

Mana Moana: A Return to the Memory of Wholeness

Mana moana is based on five years of postdoctoral research that engages with ancestral knowledge, stories, language, proverbs, archetypes, learning narratives that teach us about how to be healthy in the world and understand our place within it. The aim of this research was to develop a mental health intervention for Pasifika peoples. The fundamental guiding question was: "What is healing in a Pasifika mental health context?"

After a rigorous research process of interviews, consultation, wananga, testing for face validity, cultural credibility, teachability, feasibility and acceptability, Mana Moana has emerged. Using a model by Friere, Mana Moana begins with - and is based on - language as the building blocks of worldviews and meaning-making. The programme logic and therapeutic approach that has emerged is in alignment with a restorative, releasing healing logic found across many cultures of the Pacific.

Mana Moana is essentially focused on restoring the balance of 'aroha atu, aroha mai^[1]' in peoples lives and this is seen as key to wellbeing. The ability to give empathy, compassion and love to others and to also be in the receiving mode: a reciprocal free flow of mutuality and positive relating. Others, in this context includes the realm of the interpersonal but extends beyond this to include the spiritual, ancestral, the ecological, and all creation. The root cause of ill health and poor wellbeing is seen to lie in these relationships. The restoration of health and wellbeing is seen to lie in these relationships.

Mana Moana focuses on return to our best selves, and being positive for all those around us. It is not about 'fixing' people, it is about encouraging them to be more themselves, unhindered from entanglements, travelling light, guided by legacy and purpose. This may require acknowledging and addressing harm caused by self or others in relationship, and taking steps to restore the flow of aroha atu, aroha mai. This is perhaps best summarised succinctly in the Hawaiian proverb, "Ke kala aku nei au ia 'oe a pela noho 'ai e kala ia mai ai. I unbind you from the fault and thus may I be unbound from it." Unbinding, unburdening, forgiving and restoring relationships of significance is seen as critical to the restoration of a healthy self.

However, because this is hard and triggering work - a huge component of the Mana Moana programme / journey is metaphorical. This is because we are a people who value oratory and metaphor and have used these techniques to talk about difficult things for centuries. The structure of the group-work (or individual) journey is to explore a metaphorical landscape and encounter many elements embedded within vao/wao, langi/rangi, maunga, uta, tai/tahi – essentially encounter the library of the land.

We believe that our ancestors deeply theorised the whenua that they encounter and encoded knowledge within it. This can still be accessed within our proverbs, language and stories. Engaging with this knowledge helps us get a sense of how our ancestors viewed the world, how brilliant and genius they were/are, and how we can mobilise this knowing to enrich our lives. Our language, proverbs and stories are laden with values and insights about how to be in the world, engaging with legacy knowledge is about finding our purpose, contextualising ourselves in our genealogical lines, understanding who we are from and what we are called to do.

Seventy 'power' words that are found in all of our Polynesian languages are encountered through this journey. These are words of the earth, sea, sky, atua, people and relationship.

All of these words can be found in at least 15 Polynesian languages. For example, Moana, meaning 'ocean', is a Polynesian word that can be found in 35 contemporary Pacific languages. Mana is an Oceanic word that can be found in 26 Pasifika languages. It refers to power, energy, abundance, authority, miracles – the ability to manifest the energy, flow and fortune of the intangible with grace and efficacy so that it is recognised and impactful in the tangible world.

Mana Moana, then, is about the power, energy, vitality sourced to being from the moana and indigenous to the South Pacific region and connected to that unique cultural legacy of knowing and being. All of our cultures have mana whenua, which points to our own rich cultural specificity and points to our cultural diversity and unique rights and responsibilities as kaitiaki and ahi kaa of a particular place. Mana Moana is about our genealogical and cultural connection to the largest ocean in the world. It is about where we connect and what we have in common.

Collectively we have a huge contribution to make to the world in crisis. We know – and have always known - about sustainable and reciprocal relationships of mutuality with everything in the environment around us. We understand about the mauri of things. Reclamation of this knowledge, which has been deeply colonised and attacked and degraded as savage, primitive, a threat to Christian beliefs and the opposite of science – reclamation of this knowledge is seen as integral to reclamation of ourselves.

The whole point of Mana Moana is to find a way into Oceania's library, to seek, to find and empower ourselves through this knowledge. It is accessible for non-indigenous language speakers, each word encountered is a building block of an alternative world that survives against many odds. In alignment with Friere's model, many of these words have been illustrated and designed into a visual by Dr Johnson Witehira. Engaging with images allows opportunities for non-language speakers to learn, it allows people to bring their own knowledge and understanding to these concepts and stimulates intergenerational transfer opportunities and vitalising conversations. Together, all the concepts are accompanied by hundred of proverbs that have been collected from Hawaii, Tonga, Samoa, Cook Islands, Tokelau, Māori and Niue. These encircle, reference and add further richness to these concepts and power words. Stories and sessions are built on language, proverbial knowledge, narratives, stories about navigators, our archetypal characters such as Rongo, Tū, Māui, Rata (Lata) who are found in most of our cultures.

The journey is, where possible, experiential and fun. We climb maunga. We walk through the dark of the forest and talk-story. We get into swimming pools or oceans and feel the impact of being up to our necks and coping with waves of distress and despair. We learn what our ancestors said about coping with this. We they recreate ancestral pathways and landscapes of the journey back to ourselves. We create our own matau, thinking about how Māui fished up whole countries using his grandmother's jaw bone. If we were to cast a net using our tīpuna's jawbone, what would they want us to catch in this lifetime? We think about words as kai, and what we feed ourselves and others. We reflect about what words we feed our children and whether this is nourishing. We are more conscious about the spaces between us and others, what we put into those spaces – energetically, words-wise, actions-wise. We think about the mauri in our shared spaces.

The development of Mana Moana involved many guides and significant collaborations that assisted its development. Hundreds of elders, experts, mental health professionals, young people and knowledge holders of all ethnic groups were consulted. Multiple wananga were run focusing in on the credibility of this approach and wielding of ancestral knowledge. It was closely supervised by a range of elders and experts who brought different skills to the research. The most significant collaboration was with the clinical psychologist Dr Evangelene Daniela. She piloted and developed the operationalisation of the programme in a youth forensics context in the Hawkes Bay. She continues to base her therapeutic practice on Mana Moana. Her partner Dion Wong is the skipper of Te Matau a Maui and they are increasingly incorporating mana moana knowledge and theory with ocean voyaging for wellbeing.

The programme was formally tested for feasibility and acceptability. It went through a rigorous ethics approval process and pre and post measures using psychological scales and the custom designed Mana Monitor were carried out with extremely positive results. Part of the research process was to see if people could be trained in the intervention. Twelve practitioners trained in Mana Moana and three delivered the programme to the Wesley College prefects. Satisfaction surveys showed that among a youth population the journey was deeply appreciated and enjoyed. Pre and post measures were promising.

Because the material is so focused on actualising, optimal wellbeing, purpose, legacy and personal growth, even though it was originally developed as a mental health intervention focusing on identity and culture – it was effortlessly transformed into a leadership programme for adults. Dr Mila did this with the assistance of Louise Marra, Programme Director of Leadership New Zealand. This was run through the NGO Le Va with excellent evaluation results and again, an improvement using pre and post measures.

In 2017, Foundation North decided to fund Mana Moana as a leadership programme for emerging Pasifika leaders. The umbrella organisation is Leadership New Zealand and we are currently advertising for a cohort for mid-career leaders. The funding lasts for three years.