



Article

“It Feels like You’re a Stranger in Your Own Skin”: Young People’s Accounts of Everyday Embodiment

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Abstract: While much existing research investigates embodiment and body image in individualised terms, new research in youth studies takes a wider view. How are young people’s experiences of embodiment entangled with sociocultural and structural influences? How do young people come to develop a sense of embodied identity in contexts that teem with hostile and unattainable body ideals? How are possibilities for affirming and affirmative embodiment navigated by young people—especially those living outside prevailing appearance norms? In this paper, we engage with these questions, drawing insights from an in-depth, collaborative research project designed to understand what supports and constrains hauora and wellbeing for young people in Aotearoa (New Zealand). First, we analyse young people’s accounts thematically, identifying three prevailing systems of cultural privilege that regulate embodiment. These include processes of racialisation and gendering, as well as cisnormative, heteronormative, ableist and healthist logics. Second, we work closely with one young person’s interview, exploring how her narrative unsettles prevailing norms of appearance and embodiment. By spotlighting what young people themselves tell us about their bodies and embodied experiences, this paper demonstrates the value of an embodiment lens for youth and wellbeing studies.

Keywords: embodiment; young people; Aotearoa; qualitative; body image; privilege; identity; wellbeing; hauora



Citation: Calder-Dawe, O.; Carlson, T.A.L. “It Feels like You’re a Stranger in Your Own Skin”: Young People’s Accounts of Everyday Embodiment. *Youth* **2023**, *3*, 1225–1243. <https://doi.org/10.3390/youth3040078>

Academic Editor: Julia Coffey

Received: 29 September 2023

Revised: 18 October 2023

Accepted: 24 October 2023

Published: 1 November 2023



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1. Introduction

In discussions of what matters for young people’s wellbeing and flourishing, questions of bodily experiences, embodiment and body image are increasingly front and centre. From wide-ranging academic scholarship [1–9] to mainstream commentary [10–12] to the testimony of young people themselves [13,14], calls to tackle body-related distress and to enhance embodied vitality are gaining momentum. And for good reason: bodily and embodiment-related difficulties in young people have been consistently linked to distress and suicidality [15–17]. While commentators agree that bodies matter, theories of what matters most for body image and embodiment vary considerably. Some focus tightly on social media and its relationship(s) with ratcheting appearance pressures and concomitant repertoires of bodily work and discipline [18–22]. Work in this area is nuanced, pushing against deterministic readings wherein hegemonic media messaging stamps itself onto passive bodies in order to highlight possibilities for pleasure and subversion [23–25]. Another thread of scholarship and activism takes a broader view, examining the intersectional complexities of embodiment in an appearance-obsessed culture—especially for those living outside prevailing appearance norms and ideals [5,9,26–34].

One prevailing lens and language for academic scholarship on bodily experience has been body image. Packaged up in this phrase is a distinctive—and arguably restrictive—demarcation of the territory of interest. Reflecting its entanglements with

psychology and applied research on eating disorder prevention and intervention, body image is typically conceptualised as something an individual has: a personal mental schema or representation [8]. While the sociocultural domain does have a place in these understandings of body image, the emphasis tends to remain on internal psychological processes [18]. Work of this kind is often focussed on developing and maintaining positive body image at an individual level [35]. While undeniably useful for some purposes, this operationalisation of body image as a universal psychological construct invites a flattened focus on body satisfaction and appreciation. This leaves relatively little scope to address the different ways in which bodies are assembled through processes such as racialisation, ableism and healthism.

Increasingly, scholars from diverse disciplines are turning to theories of embodiment as a more spacious frame to investigate bodily experience and embodied practices. We approach embodiment not as a tight term or a bounded discipline, but instead as a wide field of interest that can encompass a range of different theoretical perspectives [26,36–38]. What unites scholarship across these different spheres is an interest in the body–mind–culture–materiality interconnection on multiple levels. Whereas body image tends to invoke an individual (and often decontextualised) psyche and to subtly reinforce mind–body dualism typical of Western thought, embodiment scholarship takes a more integrated approach. Here, bodily experiences (including body image and how people feel in and about their bodies) are understood as always already entwined with material and sociocultural contexts and places. Embodiment concerns flesh and bones, emotion, conditioning, judging, feeling and numbness and all in between. Embodied processes are guiding instincts, appetites, bodily cascades and metabolic rhythms as they take shape within and through particular moments, relational contexts, discourses and historical periods. In this regard, embodiment is expansive and integrated enough to travel across different ontological traditions nimbly (although this considerable breadth can also make it challenging to work with).

A growing strand of interdisciplinary research is concerned with embodied identities and how these identities are implicated in everyday living [1,39–41]. We use the term embodied privilege to spotlight this process, wherein cultural systems of privilege touch down on and are worked through bodies, conferring distinction and privilege to some and not others. Embodied privilege can, for example, elevate certain skin colours, forms of communication and movement, clothing and style and functional embodied capacities, with dehumanising implications for those living outside these bounds. A structural perspective sits behind this theorisation of privilege, highlighting a social circuitry [42,43] that connects the elevation of particular people and groups to the denigration and exclusion of others [44,45]. Rather than a focus on marginalisation alone, privilege-oriented scholarship foregrounds unmarked normative ideals and values [46,47]. Scholarship exploring embodied privilege is thus sensitised to racialised, gendered, eugenicist regimes of normative embodiment that determine how different bodies pass, attracting value, attention, ambivalence, distaste or violence.

In this paper, our analysis takes up the concept of embodied privilege to explore how notions of normality and desirability inform young people's sense of self, experiences and lifeworlds. To do so, we draw from conversations with 25 young people about hauora and wellbeing. As interviewers, we prompted very little direct discussion of bodies in general and body image in particular. Nevertheless, and consistent with our theoretical approach, we find elements of embodiment and bodily experience coursing through these conversations: discussions of purpose, relationships, belonging, discrimination, entitlement and vitality that necessarily engage the body.

Our analysis begins with a thematic exploration of embodied privilege, structured around three primary processes: racialisation, ableist surveillance and the policing of gender and sexuality. While in practice, these forces interweave, our analytic treatment pulls them apart to consider how each flows through young people's talk about wellbeing.

The analysis concludes with a close reading, considering the intersectional play of embodied privilege through a conversation with one young person, Zoe.

2. Methodology

Our project took place in Tāmaki Makaurau (Auckland), the largest city in Aotearoa (New Zealand), with over one-quarter of the country's total residents (1.5 million of a total 5.2 million) [48]. The te reo Māori name Tāmaki Makaurau reflects the abundance and desirability of this whenua (land) [49]. Numerous iwi and hapū claimed, sustained and cultivated the region for more than 500 years prior to British colonisation and the mass arrival of settlers in the mid-19th century, who were predominantly white and English-speaking. The immigration history of Aotearoa is highly racialised. Colonisation and concomitant violence, land theft, disease and impoverishment have had calamitous consequences for the hauora and flourishing of Māori in Aotearoa [50]. The Immigration Restriction Act (also known as the “white New Zealand” policy) restricted the flow of non-white immigrants into the country [51], and Britain remained the dominant source of immigrants until the 1970s [52]. The Dawn Raids, targeted raids on Pacific peoples' family homes to identify and deport “overstayers” [53], are a prominent example of racialised, discriminatory legislation and policing. Hostility towards non-white immigrants is a continuing feature of the cultural and political landscape [54].

Today, Tāmaki Makaurau is the country's most diverse city, home to people from over 120 different ethnicities [55] and including some of the country's most privileged and most marginalised people. Tāmaki Makaurau is the economic centre of Aotearoa, contributing around 40% of the GDP [55]. The city draws in young people from all over the country with the promise of employment, as well as educational and social possibilities that outshine regional and rural areas. For some time, however, young people have been questioning the city's affordability and liveability in a context of widening inequities, ratcheting individualisation and, for some young people, considerable stress, distress and hardship [13,56].

In this context, our project set out to identify and amplify matters of importance related to hauora rangatahi, youth wellbeing, with guidance and direction from diverse young people. In light of the over-representation of white young people's ideas and values in research, popular media and society more generally, this project weaves together three strands of inquiry, conducted with three groups of young people: a Kaupapa Māori research strand with rangatahi Māori; a Samoan research strand with young Samoan people; and a tauwiwi research strand working with young people of any cultural background (including, but not exclusively, Pākehā, white and European people). These groupings were flexible, recognising the rich and often interlocking lines of whakapapa and ancestry running between them. Young people who wanted to join the project chose to join the Māori, Samoan or tauwiwi group based on their own sense of personal fit and preference, rather than any externally imposed criteria or screening tool (as a result, one person in the broad tauwiwi group is Māori). This project was granted ethics approval by Massey University (reference NOR 1856).

Our research process is collaborative and ongoing. The foundation of our work has been a series of semi-structured interviews exploring hauora and wellbeing with 56 young people between 16 and 20 years old (11 Samoan young people, 20 rangatahi Māori and 25 tauwiwi young people). These interviews were designed to be open-ended, inviting participants to direct the flow of conversation towards events, issues and observations of significance to them. Kōrero, talanoa and conversations were often long, profound exchanges where rangatahi shared rich narratives weaving together their past experiences and present joys and predicaments, as well as their hopes and worries for the future.

To begin to make sense of these interview data, our research collective worked both independently and together, refining key themes and developing pūrākau (narrative-based) analyses within and across our three rōpū, led by Teah. From here, we held a one-day wānanga and a series of shorter hui to share these preliminary findings, inviting attendees

(some of whom were interviewees, some of whom were not) to respond to and refine the key analytic ideas and focus (see [57,58] for a fuller account of our process and our overall findings). While the words and stories we share are drawn from participants who joined the tauwi research strand, our analysis is nested within and accountable to our wider project and kaupapa. The insights that we share derive not only from the analysis of individual interviews with tauwi young people but equally from the broader, collaborative processes of engagement and deliberation outlined above.

2.1. Interviewer, Participants and Data Collection

In this paper, our analysis builds from the narratives of young people who joined the tauwi research strand. These interviews (and subsequent coding) were conducted by the first author, who is also the custodian of this group. Her identities, appearance and embodied experiences shaped how the interview conversations and subsequent analytic work unfolded. Octavia is a cisgender sixth-generation Pākehā woman, born in Tāmaki Makaurau, and now in her mid-thirties. She comes from a somewhat alternative familial culture where she felt largely free from weight-, sexuality- and gender-based monitoring, though this was rife in other contexts. Being light-skinned, economically secure, slim and non-disabled, she has considerable personal experience with embodied privileges: her life course has been structured through these. It is well established that those who benefit from systems of privilege often find it hard to see and feel [46], because advantages are perceived as normal or as personally earned and deserved. As a result, the analysis we present is linked to and limited by Octavia's sensitivity to embodied privileges that she herself carries.

The recruitment process was gradual and purposive, drawing on the team's extended networks across the city to connect us with young people with differing identities, living conditions and experiences. Interviews were held in private spaces at tertiary institutions, cafés and participants' homes. The discussion began with an open invitation to the interviewee to talk about their life in general terms, with the option of using felt-tip pens and paper in any way they chose. This opened up the potential for participants to show as well as tell, depending on their communicative preferences and affinities. Some took up the invitation to sketch out representations of their life or key events; others doodled as we talked or left the pens and paper untouched. Our interview guide included a range of prompts related to wellbeing, and interviews concluded by inviting participants to complete the WHO-5 wellbeing scale [59], asking them for their feedback on the validity and usefulness of this popular tool. Overall, the approach was relational and relaxed and encouraged interviewees to take the lead.

As part of the interview process, the 25 participants were invited to provide some demographic information about themselves in response to a series of open-ended prompts. In describing ethnicity and cultural backgrounds, most participants gave more than one answer, identifying as Pākehā/New Zealand European (14); Chinese (3); Filipino (2) Tongan (2); Cambodian (1); English (1); German (1); Indian (1); Indonesian (1); Irish (1); Lebanese (1); Māori (1); Russian (1); Scottish (1); and Thai (1). At the time of the interviews, participants self-reported their genders as male (13) and female (12). The categories of male and female denote sex rather than gender. To make sense of these answers, we note a colloquial norm of using labels of biological sex (specifically male/female) to indicate gender. Additionally, two participants described themselves as transgender as part of their answer. Participants shared a range of sexual identities: straight (12); unsure/don't know (6); bisexual (3); gay (2); queer (1); and pansexual (1). A total of 11 interviewees identified as disabled and/or reported being affected by an impairment of some kind, while 14 either wrote nothing or identified as non-disabled. Participants were either currently attending high school (12), undertaking part-time or full-time tertiary studies (12) or working full-time (1). The majority (20) were living with family (at home with parents, grandparents and/or extended family or flatting with siblings), and 5 were living away from family (mostly in university-provided accommodation).

2.2. Analytic Approach

This paper investigates embodied privilege, drawing on the privilege-oriented scholarship explored above [42,44,45], as well as Margaret Wetherell's work on affective practice [38]. Affective practice, in Wetherell's terms, encompasses "the body, the discursive, social contexts, histories, personal stories and affect's movement" (p. 26). A practice approach accounts for patterning and routine while also highlighting contingency, agency and the possibility of doing things differently. Drawing inspiration from this expansive theorisation of affect, we approach embodiment empirically as a process that is simultaneously affective and discursive, involving feeling, sensing and meaning making. Wetherell's approach offers a flexible interdisciplinary toolkit with which to examine embodied privilege in its material, physiological, personal, collective and structural complexity.

Our analysis builds from interview transcripts, which were professionally transcribed. Quotes from interviews are offered verbatim, including repetitions. A comma is used to indicate a short pause in the flow of speech, and a full stop indicates a more substantial break in talk. We use [...] to signal places where we have cut words for clarity. In order to maintain participant confidentiality, we use pseudonyms, and we have also altered some potentially identifying details about participants' lives and activities. Where we present extracts from transcripts, we state each participant's pseudonym and age, as well as a broad indicator of their stated ethnicity and cultural background.

3. Analysis

The analysis below is presented in two parts. The first is broadly thematic, exploring young people's embodied accounts of racialisation and ableism, alongside gender- and sex-based profiling and policing. Our analytic process began by building on the existing thematic coding of transcripts, which was undertaken some time ago as part of our preliminary project analysis. Beginning with a number of codes identified as relevant to our focus, we started to play with and refine the coded data, looking for descriptions and expressions of embodied privilege in participants' talk. In keeping with our theoretical commitments, we were particularly alert to absences, silences and trouble as potential markers of embodied privilege (this is fleshed out, for example, in our discussion of "Kiwiness" below).

The second part of our analysis takes a different approach, exploring a single participant's talk about embodiment in detail. While many of our 25 interviews would have been amenable to this kind of reading, Zoe's interview stood out as especially richly patterned with insight about bodies, embodiment and embodied value. To develop this strand of our analysis, we returned to the transcript of our interview with Zoe, reading and re-reading it carefully. Rather than coding thematically, we approached this transcript structurally, looking at moments where bodies "showed up" and paying close attention to how Zoe's personal stories of embodiment unfolded in relation to wider social narratives [60]. After pulling out pivotal stretches of talk for close reading, we slowly refined and organised our analysis around three short stories. Each of these stories pulls on threads from our thematic work to examine Zoe's experiences navigating and resisting normative embodiment.

3.1. Embodied Privilege

3.1.1. Racialisation and Belonging

In our project, many young people spoke about how their sense of wellbeing and belonging was impacted by hate, exclusion and violence meted out on the basis of perceived race or culture. Reflecting on her own experiences, Violet (19, Chinese and South East Asian) recalled being singled out from her peers as one of the few "Asian" students in her classroom and being subject to racialised verbal attacks (in this case, "stupid claims" about eating rice). Violet observed how the nature and severity of these varied according to a person's embodiment, where more hostile treatment was reserved for those with "darker" skin:

the darker you are generally it's like a bit more difficult, so it's kind of you're being dirty, like unclean yeah that type of racism, not wanting to hold that person's hand, kind of like that (Violet: 19, Chinese and South East Asian)

This young person's observation of the racial politics of contemporary Aotearoa reflects scholarly understandings of the operation of white supremacy. Whiteness is privileged over non-whiteness and people are progressively dehumanised the greater their embodied difference from typical Caucasian colouring and features [31].

Racialisation could also be less explicit. Oscar (16, European and Pacific) described how a stranger threatened his friend's mother while she was picking them up from school:

Oscar: a man from across the road was like—I will set my dogs on you, you're on my land. [My friend's Mum] was across the road and it was just like—what? Yeah.

[author]: And did you detect there was a kind of racist element to that?

Oscar: Yeah, I think there was a bit of, yeah, I would say there was a bit because I don't think he would have done it to another person of his culture. I think that was just one of the things that played into it kind of thing.

This exchange points to the significance of embodiment in understanding racism and racialisation. Oscar felt the racism driving this exchange. Through his accumulated experience with racialised privilege, he understood this as a situation where race and cultural belonging were at stake, even in the absence of overly racist speech. Elias (19, Middle Eastern) also sensed how unspoken racialisation structured the way he was treated by others. In presenting his passport to border officials (an act that made him visible as Middle Eastern), he became subject to an intrusive racialised gaze:

they were like oh it is just a random check but I was like it is not a random check, you can, you are lying [...] I know exactly what you are doing [...] I was like this is not random it is just because I come from Middle Eastern country they were like yes but we can't say that (Elias: 19 Middle Eastern)

Here, Elias articulates what institutional actors prefer not to: "random checks", scrutiny and detention are distributed along lines of embodied privilege. These small moments serve as powerful markers of belonging: who moves with ease, and who is considered suspect.

An interest in embodied privilege turns our attention not only to instances of racism and oppression but equally to naturalness and belonging, which settle on particular (often perceptibly white and Anglo) bodies. In our interviews, one place where we identify white privilege is in young people's talk about "Kiwiness". Kiwi is a reo Māori (Maori language) name for an Indigenous flightless bird that has become the "national bird" of New Zealand and is emblematic of the settler colonial nation on the international stage. New Zealanders travelling overseas are often referred to as "Kiwis" (or simply as "Kiwi" without an anglicising "s"). While the Kiwi identity is theoretically available to all, our interviews with young people demonstrated how Kiwiness maps most readily to white bodies. Pākehā and New Zealand European young people appeared to be able to describe themselves as Kiwi with particular ease:

I'm just a Kiwi I'm like Kiwi I would say yeah. Just a New Zealander I would identify it with to me yeah. I haven't really thought about that kinda kinda side. (Annabelle, 20, NZ European)

This comment from Annabelle illustrates the workings of embodied privilege in multiple ways. The comfort and obviousness of being "just a Kiwi" reflect a wider structure of feeling wherein whiteness is naturalised (whiteness as Kiwi) and white settler histories and cultures are subtly positioned as something that does not need to be accounted for or "thought about". The ease and comfort of a Kiwi identity for Pākehā like Annabelle signal the position of whiteness as the default: the unmarked "normate" [46] category against which all others are defined. In this way, white young people have privileged access to

embodied wellbeing and belonging through the naturalisation of whiteness and of Anglo culture, priorities and values more generally [47]. Where New Zealand is imagined here as a white place, the position of Māori as tangata whenua recedes from view.

The potential exclusions of a “Kiwi” identity became evident in an exchange with Amy (16, Chinese). Amy articulated how she felt that her embodiment as a perceptibly Chinese person constrained her access to a Kiwi identity, despite being “more like a Kiwi”:

Octavia: [. . .] So, how would you be, in what ways would you be not Kiwi or not Chinese in a full sense? How do you know this?

Amy: It's like, how I think is [I'm] probably a bit more like a Kiwi but then, my lifestyle is not that much. Also, if I go to China, I find it hard to just communicate straight in Chinese because sometimes I want to say something but I realise I don't know how to say it. And if I, yeah, but then also I look Chinese so I am not fully like Kiwi. Yeah.

Octavia.: So, your sense of, this is quite a tricky question, but what would a Kiwi look like?

Amy: Like just colour. Yeah.

Here, Amy describes how skin colour, as well as “look[ing] Chinese”, affects her access to Kiwiness. To be “fully. . .Kiwi” is to look like you belong; to look like you belong is to not look Chinese. Entangled with this account are a raft of exclusionary, racialised ideas about what a “real” New Zealander looks like: who belongs and who does not. Picking up on this thread when asked about the racism he observed around him, Connor (18, Pākehā) recalled:

[at uni] there was someone that made a post on the internet about how all these Asian international students should just go home [. . .] it just caught a lot of people off guard and it made a lot of these students feel like unsafe and unwelcome (Connor: 18, Pākehā)

Connor’s comment attests to the continuation of a New Zealand “tradition” of racism directed at perceptibly Asian people [61]. This particular instance of racism relies on an understanding of New Zealand as not-home for Asian people.

Zoe (17: NZ European and British) also described a related pattern of racialised exclusion in her account of “one of those ‘where are you really from?’ things”:

the girl across from me was like “oh so where are you from?” And I was like “Auckland”. And she said “No, no, no, where are you from?” And I said “Auckland”. And she said, “where are your parents from?” And I was like, “New Zealand and Britain” [. . .] and then she said “where are you actually from?” [. . .] She's like “yeah, but you're brown” or “your skin,”

Zoe was born in Aotearoa and speaks with a local accent. As she herself makes clear, the contestation evident in this exchange is about skin colour and belonging. Zoe’s embodiment as not-white has prompted these highly racialised questions about where she is from and where she belongs, precisely because New Zealand and Britain are imagined as white.

Of all participants, racialised exclusion and dehumanisation were described in the most vicious terms by Aya (19, Middle Eastern). Aya described herself as a “clear Muslim woman” and spoke about being “attacked on a daily basis” in Aotearoa as a consequence of her embodiment:

it's probably just like, the way that I actually look different, like as a clear Muslim woman, and yeah like it's just, I think it's, I don't know how to explain it, but I think it's hard being a person who is different, and I think that affects my wellbeing, it kind of makes me almost uncomfortable in some situations, and just being surrounded by people that don't always accept me, or yeah accept me, it's pretty hard [. . .] the name calling isn't a big deal to me, but being told that I shouldn't you know be, shouldn't be here or I don't fit in, or like you definitely aren't part of us, that's kind of the hard part. (Aya, 19, Middle Eastern)

Aya's account makes clear the relentlessness of hostility directed against her on the basis of her perceptible embodied identities. She is perpetually told—with words, but also gestures and stares—that she is “different”; someone who “shouldn't be here”. In the passage below, Aya describes how embodied privilege facilitates this abuse. Racialisation marks out certain bodies as targets and empowers others as agents of abuse. Violence becomes *comfortable*, something that is “easy for them to do”:

it's really easy for [people] to do it, like personally when I'm like how does one walk up to someone and be like you're gross, how does someone walk up to someone and be like you're a terrorist because you cover your hair, literally it shocks me that people find it ok to do it, but people are really comfortable doing it which is a big, big problem (Aya)

In Aya's account and elsewhere in our study, an embodiment lens helps us to tune into the everyday workings of power. In doing so, this approach opens up matters of profound importance for understanding young people's lives, illustrating how embodied privilege is distributed, sensed and acted on.

3.1.2. Ableism

The second cluster of forces we examine through the lens of embodiment relate to ableism. We deploy the concept of ableism here in its full breadth to refer to the systems of privilege that produce and maintain particular embodiments as the “perfect, species-typical. . . human” [45]. The ideal body produced through contemporary forms of ableism is non-disabled, youthful, diligently “healthy” and productive, unencumbered by fat, pain and fatigue, and performs at a high level physically, mentally and psychologically. This fantasy of able-bodiedness thus encompasses a range of embodied dimensions related broadly to disability as well as healthism and constructions of healthiness [26,62].

In our conversations with young people, ableist restrictions on embodiment showed up most consistently in talk about fatness and thinness. Interviews offered clear insight into the functioning of thin privilege and the stigma and devaluation of fatness and fat people. Whereas a considerable amount of body image scholarship is concerned with individual cognitive processes, an embodiment approach invites us to foreground social dimensions, illuminating how qualities of health, vitality and worthiness infuse into some bodies and not others. In a healthist context, a moral glow elevates the “super healthy” (Bea, 17, South East Asian), and health is strongly aligned with achieving thinness and avoiding fatness. It was striking, for instance, that when asked to speak about physical health, many participants responded by talking about body fat:

Octavia: is anything affecting your wellbeing that is related to your physical health?

Amy (16 Chinese): I don't . . . when I was young, I was quite fat

Octavia: And one other thing is just around physical health generally. What's that been like for you?

Ash (18 NZ European): I mean . . . back in high school, I ate too much and kind of put on a bit of weight

Octavia: In terms of physical health has that been okay for you along your life?

Daniel (17 South East Asian): I used to be really fat when I was a kid but then winter came and I started doing sports and stuff. I became skinnier.

Through these comments, fatness comes into focus as a threat to physical health—and therefore, something to be worked on and eliminated. Despite the considerable challenges levelled at the weight-is-health association by fat activists [63,64], it is made clear here how these logics continue to shape young people's embodiments—quite literally—as they work to avoid fatness.

This kind of meaning making was drawn out at length in an interview with Reuben (16, Pākehā), who spoke in considerable detail about his embodied experience of “feeling fat” (once again, in response to a broad prompt about physical health):

It's been a really rocky road. I struggled a lot for a while because I was so insecure. That was, I always forget about that because I am just very confident and happy now but I used to just feel so bad. I just really felt fat always. My brother has always been, a high metabolism, really skinny frame and I just always, no matter what I did, felt really fat.

(Reuben: 16 Pakeha)

The “rocky road” of physical health for this young person is not what one might have imagined: this is not a narrative of illness, functional restriction or physical pain. Reuben’s difficult journey hinges on the pain of embodied shame, of feeling insecure and inferior “no matter what I did”. It is significant that fat features here as a *feeling*. Probed further, Reuben noted that it was “so hard to explain”:

Octavia: I am really interested in, what is feeling fat? Like, how would you describe what that is?

Reuben: It's so hard to explain, but it is just this feeling that I was carrying this . . . it was horrible. [. . .] I just felt this constant grossness, and I wasn't even that big at all, seriously, now that I look back on it. But it was still that feeling of not being as skinny as everyone else who just was effortless.

A theory of embodiment helps us to explain how sociocultural webs of value come to be taken up and lived out—in this case, self-perceived fatness maps onto a sense of disempowerment, “constant grossness” and inferiority. There was no sense from the conversation with Reuben that he had experienced social exclusion or accessibility issues directly arising from fatness (for example, difficulty finding clothing in his size or comfortable seating). Instead, fatness has become a shorthand for embodied distress and dissatisfaction, which he linked to body fat and awareness of his own appetite:

I always just felt like I couldn't stop eating and it was just this constant, like I needed food. And that in turn made me feel really insecure and really fat [. . .] since I went vegan and I started going to the gym, I have just felt so much better. And I developed a really good metabolism from going to the gym all the time so that I can have a really good relationship with food where I can eat and be happy and not worry. (Reuben)

Across these three short passages, we see how Reuben’s “rocky road” to physical health and his difficulties with his own body arise through a weaving together of the physiological (metabolism, flesh and fat, the clamour of appetite) with elements of biography (being the younger brother, a feeling of comparative inadequacy), as well as broader sociocultural threads (a healthist moralisation of thinness and bodily discipline).

A second element of embodied ableism running through our conversations with young people relates to assumptions about “normal” capabilities and productivity. For some participants, these structuring assumptions became evident in situations where they experienced substantial disruption to their work or study through illness or injury. These disruptions altered their embodiments, also altering the ease with which they navigated school and work. Annabelle (20, NZ European) described being diagnosed with chronic fatigue, a diagnosis she queried and resisted. Although she worked full-time in a physically demanding hospitality role, she decided not to tell most of her co-workers. She explained that she “didn’t want everyone knowing what was wrong” or “to think of me that I’m sick”:

I haven't told anyone at work [. . .] I just feel like that if I say that I've got [chronic fatigue] that they might you know judge me or yeah say you know “oh don't work too hard”. But it's like I don't want you to think of me in that way because I'm working really hard. [. . .] I didn't tell the other person that I work with just cause yeah I just want her to see me you know just to like think of me that I'm sick in a way. [. . .] I was like oh my god you know people with this condition they don't do anything. (Annabelle: 20, NZ European)

The flow of meaning making in Annabelle’s talk illustrates powerful cultural associations between sickness, laziness and inertia. Value accrues through demonstrations of productivity and the capacity to work hard [65]. Rather than describing an embodied

experience of exhaustion, Annabelle's talk about chronic fatigue centres on the threat that this diagnosis poses to her capacity to work (and, thus, her embodied privilege).

Similar ableist logic is evident in Rose's talk about living with a traumatic brain injury. Rose (18, NZ European and European) explained how she struggled to come to terms with a shift in her embodiment, which altered her concentration and focus:

it was really hard because I think the way I cope with things is working towards a goal or working, often with things academic, I do have really high expectations for myself in school. [...] It is now a year and a half later and I am still having a lot of these symptoms that really do restrict my ability to engage in university [...] it is really hard to go up to a lecturer or go up to someone involved and kind of talk about [my injury]. In the same way, I don't want people to ever think that I am using it as an excuse and a lot of that is probably around how you can't see a head injury and you can't see the effect it is having on someone's life. And so yeah, I think, it is kind of hard getting over that. (Rose: 18 NZ European and European)

Rose's talk evokes a sense of disrupted momentum, compounded by the considerable difficulties of managing a chronic condition that is not perceptible to others in an ocular-centric society [29,66] and where value is linked to productive capacity. There are clear reasons why Rose "do[esn't] like disclosing [...] that much, even with my friends". Both Annabelle and Rose orient to the ableist judgement and devaluation that is linked to asking for accommodations ("they might judge me"; "I don't want people to ever think that I am using it as an excuse"). This constellation of restrictive and discriminatory assumptions privilege those whose embodiments allow them to work hard in ways that are understood and valued by others.

In contrast to Rose, Liam's (17, NZ European) ways of thinking, moving and being in the world have never been an easy fit with mainstream schooling systems. He described "always" having an embodied awareness of being different: "I have always known [...] I haven't been like others". This embodied awareness of his difference was especially pronounced in schooling:

I saw this thing from Albert Einstein and this drawing of all these animals and then basically the idea was that there was an elephant, a giraffe, a fish in a fishbowl, a monkey and basically this human set a task to these animals of trying to climb a tree—there was this tree. And of course, the only one that could properly do it was a monkey and that is like school. (Liam: 17, NZ European)

Liam's striking extended metaphor emphasises the futility and violence of institutional processes for those "fish in the bowl" who are expected to "climb that tree". His choice of animals with profoundly different bodies and functional capacities (monkey, elephant, giraffe and fish) draws attention to the embodied nature of success and belonging at school. Liam suggested that those who think, move and communicate in ways that challenge normative ableist expectations are simply not accommodated:

Our education system for me personally—what if you are the fish in the bowl? The fish is an amazing swimmer but it is never going to climb that tree, regardless of how much content or how much tips, tricks or assessments on how to climb a tree you shove down it's throat. It is never going to be able to do it; it just doesn't fit [...]

there are a lot of fish at school, but we are only teaching how to climb a tree really. And that tree is to get a good job so we can get money so you can live a good life, really. Which is not something that I believe in, that you just ... there are elephants, there are giraffes and there are fish, you know? We can't just teach to that monkey. [we can't keep] shoving things down their throat and expecting them to only come out as a monkey when they want to be something else and do something else. (Liam)

While a dominant ableist lens casts difference as deficit, Liam's account is oriented to the unexplored possibilities and potentials of being "something else" beyond rigid achievement and productivity pressures.

3.1.3. Policing Gender and Sexuality

The third collection of social forces that we examine through an embodiment lens cohere around normative expectations of gender and sexuality. Young people who we spoke to identified the ways in which hegemonic expectations of masculinity and femininity shaped their lives. Being read as feminine was to be subject to intense appearance pressures. Interviewees explained how feminine bodies were frequently judged as too much or too little, too worked up or not carefully tended enough. At the same time, girls and feminine people who pushed “the limits of what to wear” (Julie, 17, South East Asian) could be slut-shamed for “not respecting yourself” (Julie) or dismissed as vain or stuck up. Lizzy (16, NZ European) explained how a guy she had turned down decided to punish her by getting “all of his mates and all of his mates’ girlfriends” to “bombard me with messages about how I looked”:

I was pretty self-conscious in Year 10 um and so I'd wear like a lot of makeup [. . .] it was all just like a learning process, to to see what was OK with makeup and everything um, but like yeah I, it took me a while to get over with they would just make fun of how I looked just with how much makeup I was wearing and that um and also the weight kind of stuff (Lizzy: 16 NZ European)

At the same time, feminine embodiment meant being told to expect less respect or that others expected less from you academically and physically.

My teacher she is like in the Black Ferns and so she basically kind of like outlines that they are treated way less, like more poorly than like the All Blacks. And they get paid much less as well and they are just like not as recognised (Julie: 17, South East Asian)

Prevailing understandings of masculinity also profoundly shaped how those who were read as men were treated by others. The embodied privileges of masculinity were contingent on maintaining distancing from femininity [67]. Elements of embodiment that created trouble for boys and men in this study included “growing my hair long” (Oscar: 16, NZ European and Pacific), being “skinny” and not eating enough (Elias: 19 Middle Eastern) and gesticulating and “us[ing] my hands too much when I speak” (Ash, 18, NZ European). Participants also described very tight policing of masculine emotionality. Expressions of distress and sadness were routinely described by young men as off-limits because they were considered unmanly by others:

I have this whole thing that if I show I'm weak, if I am sad or feeling down then I'm weak and with that weakness it is bad and I should shove it down. And with that I find it quite common in the conception in that males can't show their feelings males cannot express how they feel without being judged or persecuted because it's quote unquote not manly. (Joseph, 18 NZ European and Māori)

It sucks being an emotional guy—very, very much so [. . .] most guys can't express their emotions. And I think it is not because they don't want to, it's because society has just made them and they are meant to be the ones that you, they are the rock. [. . .] they are not meant to be feeling sad, upset or emotional [. . .] they are meant to keep it in and fight it and stay strong. (Liam, 17, NZ European)

Nic (18, NZ European) described particular disciplinary treatment from his dad, who has “always wanted me to be more masculine”:

I remember one time I just started crying it was really random, one night I just started crying like a lot and that was sort of led me to realise how bad things had been prior to that and like how I'd bottled everything up because I'd never cried over any of [. . . it] and I remember my dad telling me to man up (Nic)

In school life and home life, many young people who placed themselves outside cisgender and heterosexual norms described a relentless policing of their bodies. Parents, family and peers were described as profoundly attuned to markers of difference, with heightened significance placed on embodied attributes considered to be markers of gender

and sexual minorities. Several participants described being quizzed by parents about their sexualities. Daniel (17, South East Asian) explained,

Daniel: I mostly have girlfriends, like friends who are girls. [Dad] is not also sure about my sexuality and stuff like that. So he would usually ask if I am queer or something like that and I would say no but sometimes I would think that he is still doubting if I am straight or not.

Octavia: Would that be a problem? If you were gay?

Daniel: No, he says that it's not, it won't be a problem but I think it would be if I were gay.

My dad doesn't like it at all my mum pretends to be OK with it but she's not. Like if I ever like married a guy my dad wouldn't come. I don't think I'd invite him. (Nic: 18 NZ European)

At school, elements of voice, clothing and body language that could signal embodied difference made young people targets:

I never thought it would but apparently my voice gives it away [that I'm gay] (Nic)

I kind of was being bullied for being like, a girl that was really chubby and wore manly shit. In a way people wouldn't be saying it outright but they would be like thinking . . . Oh dike—you know? (Ash: 18 NZ European)

It was this boy that I was best friends with at the start of the year and then just turned on me and would say the weirdest things. Like, at the time I had short hair, wore no makeup, whatever, normal. And then he would just say the most bizarre things, like say I was trans and I'm like what, was like—what? Not an insult, but okay. Just weird. Like, everyday it was constant and it reached a point where I just didn't want to go to school. (Reuben: 16 Pākehā)

Discussion with the two trans participants whom we interviewed further illuminated the stifling restrictions of cisnormative privilege. In addition to experiencing transphobia from people close to him, Ash (18, NZ European) described a sense of profound dislocation from his body, over which he experienced limited autonomy:

I don't own my physical form because I'm just like. . . this sounds really weird but I'm basically just like . . . like a price tag now because everyone else is making decisions about what I do with my body. [. . .] Because I'm on testosterone right, and that was my decision. But I had to go through months and months and months of them, asking me questions and doing like evaluations on me. And that makes sense right, but at the same time it makes me feel like I have no autonomy over my own body, which means that I'm not . . . that I don't truly like own myself—does that make sense?

Ash's comments depict a cisnormative system where the embodied sovereignty of trans people, especially young trans people, is contingent on the agreement and facilitation of others. Reflecting back on a very difficult period of embodied discomfort, Morgan (18, NZ European) explained the revelation of learning that he was trans:

I mean I just learned that I'm trans, like I'm a man, no wonder why I hate my fucking body, you know and you say it's just a phase, no it turns out I just am not equipped properly. You know, it's ridiculous, yeah. I can just imagine now just like for a section in your paper, just like the word ridiculous like pasted like 70 times and it's like done.

What is "ridiculous" here appears to be the inevitability and the avoidability of distress for this young person. Under cisnormativity, individual embodiment is profoundly constrained through binary and biologised understandings of gender that reinforce unequal relations of power and encourage body hatred. While norms are undoubtedly shifting in Aotearoa, young people's embodiments are still profoundly shaped by prevailing cisnormative and heteronormative logics [68]. A focus on embodiment allows us to attend to the ways in which social constructions of gender and sexuality that engrain heteronormativity

and cisnormativity weave through young people's embodiments, shaping how they are read, responded to and, in some cases, punished.

3.2. Zoe

Our analysis so far has identified three prevailing systems of cultural privilege that shape embodied experiences, considering them in isolation from each other. In this second analytic section, we move from a thematic to a narrative mode to explore a conversation with one participant, Zoe, in depth. A close analysis of this kind creates breathing space for a more joined-up analysis, exploring how experiences with systems of embodied privilege coalesce within and reverberate through Zoe's talk. In the three sub-sections below, we examine the knotty ways in which sociocultural forces contour Zoe's embodied meaning making while also exploring possibilities for embodied resistance and reconfiguration.

3.2.1. "A Great Chain of Events"

Zoe was aged 17 and in her final year of high school when we met up to talk in a café near where she was living with her parents. Zoe described herself as NZ European and British and a straight female. As a person of colour, Zoe responded to the white interviewer's question about her experiences with racism by saying that she felt "really lucky" not to have experienced racism in Aotearoa, other than the "where are you really from?" incident explored in Section 3.1.1. We note that Zoe's narrative was produced with and for Octavia (who is light-skinned and who identified herself as Pākehā prior to the interview). In keeping with narrative theoretical approaches, we assume that Zoe's talk will have been shaped by her perceptions of her audience (Octavia), in this case potentially closing down possibilities for a discussion of racialisation and racial privilege.

Like others we spoke with, Zoe seemed a little unsure at first where to begin in her talk about herself, her life and what mattered for her wellbeing. We laughed as she described herself as living "a plain kind of life" that was mostly "uneventful". The first place where Zoe's talk settled was her experience of herself as "uncoordinated", someone who struggled with sports from an early age. Zoe described her primary-school experiences of "dropping the ball" in this way: as the catalyst for a more general withdrawal from sport:

Zoe: I did netball for a bit and I was constantly just like dropping the ball [...] I was like oh you know even though we're a bad team, it's not fair that I keep, you know, not actually throwing the ball the right way or catching it yeah.

Octavia: So, did you take yourself out of it for that reason?

Zoe: Yeah, I am just like yeah I'm not going to do this ever again

This formative embodied lesson about herself as a body out of place on the sports field appeared to have a profound reach, curtailing Zoe's sense of embodied possibility and catalysing a more general withdrawal from sport. She explained that, through these experiences, she decided from a young age to "not really [...] do anything because I don't want to like embarrass myself".

Over the course of the interview, the significance of this passage of talk for understanding Zoe's embodied identity became clear. Firstly, being devalued, challenged and queried by others on the basis of her embodiment was a recurring motif in Zoe's narrative. These deficit-based projections arose through interlocking elements of Zoe's embodied identity as a racialised, disabled woman who subverts prevailing norms of bodily femininity, and we explore these in further detail below. Second, Zoe's narrative of "dropping the ball" in sports provides vital context for the "great chain of events" that would transform Zoe's embodied experience of herself:

I started doing [boxing] and that was not so much coordination, so I was like—oh yeah, I can enjoy sport and not have to worry about like dropping the ball or hitting it the wrong way because it's not important [...] it was like the week before my [fourteenth] birthday and Mum was like she saw someone on a Facebook page and they were like talking about

boxing so she as a joke said 'you should try it out'. And I was like—okay. She never expected me to stick with it, and I did [.]

[boxing] was really positive for me um both mentally and physically. And it just, you know, boosted my self-confidence and my friendships and all of that um my mental health [.] I didn't know how going along one holiday for a few classes would be such a big thing in my life, but it turned out to be. I was like I think I have finally found something that I am good at and I had never really found anything I was good at especially sports-wise before then.

In these passages of talk, Zoe sketches out the impact of “finally” finding “something that I am good at”. Zoe talked animatedly about boxing and the sense of embodied power, joy and flow she experienced through it (“I feel sorry for anyone who doesn’t do it!”). Resonant with findings in feminist sport and leisure scholarship [69,70], boxing offered Zoe new embodied experiences that directly challenged the diminishing embodied lessons (“uncoordinated”; “unfit”) she had been carrying with her for her whole life:

it really boosted my confidence I'm like yeah actually I'm not un-coordinated and unfit I just didn't have the right sport yet and you know it took 14 years but I found it (laughs).

Zoe described boxing as a kind of homecoming at the end of a difficult quest: at last, she had found a place where she fitted, an experience that allowed her to experiment with a different understanding of her body.

3.2.2. “I Wouldn’t Think There Was Anything Wrong with You”

In Zoe’s narrative, boxing was also central to how she navigated other instances of embodied diminishment—and, in particular, to how she resisted and reinterpreted these projections from others around her. This was clear in her talk about how teachers at school had failed to recognise and support a developmental condition affecting her ability to focus, instead dismissing her as “lazy” and “daydreamy”:

I just lack concentration, I really lack all of that [.] my teachers never really pointed it out, they instead just called me lazy and or daydreamy [.] you know it was my old [boxing] coach, he pointed out the fact that I was struggling it was just really difficult that no one had picked up on it, especially with teachers because instead of thinking you know perhaps she is struggling, they just thought I was lazy

Again, we see how Zoe’s way of being—in her telling, a lack of concentration—is interpreted by those around her as a negative form of cognitive difference. Rather than part of Zoe’s distinctive embodiment, Zoe’s diagnosis signifies to those around her a mental lack or dysfunction that diminishes her in some way. Once again, echoing her experience with sport, Zoe’s embodiment (in this case, the way she senses and attends to her surroundings) comes into focus as a problem: a problem with her. This time, however, Zoe narrates some distance from this representation of herself. In the end, it is an old boxing coach who points the way towards further investigations and a different understanding of Zoe’s situation and why things were “not working” at school.

Zoe went on to describe striking contrasts between her own reading of her diagnosis, her body and her capabilities and others’ responses to the “piece of paper”:

For me it was fine, because I'm like well you know no matter what it's who I am and it's who I have been my entire life so I don't see how a piece of paper saying that I've got something is going to change that, but I think it was more difficult for my parents because they initially just felt guilty because they hadn't picked up on anything [.] they felt guilty all about that. But then I think it's been hard for me not getting a diagnosis but it's been hard for me with my parents' acceptance of the diagnosis because it is such a big deal to them.

my Nan, she's like oh well you would never know you had it because you look normal. I'm like what's that meant to mean? I'm like thanks, I guess. And she is like, well I wouldn't

think there is anything wrong with you because you are normal. I'm like, well there's nothing wrong with me first of all, um just because something says I have a um disorder doesn't mean there is anything actually wrong um and B I don't know how I am meant to process am I meant to be thankful that you think there is nothing wrong with me? (laughs)

While the actions of many of those around her suggest that there is “something wrong” with her, or something to grieve, Zoe takes up a far less pathologising and atomising orientation. Her learning disability figures in her talk as familiar, an integrated element of her way of being in the world.

More broadly, this thread of Zoe's narrative demonstrates the constrictive influence of ableism in young people's lives [1]. A high premium is placed on being—or at least looking—“normal”, and variations in learning styles are considered evidence of either laziness or a lack of capability.

3.2.3. “Are You Sure You Want to Get Bigger?”

Zoe's experiences of embodied wellbeing took shape against dominant expectations and body ideals for young women, centred around thinness and smallness. Zoe remarks that although she would “like to say ah I'm one of those self-love body confidence people [...] it wasn't always like that”. Zoe described a period of time when her understanding of her own body was swamped in thinness pressures. Once again, it is her relationship with boxing that Zoe positions as the eventual trigger for a shift in how she understood and related to her appetite and appearance:

[back then] I'd train like three, four or five times a week but I wouldn't be eating the right amount to be doing stuff like that. So, I'd be eating the diet of someone who you know well probably 1000 or 1500 calories on average a day, whereas I should have been eating like 2500 with the amount of training I was doing. So I just got I was like “oh look, I am getting really skinny look I've got a flat stomach” but, it was horrible. I felt horrible all the time um and then I started doing [boxing] more competitively and I realised that actually, if I wanna be good at this I have to look after my body and I have to know that to look after it and nourish it and I'm probably not gonna look like you know everyone else because I'm not going to be trying to get toned or this or that

This sense of bodily comfort and confidence carried through to other encounters that Zoe described, such as an experience shopping with her Nan:

I put on a shirt and it's a it was one of those long-sleeved sports ones and I am like, you know what I'm gonna get it a bit bigger because I don't want to like, you know I want to be able to fit it and not get too buff for it. And she was like are you sure you want to get any any more ah any bigger, because you might start looking a bit- and I just stopped her and said “I want to be strong and I want to be buff, so yep”.

Living in a feminine body in a weight- and size-focussed culture also puts Zoe on a collision course with a biomedical gaze, where flawed measures like BMI are used to privilege some bodies and to police others. Zoe described the experience of receiving a “medical sheet” from the doctors recently:

so I'm in the 91st percentile for height and I was like what does that mean? And they are like oh you're in that top 9, like you're tall, you are really tall. But then I was also in the 91st percentile for my weight and I was like what? Like, I am not really, really heavy what does this mean? So, then I started getting all those ‘maybe I should be smaller’ thoughts, but then I just shoved them aside straight away and I'm like nah, I'm happy how I am. I don't care what some paper tells me.

Echoing her earlier reference to the “piece of paper” denoting her developmental disability, Zoe chooses to carry this medicalisation of her body like “paper”: lightly. In a context where Zoe's embodied decisions are continually questioned (Are you sure? Are

you small? Are you normal?), Zoe's response interrupts these processes, both literally and figuratively.

4. Concluding Discussion

In this paper, we have worked with the concept of embodied privilege to analyse how young people's mundane bodily experiences unfurl in relation to racialisation, ableism and gendered normativity. Drawing from wide-ranging conversations with 25 young people about their lives, our analysis points to the significance of bodily experiences for generating knowledge about youth wellbeing. Thinking about privilege with theories of embodiment highlights how sociocultural logics confer privilege, weaving through young people's bodies in ways that facilitate and constrain. As our analysis suggests, fleshy feelings of ease, belonging and comfort accrue unevenly along lines of privilege, settling most readily into bodies that are read as white, straight, cisgender and "healthy". Many young people we spoke to offered vivid accounts of the unease of existing outside these privileged embodied norms: living as "a stranger in your own skin" (Ash: 18, NZ European). Through a close reading of our conversation with Zoe, our analysis has also foregrounded the ways in which hegemonic forms of embodied privilege can be contested in life-affirming ways. Centred on the revitalising experience of becoming a boxer, Zoe's talk suggests how feelings of power, ease and belonging in the ring leak out into other spaces, providing a foundation for resisting the acts of embodied diminishment that she comes up against elsewhere.

In formulating this analysis, we hope to contribute to a growing literature in youth studies that is exploring theories of embodiment. This contribution arises through a project that did not focus explicitly on bodily experiences or body image. Reaching into the rich constellation of embodiment-focussed scholarship has pushed us to find the body in young people's wellbeing talk. Our conversations with young people, spanning experiences of belonging, ease, fatigue and vitality, were ripe for this kind of exploration. We also hope to embolden analysts outside cultural and sociological studies—such as those within the more psychology-oriented field of body image research—to experiment with this more spacious lens. Our combination of thematic and narrative analytic modes is necessarily limited and partial. Even so, it illustrates some of the analytic possibilities that a focus on embodied privilege opens up. Paying attention to the flows of power that contour bodily experiences sets the stage for rich and respectful analyses that do not reduce difficulties to faulty cognitions or a failure to be sufficiently body-positive [2]. After all, bodily experiences are never truly individual, and embodied wellbeing necessarily unfolds within collective relationships with others, with our histories and through te tai ao, the natural environment [50,71]. With all of this in mind, we add our voice to the chorus of scholars who stretch youth studies with a focus on embodiment, holding tight to what it invites—and demands—us to attend to.

Author Contributions: O.C.-D.: Conceptualisation; methodology; analysis; writing—original draft preparation; writing—review and editing; project administration; funding acquisition. T.A.L.C.: Conceptualisation; methodology; analysis; writing—review and editing; project administration; funding acquisition. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

Funding: This research was funded by the Health Research Council of New Zealand, grant number 18/651.

Institutional Review Board Statement: The study was conducted in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki and approved by the Institutional Ethics Committee of MASSEY UNIVERSITY (reference NOR 1856, 2018).

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all subjects involved in the study.

Data Availability Statement: The data are not publicly available due to ethical restrictions.

Acknowledgments: Tākiri mai ko te ata huaki rangi, kia whiti mai te rā. Tēnā anō tātou katoa. We are very grateful to the young people who joined us in this project. Thank you for your time, kōrero and wisdom. We would also like to acknowledge the guidance and support that we have received

from the wider project team, including Victoria Jensen-Lesatele, Emerald Muriwai, Jessie Mulholland, Danielle Squire and George Kingi, as well as invaluable input from Helen Moewaka Barnes, Tim McCreanor, Karen Witten and Brendon Blue.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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