Māori in the workplace: Understanding drivers of mental health

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In New Zealand, Māori account for 16.7 percent of the population (Statistics New Zealand, 2020a), making Māori one of the largest indigenous groups (by proportion) in the world. For example, other indigenous populations include Australia (3.3 percent) (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2018), American (1.3 percent) and Native Hawaiian, and other Pacific Islanders (0.2 percent) (United States Census Bureau, 2020). The United Nations highlight that indigenous populations inherit and practise unique cultural values, and retain characteristics (e.g., social, cultural, economic) that are distinct from the dominant societies where they live (United Nations, 2020). However, globally, indigenous peoples share common problems with poorer wellbeing being paramount (Haar & Ghafoor, 2021). Indeed, research suggests that globally, indigenous people have the worst wellbeing rates (Prout, 2012). The main reason for the disparity in wellbeing is income (Haar & Ghafoor, 2021), for which Māori are similarly affected.

Māori income, occupations, and unemployment

Māori employees have median earnings 10 percent lower than the dominant society – New Zealand Europeans (Statistics New Zealand, 2020b). The latest New Zealand Census data shows that amongst individuals earning the top income band ($150,000 or more), only 1.1 percent are Māori. This compares to 2.9 percent for other New Zealanders (Statistics New Zealand, 2021a), representing a 264 percent difference. Indeed, Māori are over-represented in all low-income groups, with a few examples being: 8.0 versus 6.8 percent (all others) for zero income, 11.7 versus 9.9 percent (all others) for income $15,001–$20,000, and 5.9 versus 5.6 percent (all others) for the $35,001–$40,000 group (Statistics New Zealand, 2021a). Thereafter, Māori have a lower rate of income compared to all others for every income level. Income is a vital factor in wellbeing (Ferrer-i-Carbonell, 2005). A meta-analysis on economically developing countries, with 111 independent samples, found a positive effect of economic status on wellbeing which was "strongest among low-income developing economies and for samples that were least educated. The relation was weakest among high-income developing economies and for highly educated samples" (Howell & Howell, 2008, p. 536). Specifically, towards indigenous populations, the importance of income has been argued to be a strong indicator of wellbeing. Having a constant stream of income provides indigenous workers not only with greater (and much needed) stability but can also be instrumental in the achievement of other valued cultural factors including autonomy (Yap & Yu, 2016).

One reason for this disparity is around education. Māori are more likely to have no formal education (25.3 versus 18.2 percent). Towards tertiary education, 8.4 percent of Māori have a Bachelor's degree compared to 14.6 percent for non-Māori. These rates are exacerbated at the highest qualification levels, with Māori having a Master's degree at 284 percent lower rate (1.3 versus 3.7 percent) and similarly a PhD at 267 percent lower rate (0.3 versus 0.8 percent). Another key income driver is around occupations. Māori are less likely to be managers (13.0% versus 18.0%), professionals (16.3% versus 23.0%), and more likely to be labourers (19.4% versus 11.3%) and machine operators and drivers (9.1% versus 6.0%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2021a). Furthermore, when we compare different employment status, we find Māori are significantly lower in self-employed roles (6.9 versus 17.1 percent).

Overall, from an economic angle whereby capital is controlled by the business owner, Māori are disadvantaged because they are not in control of capital to the same level as New Zealand Europeans. Māori are much less likely to be an employer (2.8 versus 14.5 percent) (Statistics New Zealand, 2019), representing a 515 percent difference in the likelihood of being an employer. Further, typically working in low paid occupations (e.g., labourers) also minimises the income potential. This can also affect Māori wellbeing, indirectly. For example, low paid occupations might require Māori to work longer hours, which itself is related to poorer wellbeing (Pega et al., 2021). Indeed, 16.3 percent of the workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand work 50 hours/week or more. While one in ten New Zealanders work multiple jobs of these, 20 percent work over 60 hours/week (Statistics New Zealand, 2019). Although this data does not delineate by ethnicity, evidence suggests Māori do work multiple jobs although possibly less than New Zealand Europeans (Pere, 2007). Overall, there have been calls for policies to enhance Māori occupational choice and job assignment for many decades (Brosnan, 1985), but change has been stubbornly slow.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge unemployment. Despite New Zealand having a low unemployment rate overall (4.0 percent overall), it is 252% higher for Māori (7.8 percent) compared to New Zealand Europeans (3.1 percent) (Statistics New Zealand, 2021b). Similarly, Māori are over-represented in the New Zealand underutilisation rate. This reflects the proportion of those in the extended labour force (including both unemployed and underemployed). This rate is 17.5 percent for Māori but only 9.2 percent for New Zealander Europeans (Statistics New Zealand, 2021b), representing a 190% higher rate for Māori.

Job factors driving Māori mental health

Job insecurity

It has been argued this disparity in unemployment rates is critical because amongst those Māori in work, they are likely to have different perspectives and shared stories around unemployment (Haar & Brougham, 2016).
Job insecurity is one of the critical factors facing employees, which can be present due to threats from new technology and international competition (Haar & Brougham, 2020). Job insecurity has a wealth of research showing it is detrimental on employee mental health (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). Basically, employees who perceive their job security is under threat tend to be worse off because they spend time and energy worrying about their future job, what they may have done to contribute to potential job losses, and then considering alternative job scenarios. An important issue with job insecurity is that it is a subjective perception and reality is less important. It does not matter if a job loss is real or imagined – the perception of having an issue is what leads to detrimental effects (Haar & Brougham, 2020). Further, it might be suggested that given Māori have a collectivistic orientation including in the workplace (Haar, Russo, Sune, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014) and have strong whānau (extended family) influences around work issues (Haar, Roche, & Taylor, 2012), they might be especially prone to experience job insecurity issues. Consider that Māori are more likely to share work stories with family and friends and such conversations would include the inability to get a new job, or the threat of job loss, or actual job loss. It is likely these factors can contribute to Māori insecurity perceptions around their job, which can impact wellbeing. Hence, the overall unemployment rate being much higher for Māori likely impacts their insecurities around work due to economic vulnerabilities (Haar & Brougham, 2013).

Importantly, job insecurity can devastate the wellbeing of employees. An early meta-analysis reported a relationship between job insecurity and mental health, indicating strong links between perceptions of job insecurity and employee wellbeing (Sverke, Hellgren, & Näswall, 2002). A more recent meta-analysis (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018) found job insecurity perceptions were significantly related to work-related wellbeing outcomes including emotional exhaustion and cynicism and job burnout overall. Further, job insecurity was related negatively to psychological and physical health and positive mood, and positively related to anxiety, depression, anger, and negative mood (Jiang & Lavaysse, 2018). Finally, a review (Mauno, Cheng, & Lim, 2017) found job insecurity was associated with impaired family wellbeing, with family/whānau being a critical dimension for Māori (Haar, Roche, & Taylor, 2012). Despite the potential important links between Māori and job insecurity, there has been little exploration.

While job insecurity studies in Aotearoa New Zealand establish similar findings to the literature around links to higher job anxiety and depression (Brougham & Haar, 2018) and higher emotional exhaustion and cynicism (Douglas, Haar, & Harris, 2017), those for Māori remain untested. However, as noted above, Māori are likely to suffer higher job insecurity and thus have poorer mental health outcomes. In the New Zealand context, research has explored the hypothesis that Māori employees will have higher job insecurity due to lower employer training (Gibson & Watane, 2001). While that hypothesis was not supported, they suggested systematic and endemic issues drive the higher job insecurity of Māori employees. There have been calls for more studies of Māori employee job insecurity (Haar & Ghafoor, 2021), and it is argued that Māori are likely to be strongly affected by job threat and unemployment rates, which is expected to detrimentally influence mental health (Haar & Ghafoor, 2021).

Job insecurity implications

Organisations and managers need to understand the destructive power of rumour and assumptions around job losses. They are destructive on mental health – even when not true. The easiest way to combat the detrimental effects of job loss rumours is to communicate effectively. Unequivocally refute any such rumours and lay the issue to rest. In strange times like COVID-19, where economic realities might fluctuate, it might be necessary to make such clear communications multiple times across the year. Organisations and managers are encouraged to confirm job stability when needed. Of course, sometimes organisations do need to lay off staff, but doing this one and clearly communicating the rationale will at least ensure those who remain have lower insecurities around 'being next'.

Other factors

Organisational-Based Self-Esteem reflects the esteem workers feel from their bosses and organisations around their work competence. One study exploring this self-esteem reported Māori and New Zealand Europeans employees did not differ in their self-esteem (Haar & Brougham, 2016). Importantly, the self-esteem for Māori employees was more beneficial in dealing with negative mood, being negatively related. While this effect was similar for Māori and New Zealand Europeans employees, it was especially beneficial for Māori employees. The implication for organisational leaders is to understand the importance of communicating positive work experiences to Māori employees. Organisations should encourage leaders to be forthcoming around praise and acknowledgement of good work. This appears to be a positive approach that aids Māori mental health.

Distinct from self-esteem from work, researchers tested the role of Māori cultural efficacy and found it was negatively related to mental health issues, showing the importance of cultural efficacy for Māori (Muriwai, Houkamau, & Sibley, 2015). Here, cultural efficacy refers to Māori perceptions around the extent to which they can engage appropriately with other Māori in social and cultural contexts. Indeed, this aligns with other research finding Māori working for an organisation that espouses positive Māori cultural values, leads to positive work attitudes (Kuntz, Näswall, Beckingsale, & Macfarlane, 2014). Organisational implication is to facilitate and aid Māori employees in understanding, engaging, and feeling confident in their Māori culture. Such resources (e.g., te reo classes) might provide benefits beyond the language.

Māori culture is aligned with collectivistic beliefs where the 'we' or team is more important than the individual (Haar, Russo, Sune, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014). Exploring this aspect specifically towards Māori employee mental health, researchers found Māori working within a collectivistic context reported better mental health, with lower anxiety and depression (Brougham & Haar, 2013). Importantly, workplace collectivism had a strong effect on Māori mental health. Implications for organisations are around considering the role of teamwork and the value placed on the collective for the work and jobs and co-workers that Māori employees might need. Here, Māori cultural values around the group was especially valued by Māori employees. Placing Māori employees in teams and shaping reward mechanisms at the team level might be especially beneficial for Māori mental health.

Despite findings highlighting the importance of whānau for Māori job behaviours (Haar, Roche, & Taylor, 2012), a recent study explored work-family enrichment, which reflects the positive aspects of work and how they impact the family, such as building skills and providing resources (Haar & Cordier, 2020). The study found Māori with higher enrichment reported significantly higher positive mood and lower job stress (Haar & Cordier, 2020). Hence, positive work experiences are critical for building the mental health of Māori employees, and organisations are encouraged to provide Māori employees with experiences around understanding different viewpoints at work, building happy work experiences, and aiding employees to feel personally fulfilled from their work (Haar & Cordier, 2020). Combined, these experiences are likely to enhance the mental health of Māori employees.

Finally, researchers have begun to explore occupational stress in the workplace for Māori (Stewart & Gardner, 2015). This research highlighted that some aspects of occupational stress are different for Māori workers, and these can be important predictors of mental health. It can be beneficial for organisations to provide strong cultural safety and connect individuals with strong personal Māori cultural resources – Te Whare Tapa Whā (concepts of recreation, social support, self-care, and coping strategies) (Stewart & Gardner, 2015). These findings align with recent research around the workplace challenge for Māori scientists, and how Māori employees can end up working a double cultural shift, that leaves them burnt out (Haar & Martin, 2021). Organisational implications include encouraging and developing these culturally appropriate individual resources and providing greater understanding of workload issues for Māori professionals and providing greater cultural safety to aid mental health.

Organisational implications

Key to the literature is that organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand do have an important role to play in managing and facilitating better mental health amongst their Māori workforces. There are clearly many factors for organisations to consider, including workload issues around cultural roles (Haar & Martin, 2021) and providing clear communication and support around job insecurity. This is likely to be especially critical given the disproportionate level of unemployment held by Māori and stronger whānau connections that could lead to greater discussion and worry. There are clearly ways that organisations can build up and strengthen their Māori workforces too, through enhancing self-esteem, Māori cultural efficacy, and cultural safety. These are likely to be areas where more positive leadership can play a role in shaping these attitudes and behaviours. Further, richer work experiences and greater attention to teamwork are areas that can also aid Māori workforces to have stronger mental health.

Conclusion

Overall, the mental health of the Māori workforce is challenged. It is challenged broadly by structural issues in society which ultimately impact aspects like education, training, and job choice. However, it is also shaped by the work experiences of Māori. Of these, perceptions of job insecurity are likely to be critical for Māori employees, mainly because their contextual background around higher unemployment might facilitate such perceptions. There is much evidence to show that self-esteem and cultural efficacy might be robust and beneficial in responding to this. Hence, for working Māori, there is a potential for the workplace to provide both organisational support (e.g., cultural safety) and build personal resources that facilitate mental health. Overall, enhancing the mental health of the Māori workforce is likely to have important engagement, performance, and retention benefits to Aotearoa New Zealand organisations that provide additional encouragement for building better workplaces to make employee mental health paramount.

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