

The impact of therapeutic community rehabilitation for Māori men



RESEARCH

‘Māori men’s experiences of rehabilitation in the Moana House therapeutic community in Aotearoa/New Zealand: A Qualitative Enquiry’

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Background

Residential therapeutic communities are widely used to treat mental health disorders, psychiatric illness, drug addiction and criminal offending. For Māori in Aotearoa/New Zealand, culturally embedded residential therapeutic communities have been developed that incorporate *Kaupapa Māori* (Māori traditions, methods, approaches).

Enhancing knowledge and understanding of Māori culture for Māori in therapeutic communities has shown to improve the outcomes of these programmes. Yet there is a relative lack of research on the residents’ perspectives of their rehabilitation within these programmes.

Dr Tia Neha, a Fellow of the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research, part of Victoria University of Wellington, contributed to University of Otago research that explored the experiences of Māori men’s rehabilitation in the Moana House therapeutic community.

Main research findings

Semi-structured interviews with seven men from the Moana House therapeutic community — an all male kaupapa Māori therapeutic community in Dunedin — were conducted by a Moana House staff member as part of Jacob Ashdown’s psychology master’s research project. The research identified three main themes that related to participants’ rehabilitation experiences: the importance of healing family relationships; the relevance of Māori culture in rehabilitation; and increased self-awareness.

Participants discussed the importance and difficulty of reconnecting with family. Improving family connections was seen as beneficial for rehabilitation, particularly for offenders with children. However, participants indicated that reconnecting with family can be difficult when family members were still active in gang, criminal or anti-social activities. The Moana House therapeutic community also allowed the opportunity to build new family-like relationships which were seen as instrumental in rehabilitation.

Prior to joining Moana House many participants lacked a sense of cultural identity and some suggested that learning about their heritage was an important motivation for joining Moana House. As some of the participants had been raised within and around gang culture, learning about their heritage, language, and identity as Māori, sparked a cultural awakening and desire to learn more. Participants also felt that being a member of a therapeutic community helped increase their self-awareness and contemplation of positive behavioural changes in their life. Living with others allowed them to learn more about themselves and improve their self-control and communication with others.

Relevance of findings to New Zealand

Taken together, the findings highlight the benefits of therapeutic communities in the rehabilitation of Māori men. Incorporating family relationships and cultural identity can lead to better outcomes for Māori offenders and communities, indicating ways to develop and improve future therapeutic programmes which are responsive to the needs of Māori men. Yet the research also highlighted that family relationships are diverse and require important individual consideration.

The findings also suggest that adapting therapeutic programmes to be culturally responsive to a Māori worldview may not only increase the outcomes of Māori participants but also increase the number of Māori offenders who are willing to join rehabilitation programmes. Hence, increasing the accessibility of these types of programmes is of importance to policy makers and government officials.