



Defining positive mental wellbeing for New Zealand-born Cook Islands youth

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Abstract

Introduction: Exploring New Zealand-born (NZ-born) Cook Islands youth worldviews acknowledges the diversity that exists amongst Pacific peoples in New Zealand. By improving mental wellbeing and its potential to inform Pacific ethnic specific suicide prevention, it is important that a Cook Islands focus to suicide prevention is applied. Thus, reinforcing the notion that although some approaches may be similar to other Pacific populations, current policy and strategies should not be generalised to a one size fits all. **Aim:** The aim of the study was to provide some understanding to NZ-born Cook Islands young peoples' perceptions around positive mental wellbeing with the view that their voices help to inform the development of Cook Islands-specific strategies towards positive mental wellbeing and suicide prevention. **Methods:** This qualitative study involved 21 face-to-face interviews with NZ-born Cook Islands youth (16-24 years) who resided in Auckland. A

talanoa Pacific research methodology was employed to collate data in a culturally appropriate manner. A grounded theory approach was used to analyse this data. **Results:** An emergent theme from the interviews around positive mental wellbeing was maintaining social and cultural connections. These included connections via: social support networks; pride in their Pacific ethnic identities; cultural participation; and language retention. These were expressed as central to enhancing positive mental wellbeing and suicide prevention measures. **Conclusion:** These findings contribute to a limited knowledge base. The encouragement and maintenance of social and cultural connections during the formative years of NZ-born Cook Island youths were deemed to be strong buffers against poor mental wellbeing and suicidal behaviours.

Keywords: Mental wellbeing, suicide prevention, youth, Cook Islands, New Zealand, Pacific.

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Introduction

The promotion, protection and restoration of mental health are believed to be crucial to positive mental wellbeing (Barry, 2013; Huppert, 2005; Keyes, 2013). Positive mental wellbeing is defined as maintaining good overall health and is often linked to one's ability to think, be creative, engage in healthy and positive relationships, earn a living and enjoy life (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008; WHO (World Health Organization), 2014a). These may be enhanced when an individual is able to fulfil their personal and social goals and realise their sense of purpose in society (Foresight Mental Capital and Wellbeing Project, 2008). It is in fact also a protective factor against suicidal behaviours and a core construct for mental health (Friedli, 2009; WHO, 2004).

Youth suicidal behaviours have emerged as a global public health issue (WHO, 2014b). It is also an overall concern in New Zealand, which has disproportionately impacted the lives of young Māori and Pacific peoples (Associate Minister of Health, 2006; Ministry of Health, 2015). In 2012, New Zealand's survey of the health and wellbeing of secondary school students found that Pacific students (n= 1445; 17.1% of the national sample), were significantly more likely than their New Zealand European counterparts to have poorer mental health, and higher numbers of self-harm and suicide attempts (Fa'alili-Fidow et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the commonly referenced, *Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey of 2006*, reported that compared to other ethnic groups, Pacific peoples had a higher prevalence of mental disorders and particularly New Zealand-born (NZ-born) Pacific peoples (Foliaki, Kokaua, Schaaf, & Tukuitonga, 2006). In this same survey, Cook Islanders in general reported a higher prevalence of mental disorders

compared to the other Pacific groups. (Foliaki et al., 2006; Kokaua & Wells, 2009).

Pacific peoples and Cook Islanders in New Zealand

The term Pacific, is commonly used to describe peoples who share ancestral links to the Pacific region (Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia) (Gray, 2001). In New Zealand, Pacific peoples make up seven percent of the total population with a predicted increase to ten percent by 2026 (Statistics New Zealand, 2012).

Pacific peoples are highly urbanised and live mainly in Auckland, with many smaller Pacific communities found throughout New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Pacific peoples do not necessarily share a common migrational history to New Zealand (Gray, 2001). For instance, Cook Islanders, Niueans and Tokelauans as New Zealand citizens by birth, have unrestricted rights of settlement in New Zealand which accounts for the higher numbers of NZ-born Pacific peoples from these ethnic groups compared with others. This has prompted higher levels of acculturation among these Pacific groups with unrestricted rights of settlement (Berry, 2010). The Cook Islands population is the second largest group after Samoa living in New Zealand and like the general Pacific population displays a youthful population structure (Statistics New Zealand, 2012).

For most young Pacific peoples, the extended family is a primary support mechanism (Bathgate & Pulotu-Endeman, 1997). Pacific peoples have a holistic concept of health and wellbeing and this view is deeply entrenched in strong and stable families, which form the foundations of an individual and community (Bathgate & Pulotu-Endeman, 1997).

Social isolation is a common and important predictor for declining mental wellbeing and risk of suicide (Friedli, 2009; Pevalin & Rose, 2003). Some evidence also suggests that poor social environments and support also can negatively impact on the overall health and wellbeing of a young person (Clark et al., 2013).

Regardless of one's ethnic background, social support not only increases an individual's resilience but also improves a person's social

connections, lifestyle behaviours and quicker recovery from illness (Pevalin & Rose, 2003).

Māori and/or Pacific young peoples in comparison to non-Māori and non-Pacific continue to face greater social disparities and are disproportionately overrepresented in low socio-economic conditions (Fa'alili-Fidow et al., 2016; Pearson, Griffin, Davies, & Kingham, 2013; Statistics New Zealand, 2012). Factors associated with economic disadvantage magnifies the lack of community resources, overcrowded homes and homelessness as well as a sense of isolation (Pearson et al., 2013). Although Pacific youths are seen to be very resilient in the face of multiple adversities, prolonged exposure to extreme conditions as those mentioned, ultimately lead to increased risk of poor mental health outcomes (Fa'alili-Fidow et al., 2016).

Strong cultural identity is an important protective factor for Pacific youths and has the ability to strengthen an individuals' sense of belonging and mental wellbeing (Durie, 1999; Herman, 2013; Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Ministry of Social Development, 2010; Puna, 2013). In addition, Pacific youths who are proud of their Pacific heritage and place importance on the values of their cultures have a lower risk of suicide (Mila-Schaaf, 2010).

To discuss Pacific peoples, mental health and suicide prevention, one cannot dismiss the centrality of culture and its rightful place at the fore of the issue (Tiatia-Seath, 2014).

Between the 2006 and 2013 New Zealand Censuses, there was a notable decrease in language retention amongst Cook Islands Māori speakers in New Zealand, from 16.1 percent to 12.8 percent (Statistics New Zealand, 2014). Unfortunately, Cook Islands Māori is mainly spoken amongst older Cook Islanders and only 3.6 percent of NZ-born Cook Islanders were able to carry out a conversation (Statistics New Zealand, 2014).

Taumoeofolau (2013) argues that although many NZ-born Pacific peoples do not speak their respective Pacific languages, there is still much value placed upon them and the important role it has in the lives of Pacific communities. For many Pacific NZ-born youths this can be detrimental as their 'in-betweenness' as defined by

Taumoeofolau (2013) means that they neither feel fully part of their traditional Pacific culture, nor of the Western mainstream. Thus, feelings of not belonging to either group can become disabling and alienating for many youths, emanating from a lack of language proficiency (Taumoeofolau, 2013; Tiatia, 1998).

Currently, there are still gaps in the literature that cannot explain some reasons as to why Pacific peoples experience poorer mental health outcomes and suicidal behaviours in comparison to other ethnic groups in New Zealand (Kokaua & Wells, 2009; Tiatia-Seath, 2014). Fortunately, for Pacific peoples overall, there is a growing body of evidence which has aimed to address this knowledge gap (Lino, 2015; Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Puna, 2013; Samu & Suaalii-Sauni, 2009; Sinisa, 2014; Teevale et al., 2016; Tiatia-Seath, 2015; Tiatia, 2003; Vaka, 2014). However, these understandings have predominantly focused on Samoan and Tongan communities (Kokaua & Wells, 2009; Puna, 2013). Whilst they have contributed significantly to similar understandings for other NZ-born Pacific and Cook Islands peoples, it is evident that there is still the need for a Cook Islands focus (Kokaua & Wells, 2009) in current information, in addition to some emerging Cook Islands evidence (Herman, 2013; Manuela & Sibley, 2015; Puna, 2013).

This paper derives from a Masters of Public Health project which investigated NZ-born Cook Islands youth views around positive mental wellbeing and suicide prevention. It proposed that maintaining social and cultural connections can enhance positive mental wellbeing for young NZ-born Cook Islanders. Specifically, the significance of social support and networks, cultural participation and understanding, pride in ethnic identity and language retention for the Cook Islands diaspora can be a major contribution to more positive mental wellbeing outcomes and suicide prevention possibilities.

Methodology

This qualitative study investigated the perceptions of NZ-born Cook Islands young people about what constituted positive mental wellbeing and the effect on suicide prevention.

To be included in the study, participants had to be of Cook Islands descent, born in New Zealand, aged between 16-24 years, and living in the Auckland region.

The principal investigator carried out 21 face-to-face interviews and brought to this research an 'insider-outsider' perspective (Asslein, 2003). Insider, because she is a Cook Islander carrying out research on her people, and yet, also an 'outsider' because she was born in the Cook Islands and lived in the islands before coming to New Zealand. Asslein (2003) affirms that although the researcher may be from the culture under investigation, he or she may not have complete knowledge of the subculture that exists.

Face-to-face interaction is pivotal to establishing meaningful relationships in Pacific health research and considered an appropriate way of acquiring knowledge (Health Research Council of New Zealand, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006). These face-to-face interviews were guided by a semi-structured interview schedule and underpinned by the *talanoa* methodological approach.

The *talanoa* Pacific research methodological approach (Vaioleti, 2006) refers to the use of Pacific traditions and protocols to enable cultural safety, familiarity and appropriateness in the engagement and dialogue about issues that are important to the interviewee. Although this was not a Cook Islands-specific developed framework, the values encompassed in this approach were compatible with the Cook Islands approach to undertaking an interview process.

The interview schedule consisted of eight question zones. The question zones entailed a series of semi-structured, open-ended questions addressing risk and protective factors around mental wellbeing and its direct impact toward suicide prevention. Pilot interviews were undertaken, preliminary analyses conducted and further discussions around these findings and research methods. A research team ensured culturally appropriate and ethical processes were adhered to.

All participants agreed for their interviews to be digitally audio recorded. All names and any other identifying information were either changed or omitted.

Ethical approval was granted and obtained from The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC), Auckland, New Zealand.

Recruitment

The study utilised social media Twitter and Facebook, personal, community and professional Cook Islands networks, to advertise, promote and recruit potential participants. For those who responded to the invitation, a Participant Information Sheet outlining the details of the study was sent to them electronically prior to the face-to-face meeting. Participation was voluntary, and each participant was given the opportunity to ask questions before arranging a convenient time and location for interviews. At the meeting, the study details were explained again before the interview commenced.

Data Analyses

The *talanoa* approach complemented the analytical use of grounded theory which collects, analyses and reports data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Denscombe, 2014). Grounded theory requires the researcher to generate theory discovered and produced on the interpretations of participants (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Creswell, 2013).

The grounded theory method ensured that the narratives of research participants were the primary source of theory construction and used a general inductive approach (Attride-Stirling, 2001; Creswell, 2013). All interviews were transcribed verbatim with repeated readings of transcripts so the research team could familiarise themselves with common themes. A thematic narrative analysis involved identifying the meanings associated to the shared experiences and selected narratives coded to each theme (Attride-Stirling, 2001).

Findings

There were 21 participants; 10 males and 11 females. The average age of the participants was 19.8 years, most were tertiary and secondary school students residing in South Auckland suburbs. The ethnic makeup of participants consisted of those whom identified as being of full Cook Islands descent (n=13) and/or mixed

ethnicities (n=8), which included: European, Samoan, New Zealand Māori, and Tongan.

Narratives around maintaining social and cultural connections are presented as findings under subthemes of social support, ethnic and cultural identities and language retention.

Social Support

The majority of youths agreed that positive mental wellbeing is achieved by feeling loved and supported primarily by one's family, friends, and community. This was identified as being a strong motivator for participants to be successful in life.

Love and support were associated with the acceptance by family and friends of their life choices, whatever that may have been. This kind of support is essentially underpinned by good familial relationships.

It's really important to me now that being older, growing up and realising how much our families love and support is important, it is really something you need in life. Because when you're younger [teenage], ...sometimes you tend to pull away from your family, and then you don't feel or think how much your family means to you but now I do think it is important... cause a lot of the support that you need from your family and friends you can't get from anywhere else. (Male, 23 years old)

Sustaining familial ties and friendships for these youths is viewed as important and may be the common view for most youth in general. This includes developing meaningful relationships with family by avoiding negative people. These positive relationships were deemed important for these young people especially when confronted with difficult situations. For instance:

Positive mental wellbeing I think is being connected to people...family and friends because we look to others as to how we view ourselves...family are really like a reflection of how you see yourself and it is having good relationships with people and not negative [relationships]. (Female, 22 years old)

In addition, participants found that it was equally important to promote the message that you are never alone especially to young people, with the knowledge and that there will always be someone who you can talk to. The centrality of family and friendships in this message may also be a

common view held by most youth as evident in the following statement:

We need to promote it...the idea of that they are not alone like when I think about it the person who commit suicide I think about who they left behind like their family, I have seen the effects on their family and friends...family and friends will always be there...we [youth] just need to be able to talk about it and not think about...people judging you.. (Female, 18 years old)

Family, which includes the extended family members as well as friends, continues to be critical to the mental wellbeing and development of NZ-born Cook Islands youth. They also discussed the importance of open communication with no judgement as vital to maintaining healthy relationships and contributed positively to their mental wellbeing.

This study also identified that for most participants, their families were loving and supportive despite the daily pressures that confronted the youths and their families. Most participants shared that they felt their parents/guardians were more relaxed towards them and their individual choices as compared to their peers of other Pacific ethnicities. Participants of mixed ethnicities reported being more inclined to talk openly about issues with their Cook Islands side of the family/parent.

This is summed up in the following quote by a mixed ethnic Cook Islands individual:

I'm way more open to my Cook Island family and friends. I think it's because they are more laid back like you can tell them the worst things. They will take it easier even though they will give you some advice. With the 'bad' stuff I am more open to my Cook Island side, then the lighter and less embarrassing stuff with my other family. (Female, 23 years old)

Ethnic and Cultural Connections

Having a connection to one's ethnic identity and knowing who they are and where they are from were also common themes. Initially, at the start of the interview, the majority of participants asserted themselves as proud Cook Islanders. However, as the interview progressed they appeared to question the authenticity of them being *Cook Islands enough* especially during discussions on the importance of culture and

language to their ethnic identity. As explained by the following participant:

I am a proud Cook Islander...I am someone that I would identify more with my culture if I could, like I feel I'm a bit lost in that area... I'm not quite sure where I stand in terms of my culture or heritage and identity now...I see someone who would like to become more Māori and Cook Islander... I want to know more about that kind of side of me culturally. (Female, 21 years old)

There is a possibility that the feeling of authenticity may have been heightened because the interviewer was Cook Islands born and raised. However, these feelings did not seem to diminish their sense of pride in their Cook Islands identity.

It was evident that many youths prided themselves in the distinctiveness of their cultural and ethnic identity and agreed that it played a significant role in their lives regardless of how limited their cultural knowledge or connection may have been. In addition, most participants identified that the positive experiences of watching or participating in a Cook Islands cultural dance performance created a sense of belonging and inclusiveness. More than half of the participants shared that they had been involved in a cultural dance group at some point in their young life. They agreed that it was something that helped them connect to their cultural identity as described by the following participant:

I stopped dancing four years ago, that was like my only 'Island' thing that I did...it was a positive experience, yeah but it was hard to continue Cook Island youth [cultural] groups after high school unless your church had it. (Female, 20 years old)

Cultural groups also provided great social platforms to bring youth of the same culture together. Similarly, the participants felt this was a positive way of learning and promoting social cohesion and discussions around the challenges and realities of being a NZ-born Cook Islands young person. All participants were extremely proud of their cultural heritage and described cultural expressions of dance and song as some of the most positive things about their culture and identity.

In addition, participants detailed that it was a helpful way to maintain their physical, mental,

spiritual and social wellbeing. While also connecting these NZ-born Cook Islands young people to their own cultural heritage and deeper understanding of dance and song expressions.

While most participants acknowledged that joining cultural dance teams were a great way to express their ethnic identity and be connected to their Cook Island culture, peers and families, most indicated they were not a part or actively part of any cultural groups. The group discussed cultural disengagement and this was attributed to parental reprioritisation of Cook Islands culture, deeming it unnecessary for future economic and educational purposes.

A Need for Language Retention and Revitalisation

Much of the youths considered that their relationships with parents and grandparents as well as connections back to their homeland as important because it made them understand and appreciate their ethnic identities and customs. The understanding was enhanced by proficiency in the Cook Islands Māori language. Nearly half of the participants understand some Cook Islands Māori language and only three of NZ-born Cook Islands participants spoke some Cook Islands Māori. While more than half of the youth participants interviewed were unable to speak the language, they all agreed that learning ones' Pacific language was a positive and meaningful way of reconnecting them with parents, grandparents and the wider Cook Islands community. These two participants reiterate the challenges of learning the language:

Knowing the language I mean for me just what I've been learning in the last few years, it started to really open up my mind about how I view the world...I mean I think it's really important... we have a growing population of NZ-born Cook Islanders second, third generations who don't know the language...we need to maintain our culture and just be proud of speaking Māori but obviously there is a lot of complications you know people see that it's not really of value and parents not passing it down...because they don't see the use of it for their children. (Male, 22 years old)

...it is hard for us youth to listen to something that we can't see happening...and [they] don't teach us the language...so we need to feel safe

and secure about being Cook Islands first at home. (Male, 24 years old)

All participants believed language plays an important role in securing their ethnic identities and enhancing their sense of belonging. They saw language as a positive tool for connection and deeper intergenerational understandings and that it should be encouraged and revitalised. Some youths suggested that language classes tailored for NZ-born Cook Islands youth would be helpful. As well as incorporating some of these lessons with Cook Islands dance and cultural group practices. In addition, participants also proposed encouraging parents and wider community to embrace and teach non-speakers.

Discussion

The majority of the NZ-born Cook Islands youth believed that remaining connected to family, friends and other social support systems were essential to the promotion of positive mental wellbeing and, consequently, a buffer for suicidal behaviours. This finding affirms previous studies among NZ-born Pacific youth (Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Tiatia, 2003).

Participant narratives imply that Cook Islands parents/family are more accepting of young NZ-born Cook Islanders' realities and for those of mixed ethnicity. This acceptance may be a result of their levels of acculturation to Western ideals.

Participants generally reported that strong social support especially from within a young person's cultural and ethnic community promoted their ability to engage and thrive. The extended family, consistent with the collective beliefs of most Pacific peoples, continues to be an important network group in the lives of young NZ-born Cook Islands youth. This study found that strong positive family relationships can allow for more open conversations about youth issues that can potentially impact their mental wellbeing.

Participation in cultural groups and activities should continue to be encouraged amongst NZ-born Cook Islands youths as it strengthens connections to ethnic identities and a sense of belonging. Cultural dance groups were identified as a positive means to engagement and deeper connection to active participation and learning. Dance groups also allowed participants to

express their emotions and encouraged personal strengthening of mental, social, spiritual and physical wellbeing. Some participants agreed that participating in cultural dance groups helped sustain their cultural heritage, pride and uniqueness in New Zealand's multi-cultural environment.

This finding affirms similar indigenous and Pacific group study findings (Durie, 1999; Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005; Tiatia, 2012; Wexler & Gone, 2012) which showed that the health and mental wellbeing of indigenous or minority groups living in Western dominated settings was intricately linked to their cultural connectedness. This aspect of Cook Islands culture has a unique role to play in enhancing positive mental wellbeing experiences for NZ-born Cook Islands youths.

Language maintenance and revitalisation was highlighted as having a positive role in supporting the mental wellbeing of Cook Islands youth, especially in the diaspora. For the majority of the participants, efforts to revive Cook Islands language would be important and timely. Learning, retaining and promoting the Cook Islands Māori language is perceived as encouraging inclusivity, increasing confidence to identity and participation, maintaining positive intergenerational relationships and creating better engagement between Cook Islands families and communities. Certain settings identified by participants such as the home and social groups are some of the key areas for encouraging language revitalisation.

Moreover, building mentally resilient youth through strengthening of cultural identity, relationships and interconnectedness can potentially act as buffers against suicide.

Acknowledging the social and cultural values of Cook Islands communities highlight that these facets for indigenous and Pacific communities alike are intricately linked to their overall health and mental wellbeing. This affirms research that revitalising cultural integrity (Durie, 1999; Levesque, Li, & Bohemier, 2013) and meaningful cultural understandings (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009; Taumoefolau, 2013; Tiatia, 2012) can offer for young Pacific people positive and life affirming connections.

Strengths, Limitations and Areas for Future Research

This study is the first qualitative investigation in the Pacific region examining NZ-born Cook Islands youth, their definitions of mental wellbeing and specific strategies for suicide prevention. Moreover, this acknowledges the views and needs of sub-Pacific groups that exist within New Zealand.

The findings of this analysis are the result of insights provided voluntarily by 21 NZ-born Cook Islands youth. This research contributes to the limited body of knowledge of mental wellbeing and suicide prevention for Cook Islands communities. This study also supports prospective future (Cook Islands) mental wellbeing and suicide prevention research with a strengths-based focus and the inclusion of practical methods that are grounded in the expressed needs of the target populations.

The primary limitation to the findings presented is that it may not be generalisable to other populations. Whereby, the views also expressed by the participants in this sample may not be representative of the wider NZ-born Cook Island population residing in New Zealand.

Conclusion

This study argues that maintaining social and cultural connections via: family and/or friendship ties; improved ethnic and cultural links; identities; and Cook Islands language maintenance and retention, are important components to include when seeking to improve positive mental wellbeing and suicide prevention efforts among NZ born Cook Islanders.

Promoting certain cultural aspects such as the Cook Islands Māori language, has been noted as a vital tool that can enrich and positively impact the mental wellbeing of NZ-born Cook Islands young people in New Zealand. Identified settings such as homes, and Cook Island social and cultural circles were some noted areas for encouraging language revitalisation. Language cultivation presents for policy makers, health and community workers, as one of some key areas to consider when designing programs and policies around positive mental wellbeing and suicide prevention.

Lastly, this reinforces that Cook Islands youth views like Māori and Pacific youth in general conceptualise mental health wellbeing as extending beyond the individual. Hence, its promotion should not be directed solely at the individual, but should include the collective such as families and communities as a whole. This would allow for a deeper understanding of the world views held by NZ-born Cook Islands youth and increase appropriate responses toward enhancing positive mental wellbeing and suicide prevention within these communities.

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