greene et al. (1989), the analysis intentionally draws on multiple theoretical and analytical resources to

illuminate different layers of the phenomenon. Rather than striving for a single explanatory frame, eclecticism allows the study to hold together narrative, structural, cultural, and relational dimensions of men's experiences at TMT. This approach is consistent with both the mixed-methods design and the interpretive aims of the project.

The qualitative dataset can be seen as deep, as e.g. more than 800 open-text responses to a single question in 2024 offer considerable breadth of experience and emotional nuance. While depth does not automatically imply analytic completeness, such a volume of narrative material provides a rare opportunity to explore the lived contexts through which men understand and negotiate contemporary masculinities. This scope allows for a more textured interpretive account than is commonly available in masculinity research, which often relies on smaller interview samples (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005; Pease, 2019). Such depth is particularly significant from a narrative standpoint, as the availability of rich, first-person meaning-making provides a basis for identifying preferred identity trajectories (White, 2007).

The longevity of Table membership, where over two-thirds of men report participating for more than one year, may also strengthen the ecological validity of the findings. Many reflections appear to arise from ongoing relational engagement rather than isolated or short-term impressions. This pattern suggests, though does not conclusively demonstrate, that men's experiences and narrative shifts develop within a sustained relational context.

The author's academic training in narrative practice and qualitative methodology helped guide a systematic and theoretically informed analytic process. At the same time, the author's positionality as a non-Australian, non-male researcher may be interpreted as offering a vantage point from which certain cultural assumptions, idioms, and relational scripts become more visible (Finlay, 2012). This vantage point, however, also introduces interpretive limitations, particularly in

relation to culturally embedded humour, linguistic subtleties, and gendered norms. Throughout the analysis, reflexive attention was given to grounding interpretations in participants' own language and to using narrative externalisation (White, 2007) not to speak for the men but to situate their reflections within the broader socio-cultural tensions influencing their meaning-making.

Taken together, these strengths do not guarantee definitive conclusions, but they suggest that the findings presented here are based on a relatively rich, consistent, and meaningfully grounded dataset. They may therefore offer a credible, cautious, and contextually sensitive contribution to understanding how men within this community articulate and practise healthier, more relational forms of masculinities.

5.2.2 Limitations

Despite the strengths noted above, several methodological limitations shape how the findings of this study may be interpreted. These limitations do not diminish the value of the insights but indicate the boundaries within which they may be cautiously understood.

5.2.2.1 Sample and Data Constraints

The study draws on two cross-sectional datasets (2024; 2025) that did not include unique participant identifiers. As a result, it is not possible to determine whether the same men responded across both years. This lack of continuity limits the ability to comment on within-person development or to make claims about causal sequencing. While the high proportion of long-term members in both datasets (over two-thirds reporting attendance for more than one year) may suggest a likelihood of participant

overlap, this remains speculative. From a methodological standpoint, the absence of repeated measures means that any apparent changes across years must be viewed as interpretive associations rather than evidence of development over time (Maxwell, 2013).

The surveys themselves differed in structure between years due to organisational refinements and expanded areas of inquiry. Although these changes enhance the richness of the 2025 dataset, particularly regarding identity categories, emotional literacy, and open-ended responses, they reduce strict comparability with 2024. Methodological literature emphasises that variation in survey instruments complicates the assessment of longitudinal trends (Dillman et al., 2014). This does not invalidate the descriptive continuity observed across years but suggests that such continuity should be read as indicative rather than conclusive.

A further methodological constraint relates to the length of the surveys. Multiple participants in both years, though especially in 2025, specifically stated that the survey felt "*way too long*," "*longer than expected*," or "*too long and hard to use on a phone*" (HYS, 2025). Several participants indicated they would not have completed the survey had they known its length in advance. Such reflections may be interpreted as evidence of survey fatigue, a well-documented source of non-response bias that can shape the representativeness of community datasets (Dillman et al., 2014). It is therefore possible that the men who completed the full instrument were disproportionately those who felt more positively engaged or more motivated, which introduces an unknown degree of skew into the findings.

The qualitative dataset spans twelve open-ended questions. While this breadth allows for diversity of experience, it also means that not all themes reached statistical saturation. Reflexive thematic analysis does not treat saturation as a core quality

marker (Braun & Clarke, 2021); however, it remains relevant for considering the completeness of thematic coverage. Certain themes, although analytically meaningful, may be less frequent. This is not a flaw but a feature of an inquiry focused on interpretive richness rather than frequency.

5.2.2.2 Interpretive Constraints and Causal Ambiguity

The demographic concentration of the sample introduces further interpretive limitations. Despite holding a wide range of experiences, the participants are predominantly older (46–75), Anglo-Australian, and heterosexual. This demographic profile suggests that the findings, while meaningful for understanding masculinities within this community, should not be generalised to younger men, culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) communities, LGBTQ+ men, or intersecting marginalised groups. The aim of this study is not generalisability but transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), and readers are encouraged to consider how the insights may or may not translate to different relational or cultural contexts.

The reliance on self-report introduces potential social desirability bias (Fisher, 1993). Several survey items explicitly referenced TMT's values and mission, for instance, the statement framing healthy masculinities as the capacity to express care for oneself and others. The exceptionally high levels of agreement with such statements may reflect genuine alignment, but they may also reflect an awareness of which values are socially sanctioned within the community. This interpretive ambiguity is common in research conducted within strongly normed relational environments. Although the design cannot claim experimental control, the ecological validity of the findings is strengthened by the fact that men reflected on naturally occurring participation in their ordinary Table environments rather than reacting to

contrived research conditions. Their descriptions therefore provide insight into the lived, everyday processes through which meaning and relational practice unfold, even though they should not be interpreted as universally generalisable.

The cross-sectional design additionally limits the ability to infer causality. Although many men described changes in relational habits, openness, or emotional literacy after joining the Table, these reflections cannot be isolated from broader life events, pre-existing personal resources, or additional support. Notably, 28.7% of participants in 2025 reported seeing a professional counsellor alongside their Table involvement, indicating that TMT participation may operate as one component within a broader ecosystem of relational or emotional support.

5.2.2.3 Organizational Norms, Question Framing, and the Discursive Environment

The relational environment of TMT is shaped by the Fundamentals, which articulate expected norms of behaviour and interaction. Participants know that persistent breaches of these principles may, in rare cases, lead to removal from a Table. While this does not imply coercion, it creates a discursive setting in which certain relational values, such as confidentiality, respect, and emotional openness, are explicitly foregrounded. Within such environments, responses to survey questions may reflect an interplay between genuine meaning-making and alignment with organisational expectations. This dynamic is typical in community-based research, where shared values can influence self-presentation and narrative framing (Finlay, 2012; Fisher, 1993). Recognising this dynamic supports a more nuanced interpretation of the findings. Rather than treating responses as purely individual statements, they may be understood as shaped by both personal experiences and the relational infrastructure in which they were produced.

5.2.2.4 Researcher Positionality and Reflexivity

The author's positionality as a cisgender woman, a Danish national, and a non-native English speaker introduces further interpretive constraints. Cultural nuances in language, humour, idiom, and emotional expression may not always be immediately accessible. Narrative inquiry acknowledges that all interpretation is partial (White, 2007), and reflexive attention was given throughout to grounding interpretations in participants' own words and cultural context. Even so, the analysis should be read as shaped by this positionality. Such reflexivity is consistent with qualitative research standards emphasising transparency, humility, and awareness of interpretive boundaries (Finlay, 2012; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

These methodological and interpretive boundaries do not detract from the value of the findings but help delineate the context in which they may be understood. They also highlight clear opportunities for future research, including the development of more stable survey instruments, exploration of longitudinal designs, and further attention to the experiences of younger and more diverse men, issues considered in detail in the following section.

Taken together, these methodological and theoretical reflections suggest that the findings should be read not as definitive truths but as interpretive possibilities shaped through the interplay of narrative, structure, and relational practice. This perspective aligns with the study's broader aim: to understand how healthy masculinities are enacted, negotiated, and supported within contemporary community contexts such as TMT.

5.3 Future Work and Recommendations

The findings of this study, together with the methodological limitations outlined above, open several potential avenues for future organisational reflection and academic inquiry. These suggestions are not intended as prescriptive directives but may be understood as areas that warrant curiosity, further exploration, or intentional evaluation. They arise from the interplay between empirical patterns in the HYS datasets, feedback from participants, and broader theoretical perspectives on narrative identity (White, 2007), social capital (Putnam, 2000), and mixed-methods inquiry (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

5.3.1 Avenues for Organizational Exploration and Growth

While the current model of The Men's Table appears to be functioning effectively for many men, the thematic and quantitative patterns suggest several directions that the organisation might choose to explore if aligned with its ongoing vision.

5.3.1.1 Crisis-Skill Confidence and Light-Touch Capacity Building

One potential area for future attention concerns crisis-related confidence. The quantitative data across both years indicates that a substantial proportion of participants report lived or living experience of suicide (46.1% in 2025). At the same time, qualitative reflections suggest variability in how confident members feel when supporting peers through crisis or significant life events. Several participants described moments in which they felt unsure how to respond to another man's disclosure, while others noted receiving limited follow-up support during personally challenging times, such as health difficulties. Although TMT does not position itself as

a clinical intervention, community-oriented research suggests that light-touch, non-clinical guidance can strengthen peer environments without compromising their ethos (Davidson et al., 2012). Whether members would welcome optional support in this area remains an open empirical question, but the feedback indicates that some men may experience such guidance as beneficial.

5.3.1.2 Broadening Inclusion and Supporting Underrepresented Groups

The demographic concentration of the current sample also implies areas that the organisation may wish to explore. Multiple men explicitly requested that TMT "target young men" or "welcome more diverse men" (HYS, 2025), reflecting both an awareness of the community's demographic profile and an interest in widening participation. While the existing model appears to resonate strongly with older, Anglo-Australian men, it remains uncertain how accessible or meaningful the model might be for younger men, culturally diverse communities, LGBTQ+ men, or men navigating intersecting identities. Whether expansion in these directions aligns with TMT's strategic goals is for the organisation to determine, yet participant feedback suggests that some members see value in exploring these possibilities.

5.3.1.3 Digital Mentorship and the Contemporary Narrative Environment

Another recurring theme concerns the contemporary digital environment. Several men attributed their participation in TMT to online information, while others described sharing TMT material across digital communities. At the same time, concerns about harmful masculine narratives online were prominent in Theme 6. These reflections may indicate an opportunity to explore how members could be

supported in engaging with younger men in digital spaces or using online platforms to counter prescriptive or exclusionary discourses. Previous research suggests that grounded adult voices can disrupt the dominance of more harmful or reductive masculine scripts online (Ging, 2020). Whether TMT wishes to support this capacity is a conceptual rather than operational question, but it appears to resonate with participants' reflections on generational responsibility.

5.3.1.4 Operational Considerations and Relational Dynamics Within Tables

The feedback also raised practical considerations. Several participants commented on slow Table placement processes or expressed a desire for greater responsiveness in filling vacancies. Others reflected on uneven dynamics within Tables, including concerns about "*cliquishness*" or repetitive check-in structures (HYS, 2024; HYS, 2025). These comments do not indicate systemic issues but may point to minor areas where organisational processes could be supported or clarified. The model's peer-led structure remains central, but selective guidance around facilitation, rotation of speaking formats, or the maintenance of Table health might be experienced as beneficial by some groups, provided such guidance remains optional and aligned with the organisation's ethos.

5.3.2 Future Academic Inquiry

The current study provides strong descriptive and interpretive insight but also highlights several methodological opportunities for advancing the evidence base. These suggestions are framed tentatively, recognising that organisational priorities and resource availability will determine their feasibility.

5.3.2.1 Instrument Stability and Methodological Refinement

From a research perspective, several methodological opportunities emerge. The variation between the 2024 and 2025 survey instruments underscores the potential value of developing a stable core instrument for future years. Mixed-methods literature highlights the importance of measurement consistency for drawing plausible longitudinal inferences (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2018). Establishing a core set of repeated items, supplemented by optional modules that evolve with organisational needs, could strengthen the analytic possibilities of future datasets while maintaining the flexibility that community-based programmes often require.

The feasibility of incorporating non-identifying participant codes may also warrant exploration. Such codes would enable researchers to track individual trajectories in emotional literacy, relational engagement, and wellbeing over time, addressing several limitations noted above. While this approach would not necessarily create strict causal evidence, it could support what Neale (2021) terms temporal patterning, allowing for a richer understanding of how men experience relational or identity-oriented change within sustained community involvement.

5.3.2.2 Longitudinal and Comparative Designs

Longitudinal designs more broadly may offer valuable insight. Qualitative longitudinal research is particularly well-suited for exploring identity development, relational practice, and meaning-making as they unfold across shifting life contexts (Saldaña, 2003; Neale, 2021). Future studies might therefore consider following a small cohort of men across multiple years to examine how narrative and relational capacities evolve both within and beyond the Table context.

Comparative designs also present opportunities. Contrasting the experiences of TMT participants with men engaged in other relational or community groups, or with men not currently participating in structured peer environments, could shed light on whether the patterns observed in this study are specific to TMT or reflect broader sociocultural developments. Such research would not aim to demonstrate superiority but could enhance clarity about which mechanisms, structural, narrative, or relational, appear most influential.

5.3.2.3 Post-Participation Trajectories and Sustainability

Finally, little is known about what happens when men leave their Tables. Participants frequently described TMT as helping them "make caring a habit," yet it remains unclear whether these practices endure once the structured relational environment is no longer present. Follow-up studies with former members could shed light on the durability of preferred identity conclusions (White, 2007) and whether shifts in emotional literacy, communication, or relational engagement translate into broader life domains over time.

These potential avenues highlight how future research may help extend and contextualise the findings presented here, strengthening understanding of how men navigate plurality, care, and connection within contemporary masculinities.

Part 6: Report Metadata and Compliance

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6.2 Status of Report and Conflicts of Interest

This document is a research white paper produced as part of the author's Master's-level psychology internship. It has not undergone formal peer review and should not be interpreted as a certified scientific publication. The author declares no financial, professional, or personal conflicts of interest in relation to this work. The research was conducted independently and without remuneration. The author's role was strictly analytical, involving the interpretation of organizational survey data for academic and evaluative purposes.

6.3 Ethics and Data Statement

The ethical conduct of this research is governed by the organization's data governance framework. All participants in the Have Your Say surveys (2024; 2025) provided explicit informed consent for the use of their anonymized data for research, evaluation, and communication purposes. To uphold confidentiality, all published data is presented in aggregate, and no individual identifiers are included. Data collection and storage were managed solely by the organisation on secure, password-protected servers compliant with Australian privacy legislation. The author was granted access only to anonymised datasets for the purpose of secondary analysis. All findings are presented in aggregate to protect confidentiality.

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A. HYS 2024 dataset

The Men's Table. (2024). *Have Your Say Survey dataset (HYS 2024).* Unpublished internal organisational dataset.

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