Unearthing the Complexities of Wellbeing: Learnings from a Māori Think Tank

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Introduction

Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (NPM), New Zealand's Māori Centre of Research Excellence, is committed to its vision of Māori leading New Zealand into the future. NPM is focused on realising the creative potential of Māori communities, and bringing positive change and transformation both nationally and globally. NPM's research is organised along four main themes, specifically, Te Reo me Ngā Tikanga Māori (Māori Language and Cultural Practices), Te Tai Ao (Natural Environment), Whai Rawa (Māori Economies), and Mauri Ora (Human Flourishing). Contributing to the final theme of Mauri Ora is a platform project titled: *Practices of Sustenance: Collaborative explorations into the contours of wellness: Cultural reflections and contentions*. The research platform draws on seminal and recent research, which explores Māori wellbeing and flourishing, and which has a particular emphasis on sustainable careers and incomes in workplaces. More specifically, the project's main aim is to examine the support, barriers, tensions, and opportunities concerning Māori flourishing in New Zealand's workplace environment.

In order to gain some insight into the notion of wellbeing from a Māori perspective, a Think Tank was held on Friday 31 May, 2019 at the University of Canterbury. The participants were Māori leaders in their respective workplaces, and represented a variety of industries and sectors. This paper reports on the findings of the Think Tank, and seeks to illustrate the convolutions associated with defining, measuring, and promoting wellbeing. The first section outlines the complexities associated with achieving and sustaining wellbeing. Following this, the methodology and findings of the Think Tank are presented, and the article concludes with a series of pertinent questions employers and policy makers may consider when implementing wellbeing strategies in their workplaces.

Defining Wellbeing

Wellbeing is often interpreted as a process (a path to something), a product (an end goal), or a state of being (ever-changing). The term 'wellbeing' is often used interchangeably with terms such as resilience, health,

and wellness. However, it must be noted that such concepts are culturally and socially grounded, and can mean different things to different social, cultural, and ethnic groups, both at the individual and the community level. Examples can be seen in publications pertaining to wellbeing (Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006), but also global policies from governing bodies (World Health Organization, 2020a, 2020b, 2018).

As soon as an attempt is made to define wellbeing, notions of group homogeneity emerge.

Furthermore, achieving a state of wellbeing is as complex as attempting to define the term.

Essentially, what wellbeing may mean to one individual or group may be vastly different to other interpretations and experiences of wellbeing. The complexities of wellbeing, which exist due to our social and cultural differences, are too difficult to subject to such categorisation. Wellbeing has very different interpretations depending on how it is measured, or what survey is used. Wellbeing survey construction can vary from noting the 'absence of distress symptoms' to 'the inclusion of characteristics or protective factors'. For example, the SF-36 Mental Health subscale survey measures the absence of depressive symptoms. Conversely, the World Health Organisation's *WHO-Five Wellbeing Scale* survey measures psychological wellbeing, including aspects that contribute towards wellbeing, not just the absence of depressive symptoms (Bech, Olsen, Kjoller, & Rasmussen, 2003). To reach an understanding of what needs to be, or even could be measured, there first needs to be some consensus regarding an evidence-based philosophical grounding on what constitutes 'wellbeing'.

Essentially, the WHO argues that health is not merely the absence of symptoms, but rather health comprises social, mental and physical wellbeing. The SF-36 Mental Health scale is only part of the evidence that portrays some mental symptoms. The complexity of defining or measuring wellbeing is evident through subjective responses to both surveys. On the Mental Health subscale alone, mental health (as the absence of depressive symptoms alone) is seen as 'excellent'; however when measured on the WHO-Five, and taking in wider measures of 'mental wellbeing' the mean score is much lower (Bech et al., 2003). This example demonstrates the challenges associated with both defining wellbeing, and measuring it effectively and in a manner that reflects the subject's understanding of the notion.

Furthermore, achieving a state of wellbeing is as complex as attempting to define the term. The human lifespan is characterised by challenges and triumphs, and wellbeing fluctuates in accordance with life's peaks and troughs. Once a state of wellbeing has been achieved, which in itself is complex given the multitude of factors that can influence a given outcome, it does not mean this state will be sustained in perpetuity. The intention of this analysis of the notion of wellbeing is not to suggest we do not strive to achieve wellbeing, but rather to illustrate the complexities of the task - complexities that ought to be considered when formulating policies or strategies designed to promote wellbeing.

The Think Tank

In order to gain greater insight into wellbeing, and in particular from a Māori perspective, a Think Tank was held at the University of Canterbury. Invitations were distributed to key stakeholders in a variety of sectors and industries, including education, health, law enforcement, private companies, and iwi organisations. 24 delegates agreed to participate in the Think Tank.

The participants were asked three main questions, those being:

- What are the words and concepts that encapsulate 'Wellbeing' and 'Flourishing' from a Māori perspective?
- What are the practices that sustain wellbeing and flourishing in the workplace (Strengths and Opportunities)?
- What are the practices that inhibit wellbeing and flourishing in the workplace (Limitations and Barriers)?

The participants worked in groups of five during the course of the Think Tank, and their responses were both audio-recorded and submitted in written form. Transcripts of the audio recordings were produced, and the data sets generated in the discussion groups were analysed and coded for themes. Two approaches were employed. Firstly, a model that emerged from the *Ka Awatea* study conducted in 2014 was used as a lens through which to analyse the data. Essentially, the *Ka Awatea* study explored Māori success in secondary schools, and in particular, focused on learners, their whānau (families), and schools in the tribal context of Te Arawa, a central North Island confederation of tribes. The seminal study found that four mana constructs, and one overarching lever, play a crucial role in fostering Māori success in secondary school.

Those constructs are:

- Mana Tū (Sense of Resilience)
- Mana Motuhake (Sense of Identity)
- Mana Ukaipō (Sense of Place)
- Mana Tangatarua (Sense of Two Worlds)

The overarching lever is Mana Whānau (Sense of Family). These constructs were applied to the data that emerged from the Think Tank, and participant comments that aligned or had resonance with each construct were highlighted and grouped accordingly. Commentary that made reference to language, in particular to Te Reo Māori, was included under Mana Motuhake, and any reference to place, whether that was one's ukaipō (homeland) or not, was included under Mana Ukaipō. The second approach was to look beyond the four mana constructs and the overarching lever for other patterns in the data. In addition to the above constructs, the following themes emerged.

Voices from the Think Tank

Participants noted a variety of challenges in the workplace, ranging from discrimination in various forms to a lack of understanding about Māori cultural imperatives or commitments outside the workplace. These observations align with Mana Tū, insofar as such challenges require a sense of resilience in order to overcome or navigate through them. Allied to these observations is the commentary from participants that addressed fear, ignorance, whakamā (a sense of embarrassment or shame), and lack of confidence. Again, these comments have resonance with Mana Tū, in that the theme of resilience ought to also consider the sense of absence of resilience, rather than solely its presence.

A common assertion among several participants was feeling that in times of crises, Māori culture flourished.

Another common theme to emerge from the focus group discussions was authenticity. Participants discussed the need for cultural responsiveness, and an authentic inclusion and embedding of Māori cultural values and practices in the workplace, as opposed to tokenism. This theme has some connection with Mana Tangatarua in that one could expand this theme to include not only the ability to walk in two worlds but the merging of two worlds to create a more culturally responsive environment in the workplace. With that aim in mind, participant reflections relating to the notion of incrementalism are important, where many felt that authentic change in the workplace occurs one step at a time.

Some participants spoke of the idea of relativity, and contended flourishing differs between contexts, including in different geographic and sociodemographic settings, with others suggesting flourishing may manifest differently at an individual compared to a collective level. In other words, the common claim was that there is no one definition of how flourishing appears, but rather, what flourishing means is relative to context and different individuals or communities. In addition to this, some participants reflected on ideas of reality and theory, noting that flourishing may look different in our daily lives compared to ideas of flourishing at a conceptual or theoretical level. An example of flourishing in reality was, for one participant, having cupboards full of food, whereas others conceived of flourishing in what could be termed a more conceptual level. To illustrate this, one participant felt if the whenua (land) was flourishing, this allowed for a sense of flourishing to occur in their life also.

A common assertion among several participants was feeling that in times of crises, Māori culture flourished. Therefore, circumstances or events in the macro level of society impacted on individual workplaces with regards to the prevalence (or not) of Māori values. Only one participant mentioned the Treaty of Waitangi, although arguably the principles of the Treaty are evident in comments that relate to Mana Tangatarua, and the idea of two worlds encapsulated in both the signing of the Treaty, and the more recent emergence of the Treaty principles. Furthermore, while participants' comments were often presented as challenges, and therefore came from a place of deficit rather than opportunity, many of these comments were underpinned by issues of tino rangatiratanga, which indicate the presence of areas where growth and improvement can prevail. Finally, what was also evident in the discussion groups, was the theme of Mana in terms of the more general understanding of the concept, woven inextricably through each of the points detailed above.

In summary, the Think Tank explored NPM's core theme of Mauri Ora, and generated insights into how a sense of flourishing or wellbeing is conceived of in the workplace by Māori, and more generally, current practices that sustain a sense of flourishing, as well as some of the challenges present that thwart Māori flourishing in work settings. To this end, the Think Tank played an integral part in the overall aim of the project, encapsulated in the title of the study: *Practices of Sustenance: Collaborative explorations into the contours of wellness: Cultural reflections and contentions*.

Unearthing the Complexities

When participants spoke of the variety of challenges in the workplace, they identified that discrimination and the lack of understanding about Māori cultural imperatives or commitments were present in their work lives, and were a challenge to their wellbeing. It is argued that being socially excluded induces stress, and is subsequently harmful to wellbeing (Beekman, Stock, & Marcus, 2016). There is also evidence to support that connection is necessary for enhancing psychological resilience (Arahanga-Doyle et al., 2018; Scarf et al., 2018; Waldram et al., 2006). However, a feeling of exclusion in education or the workplace is compounded by many factors, as these findings suggest. Compounding these complexities is the realisation that feelings of exclusion for some could be unconscious to both employer and employee, or staff and student. They may not even realise that exclusion is occurring, because it has become normalised over time. For example, if a workplace has 'connection' as a kaupapa|value, but does not have a prayer room for practicing Muslims or allow the time for prayer, then it may be difficult for a worker or student to connect authentically to the workplace or educational environment. Historically, school rules and regulations were implemented when Māori language, tikanga (customs), and multiculturalism were not valued in an educational setting. How many of these rules (written or unwritten) remain entrenched? The times may be changing, but common discourse and entrenched perceptions may not have yet travelled with them (Cliffe-Tautari, 2019; Riwai-Couch, 2021). Moreover, it is important to stress that how connection manifests is not homogenous within a culture. For an individual to connect, they need the time and space to find some common ground.

The participants in the Think Tank spoke of a sense of resilience in order to overcome or navigate through challenges of discrimination and a lack of understanding of culture. Evidence suggests that it is the combination of challenges with protective factors that is the key to enhancing resilience (Olsson, Bond, Burns, Vella-Brodrick, & Sawyer, 2003; Scarf et al., 2018). We certainly heard the unique interplay of challenges and protection factors, as participants revealed feelings of physical fear, whakamā (a sense of embarrassment or shame), and lack of confidence alongside resilience when faced with discrimination. All evidencing that belonging, wellbeing and health related outcomes go hand-in-hand (Cruwys, South, Greenaway, & Haslam, 2015).

Reflecting on the complexity of wellbeing measurement may mean it is easy to become overwhelmed by the task of measuring or reporting on wellbeing in a learning environment, or a place of employment. We suggest that labelling and categorising can limit understandings of wellbeing in a workplace or learning environment. Subsequently, we offer some simple practical questions, which may help leaders or employers make their places of learning or work inclusive to identity.

A Shift in Focus

The data from the Think Tank challenged our thinking on measuring wellbeing. We propose that it may be helpful changing the focus from 'measuring wellbeing in the workplace' to 'measuring the workplace in light of wellbeing'. This requires a workplace or school to asking some key questions, challenge assumptions, and explore their environment and practices in light of Mana Motuhake|identity and Mana Ukaipō|sense of place. We offer this stance to managers and leaders in organisations as practical, useful ways to think about wellbeing

Questions that workplaces and schools could ask of themselves;

1. What are we trying to achieve by measuring wellbeing?
2. Are we being open and honest about what tools we are using, and the assumptions they make?
3. What contradictions between policy and practice exist in our school or workplace culture?
    a. With the physical environment?
    b. With our comments and actions?
    c. With our organisational structure?
    d. With our decision-making?
    e. With our team culture?
4. Do we have different voices and cultures, across all sectors and levels contributing to these discussions?
5. Do we know our Treaty obligations?
6. Do we allow mistakes and learning in a safe environment?
7. Have we sought evidence and listened to evidence that is appropriate for our workplace or school? Think about the:
    a. type and age of employee or learner,
    b. diverse voices and cultures available to you,
    c. type of work employers or learners are faced with, and the demands of that work.
8. Who are we reliant upon as our wellbeing 'experts' and do they really understand our specific staff or students, our workplace and our environment? If not, who would be better?
9. What hasn't yet been asked, and why is this?

Figure 1: Questions a workplace could ask of themselves for advancing well-being

in the workplace. An approach that does not treat any group or culture as a homogeneous group, and certainly doesn't expect that wellbeing can, or should, fall upon the shoulders of an individual alone.

The Think Tank data identified that authenticity of the inclusion and embedding of Māori cultural values was vital to a place of work being cultural responsive. By using critical questions like this, a workplace or school can increase the authenticity of wellbeing approaches or initiatives, and ensure that their adoption of wellbeing tools or frameworks are suitable for their particular workplace environment.

Conclusion

Wellbeing is a multifarious and complex topic and reducing it to a singular domain of psychology, philosophy, sociology or pedagogy is troublesome if we are trying to draw solid conclusions that apply across a broad spectrum of society. The Think Tank findings illustrate this complexity. The Think Tank data also suggest that the pathway to wellbeing is not straightforward and simple. Therefore, the questions posed above are not likely to offer an instantaneous solution. However, Think Tank participant reflections suggested that incrementalism was important, and many felt that authentic change in the workplace occurs one step at a time. Authenticity is not only necessary for sustained cultural change in the workplace, but is also seen as an essential step towards Treaty partnership (Harris, Macfarlane, Macfarlane, & Jolly, 2016). Additionally, there is evidence to suggest that championship of Māori values in the workplace leads to the creation of a more inclusive environment in general. In other words, the flow-on effects of an individual feeling a sense of belonging in their work environment can result in others feeling the same (Kuntz, Naswall, Beckingsale, & Macfarlane, 2014).

Notwithstanding the complexities of wellbeing, though, there is an increased focus on the levels of wellbeing we enjoy, and an urgent need for strategies to foster it, including in the workplace. Therefore, wellbeing is not a topic that can be ignored. Rather than concentrate on measuring wellbeing in the workplace, though, we argue that a shift to measuring the conduciveness of the workplace environment in fostering wellbeing allows for changes to occur in the environment that may result in greater levels of wellbeing for all. The questions presented above act as a starting point for workplaces to commence a journey towards the creation of a workplace environment that supports wellbeing.

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