

Getting in touch : a meeting with whakamā in psychotherapy

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Abstract

The knowledge and practice of psychotherapy in New Zealand has strong, fiercely protected roots that originate from outside of this land. For most Māori, if they enter into a psychotherapeutic relationship, it will most often be with a Pakeha, or non-Māori practitioner who has gained their theory and understanding of healing the psyche from these 'other' traditions. However, with the shift in consciousness that is occurring here in Aotearoa, there is a genuine growing desire, particularly among psychotherapists, to know more about concepts that are important for Māori, the tangata whenua of Aotearoa, so that these can be understood, appreciated and tentatively integrated into professional practice and personal worldviews. Metge (1986) believes that understanding whakamā is of crucial importance in understanding and improving relations between Māori and Pakeha. This would surely follow through to the therapeutic relationship and it is therefore timely to begin exploring the concept of whakamā in psychotherapy practised here in Aotearoa. The purpose of this paper is to introduce the concept of whakamā and other supporting or associated concepts, and to invite further discussion of whakamā in practice. There has been no attempt to provide a cross-cultural integration or comparison at this point.

Kaupapa – grounding principles

I nga wa o mua, in those times past, Māori had their own version of soul or spiritual healer. The tohunga-rongoa was responsible for attending to emotional imbalances (Robinson, 2005). This role was held, contained and attributed status within a social structure of tried and tested concepts and beliefs that gave meaning and purpose to life, living and relatedness. The need for healing and restoration remains. Though we may not see the tohunga in the traditional sense, Māori professional practitioners will continue to seek to practice in ways that fit with Māori worldview and philosophy.

When speaking of things Māori, one of my elders taught me 'This is not a 'Māori perspective', this is 'Māori worldview': it is the way we believe it is for all mankind.' Another elder taught me never to be satisfied with just being told, 'This is so.' She taught me that I needed to question: 'Why is this so?' She explained that I needed to 'whakapapa' back (to establish links) to discover the philosophy behind the practice, so that I could establish the origins of this philosophy, whether it was tūturu (fixed, permanent, considered true and authentic) Māori or belonging to another worldview.

My intention with this paper is to provide a Māori worldview that also has relevance in the professional world of psychotherapy.

Just as most other cultures do with their own worldview, so Māori also believe that what is good for Māori is good for all. Perhaps then the concepts and philosophies that underpin Māori worldview can be considered as being Māori in essence yet applying to all of humanity and universe. We can also acknowledge there are many similarities in worldviews across cultures that can be considered 'universal'. My view is that Māori do not possess the 'copyright' on this form of knowledge but they have their own very important and valued words and stories that lead us to the same 'universal' place.

He aha tēnei mea - whakamā? - what is this thing called whakamā?

The word whakamā is derived from two words 'whaka' (loosely meaning "to make") and 'mā', which carries a number of meanings (white, pale, faded, clean, freed from tapu.) whakamā is a verb transitive meaning "to whiten", a noun meaning "shame, abasement" and an adjective meaning "shy and ashamed". (Williams, 1971:161). In this context we can also understand the term whakamā to be the process of "making clean", i.e. cleansing, restoring. So we are describing a process, behaviour, an experience and an outcome.

Metge's research and subsequent publication (1986) provides a significant contribution on the topic of whakamā and is frequently referred to in this paper. She understands whakamā as a Māori concept that relates to the physical, emotional and spiritual experience of how a person or group of people affected by whakamā, participate in their relationships with others and their environment. Being 'afflicted by' whakamā or in a 'state of' whakamā causes disruptions to social relationships and is usually experienced as a negative and/or undesirable state that involves considerable personal pain and distress to everyone involved.

Whakamā could also be considered as a defence against intrusion during a time of distress. The nature of the behaviour of whakamā is to remove oneself. For some it can actually serve to provide space and time to reflect on the experience, the possible causes of situation and precipitating factors.

One of my clients Kiri, (a pseudonym), existed in a state of whakamā for many years within the context of a dysfunctional and distressing whānau dynamic. Although still 'afflicted with' and in a 'state' of whakamā during her early therapy, she came to understand her withdrawal behaviour as a positive aspect of whakamā. She described one of the benefits of being this way as "getting away from the heat", and 'getting some space away from all of that bullshit so that I could work out what to do, how to survive.'

He āhua whakamā - form, appearance and characteristics

(1) The physical and emotional aspects of whakamā

Metge (1986) identifies two aspects of being in a state of whakamā that relate to the 'look' and 'feel' of whakamā. She grouped them under the two categories, inward and outward signs, that define the physical and emotional aspects of whakamā. This is also reflected in this comment from a highly respected Northland kaumātua:

Whakamā is an outward expression of inward disintegration, an inward unease, because you know you are not what you should be within your group . . . You have a certain place in society and anything that takes you off your base in cultural terms causes whakamā . . . (Marsden, 2003:77)

Metge (1986) was able to define that the outward aspects relate to the person 'looking' whakamā; the behaviour and body language, which can be seen or observed, is clearly visible or directly observable. 'It is like seeing a house that has been shut up: windows closed, blinds drawn, showing no sign of life' (1986:15). She continues with identifying that the inward aspects relate to the person 'feeling' whakamā, the state of mind and feelings that are internal and invisible, 'nga whakaaro whakamā'. The outward signs reflect and are expressions of the inner experience.

Metge (1986) further assigned the outward, visible signs into five groups of behaviours: negation of normal activity and interaction; various ways of cutting off visual communication; small, repetitive movements indicating unease; physical flight, and behaviour that reduces communication and interaction with others (filling the space, defending against). The inward, invisible signs she assigned to nine groups of feelings: shy, embarrassed, uncertain, inadequate, incapable, afraid, hurt, depressed, and ashamed.

The feeling tone of whakamā is generally 'negative and depressed' (Metge, 1986:30) and like the effects of trauma, the state of being afflicted with whakamā varies in intensity and duration, depending on the causes, the person, their sense of self and identity, and the circumstances surrounding the situation (presence of witnesses, familiarity of surroundings, risk or level of threat and intimidation). Again like trauma, if not handled wisely and appropriately, whakamā can become a chronic condition.

Even as an adult when around her family, Kiri described herself as feeling weak and helpless, and she tended to stutter and mumble if spoken to directly. She would try to 'disappear' around others, hoping they would not notice her, always head down, eyes to the ground. In large gatherings she would 'escape' outside as soon as possible and play with the children, and act like she was 'looking after them' when really she was using them to avoid any contact with the 'others' whom she was scared of and hated being close to. She hated the fear and anxiety that would roll around in her

puku, sometimes scared that she would 'throw up', 'cos then everyone would look at me and I would just die'. She noted that if she were 'stuck inside with them' she would constantly pull at her and twist her braid, sometimes until it hurt, while staring blankly at the patterns in the carpet or the cracks in the floorboards.

In stark contrast was her behaviour in a different context. In her 'outside' world, she functioned as a capable, competent professional, managing a business, staff and clientele. The conflict between the two worlds eventually became too difficult to hold.

It was noted by Metge, 'There is a general consensus among Māori that the whakamā experienced in relation to Pakeha and especially in Pakeha dominated settings . . . is especially deep and damaging.' (1986:36). This can be a consequence of an individual's previous experience, their sense of belonging and/or isolation, and the levels of confidence in articulating oneself or being/feeling understood sufficiently in cross-cultural situations. However, it is also important to acknowledge that damage occurs in the context of differences and hence, power struggles and in some cases, the suffering of Māori at the hands of their own is no less painful.

In Kiri's case, she considered that she actually functioned more effectively in a Pakeha setting, for her painful life experience was rooted in the context of her Māori world. However, this in turn led to her to feeling whakamā in any context where she was identified as Māori when in non-Māori settings. She hid her identity as much as possible and often felt trapped between worlds. She said 'It feels too big to go there just yet. If I can't function in a Māori world as a Māori, how the hell can I survive out there as one? They'll eat me alive.' The complexity of the dynamic grows and reinforces the existence of the inward and outward aspects of being in a state of whakamā.

Whatever the cause it is important to note that in any setting where one experiences a pervasive level of discomfort this can lead to an accommodation of the actual or perceived dominant other. When this discomfort is considered irrelevant, or is minimised, misinterpreted, pathologised and misdiagnosed then the problem will be compounded and the struggle continues.

(2) Mana - the spiritual aspect of whakamā

In addressing the spiritual aspect of whakamā we are also introduced to the person, their identity and personality. When we speak of these things we are also introducing the concept of tapu. A discussion of mana would be incomplete without also referring to tapu. The terms tapu and mana are often interchangeable and the concepts in themselves can be confusing and a little difficult to understand.

Robinson's (2005) teachings from his Kai Tahu tūpuna state that laws of tapu (restrictions) were created for the preservation of mana. Mana derives from atua

(spiritual powers) and is therefore spiritual. The tapu is the restriction that keeps power present. To violate someone's tapu is to diminish or destroy their mana or personal power.

Marsden (2003) elaborates on the 'double aspect of authority and power' of mana and he uses the Greek words, *exousia* and *dunamis* to explain. *Exousia* is derived from the verb *exesti* meaning lawful or permitted, and is translated as authority where in the Greek sense, authority means lawful permission delegated by the superior to the subordinate. 'Since authority is considered a spiritual gift delegated by the gods, man remains always the agent or channel – never the source' (2003:4)

Dunamis is derived from the Greek verb *dunamai* meaning 'to be capable or to have power', the ability or power to perform. It can refer to 'power in action, power to perform . . . power of the spoken word. [Mana is] that which manifests the power of the gods' (2003:4).

So drawing on these interpretations Marsden understands mana as 'lawful permission delegated by the gods to their human agents, and accompanied by the endowment of spiritual power, to act on their behalf and in accordance with their revealed will' (2003:4). This delegation of authority is evident in dynamic signs or works of power. Here is his simple yet potent analogy that helps us to understand these teachings on mana:

A person approaches a traffic crossing and the lights turn red. He has the power to cross but no permission. The lights turn green but his car stalls at that moment. He has permission to cross but no power. His car starts and the light remains green. He has both authority and power to proceed. (Marsden, 2003:4)

Pa Michael Shirres (1994, 1997) spent over 20 years studying and researching Māori theology and knowledge, particularly in relation to tapu and mana. He states, 'to look on tapu only as 'being with potentiality for power' is to leave out the most important element of tapu, the faith element, the link with the spiritual powers,' (1994:5) as clarified in the following statement, 'Ko te tapu te mana o ngaa atua' (Tapu is the mana of the spiritual powers) (1994:6).

He explains further that:

When tapu meets tapu and one tapu overpowers the other tapu, the intrinsic tapu that has been overpowered is no longer effective and so the extensions of that . . . tapu are no longer effective. The situation is noa . . . in a negative way, for it results from, and signifies, the loss of power of the primary tapu and its extensions. (Shirres, 1994:13)

This is often referred to as the 'trampling' of tapu or mana – 'takahii te mana'. In the

Māori world if this occurs, the person who has been ‘trampled’ upon has lost mana, or is in a state of diminished mana and is considered noa, ‘free from restriction’, but in a negative way. The person is then vulnerable and at risk. Restoration of tapu comes about by addressing the forces that have brought this state of noa about, by linking the individual or group back into society, or whānau. These forces are then rendered noa, i.e. made powerless. Tihei mauri ora!

Whakamā and mana

According to Metge (1986) humans are said to ‘have mana’, be ‘mana-possessing’, ‘filled or imbued’ with mana, and likened to a cloak or mantle. Loss of mana is said to weaken a person but not to cause death, as destruction of his mauri (life principle) does. Being in a state of whakamā is related to and a consequence of the loss of mana that leads to a loss of power to act effectively and loss of protection. Further, individual mana is linked reciprocally with that of the group, and the group in turn is linked with the mana of the ancestors of that group. The action of one affects the others and the inner psychological and spiritual wellbeing of the individual is connected to the fulfilment of social obligations and expectations.

I understand that Dame Whina Cooper once said, ‘we are mokopuna of our tūpuna’ (personal communication with Malcolm Peri). She is reminding us that as a reflection of our tūpuna, our role and responsibility is to uphold their mana and that of the spiritual powers, that being mana which has been gifted to us.

The Dynamics Of Whanaungatanga teachings articulate this through the identified goal of whanaungatanga, being ‘to address, restore and enhance te tapu o te tangata [people/person and hence tūpuna also], so that they may have the mana to achieve their potential.’ (Te Hiku o te Ika, 1995).

Importantly Metge (1986) advises us that given that mana is a spiritual force with spiritual implications, whakamā cannot be understood purely as a psychological problem. Shirres (1994) describes it as a process of achieving hohourongo, entering into peace through the restoration of violated tapu. He also says ‘The real sign of a person’s mana and tapu is . . . that person’s power to manaaki, to protect and look after other people.’(1994:16). Like psychotherapy, where it is accepted that problems occur in the context of relationship and therefore the focus of healing is in that context also, so it is with whakamā. Different cultural beliefs will lead to different views on how this is done (who is responsible, who should be present and active, where should it occur, how long should it take, etc).

Causes of whakamā

Whakamā is not just an individual experience. A group can also feel whakamā for an individual, or there can be a ‘group-whakamā’, as a consequence of a group

behaviour or decision. In either case it can be observed in both individual and group behaviours. Where there is a loss of power there are questions that need to be asked. Metge (1986:38) again fills a gap here. She understands the need to distinguish: (i) whether the person/group is whakamā on their own behalf or on that of others, (ii) whether the whakamā person or group incurred the whakamā themselves by their own actions or inaction, or was it inflicted upon them by others, and (iii) whether or not actual wrongdoing is involved.

She then assigned the range of causes of whakamā into six groups (1986:38): (i) perception of lower status, (ii) uncertainty and confusion (especially in relation to conflict between traditional and modern ways), (iii) recognition of fault, (iv) being put down, (v) being singled out – inferior, superior or different, compounded by invasion of personal boundaries or an element of tapu, and (vi) on behalf of others – for or because of other.

There are two important points that were highlighted for me in this area of Metge's work. One was that whakamā could arise in any situation where there is an opportunity for comparison – as in the saying 'to suffer by comparison' (1986:42). It becomes obvious then, that if we are not secure in our identity or sense of self, if we feel inadequate in comparison to others, if we are easily swayed by others perceptions particularly of ourselves, we may be more vulnerable to being afflicted by whakamā than those who are more secure in their identity and self. Metge articulates the vicious cycle of whakamā where 'whakamā begets limitation of achievement, which begets more whakamā' (1986:110).

The second point is that the initial exploration of causes was not about attributing blame. In this context the attribution of blame comes after the identification of whakamā, not before.

Whakamā and restoration in practice

Without a doubt, the loss of mana for whatever cause or reason adversely affects the physical and mental health of individuals and groups and their capacity to act effectively. This well-known whakataukī describes it well: "Tama tū, tama ora; tama noho, tama mate". Son standing, son well; son sitting, son sick. Therefore, if your son is standing, he is active and able to function. He is well. However if he is still and inactive, there is something wrong and follows that something needs to be attended to.

As psychotherapists practising in Aotearoa, New Zealand, we can begin to consider our role and responsibility when it comes to the healing process, from the perspective of working with and acknowledging whakamā. Am I, in my professional role, willing to explore the extent and causes of whakamā? What am I, as an individual responsible for, what can I do and where appropriate, what help am I willing to accept?

Again drawing on Metge's research (1986) here is a summary of the thoughts of her interviewees on the restoration process: (i) the first step is to assess the cause and intensity of the whakamā. (ii) The first move can be made by the person causing the whakamā or by witnesses. (iii) If the person brought the whakamā upon herself by doing something wrong, it is suggested that the person should suffer or be punished by whakamā. "Waiho, mā te whakamā e patu." (Let it be, she will be hit by whakamā.) Or, "Waiho i a ia mā te wā." (Leave it with her. Time will put it right.)

However, if the ultimate, underlying cause of whakamā is a relative lack or loss of mana, the essential ingredient in it's healing is the expression of aroha therefore: (i) Encourage distractions or diversions to minimise emotional distress. (ii) Help find 'escape routes', as a way of maintaining dignity. (iii) Be watchful and provide support and reassurance by presence. (iv) Leave the person alone but maintain connections. (v) Leave doors open to return.

Then if the process seems to be taking too long, reassess. If signs of readiness are detected, begin the process of restoration, mainly with physical contact, by providing physical expression of comfort and support, the expression of aroha. Although outwards signs may cease, the inner feelings may linger and continue to affect performance and wellbeing and resurface in trying situations. You need to be prepared to keep a watchful eye and continue to express aroha.

While the concepts of tapu and mana have been discussed, attention to the inclusion of aroha is another important factor. Aroha is focused energy, compassion, respect, love, acceptance and generosity. The collective concepts of tika, pono and aroha are also important. I understand this as meaning to do what is right and just, at the right time, for the right reasons, with right intentions and in a loving and compassionate way.

This reminds me of a delightful short story of Tolstoy's, about the Emperor's three questions (in Hahn, 1991:69-75). The emperor believed that the answers to these three questions would solve all problems: What is the best time to do each thing? Who are the most important people to work with? What is the most important thing to do at all times?

Short story even shorter, the answers he discovered were: (and it really is worth reading the story as to how this came about) there is only one important time and that is now because the present moment is the only time over which we have dominion. The most important person is always the person you are with, for who knows if you will have dealings with any other person in the future? The most important pursuit is making the person standing at your side happy, for that alone is the pursuit of life.

In retelling this story, I believe Hahn is inviting us to consider how we use each moment of our time on earth, how to be of loving service to others. This for me is the essence of aroha in practice.

Rangimarie Rose Pere made what I consider to be a profound statement that really cuts to chase. She said “We must be prepared to let a person explore the dimensions of [their] mana” (Metge, 1986: 70). She was referring to the need to remember our own mana as an individual alongside that of our tūpuna and of the collective. As a mokopuna of my tūpuna, in order to know my roles and responsibilities I need to know who I am, where I stand and from whom I derive my mana. I need to know and understand where I fit in to the scheme of things as I stand between the past and the future. I know this from whakapapa and from being in relationship with my whānau, my tūpuna, and my spiritual guides. When we speak of whakamā we are speaking of mana and this is surely a goal of therapy worth consideration – to explore the dimensions of our mana.

Comment

It is interesting to note that endurance of whakamā (Metge, 1986) is often understood as both admission of fault and part of the punishment that purges the offender of guilt. If others, particularly authority figures, interpret this differently, the affected person can feel misunderstood which then leads to further difficulties between parties as stated here:

If you want to regain your place in Māori society you have to make restitution. Your restoration will come only with a change in behaviour . . . [however] In Pakeha society you get punished but your behaviour doesn't have to change. You've paid for it . . . that's it; you are free to do it again. With this level of confusion and conflict it is no wonder that it is hard to resolve whakamā in cross-cultural situations. (Metge, 1986:115)

Another interesting point has been raised in our psychotherapy circles, and that is, is the experience of whakamā only something that Māori experience? I have also heard similar questions and statements relating to wairua, aroha and mana and it raises some of my own.

If only Māori experience these things, what does everyone else experience? If we are to eat, sleep, sing and pray together, does that mean that only Māori can e kai, e moe, e waiata, e karakia and not others? Do I mimi and you pee? Do Māori have wairua but not non-Māori? Where would we draw the line and would we want to? Why would we want to separate Māori and others from a universal humanity? Is this more about the fact that given our history, that there are deep, generational wounds, particularly for Māori and that maybe Māori would feel these things in a more spiritual way than they consider Pakeha do?

Knowledge (matauranga) is different from knowing (mohio). Matau is the word for hook. In discussing knowledge, or matauranga, the hook relates to catching the knowledge. It acknowledges the first stage of learning. It has yet to be digested, taken in.

According to Marsden (2003:79) the ancestors believed that when the illumination of the spirit arrives in the mind of the person that is when understanding occurs – for knowledge belongs to the head and knowing belongs to the heart. When a person understands both in the mind and in the spirit, then it is said that that person truly ‘knows’ (mohio). If we are describing matauranga and mohiotanga, can these beautifully rich concepts only occur for Māori? I would hope not and I could not comprehend why having wairua or experiencing whakamā would be any different.

However I suspect that what seems to be missing in the use of these concepts is an understanding of the philosophy, the origins of why and how the practice or concept came about, along with the spiritual underpinnings. Without the framework or bones to a story there is nothing to hold it up. As humans, we will naturally draw on our existing philosophies and worldviews to make sense of our world and herein is where things become distorted.

The more common use of Māori words in everyday life, like mana and aroha is music to my ears. However as Marsden alluded to above, the mouth can speak what the heart doesn’t yet know. The bones, the ko-iwi, provide the connections, grounding the philosophical aspects. But without the meat, the soup just doesn’t quite cut it.

The following statement provides an interesting argument:

Ahakoia ko wai te tangata e eke mai ki te marae, me karanga, me mihi, nō te mea he mana tōna. Nā reira, ka tika tēnei kōrero, he mana tō nga tangata katoa. Translated this means whoever comes to the marae, call him on, welcome him formally, because he has mana. So this saying is right, all human beings have mana. (Metge, 1986:65).

The first part argues that this should be done because of the *existence* of mana in the person. The second sentence goes one step further; validating the truth of the initial statement by saying that this is so because mana exists in *all* human beings. And if this is so, then I suggest that all human beings have potential to experience whakamā.

The kaupapa at the beginning of this korero suggested that perhaps “concepts and philosophies that underpin Māori worldview can be considered as being Māori in essence yet applying to all of humanity and universe” and that Māori “have their own very important and valued words and stories that lead us to the same ‘universal’ place”.

From experience I suggest that one of the other difficulties has originated in some of the very painful histories of Māori-Pakeha relationships since the time when they first spotted each other across the water. Do Māori trust that Pakeha will treasure Māori taonga (these concepts and words) in the same way? Perhaps Pakeha might try and control it, and then once they have control, they will change it or distort

it. And then they will claim ownership and tell Māori this is how it is. And Māori worldview will have been invalidated, trampled, discarded. Again. Do Māori want to let Pakeha share their 'stuff'? Will it be safe in Pakeha hands?

This I believe is Māori fear, just as Pakeha fear what it means to enter into power sharing with their Māori Treaty partners. Or coming into the Māori world, of experiencing feelings of inadequacy, incompetence and powerlessness, of being in their most vulnerable places and spaces, in front of Māori. The fear that maybe Māori will turn on them and return the suffering that they endured—tit for tat, an eye for an eye, echoes of utu bouncing off the mountains and sliding down the valleys. The fear that there shall be no escape or respite from the darkness of the raging shadow of the noble savage, the native that has been feared for centuries.

Māori must overcome the desire to repeat, that which has occurred to them even though the opportunity presents itself. It has been, and in most cases still is, an unlevel playing field. The lines keep shifting along with the goalposts. But that in no way leaves Māori as the victim and we should not view ourselves or be treated as such. The story of Te Whiti-o-Rongomai and his stand at Parihaka (Scott, 1975) is a Māori model for understanding how to define and maintain identity with dignity. Crushed though he was, he practiced passive resistance. If you read nothing else about Māori, and NZ history, this is an absolute must.

I believe that Pakeha and non-Māori must overcome their avoidance of truly knowing and understanding their motivations in bicultural interactions. Overall, we must all find ways of respecting each other's worldviews and struggles in a way that avoids any trampling of mana. For if we don't then it is conceivable that we will all exist in a state of diminished mana, and be suffering from and afflicted by whakamā. Considering our history, I suspect we already are. We get involved in battles, shaming and blaming, trying to quantify and qualify our pain so that we can somehow win the 'biggest loser' competition. And if this goes on, how will we recover, as a nation of peoples? Who will save us from our pain and torment?

Conclusion

This article is by no means the final word in discussing this concept, nor the many others that arise within the discussion. This is just one Māori view – mine and while drawing on the wisdom of others I am also claiming what is now my understanding without excluding other voices.

My goal here has been to enrich your understanding of some aspects of Māori philosophy. In thinking of some final words about preventing whakamā, I can't resist one last list of questions: 'Before you speak, think: Is it necessary? Is it true? Is it kind? Will it hurt anyone? Will it improve on the silence?' (Sai Baba, 2006).

And in taking responsibility for restoring your own lost or diminished mana as a professional healer, 'You are the only problem you will ever have and you are the only solution' (Bob Proctor, 2006).

Kia tau te rangimarie. Let peace reign.

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