

Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players’
perspectives of mental well-being

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Abstract

Māori and Pasifika athletes constitute a high percentage of rugby league players in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and overseas (Keung, 2018). There is growing concern over youth development and professional athletes' struggles to maintain their mental well-being. This in turn sheds light on the effects of pressure placed on athletes to manage and maintain it (Horton, 2014; Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al. 2019; Marsters, 2017; McKenzie, 2019; Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Stanley, 2020). Māori and Pasifika are often identified by their cultural values, principles and practices. However, little is known about the impact of culture on mental well-being, from the perspectives of Māori and Pasifika athletes' currently playing in the National Rugby League¹ (NRL). This study presents current players' perspectives on managing and navigating mental well-being.

With the growing numbers of Māori and Pasifika players in the NRL, the purpose of this research was to gain insights and understanding by sharing athletes' stories, including experiences of how players within a top tier NRL squad, define, perceive, and manage mental well-being. Current discourse about mental well-being in general, is situated mainly within Euro-centric structures and outlooks. Consequently, little is known about the role and impact of culture, values and principles on Māori and Pasifika players' management of their mental well-being in the professional sport world (Alder, 2015; Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Marsters, 2017).

This study employed qualitative narrative inquiry, underpinned by two primary cultural principles which guided the pathway taken from Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika cultural principles: ***Respect*** and ***reciprocity*** (Health Research Council of New Zealand [HRC], 2014; Mental health Commission [MHC], 2001). Semi-structured focus groups and 1:1 interviews were conducted with 18 current professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league (RL) players based in Aotearoa. An inductive thematic process was used to analyse the data, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

Findings outlined the ways in which players manage mental well-being and what mental well-being 'looks like' from their point of view. At its heart, mental well-being was found to be determined by athletes' personal expression of cultural identity, values and practices, and whether it was permitted, aligned to or in-tune with their playing

¹ The NRL is a professional rugby league competition that includes teams from both Australia and New Zealand.

environment's expectations, rules and mandates. Therefore, mental well-being management was largely influenced by players cultural identity (Durie, 2006, Erueti & Palmer, 2014).

Conclusions are drawn to assert organisations need to become culturally attuned to their athletes. Protocols, procedures and practices inclusive of cultural values and principles must be developed. Athletes have to feel safe. Cultural values need to be nurtured and openly expressed, allowing mental well-being to flourish.

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Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

09/04/2021

Signature

Date

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Chapter 1 Introduction

The Man in the Arena

It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles, or where the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood; who strives valiantly; who errs, who comes short again and again, because there is no effort without error and shortcoming; but who does actually strive to do the deeds; who knows great enthusiasms, the great devotions; who spends himself in a worthy cause; who at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly, so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who neither know victory nor defeat ([Theodore Roosevelt](#), 1910).

1.1 Overview of the Research

This study investigates current professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league (RL) players' perspectives on mental well-being based in Aotearoa New Zealand (referred to as Aotearoa for the remainder of this thesis). The study looks to discover players' experiences in terms of their overall view of what mental well-being looks like to them. This study also looks to explore how Māori and Pasifika athletes manage and navigate mental well-being and what shapes that process. As Roosevelt's (1910) opening quote highlights, it is not for those outside of the arena to judge or critique Māori and Pasifika RL players. It is up to all of us to provide an environment for athletes to safely share their kōrero (conversations), Kaupapa (principles, ideas and values which act as a foundation for actions) and their knowledge. Subsequently, this research acknowledges for all athletes "*there is no effort without error and shortcoming*" but "*at the best knows in the end the triumph of high achievement, and who at the worst, if he fails, at least fails while daring greatly*" (Roosevelt, 1910).

In this light, this research seeks to unpack mental well-being using a strength-based approach. Qualitative narrative inquiry methodology is utilised to conduct this investigation. This is informed by Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika research principles to guide the process.

The remainder of Chapter One presents the following: Research aims and objectives, origins of the research and research design. The subsequent section then

provides an outline of the organisation of thesis chapters and how they align with the research purpose.

1.2 Research Aims and Objectives

The primary research question underpinning this study looks at “What are professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players’ perspectives of mental well-being?” The key objectives for this study were: (1) Define and understand what mental well-being looks like from Māori and Pasifika National Rugby League (NRL) players’ perspectives. (2) Understand how Māori and Pasifika players manage their mental well-being.

Within these objectives a greater focus towards understanding the lived experiences for Māori and Pasifika professional athletes is explored, to fulfil the purpose of better comprehension towards the following:

- How does this cohort of athletes view mental well-being in relation to their professional and personal lives on and off the football field?
- Does cultural heritage impact their mental well-being?
- Does the professional NRL environment meet athletes’ needs with regards to their mental well-being management within the Aotearoa context?
- What findings can we learn from this cohort that can inform evidence-based practice for NRL club organisations?
- Based on the findings uncovered in this study, what learnings can be drawn to provide a footing to inform future PhD research?

Answering these questions and a review of the aims, objectives and purpose of this investigation will be presented in Chapter Six (Conclusion) of this thesis.

1.3 The Origins of the Research

The genesis and impetus for this research arose from my family, where sport had a significant role for me and my siblings in youth sport participation and Scottish international teams; in field hockey, sailing, track and field athletics representative teams and competitive horse riding. This foundation led to myself pursuing a professional career in sport management and for my siblings in commercial sailing. These underpinning experiences resulted in my professional career path spanning over

20 years working in High Performance (HP) sport across multiple sport codes. Throughout this journey, I have worked as a clinical sport injury therapist, sprint coach, mixed martial arts coach, strength and conditioning, athlete management/administration, athlete welfare and professional athlete representation.

In recent years (2014-2020), I have been immersed in professional sport therapy in RL, NRL football, and Auckland Rugby Union (ARU), as well as international tests and world cup campaigns. During this time, I had the privilege of being part of the New Zealand Kiwis, the Tonga and Samoa national league teams for multiple international test matches, the Rugby League World Cup, Vodafone Warriors (NRL) team and Auckland Rugby ITM cup teams. I also spent time working with rugby union (RU) British and Irish Lions Aotearoa 2017 tour team. Over the past decade the majority of the athletes in my professional care came from an Indigenous Māori and or Pasifika heritage.

Through my personal experience as a youth athlete (at both national and international representative level) and in my professional sport management and medical services sport career, I have been blessed to see first-hand the impact professional sport can have on individuals, their families and communities. However, being raised in a European household in Scotland by migrant parents, it was instilled in me from an early age that education came before sporting success. After migrating to Aotearoa in 2002, I quickly learned that this was not a trend I observed amongst the athletes I was working with. It became apparent that many athletes opted to put sporting endeavours and/or professional sport careers over and above education (McKenzie, 2019; Stanley, 2020). Subsequently, I became familiar with the Aotearoa sport landscape and more specifically its athletes in professional teams. I became increasingly concerned about the pressures, obligations, responsibilities and cultural expectations put on athletes, often at a young age, specifically of Māori and Pasifika heritage.

This footing was the impetus for this research. After years of hearing first-hand the struggles of many athletes within their performance environment, and heart-breaking stories recited during clinical treatment sessions; I decided more evidence-based practice was needed. This could better equip organisations and teams to support their athletes.

Former All Black, Craig Innes, in a recent interview remarked that there was a common perception amongst rugby communities that specific developmental markers or milestones along the player development pathway in Aotearoa, positively position athletes to achieve professional careers (Innes & Stanley, 2020). This perception places significant pressure on youth athletes and rising professional grade athletes to meet these benchmarks both in rugby union (RU) and RL. Additionally, these benchmarks are regarded as critical, for positioning young athletes on a professional career trajectory onto professional football franchises and professional sporting contracts (McKenzie, 2019).

There is a small offering of research that has looked at athlete development more specifically, Keung (2018), McKenzie (2019) and most recently Stanley (2020). However, these studies focused on youth development age groups and player experiences. Only one other study specific to an Aotearoa context has specifically investigated mental well-being of Pasifika semi-professional and professional grade athletes' experiences in both RL and union. This study by Marsters (2017) aligns most closely with this research, as it investigated Pasifika males' positive mental well-being attributes and management. However, despite these recent scholarly contributions there remains limited research in this field. Moreover, currently no research has specifically explored the lived experience of both Māori and Pasifika current full-time, contracted professional NRL players. Further, there is only a small offering of research that has looked at understanding or managing mental well-being and culture specifically from both Māori and or Pasifika athletes' perspectives (Alder, 2015; Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017). It is assumed in the RU and RL communities in Aotearoa and Australia, that professional athletes are better equipped off the football field than their youth counterparts. This is assumed due to the current provision of support pathways and services at the professional grades within RL organisations, to help athletes cope with professional sport expectations and pressures. However, there remains limited research in this area as to whether professional grade athletes are better equipped and ultimately better manage their mental well-being than youth players (Lakisa et al., 2019; Marsters, 2017; Panapa & Phillips, 2014).

This scarcity in scholarly research specific to mental well-being of both Māori and Pasifika professional athletes positions this study to provide further support and grounding to the small but growing contribution of research in this field. Although the

findings from this research cannot be generalised to all Māori and Pacific athletes (or even those at different clubs within the NRL), it is hoped that it can provide a footing for understanding the lived experience of managing mental well-being from this specific cohort.

It is hoped the findings of this study will encourage the Vodafone Warriors NRL club, New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL), Regional Sport Organisations (RSO's) and domestic rugby league clubs across Aotearoa to carefully consider the development of their pathways and policies. It is hoped this research, and the stories within that have been shared by players, will strengthen what previous scholars have already said. In doing so, we hope to help position culturally responsive footings, and encourage pragmatic club/organisational frameworks to continue to develop.

1.4 Research Design

An interdisciplinary approach was utilised to address the research aims and objectives and put Māori and Pasifika athletes' experiences and perceptions at the centre of the investigation. Careful navigation to position the research to capture the lived experiences of the participating athletes was necessary.

Most of the literature involving Māori and Pasifika has remarked on the disservice and limitations of adopting Eurocentric methodologies, methods and frameworks, when investigating or trying to understand the lived experiences and perspectives of Māori and Pasifika (Keung, 2018; Mead, 2019). This includes their worldviews (Health Research Council [HRC], 2014; Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2012). Considering this limitation, the chosen methodology employed narrative inquiry (storytelling) informed in part by Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika research principles, practices and tools.

The study design, gathering of data and analysis interpretation was guided by the shared cultural principles of *respect* and *reciprocity* interwoven throughout the study design. This helps provide a combined cultural foundation for both Māori and Pasifika athletes and their communities to be better positioned within the research (Keung, 2018; Mead, 2019). In doing so, this research attempts to ensure that cultural sensitivity is infused from the conceptualization through to the design, delivery, analysis, and final presentation of the research project (Hodge et al. 2011). The rationale for adopting this approach is provided with further context and discussion in Chapter Three (methodology).

The initial research planning and design phases utilised informal group meetings with the Vodafone Warriors NRL organisation management team, to appropriately design a study that both respected and met the needs of the athletes and their organisation. Further gatherings were then conducted with the athletes to provide opportunity for collaborative design and develop a safe research environment prior to commencement of the study. This small attention to detail afforded the shared principles of *respect* and *reciprocity* to be nurtured from the start. Semi-structured focus group sessions and individual interviews were then used to collect data right across the cohort.

Data analysis employed thematic analysis. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach, this analysis method provided for an organically derived establishment of predominant themes to surface out of the participants' testimonies. This provisioned for the fluid organisation of these themes into data sets and dominant themes to naturally surface from the narrative threads.

Merging Western approaches with cultural tools throughout the research, it is hoped the findings from this study can on-share the athletes' *kōrero*. It is hoped this can expand cultural awareness and understanding by the athletes' organisation and management, which are predominantly based in a Western performance construct (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Marsters, 2017; Stanley, 2020).

1.5 Thesis Chapter Overview

The following section outlines each chapter individually and provides a brief overview of its content.

1.6 Chapter 1- Introduction

This chapter provides a grounding for the study and its context. It presents the aims and objectives of the study and the research focus. The origins and impetus of the research questions and research design are also presented. There is a brief overview of the primary researcher's history and a brief outline of existing literature on the topic of Māori and Pasifika NRL athletes' mental well-being.

1.7 Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter provides a more detailed background to the research field and starts to frame the existing literature's response to the research question: "What are professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players' perspectives of mental well-

being?” The literature review sets out to structure and position the aims and objectives of the initial research question and provide the footing for the research study. To do this, themes from interdisciplinary fields (sport psychology and sociology, coaching pedagogy, sport leadership-governance, Māori and Pasifika health research, cultural identity and mental health in sport) are all explored. The purpose of this chapter is to provide the grounding for the research methodology and design, while providing for later discussions and critique of the study findings (Chapter 5).

1.8 Chapter 3- Methodology

This chapter presents the methodological foundations of the research study. It explores the chosen methodology of narrative inquiry (Bryman, 2016; McAlpine, 2016) and presents Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika cultural research principles which underpin, shape and inform the methodological approach. This chapter also outlines the overarching, shared principles adopted throughout the study from indigenous and Pasifika research practices of *respect* and *reciprocity* (HRC, 2014; MHC, 2001) which guided the study path. Within this chapter, the researcher’s positioning is presented and a brief overview of the epistemological and ontological stances which informed this study are outlined. The rationale for employing a Euro-centric methodology, underpinned by cultural footings from shared Māori and Pasifika values are presented. The use of narrative storytelling for data collection is discussed, and how this closely relates to traditional oratory methods for gathering knowledge from Indigenous Māori (pūrākau) and Pasifika (talanoa) communities. Lastly, the data analysis method of thematic analysis is presented along with a rationale for its relevance.

1.9 Chapter 4 - Findings

This chapter presents the study findings and the subsequent primary themes which were identified from the thematic analysis. Four primary themes are presented along with their corresponding interconnected sub-theme concepts. Each theme is displayed individually and includes carefully selected narrative extracts from the focus groups and interview sessions supporting each finding. A summary of all the findings is offered with a prelude to the proceeding chapter.

1.10 Chapter 5 - Discussion

This chapter presents a critique of the four identified emergent primary themes from the data analysis and discusses their key findings in relation to existing literature.

Further sub-headings are presented as they interrelate to the primary themes. Extensive discussion is provided unpacking the primary research question and the subsequent research focus. Player recommendations for sport organisations are offered, supported by existing literature. The study limitations and recommendations for future research are proposed. Finally, a synopsis of the discussion topics in relation to existing literature, and an introduction to the final thesis chapter is presented.

1.11 Chapter 6 - Conclusion

The final chapter fully summarises the thesis. It reviews the study's aims and objectives. A short synopsis of the key findings is provided. Lastly, closing remarks outline what has been achieved, the implications of these findings, and key 'take-home' messages of this research.

Chapter 2 Literature Review

This chapter reviews existing literature related to Māori and Pasifika rugby league (RL) players' mental well-being. The critique focuses on existing perspectives and definitions of mental well-being and related empirical work within this field. Recent admissions from professional sporting stars who have struggled to maintain their well-being sheds light on the effects and pressures that being a professional athlete can have (Horton, 2014; Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017). My study investigates and unpacks mental well-being by drawing on players' experiences and perspectives. (Current Māori and Pasifika athletes who play in the National Rugby League (NRL) – specifically, from an Aotearoa context.) To date, no research has explored mental well-being from NRL players' perspectives in this manner.

The primary purpose of this research is to understand how players within a top-tier NRL squad define mental well-being, what mental well-being 'looks like' to them and how they manage/maintain it. Current discourse around well-being in general, let alone mental well-being in a high performance (HP) sport setting, is situated within predominantly Euro-centric/Western perspectives. Consequently, little is known about how culture influences Māori and Pasifika players' mental well-being (Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017; Stanley, 2020).

This critique evaluates past academic literature both domestically (in Aotearoa) and internationally. The literature reviewed provides the foundation for research to be undertaken. A qualitative Narrative Inquiry approach, underpinned by Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika cultural research principles was utilised. This served to provide a cultural context and the lens to better represent the diverse Māori and Pasifika players' perspectives and kōrero (conversations/discussion) about mental well-being.

Our critique focuses on relevant themes from: Current definitions of well-being at large; Māori and Pasifika views of health and well-being and relevant literature from sport psychology pertaining to maintaining mental health and well-being. Proceeding this, current well-being initiatives in sport are offered as well as the cultural relevance of HP sport research.

2.1 Rationale for the Research

Despite their considerable contribution to the talent pool across the NRL and the game of RL internationally, there remains a scarcity of academic literature exploring the experiences and perspectives of Māori and Pasifika players (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2014, 2019; Marsters, 2017; Ng Shiu & Vagana, 2016; Panapa & Phillips, 2014).

According to literature, RL and RU combined have one of the highest participation numbers of Māori and Pasifika players in all of Aotearoa sport (Horton, 2014; Sport New Zealand, 2015; Marsters, 2017; McKenzie, 2019; Stanley, 2020). Horton (2014) asserts this is due to British ‘cultural imperialism’ where the popularity in the Pasifika region of RU grew rapidly and resulted in substantial social and cultural capital. Consequently, young males were given significant status if they demonstrated success on the rugby fields (Hokowhitu, 2004; Horton, 2014). However, the introduction of professionalism and corporatisation to the game, and success on the rugby field, now holds significant benefits for Māori and Pasifika athletes (Horton, 2014; Lakisa et al., 2019; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). For Māori and Pasifika, professional sport has evolved over the past 20 years to provide economic opportunity and socio-economic advancement (Uperesa, 2014; Teaiwa, 2016). Professional contracts in both RL and RU offer a viable career pathway for many Māori and Pasifika youth and the opportunity to provide financial stability for their families and larger communities (Besnier, 2014; Horton, 2014; Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Marsters, 2017; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013). Subsequently, Māori and Pasifika athletes are considered by some as a key ‘commodity’ for a global sports labour force (Uperesa, 2014; Teaiwa, 2016; Zakus & Horton, 2009). RL and RU have thus become well established in both Māori and Pasifika communities.

Yet for every success comes the burden of failure to reach the top level (Horton, 2014). In this environment there are high levels of stress and expectations, and the possibility of injury, rejection, burnout, and financial insecurity becomes very real for the aspiring RL athlete (Horton, 2014; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). These factors can take a tremendous toll on individual’s health and mental well-being at the elite level of sport (Beable et al., 2017; McKenzie, 2019; Sport NZ, 2019).

It has been argued that many Māori and Pasifika youth (transitioning to the professional grade of NRL) have been ill-equipped and not appropriately supported to deal with the pressures associated with the professional game (Horton, 2014; Keung,

2018). Also, expectations from family and community put on this specific demographic is raising growing concern about the management and support of these athletes (Horton, 2014; Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Marsters, 2017). Such elements illustrate the urgent need for further evidence-based practices supported by scholarly research. Additionally, how mental well-being is viewed through Māori and Pasifika athletes' lens requires urgent investigation (Durie, 2006; Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Marsters, 2017; Ngawati, 2013).

2.2 Research Strategy

The strategy used to gain empirical knowledge and literature pertinent to the topic of mental well-being utilised multiple search engines. SportDiscus, Medline, PubMed, Scopus, Pacific Health dialogue, Science Direct and Google Scholar were all sourced for relevant publications. Due to a scarcity of literature on mental well-being specific to Māori and Pasifika male athletes, a wider search was undertaken into general health and well-being, sport mental health, cultural disparities of health/well-being, Indigenous literature and Pasifika health literature. Further searches were undertaken to scour the Ministry of Health (MOH) database and the Health Research Council (HRC) database for relevant research reports pertaining to mental well-being at large.

The terms used to search for literature across the search engines were: 'Mental well-being in sport'; 'Mental well-being in New Zealand sport'; 'Mental illness in professional sport'; 'Managing stress in professional sport'; 'Mental health in elite sport'; 'Managing well-being in sport'; 'Māori health in sport'; 'Pacific health in sport'; 'Māori culture in sport'; 'Cultural identity in sport'; 'Understanding cultural identity'; 'Sport leadership and culture'; 'Cultural leadership'; 'Management of health in sport'; 'Sport psychology and management'; 'Sport psychology and mental health'; 'Psychological stress in sport'; 'Mental health in rugby'; 'Rugby and culture'; 'Cultural identity in rugby'; 'Qualitative research methodologies'; 'Cultural methodologies'; 'Kaupapa Māori methodologies'; 'Kaupapa health models'; 'Cultural health models'; 'Māori health disparities'; 'Pacific males in sport'; 'Health and well-being'; 'Sport culture'; 'Indigenous health in sport'; 'Coaching practices in professional rugby'; 'Coaching styles in sport'; 'Coaching pedagogy' and 'Athlete-coach relationship'.

Inclusion and exclusion of articles and reports reviewed was limited, due to the scarcity of specific related material on mental well-being in professional sport. Therefore, broad criteria were assumed, in order to review as many articles as possible

under the search terms that were listed. Focus was directed towards positive mental well-being and or its attributes, positive HP sport practices related to mental health and or health maintenance in HP sport. Articles that focused on ill-health or negative mental-health determinants in professional sport and youth development were generally excluded. However, as there were even fewer articles specific to Māori and or Pasifika on our topic, in some cases, such sources were included.

2.3 Background Literature to Study Focus

Several prominent athletes within the NRL have stepped forward in recent years and acknowledged their struggles with mental health issues (Horton, 2014). Literature affirms there is historically the perception that athletes tend to keep their mental health concerns to themselves (Lakisa et al., 2019, Marsters, 2017). Compounding this issue, past research highlights that the prevalence of depression rates in elite sport does not appear to differ from the general population at large (Beable et al., 2017; Dallmann et al., 2016). Therefore, the assumption that mental health issues are not present, nor part of professional sport practice does a disservice to athlete mental well-being and its preservation. However, the focus of this study is mental well-being and the attributes which maintain it, as opposed to mental illness at large.

2.4 Insights and Definitions of Mental Well-being

The World Health Organization (2014) defines that “mental health is a state of well-being in which an individual can realise their own potential, be resilient in the light of typical life stresses, can work successfully, and contribute to their community”. Although this definition provides a rudimentary holistic view and recognises the importance of societal connections, it places the individual at the centre of its definition. As most Māori and Pasifika hold fast to a community or a collectivist view, it is important to acknowledge how this may relate to or differ from cultural perspectives and positioning of mental health - which appears to be quite different from this ‘common’ definition (Alefaio, 2009; Durie, 1994, 2015; Mead, 2016; Samu & Suaalii-Sauni, 2009; Tamasese et al., 2005). Consequently, for the context of our study, it is appropriate to adopt a research framework that is enhanced by cultural principles significant to Māori and Pasifika and reflective of their lens (Keung, 2018; Ngawati, 2013; Stanley, 2020).

2.5 Māori View of Health and Well-being

For Māori, the dominant biomedical model of health and illness has a limited view of people and their well-being (Mark & Lyons, 2010). Research suggests that for Māori, family, genealogy, and the natural environment are fundamental to a person's overall health and well-being. Kingi (2018) remarked:

For Māori, and many other Indigenous populations, these issues become increasingly relevant when tools, often derived from a Western bio-medical base, are set against Indigenous models that encourage a more holistic approach to health and well-being. Tensions are likely to emerge when these broader contributions to health and well-being are not considered or measured or are deemed irrelevant (p.257).

A consideration for these underpinning cultural values, can help bridge the disparities between Western knowledge assumptions and better health and well-being for Māori. At its core, health and well-being is a collective holistic approach encompassing physical, mental, spiritual, family genealogy and ancestry as well as connectedness to the land and whakapapa (genealogy and connection to all things) (Durie, 1994). Conceptualising a holistic approach towards well-being is fundamental for Māori (Puna, 2013). Durie's (2011a) thesis, *He Kawa Oranga*, explored Māori well-being in a modern world, which affirmed well-being needs to be distinguished from a list of guidelines or set of actions, but rather, is comprised of a cultural and spiritual foundation, derived from "tikanga" (customs/ways of doing things that are deemed "correct"), "āronga" (direction) and "Kaupapa" (set of principles, values act as a base) (Durie, 2011a, p.341). If we do not position well-being within a culturally relevant philosophical base and attach value to each of the threads which underpin it, we run the risk of well-being becoming lost and or misunderstood from a cultural context (Durie, 1994, 2006; Durie, 2011a).

From Indigenous standpoints, diagnoses of mental illness were shaped according to parameters and classifications. These are based on what is deemed acceptable or irregular within each cultural paradigm (Kingi, 2018). More often, these parameters are grounded in social bias founded in notions of 'normality' or accepted as the predominant cultural norm within each social setting/construct. Kingi asserts (2018) "what is rational and clear in one system of knowledge may become distorted and misread within constructs of another" (p.2). Put simply, when different world views

engage (as is often the case with Māori and Pasifika RL players within the RL environment) rational understanding of cultural practices and values, ill-health and its management, may be misread within one cultural construct to another, when viewed from an outside cultural lens.

2.6 Pasifika View of Health and Well-being

Pasifika views of health can be categorised into groups: Traditional views, contemporary views, and a blend of traditional and contemporary views (Vaka, 2014). Each perception provides a footing for the way health is understood and offers insight into the differing worldviews among Pasifika peoples (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009). Features such as disconnect from traditional culture, loss of language, and mixed ethnic upbringings can lead to divergent worldviews, which contribute to their perceptions of overall health (Le Va & Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui, 2009). Pasifika insights of health, both traditional and contemporary, differ to those found in the conventional Western works. Mainstream views of mental health appear to be subject to clinical and biomedical paradigms as noted earlier and tend to lean towards an individualised stance (Alefaio, 2009; Bush et al., 2009; Pulotu-Endemann et al., 2004; Tiatia, 2012; Tukuitonga, 2013). Family and spirituality are fundamental pillars of health and well-being for Pasifika peoples, which need to be given more weight when considering what mental well-being ‘looks like’ and how it is managed.

While Māori and Pasifika peoples share many perspectives relating to well-being, including a collective orientation, Pasifika people are not Indigenous to Aotearoa. This may add another dynamic to cultural identity for some Pasifika peoples, living away from their Indigenous nations in a country dominated by Western ideals. As Vaka (2014) highlights, this can result in a blend of cultural perspectives which hold a contemporary position (infused from new cultural settings/blended cultures/and or other societies). This may be informed by both traditional cultural values and a modern perspective infused by adopted dominant societal norms and or values.

2.7 The Influence of Family and Culture on Well-being

Family is a foundational value for many Māori and Pasifika people. It is through family (understood culturally in the broadest sense of the word – including the support of relatives not just ‘nuclear’ family) that individuals can be nurtured mentally, physically, spiritually and gain social support (Anae, 2001; Manuela & Sibley, 2013;

Pene, Peita & Howden-Chapman, 2009; Tiatia, 1998). Family is an essential component of a holistic self-concept (cultural identity) and a central factor that can influence well-being (Manuela & Sibley, 2013). Tamasese et al. (1997) remark that family are of greatest importance and breaching these relationships could have damaging consequences on well-being. Similarly, Manuela and Sibley (2013) state, core values such as respect, communication, relationships, and happiness within the family are all central cornerstones of well-being. Likewise, Durie (2011), Hokowhitu (2008), Te Rito (2007) and Gordon et al. (2013) all affirm similar conclusions that for Māori, family is the cornerstone of their cultural identity and or well-being.

On the other hand, the impact of colonisation and the modern way of life may have led to a disconnect away from traditional family support structures. For example, the difficulty of buying homes or re-locating near family, the struggles to support large families due to rising living costs, minimal employment opportunities, may all contribute to a move away from traditional support systems or close community living environments. Durie (2011) stipulates for Māori, sense of family unity (inclusive of wider whānau - cultural community) influences the maintenance of holistic well-being. Subsequently, how such structures impact NRL players specifically is yet to be investigated. Moreover, research which has explored the impact of NRL athletes' routines (absence away from family), travel schedules, living away from loved ones' (relocation) and life on the road (constant travel requirements), has not yet been explored. There is however, a small offering from Australia that has looked at retired, elite NRL players' experiences from Lakisa et al. (2019). They interviewed retired Māori and Pasifika players that were residing in Australia. They conclude that many NRL players struggle to maintain their cultural identity when they relocate away from family. Furthermore, players' remarked on the struggle to preserve their cultural practices outside of their family communities.

Sport literature has also highlighted that well-being can be impacted negatively as a result of many factors. Horton (2014) and Panapa and Phillips (2014) both remark that factors such as: Family pressures, a lack of alternative activities outside sport commitments, difficulties transitioning from amateur to elite professional status, pressures associated around talent development, performance-related anxiety (such as dips in form), injuries, alcohol misuse and stigma or shame associated with mental illness, can all impact athletes' mental well-being negatively. However, Manuela and

Sibley (2013), Masters (2017) and Keung (2018) all suggest: Family support (inclusive of the wider family), the support of partners/significant others, faith and spirituality, the ‘brotherhood’ from team-mates, a secure athlete identity, nurturing personal development, and supportive sports organisations, were all important aspects toward maintaining Māori and or Pasifika athletes well-being. To our knowledge, no study has yet investigated the perspectives of current full-time professional Māori and Pasifika athletes combined, or how they manage mental well-being from a cultural perspective.

2.8 Cultural Weighting of Spirituality and Religion

Religion is a foundational influence that plays an important role for many Māori and Pasifika people (Taule’ale’ausumai, 2001). Many consider the church setting to be the village away from the islands (Macpherson, 1996) where social connections, support and fulfilment of religious and cultural needs can be attained (Anae, 2001; Tiata, 1998). Spirituality and faith, whether connected to organised religion or not, are a fundamental part of the aforementioned holistic health models for both Māori and Pasifika. They recognise faith and spirituality as a foundational value which encompasses cultural identity and well-being (Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Durie, 2006; Kupa, 2009; Mead, 2019; Ministry of Health [MOH] 1995). Manuela and Sibley (2013) argue that spirituality and religion are crucial aspects of identity for Pasifika people, and that culture and religion for many Pasifika societies, are intertwined. Subsequently, it is important to consider spirituality and religion as an essential element of any discourse pertaining to mental well-being from a cultural context (Durie, 2006).

2.9 Well-being in Sport

Historically there are assumptions that only emotionally strong athletes compete at elite levels of sport. Markser (2011) contends this may be due to professional athletes being subject to immense somatic, social, and mental stress. However, despite public interest for athletic accomplishments, the emotional strains thereof are poorly investigated or discussed. Markser (2011) concludes, this is the result of widespread assumption that only emotionally strong athletes compete at highly professional levels and therefore mental disorders do not exist in professional sport. Such misconceptions could underestimate the prevalence of mental illness and its impact on sport (Beable, et al. 2017; Panapa, & Phillips, 2014). As a result, athletes who are seen to have mental illness, are often portrayed as ‘rare cases’, hastily diagnosed, and treated by external specialists away from public view (media scrutiny/public opinion) (Markser, 2011).

Consequently, few academic papers are currently available in this domain. Therefore, further studies are required to address this gap in scholarly research. Subsequently, future research which focusses on factors which maintain and strengthen athlete mental well-being and the nurture of it are needed. This could help support professional athlete's unique challenges, as there remains limited research in this area, particularly those which consider the role of culture and its impact on well-being at large (Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al. 2019; Marsters, 2017; Manuela & Sibley; 2013; Stanley, 2020). Our study hopes to address this gap and provide further support for the small body of literature on offer.

Due to the unique challenges of the professional RL setting, athletes are negotiating cultural and social expectations of what mental well-being 'looks like' from varying cultural and Euro-centric perspectives (Durie, 1994; Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Keung, 2018; Ryks et al. 2018). For Māori and Pasifika RL athletes, these social structures may be further compounded by negotiating Western performance environments, based predominantly in Euro-centric constructs (such as performance environments which are governed by pākehā (European descent) governance boards – with minimal Māori and Pasifika cultural representation, or being surrounded by pākehā management and coaching personnel only). Therefore, investigation into how culture and social structures impact athlete mental well-being will likely require additional investigation beyond the scope of our study.

Kingi (2018) highlights that behavioural norms in one culture may be viewed as alternative, or entirely unacceptable in another. This notion was exemplified by early descriptions of Māori haka, which presently provides a stoic part of the modern Aotearoa sporting pre and post-game patriotism. However, historically this symbol of national pride "was once viewed by some as a '*formal frenzy*' performed by a '*mob of maniacs*' swayed by insane volition" (Domett, 1934, p.373). Fast forward to the modern era and a recent article published by Newshub, journalist Dan Satherley (2021) writes about the current rhetoric and critique of the modern haka and what it still holds in Aotearoa. He highlights that for some the haka encourages brutality and violence. He further notes this was encapsulated on live talk-back radio by former New Zealand National Party Leader Don Brash, who unapologetically exclaimed, "Haka glorifies domestic violence" (Satherley 2021). Such misrepresentations demonstrate that while perspectives have evolved and many love and embrace the haka, it is important to

acknowledge that there is still that negative belief and or racial misrepresentation associated with it.

From a Māori perspective the haka represents historical significance. Prior to the arrival of pākehā to Aotearoa, Māori language was exclusively oral. However, this did not impede the archiving of knowledge and history deemed important by tīpuna Māori (ancestors) (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010). In fact, tribal history, knowledge and traditional practices have been preserved for generations via the many waiata (songs) and haka composed throughout the country.

These mediums have been used traditionally and still are a method for the transmission of knowledge, tribal history, cultural practices, historical landmarks, genealogy, cultural identity and environmental knowledge. They also act as a traditional form of expression for the articulation of anger, sadness, hatred, love and desire (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010). In this sense, waiata and haka are bound to Māori identity and the identity of whānau, hapū and iwi. Therefore, for Māori, such mediums of cultural expression are likened to the archives of the Māori people, preserving important historical and cultural knowledge, thus representing tribal philosophical doctrine (Ka'ai-Mahuta, 2010). Subsequently, it should be viewed as such, sacred and a fundamental aspect of Māori culture and identity (Hokowhitu, 2004, 2012). For Pasifika people the 'challenge' or 'siva tau' that is incorporated into rugby pre-game patriotism and team songs or chants from respective Pasifika national equivalents such as the Fijian 'cibi', Tongan 'sipi tau' and Samoan 'siva tau' hold as much symbolic and cultural significance to Pasifika peoples' national identity as it does for their Māori counterparts (Dewey, 2014). It is therefore important that we highlight the current rhetoric and or misrepresentation that still exists in Aotearoa. Such examples of cultural expression which are subject to potential distortion from Euro-centric perspectives may have a direct impact on RL athletes and their mental well-being maintenance.

One can argue perspectives are evolving in some ways. For many the haka is now considered a powerful part of cultural heritage and national identity, particularly in sport. Hokowhitu (2004) asserts the haka has become a largely subconscious but no less insidious pattern of subjugation through well-framed sporting images. But at times it is subjugated to colonised misrepresentation which encourages distorted imagery of brutality and violence. Moreover, snippets of savagery during haka presentations that mainstream media edit into their coverage, has resulted in its now common use as a

vehicle to reproduce conditions of power and intimidation on the sporting field (Hokowhitu, 2014). Subsequently, this research looks at a unique group of people, vulnerable to significant historic misinterpretations with regards to their cultural identity and practices. Therefore, how athletes ‘look, act or feel’ and ultimately how they manage or maintain their cultural identity and expression of it, while navigating their mental well-being are very real concerns for the current RL player.

Additionally, shared collective cultural identity has been found to be a positive stabiliser towards coping with the many pressures and unique performance environments for many Māori and Pasifika athletes. Lakisa et al. (2014) found that collective identity amongst athletes can provide individuals with a sense of belonging, strengthens bonds amongst players, and instils a greater sense of pride in their respective cultural heritage. Panapa and Phillips (2014) assert such connections provide positive advantages for many young Pasifika athletes. They contend player development is greatly strengthened by more experienced surrounding athletes, who act as mentors, provided comradeship, companionship, and sense of safety and security for their younger counterparts. Similar findings were found by Keung (2018) in regard to Māori and Pasifika RL talent development pathways in Aotearoa. Stanley (2020) investigated academy representative players in Aotearoa RU and came to a similar conclusion relating to positive experiences in player development when bolstered by collective shared cultural identity. Equally, Rodriguez and McDonald (2013) found that many young Pasifika athletes assimilated the experienced team-mates as their role models and foremost sources of guidance and support. As a result, this unified understanding of struggles and challenges, provides a sense of security and safety for younger Māori and Pasifika athletes in their professional sporting landscape. Erueti and Palmer (2014) remark that collective partnerships with fellow team-mates and organisational relationships are strong cornerstones for Māori athletes negotiating cultural identity in professional sport. Finally, Alder (2015) supports a conclusion that cultural collective leadership is fundamental to the success of organisational team culture nurturement for elite RL athletes in Aotearoa.

2.10 Barriers Preventing Athletes Seeking Help

Masculinity and stoic toughness are attributes often associated with contact sport like RL. Early nineteenth century writings capture the Māori ‘physicality’ as something to be conquered and civilized (Hokowhitu, 2004). This has now evolved into what is

now considered a spectacle, played out by overachievement on the sports field (Hokowhitu, 2014). Subsequently, the cultural pressures and expectations on rugby athletes to succeed (both from colonised Western expectations and assumptions of physical prowess to internal social cultural expectations from Māori and Pasifika communities), are very real for the current NRL athlete (Erueti & Palmer, 2014, Panapa & Phillips, 2014). This places unique demands on mental well-being, which are unlikely to be effectively understood when viewed through a solely Euro-Western lens.

Gucciardi et al. (2017) remark that the incidence of therapeutic help and mental support sought by athletes at large is concerning. Specifically, a lack of research towards the role of emotional and behavioural aspects within mental toughness, such as safety, survival, and knowing oneself require deeper review (Fawcett, 2011). Reviewing Pasifika research, there are reports of stigma and discrimination and or shame related to mental illness which has had a significant impact on Pasifika athletes reaching out and seeking help (Crampton, 2014; Horton, 2012; Hughes & Leavey, 2012).

Rice et al. (2016) remark that stigma, discrimination, and absence of understanding around mental health and illness are key barriers for elite athletes in general seeking mental-health support. They assert the evidence-base regarding mental health and well-being of elite athletes at large is limited by a paucity of high-quality, systematic studies. Nonetheless, Rice et al. (2016) concludes however, that elite athletes are vulnerable to a range of mental health problems (including substance misuse), which may be related to both sporting factors (e.g., overtraining, injury and burnout) and non-sporting factors (social, environmental). Subsequently, we can assert more high-quality epidemiological and intervention studies are needed. This may help to inform and or identify optimal strategies to respond to player mental-health needs and mental well-being management. Rice et al. (2016) and Hughes and Leavey (2012) both emphasise that practices towards identifying and managing mental illness in sport are fraught with stigmatisation, denial, and dichotomous paradigms of mental versus physical well-being. Therefore, further investigation into mental well-being from a cultural perspective is even more urgent, however fraught with barriers of stigmatisation and or misunderstanding.

Tiatia-Seath (2014) identified that Pasifika youth (especially males) experienced substantial barriers seeking and obtaining help from their friends and family, because of the stigma around mental illness that occurs in their communities. A lack of self-confidence accessing mental health services was also apparent among Pasifika athletes

as noted by Rodriguez and McDonald (2013). They further argue that negative views about mental illness and apparent shame or embarrassment were major contributors preventing athletes speaking out. However, little is known about current professional Māori athletes in this regard. Subsequently, the current study does not directly address this gap, but hopes to provide further understanding of the ‘lived experiences’ of managing mental well-being.

Lastly, Gucciardi et al. (2017) state the extent to which subcultural norms, values and beliefs about mental toughness within sporting environments, foster ‘forms’ of masculinity and thus decrease incidence of therapeutic help sought by athletes has plausible discourse. Horton (2014) suggests that sports, (specifically rugby) is a constructive socialising agency for athletes who face challenges to their identity, sense of belonging, and a sense of worth. Erueti and Palmer (2014) assert Māori athletes require freedom of expression of cultural identity in all social environments to allow well-being to flourish. This supports previous findings from Pasifika investigations, that identity expression is inextricably linked to both positive and negative balance of mental well-being (Marsters, 2017). Therefore, aspects of stoic toughness and male masculinity perceptions are important considerations that may be imbrued by historic societal aspirations and or colonised assumptions (Hokowhitu, 2004, 2014).

2.11 Mental Health in Sport

The prevalence of depression in elite sports does not appear to differ from the general population at large (Dallmann et al., 2016). Such findings are surprising, given the pressures and public scrutiny elite athletes endure in the modern commercialised business of professional sport. In the Sydney Morning Herald, Barrett (2018) published a story highlighting NRL star Greg Inglis’ struggles with mental health, in the hope of bringing awareness and opening the dialogue for other athletes to step forward (Barrett, 2018). In the United States, multiple professional basketball players have also stepped forward to speak out about their mental health struggles. MTV News writer, Rearick (2019) highlights a new era for mental health and player welfare provision is being sought by the National Basketball Association (NBA). She writes that the NBA has taken a strategic governance approach to implement and resource for the provision of mental health and well-being services for the first time in NBA history. As a result of such admissions, athletes and wider sporting communities are becoming more mindful of mental health and its effects on an athlete’s overall well-being and performance.

The general well-being of elite athletes is a concern for the wider community at large, remarks Beable et al. (2017). They assert there is a lack of scholarly research currently published exploring this topic. Additionally, athlete well-being management requires support both from internal sporting organisations and externally from athletes' family and mental health/performance professionals (Manuela & Sibley, 2013; Marsters, 2017; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). Moreover, in a study that looked at collectivism amongst employee well-being, mental health disparities were improved and anxiety and or depression found to be less, where participation in organisations with high collectivism and cultural knowledge was present (Brougham & Haar, 2013). This highlights the need for support to be a shared collaboration between athletes, coaching staff and external family support. However, Balk et al. (2017) contend the provision of help for athletes to promote their mental well-being is an area that requires specific individualised attention. Such examples suggests that both approaches or a balance between the two may be required in the elite sport environment to improve or promote mental well-being.

Many sport organisations are addressing such needs with in-house psychologists and other health-care professionals. RL has taken a step further. All 16 of its NRL clubs across Aotearoa and Australia currently operate in-house well-being/welfare personnel - and most clubs are opting to seek specialist psychological services via referral from expertise as and when required (National Rugby League, n.d.). It is also common practice across multiple professional sporting codes, for sport organisations to seek mental skills coaching consultants. In some instances, Sports Chaplaincy consultants and support are also being utilised. These added support services are helping to provide spiritual and mental skills to organisations and their teams, in a bid to provide a more holistic support for athletes on and off the playing field (Sports Chaplaincy New Zealand, n.d.).

2.12 Mental Well-being in Aotearoa

Currently there appears to be limited literature focused on the mental well-being of Māori and Pasifika male athletes in Aotearoa (Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017), although it is recognised that there is an emerging evidence base from Australia (Horton, 2012, 2014; Lakisa et al., 2014; Panapa, 2014; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013). Whilst these scholars have provided some understanding into the lived experiences for Māori and Pasifika athletes in elite sport, research has yet to focus on unpacking mental well-being

from the context of athletes currently playing in the NRL and specifically those residing in Aotearoa. The specific demographic of our study facilitates an opportunity to better understand the socio-cultural contexts which may underpin misalignment between Western assumptions and definitions of overall well-being for Māori and Pasifika.

In addition to limited studies pertaining to Māori and Pasifika mental well-being in elite sport, there is also a lack of research investigating clinical depression, specifically from a cultural perspective or lens (Marsters, 2017). Studies conducted with the Australian Institute of Sport (AIS) highlight a lack of research specific to elite athletes' mental health (Gulliver et al., 2015). This is supported with similar conclusions in regard to risk factors of depression symptoms in Aotearoa by Beable et al. (2017). Compounding this gap in literature, Indigenous positioning in health research is also scarce (Curtis, 2016). Further, scholarly enquiry directed toward Māori and Pasifika cultural identity in sport, athletes' mental well-being and psychology, were all found to require greater development (Manuela & Sibley, 2013). Erueti and Palmer (2014) who investigated cultural identity in Māori athletes, echoed the need for continued research into mental health, but more specifically, attributes which aid in the flourishing of holistic well-being. Our study hopes to address this call, by focusing on the positive attributes which maintain RL players' mental well-being.

2.13 Self-Confidence

Self-confidence is suggested as one of the most influential qualities that elite athletes possess, as it impacts performance over and above that exerted by perceptive anxiety and physiological arousal (Hanton et al., 2004; Hardy, 1996). Compounding these findings, self-talk is considered to enhance self-confidence while reducing cognitive anxiety, therefore impacting mental health. Hatzigeorgiadis et al. (2009) suggest that self-confidence is closely related to performance outcomes. Additionally, Todderdell (2000) remark mood linkage (emotional behaviours both positive and negative) of individuals and team-mates has been shown to affect anxiety and performance. These findings suggest self-confidence and overall team moods could be linked to individual's mental well-being. Todderdell (2000) further asserts mood linkage is greater when athletes are engaged and happy in communal activity. This highlights the significance of the relationship balance between communal activity and collectivist cultural identity, for Māori and Pasifika mental health (Brougham & Haar, 2013; Manuela and Sibley (2013).

Self-confidence is enhanced when athletes achieve goals, engage in self-regulation of behaviour and compete in caring and competitive climates according to Vealey et al. (1998). While Vealey's et al. (1998) research highlights the impact of self-confidence, they lack a cultural lens or cultural positioning. Their findings place the individual at the centre. Albeit they highlight the positive impact of community engagement on an individual's well-being. As Māori and Pasifika share a collectivist ontological and epistemological foundational base, such investigations into self-confidence may contradict what we already know about cultural identity and the importance of relationships with collective community, whānau and or team-mates. Therefore, a cultural positioning towards athlete behaviours and or self-confidence require further investigation. Subsequently, cultural research states that constructive collective balanced relationships, which consist of mutual understanding, reverence, trust and support in families are strong protective factors within Samoan communities (Fa'alau, 2016). This research underscores collectivism and caring amongst families (inclusive of extended community members), is a foundation for mental well-being. This aligns with Durie's (2006) conclusions regarding Māori well-being. He asserts it is dependent on collective social structures of family support, trusting relationships and cultural belonging. This study does not look to address self-confidence from a cultural lens, but it may be inextricably linked as an important attribute towards the maintenance of mental well-being. Therefore, one can postulate self-confidence for Māori and Pasifika RL players, may be enhanced by collective social factors and team confidence both by their professional and family environments.

2.14 Anxiety

Anxiety is widely regarded as a complex psychological phenomenon within high performance (HP) sport milieu. In sport psychology, the theoretical relationship between competitive anxiety and sport performance is one of the most debated domains (Woodman & Hardy, 2003). This debate has centred around the impact of performance pressures and how athletes cope, adapt or be motivated by these. Scholarly discussion has argued these can have both negative and positive outcomes on athletic achievements and performance outcomes. Contextualised models have over the years deconstructed this phenomenon. From Martens et al. (1990) research into anxiety models, to the psychological catastrophe model by Hardy (1990, 1996), and that by Jones (1995) who looked at a behavioural control model. These models all highlight that anxiety can arise in multiple forms - from a multitude of physical and emotional stimuli that are often

unpleasant in nature or deep rooted from past childhood trauma. From an evolutionary perspective, conceptualisation of anxiety appears to conflict with the roots of anxiety, which stem from a functional defence mechanism, protective in nature against imposing threats (Ohman, 2000). From a sporting context, such arguments disregard any positive effects or attributes that performance pressures may have on sporting successes/outcomes (i.e., increased motivation from positive performance pressures, stress or competition climates, resulting in positive performance outcomes). Therefore, we should consider anxiety as a multidimensionality of adaptive, maladaptive and coping dynamic constructs (Cheng et al., 2009). Anxiety can lead to both positive and negative factors which impact athlete regulatory performance mechanisms. Consequently, impacts of anxiety (both positive and negative) should be an element for argument within any discourse pertaining to mental well-being management for professional athletes and its resultant impact on performance.

2.15 Coaching Influence on Well-being

A coach can have an impact on an athlete's physical performance, emotional management, mental well-being, leadership and self-confidence. Cassidy et al. (2016) asserts this occurs concurrently, both for the individual athlete and in a collective unit for teams. Fransen et al. (2017) note that the mechanisms sustaining sources of team-confidence are determined by the collective efficacy of athletes and coaches. They assert this is dependent on laying the platform for a mastery climate (during sport performances) while simultaneously providing a teaching environment for self-reflection and learning. Subsequently, the coach-athlete relationship should be viewed as a fundamental component of obtaining team-confidence and creating a performance environment which nurtures athletes' well-being both on and off the football field.

Mageau and Vallerand (2003) highlight the coach-athlete relationship as a critical influence on athlete motivation. Additionally, there are suggestions that coaches and athletic personnel need to start to appreciate their role as influencers and educators. Specifically, start to develop self-awareness to recognise and acknowledge their impact on an athlete's mental health and athletic performance (Varney, 2009). This concept is echoed by Thurston (2017), who suggests the coach is charged with athletes' well-being. Therefore, the impact and influence coaches have on leadership, athlete behaviours and reflective learning is an area that warrants further investigation, specifically from a cultural positioning towards player mental well-being. Our study

does not address this directly, but it may be a factor for consideration within the discourse of mental well-being management for Māori and Pasifika RL players.

2.16 Psychological Debrief and Post-Match Review

Athlete debriefing or post-match review is a common protocol in professional rugby and many other sporting codes. The session is generally coach-facilitator driven and result-focused, it allows for player engagement and a balance between reflection and preparation (Middlemas et al., 2018). However, many athletes describe this process as stressful, anxiety and fear provoking. Several factors are perceived to influence a coach's ability to engage players during post-match review. These include (but are not limited to): Time, results, coaching philosophy, leadership within the playing group, and the ability to convert learnings from debriefs into performance on the field (Middlemas et al., 2018).

'Post-match-reviews' draw their roots historically from psychological debriefing. Mitchell (1983) was the first to formulate a structure around crisis intervention to formulate a procedure to be executed in group meetings (as cited in McNally, 2004), often termed Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD) or psychological debriefing as noted by Jambois-Rankin (2000). Psychological debriefing refers to a planned structured group activity, organised to review in detail the facts, views, impressions, feelings and reactions of individuals. The aim is to prevent unnecessary after-effects, accelerate normal recovery, stimulate group cohesion, normalise reactions, stimulate emotions, and encourage a cognitive "grip" on the situation (Dyregrov, 1997).

Psychological debriefing was developed as a structured intervention following potentially traumatising events, designed to reduce the incidence of long-term psychiatric illness (Deahl, 2000). However, in the sporting domain, it remains a common post-competition procedure. In an analysis by Groom et al. (2012) of interactions between athlete and coaches during debriefing sessions in elite youth soccer, conclusions emphasised the importance of coaching behaviours impacting athletes both negatively and positively. It was determined this was dependant on the athlete-coach relationship and dialogue delivery, which transferred to knowledge and overall athlete health (Groom et al., 2012). In the sport milieu, the aim of post-match review is to enhance cognition and performance. It is deemed to be a facilitated or guided reflective cycle of experimental learning as noted by Middlemas et al. (2018).

Therefore, a hypothesis can be drawn that the success of the de-briefing session may be dependent on the behaviours of both the coach and athletes collectively.

2.17 Sport Leadership

In a study that reviewed transformational leadership theory, Price and Weiss (2013) remark that coach leadership is more influential than peer guidance, when it comes to individual outcomes. They assert that collective efficacy and peer leadership were correlated to social team-cohesion. However, they determined that both peer and coach leadership were equally important for task-cohesion (Price & Weiss, 2013).

Additionally, Myers et al. (2004) remark that team-cohesion is dependent on self-confidence of the collective team-unit. Consequently, the relationship between athletes and coaching parties is a complex social system. Hodgson et al. (2017) remark psychological attributes underpin effective coaching leadership at the elite level. Such subtle nuances between athlete's mental well-being, anxiety, confidence, and performance have vast repercussions on the overall athlete experience. Therefore, management of a team's mental health and/or well-being, needs careful, culturally inclusive theory, to reinforce prescriptive practices for both coach and athlete advancement (Manuela & Sibley, 2013).

Shilbury and Ferkins (2020) support a notion that sustained research is required to understand the theory, processes and practices of sport governance and motivation of those elected officials in professional sport. Jackson and Perry (2011) state leadership is essentially an organisational cultural activity (team culture) or social endeavour. Therefore, there is a role to play in contributing to continued understanding of what good governance and leadership looks like across all levels of sport practice, including professional sport (Shilbury & Ferkins, 2020). From a cultural perspective - i.e., Māori and Pasifika, leadership research is calling for a re-framing, where management should attempt to align with their followers (Jackson & Parry, 2011). Therefore, cross-cultural leadership should attempt to influence goals that are appealing to the cultural group, by integrating their knowledge systems and shared meaning. Subsequently, in cultural leadership it is important to understand the influence that values, guiding beliefs, assumptions and behaviours have, in order to bridge knowledge systems between Māori and Pākehā (i.e., non-Māori) as further noted by Jackson and Perry (2011). Therefore, any endeavours toward mental well-being re-framing, ought to include health models

reflective of both Māori and Pasifika people's value system and societal health aspirations (Durie, 1994, 1999; Pulotu-Endemann, 2001).

2.18 Risk Factors of Mental Health and Well-being

In a study which examined the prevalence and risk factors associated with feelings of anxiety and depression, Du Preeze et al. (2017) concluded that RL players across Australasia had lower prevalence of depression compared with other studies in the general population at large and other athletes, but a higher prevalence of generalised anxiety disorder (GAD), and greater incidence of alcohol misuse. Horton (2014) asserts sport-related stressors, social-cultural pressures and self-regulation interventions are complex within RL. While Marsters (2017) also remarked positive attributes of mental well-being were largely dependent on player's ability to self-regulate and manage the many day-to-day pressures/expectations which come with an elite performance environment and public platform. More specifically, how athletes maintain positive psycho-social activities off the playing field. While research is limited, specific to the RL domain, the small offering of studies available highlights the many pressures on RL players and the multitude of variants which impact their mental health and management of mental well-being/player welfare are complex (Du Preeze et al. 2017; Horton, 2014; Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al. 2019; Marsters, 2017; Ng Shiu & Vagana, 2016; Panapa & Phillips, 2014).

Multiple risk factors in the maintenance of athlete mental well-being (specifically for Māori and Pasifika) have been highlighted in previous literature. These factors include (but are not limited to): Cultural marginalisation, socio-economic disadvantage, familial pressures, relocation, and a lack of lifestyle balance (Horton, 2012, 2014; Lakisa et al., 2014; Panapa, 2014; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013). Furthermore, depression, anxiety, stress, substance misuse, burnout was all found to be present within RL (Horton, 2012; 2014). While performance anxiety was substantiated as a risk factor for Pasifika by Panapa and Phillips (2014) and Rodriguez and McDonald (2013). Additionally, for Māori and Pasifika athletes, cultural pressures, expectations, and trust-relationships were all found to be potential risk factors impacting mental well-being (Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017, Manuela & Sibley, 2013). Lastly, sporting injuries, energy levels, non-selection and suicide were amongst the multitude of mental health issues identified as risk factors impeding mental health and the maintenance of well-being (Horton, 2014). Nevertheless, Beable et al. (2017) conclude that risk factors for

elite athletes are yet to be fully understood and further investigation into this domain is urgently needed.

2.19 Well-being Initiatives in Sport

Over past years, numerous initiatives have been established for well-being in sport. These include professional players' associations career planning and education training, multiple media campaigns which focus on raising public awareness of mental health issues to name a few (Crampton, 2014; Marsters, 2017; Zakus & Horton, 2009). Initiatives have been implemented at both the National Sport Organisation (NSO) policy level and grass-roots amateur club level (Crampton, 2014; Marsters, 2017). However, few are directed at Māori and Pasifika specifically, or include a cultural lens (Crampton, 2014).

While mental well-being initiatives targeting Māori and Pasifika athletes are limited, there have been some aimed at overall player welfare. Those applicable to this study are: New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL) 'It's More Than Just a Game' programme, facilitated by Ministry of Education, which adopted RL as a sport platform to roll out region wide health, well-being, and education programmes for Pasifika youth (Marsters, 2017; State Services Commission, 2015). Auckland Rugby Union (ARU) 'Pro Sport' initiative aimed to facilitate employment and education for transitioning high school leavers into professional rugby (Auckland Rugby Union, 2015). Additionally, New Zealand Rugby Union's (NZRU) 'Personal Development Programme' focussed on assisting player development through education, long-term career planning strategies, and providing business opportunities in sport (NZRPA, 2013). Similarly, the NRL's 'CareerWise' Programme supported young athletes to attend university or trade school (National Rugby League, n.d.).

The NRL has followed this up with numerous other campaigns such as the 'No Work, No Study, No Play' policy. This targeted elite under-20's players to work or study for a minimum of 24 hours per week to maintain playing eligibility. This programme also set directive training schedules for NRL clubs to adhere to holding them accountable to uphold this mandate (Horton, 2014; National Rugby League, n.d.). However, to our knowledge little is known about whether such initiatives may be contributing to further compounding or added performance pressures on current NRL players mental well-being and warrants scholarly research in this regard.

The most recent initiative specific to this study is the NRL's 'State of Mind' programme. This is aimed at reducing issues pertaining to mental illness stigma and focusses on facilitation of positive help-seeking behaviours and mental health literacy by Le Va (2015). Initially developed in 2012, this programme took its promptings from the NRL's English Premier League counter-part organisation, which created a similar programme in 2011. Le Va, a 'not for profit' organisation based in Aotearoa, specialises in the development of mental health services from a cultural position. They aid in the delivery of mental health services and provide collaborative partnerships with corporate organisations. Le Va collaborated on numerous projects in recent years with the NRL and NZRL collectively. Their goal in this partnership was to better meet the needs of Pasifika players both domestically, in Australia and across the Pacific Islands (Le Va, 2015). More recently, Le Va assisted the NRL to develop a culturally inclusive 'Well-being Relocation' assessment tool, helping athletes and their family's transition from one professional club to another (Lauano, 2016). This tool sets out a framework for NRL well-being/welfare staff to assist players and their families navigating re-location and the many factors which may cause stress and or pressures to them.

These varying initiatives in sport have primarily focussed on social determinants of health, with a specific focus on education and employment opportunities for youth athletes. What's more, they seek to assist in the development of transferable life skills and help develop athletes' self-identity outside of the sport environment. Such factors were determined to be critical skills for succeeding in a balanced life after sport (Horton, 2014; Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013; Schaaf, 2006).

Despite this work, few studies appear to have investigated mental well-being for Māori and Pasifika athletes using a strength-based approach. Previous researchers have highlighted the benefits of implementing a hybrid approach to sport organisation structures and policy, inclusive of cultural values to meet Māori and Pasifika athlete needs and aspirations (Rice et al., 2016; Suaalii-Sauni et al., 2009). It is therefore significant that our study investigates Māori and Pasifika athletes' perspectives of mental well-being from their lens. This will help to unpack and understand mental well-being better, to support players' management and maintenance in the future.

2.20 Cultural Relevance in High Performance (HP) Sport Research

Thomas and Dyal (1999) highlighted the need to modify sporting environments in Aotearoa, to become culturally relevant. Such examples require a practical framework of guidance for organisational strategy and reform that are culturally inclusive. These initiatives can be found in more recent frameworks such as: Sport New Zealand [Sport NZ] (2019) recent strategy; ‘Creating a Sport NZ Outcomes Framework for Wellbeing Behaviour Change and with a Treaty of Waitangi Perspective’ (Sport NZ, 2019). These small in-roads in sport policy are helping to promote a more positive culturally inclusive trajectory for Aotearoa sport practices. It is hoped will promote cultural sporting health aspirations. Parallels can be drawn between these practices and Kaupapa Māori research, which promotes emancipation. It moves discussions away from victim-blaming and individual deficits to a more comprehensive understanding of people’s lives and systemic health and wellness determinants (Cram, 2017). Likewise, cross-cultural research, whether in a health or elite sporting context, requires the researcher to start from a place of commitment to participant members and their families, combined with a willingness to learn (Cram, 2017). This presents an opportunity to look at NRL players’ well-being through the players’ lens, defined by their experiences and perspectives – Changing the discourse to a strength-based outlook for Māori and Pasifika mental well-being, as opposed to the common deficit approach that is often reflected in Euro-centric perspectives and structures (Keung, 2018).

Literature is replete with studies calling for the reconsideration of Western frameworks applied to investigations involving Māori and Pasifika. Scholars suggest methodological approaches require re-positioning/re-framing to meet cultural needs (Keung, 2014; Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Zakus & Horton, 2009). Erueti (2015) remarks that the lack of empirical research could be due to the challenge for researchers to satisfy both Western academic criteria and be respectful of Indigenous conditions. However, existing studies have tended to focus on cultural motivation, athlete development and identity within the HP sport milieu, as opposed to mental well-being in elite sport (Erueti, 2015; Erueti & Palmer, 2014; McCausland-Durie, 2007; Schaaf, 2006). Mila-Schaaf and Hudson (2009) state, deeper understanding of Māori and Pasifika athletes’ cultural practices (inclusive of fundamental cultural principles and values) are necessary and require further investigation.

Parts of the health sector in Aotearoa have adopted Māori and Pasifika perspectives and knowledge, to address health and well-being development (Durie, 1985; HRC, 2014; Te Whānau o Waipareira Trust, 2016). Through a Pasifika lens, positive mental well-being is holistic and emphasises the importance of family support and reciprocity, a well-balanced life and personal development (Alefaio, 2009; Samu & Suaalii-Sauni, 2009; Tamasese et al., 2005). For Māori, aspects of whānaungatanga – relationships; rangatiratanga – autonomy and leadership; manaakitanga – to protect and look after; wairuatanga – spirituality and identity; and kaitiakitanga – guardianship underpin core Māori values and provide the basis of many health and well-being models (Durie, 1994, 2015; Mead, 2016; Ryks et al. 2018).

Several models within Te Ao Māori have arisen in health practice, such as Te Whare Tapa Wha (Durie, 1994), Te Wheke (Pere, 1991), and Te Pae Mahutonga (Durie, 1999). Likewise, for Pasifika communities, cultural health models have also been created, such as: Fonofale (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001), Te Vaka (Kupa, 2009), and Fonua (Tu'itahi, 2007). In a study which draws on Durie's Te Pae Mahutonga model Ryks et al. (2018) found that utilising such health models created recognition, where Indigenous frameworks are given a voice and platform (which may be more relevant to iwi - tribe and hapū - sub-tribes/extended family) in relation to their well-being. Put simply, cultural models help to provide frameworks to understand mental well-being through a cultural lens. Therefore, they are a useful tool to understand the management and maintenance of Māori and Pasifika NRL players' mental well-being. For both Māori and Pasifika peoples, these models are reflective of their holistic health approach - inclusive of cultural values, principles and aspirations. These are typically overlooked by Western criteria of health and well-being. Moreover, these models do not readily feature in HP sport strategy or frameworks which tend to lean towards Euro-centric structures (Keung, 2018; Manuela & Sibley, 2013; Marsters, 2017). Therefore, it is relevant to afford each belief system its own integrity, while still leading to innovations and applicability specific to the NRL community and their whānau (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Durie, 2004; Mead, 2016; Warriors, n.d.).

2.21 Summary

The body of this literature review has looked at definitions of well-being from both Western perspectives and Māori and Pasifika positioning. Numerous topic areas pertinent to mental well-being in professional sport have been reviewed. Discourse

surrounding elite athletes overall well-being and mental health is gaining momentum. Specifically, culturally reflective inquiry is not only desired, but greatly lacking within the sport milieu (Keung, 2018, Marsters, 2017; Maunuela & Sibley, 2013; Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Stanley 2020).

The topic for our study was selected as there remains an urgent need for additional research on mental well-being, explored and unpacked through a lens that resonates with both Māori and Pasifika athletes here in Aotearoa. The literature reviewed highlights existing empirical knowledge and presents the literature currently available in the field, specific to the Aotearoa sport context and the game of RL. A multi-disciplinary approach has been utilised to review relevant literature pertinent to mental well-being and the professional sport context.

Chapter 3 Methodology

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the research methodology employed to guide and undertake this study. It presents the aims of the study, the philosophical standpoints, researcher positioning and the underpinning cultural principles which informed its theoretical framework. These guiding principles provided the context to situate the cultural narrative more appropriately alongside Western research parameters and better reflect the cultural perspectives of our participants. Succeeding this description, a depiction of the employed research methods, research design, sampling, procedures, data collection, data analysis and ethical considerations are presented. Lastly, a description of considerations relating to Te Tiriti o Waitangi for the Aotearoa context are presented.

It is important to note that the majority of this chapter will be presented from the first-person narrative. Using this descriptive approach, I hope to accurately present my unique positioning as the primary researcher within the context of this research. Undertaking this research required careful navigation, via employing guiding principles from both Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika cultural research. Throughout this voyage I grappled with adhering to Western academic criteria while trying to navigate perspectives and values of the Indigenous Māori and Pasifika participants.

3.2 Aims of Study

My aim for this study was to explore; *‘Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players’ perspectives of mental well-being and how they manage it’*. Using a strengths-based approach, I envisaged this could provide useful information to support the health and well-being needs of the National Rugby League (NRL) community and New Zealand Rugby League (NZRL) at large. This was undertaken using qualitative narrative inquiry and storytelling. My key objectives for this study were: (1) Define and understand what mental well-being looks like from Māori and Pasifika NRL player’s perspectives, and (2) understand how Māori and Pasifika players manage their mental well-being in a cultural context.

3.3 Literature Review

A literature review was undertaken to explore both Aotearoa domestic literature and international evidence. The primary search engines used in this study were; SportDiscus,

Medline, PubMed, Scopus, Pacific Health dialogue, Science Direct and Google Scholar. Due to a scarcity of literature on mental well-being for Māori and Pasifika male athletes, a wider search was undertaken utilising an interdisciplinary approach into general health and well-being, sport mental health, sport psychology, cultural disparities of health/well-being, Indigenous literature and Pasifika health literature as noted previously in chapter two (literature review).

Exploration across a wide scope of sport and mental well-being literature helped frame the variety of interconnected sport fields, cultural relevance and topics which potentially impact this cohort of athletes in their professional environments. My search highlighted the gap in academic research on mental well-being and more specifically to professional Māori and Pasifika athletes. The disparity of academic literature in this regard, strengthens the rationale for my study and the pressing need to continue to build on the small but growing body of literature in mental well-being in professional sport.

3.4 Qualitative Research

The research methodology is the “strategy of enquiry that guides a set of procedures” (Petty et al., 2012, p. 378). The methodology reflects the theoretical, political, social and philosophical positioning of the study (Petty et al., 2012). It looks at the social environments and those positioned within it, aiming to grasp a deeper comprehension of the why, and how that constructs human behaviours (Berg, 2009; McKenzie, 2019).

My goal throughout this study was to understand a phenomenon from the outlooks of those experiencing it (Vaismoradi et al., 2013). Within descriptive research, by utilising narrative dialogues of an event or experience, the researcher must reflect and choose what narrative threads to recite (or what not to) and in doing so, bring to light the research participants’ experience of a said event (McKenzie, 2019; Sandelowski, 2000). This study took its trajectory from qualitative narrative inquiry. My goal was to un-earth, capture, understand and practically apply learnings, around players’ mental well-being and how its maintained. To do this from a quantitative quantifiable measurement, would not have appropriately embodied the experiences, *kōrero* (conversations) of this cohort. Moreover, utilising a qualitative narrative approach provides both rigour and trustworthy descriptive practices (Bryman, 2016), which are both academically acknowledged and culturally fitting. My hope is that employing qualitative approaches infused by cultural tools and cultural guidance, I have positioned this study appropriately utilising collective

orientation and design (Hart, 2010; Mo'a, 2015) respectfully and inclusively towards better cultural understanding and emancipatory practices (Chilisa, 2020).

3.5 Positioning and Reflexivity

Qualitative research can be subjective, often influenced by historical events, sociocultural contexts, perceptions of lived-experiences, personal interpretations or biases, acuties, experiences and cultural predispositions (Creswell, 2014). Bourke (2014) contends researcher positionality is determined by where the researcher positions themselves in relation to their participants.

I am a female Pākehā (European descent) researcher. From a socio-cultural perspective, I am a migrant to Aotearoa, and therefore very much an 'outsider', having come from a different background (largely Euro-centric) worldview, when compared to the participants in this study. However, I hold a unique individual perspective and relationship to the cohort of NRL athletes. Prior to commencing this study, I had already built a foundational relationship with each athlete, having worked closely in their professional team environment and one on one within the NRL club medical team as a Sport Therapist for the last six years. The many experiences and informal kōrero with players during treatment sessions over the years played a major role in the conception of this research study and its focus.

In some ways, I am uniquely placed to navigate the cultural values and practices of both Māori and Pasifika athletes as a result of my personal positioning within both communities. As noted in the introduction (chapter 1) of this thesis, I share three Māori children from my previous marriage to a professional Māori athlete. Along with my three children, I now live with my Samoan partner and step-daughter. Together, we live as a blended family, observing both Western cultural practices, Fa'a Samoa (Samoa socio-political and traditional customary way of life) and some Māori values and teachings. Given my connections with the Vodafone Warriors NRL club and players, as well as my home environment, I was uniquely positioned to conduct this research.

3.6 Evolving Ontological and Epistemological Perspective

Ontology reflects the nature of social reality and guides beliefs towards what is 'real' to that society (Grant & Giddings, 2002). An Indigenous ontological stance comprises of both a spiritual realm and a physical realm where both realms are equally positioned and uniquely interconnected with one another (Hart, 2010; Keung, 2018). This perspective is

somewhat far removed from a classical Euro-Western positioning, of how we understand and view our world around us. Moreover, for Māori and Pasifika peoples, the connection between what is above and below the land, between the living and the dead, and between people and creation, are very real concepts. Additionally, ancestry, forefathers, the cosmos, spirituality and care of their environment are all interwoven threads which inform a cultural ontological and epistemological perspective (Curtis, 2016; Hart, 2010; Wilson, 2008).

This juxtaposition between my lens as the primary researcher and that of the cohort in this study required careful navigation, acknowledgement and recognition of these differences to meet on common ground. This necessitated introspective reflection as the primary researcher. This sits within the acknowledgement of my own Euro-Western cultural heritage and comprehend, understand and be empathetic towards Māori and Pasifika beliefs and values. This self-reflective processing provided the positioning and footing required as the primary researcher to conduct this study, which came with significant personal learning, self-reflection, and personal growth.

I acknowledge my ontological and epistemological stance may never be the same as those within this study. However, I have strived (and continue to strive) to become more aware of the different lived experiences of this cohort. The stories and kōrero shared by participants are informed and framed by their own cultural principles and values. This in turn helps us within Western academia, better make sense of how this group of Māori and Pasifika RL players define and maintain mental well-being from their perspectives.

As a methodological framework, narrative inquiry can be construed as employing a lower inference than other qualitative approaches (such as phenomenology, ethnography studies or grounded theory) however, none are free of interpretation or biases from the researcher (McKenzie, 2019) as “all description entails interpretation” (Sandelowski, 2000, p.335). My unique positioning within this study resonates with the previous works from Puna (2013) and Dwyer and Buckle (2009). Surrounding myself with a Māori supervisory team and Pasifika research advisory group (RAG) members helped me navigate and appose the differences in values, beliefs, and views between myself and the participants to meet on common ground, respectful of their cultural lens and position.

Importantly, insider positioning prior to commencement of this study helped bridge any gaps between myself and participants. This is a fundamental aspect of cultural research protocols – enabling communal relationships, respect and reciprocity (HRC,

2014) to be nurtured. It is hoped that drawing on guiding principles from te ao Māori and Pasifika cultures, will be an activity in emancipation within the respective communities. To do this from a solely Western methodological perspective, would have been inappropriate (given the background of this cohort) and potentially disregards the varying worldviews, cultural perspectives and social constructs of how each athlete views their mental well-being (Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017; Manuela & Sibley, 2012; Ngawati, 2013; Singh & Singh, 1998).

3.7 Narrative Inquiry Paradigm

People shape their daily existences by interpretation of their experiences and their past by leading storied lives (McAlpine, 2016). Narrative inquiry first and foremost is a way of thinking about an experience. Each account provides ways of integrating past experiences into expressive learning (Erueti & Palmer, 2014), locating oneself and others in the account, and foreshadowing the future (McAlpine, 2016). Narratives incorporate temporality, a social context, complicating events, and an evaluative conclusion, together making up coherent meaning. Thus, providing a window into the process of how a given individual views himself and their identity (Holley & Colyar, 2009; Riessman, 2008).

As a methodology, narrative inquiry elicits narrative threads into data sets. People re-tell stories about lived experiences or events while injecting knowledge and accounts through auditory storytelling (Andrews, et al., 2013; Bryman, 2016; Denscombe, 2014; Elliott, 2005; Riessman, 2003; 2008). Focus shifts from what happened to how the individual makes sense and meaning of what happened and to what effect. Coffey and Atkinson (1996) contend that a narrative should be viewed in terms of function and acts as an aid for the raconteur. Likewise, Miller (2000) proposes narrative interviews are far more concerned with eliciting participants' perspectives, reciting stories pertained to individual lives or family experiences, as opposed to factual constructs. Hence, storytelling can be a window from the past, to frame a parable for a moral reference point, provide cultural values and lessons, which hold symbolic significance and are passed down through generations (Andrews et al., 2013).

Importantly to this cohort, narratives can embody how individuals view and represent their identity (Denscombe, 2014). Each construct leads to meanings of ideology and how it links to cultural and historical contexts. Consequently, narrative inquiry, as a methodology, afforded a platform for perspectives and values of Māori and Pasifika ways of seeing and doing to be disseminated respectfully (Erueti & Palmer, 2014).

3.8 Storytelling

Storytelling, in the current idiom, is a portal through which a person enters the world and by which their understanding of the world is interpreted and made personally meaningful. Talanoa is a method acknowledged and used by Pasifika to gather and disseminate knowledge passed as gifts through generations via myths and legends (Glasgow & Rameka, 2017; Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Vaoleti, 2013). Similarly, Kaupapa Māori uses pūrākau for storytelling and passing knowledge on. It includes epistemological constructs, philosophical thoughts, worldviews and contributes to who Māori are as people (Glasgow & Rameka, 2017; Lee, 2009). Both share similarities to the Western framework of narrative inquiry, and all three seek to understand the experience, knowledge and stories of participants through eliciting conversations.

3.9 Methodological Construct

The methodological framework for this study was supported by cultural principles. These principles were drawn from both Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika research. Their inclusion helped direct, align and strengthen the study to align with cultural practices/values shared by both Māori and Pasifika communities. Thus, positioning this study to echo the athletes experiences in a culturally reflective framework, as opposed to a Western ideology or perspective imbrued by colonised assumptions (Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Hokowhitu, 2004; Manuela & Sibley, 2013).

3.10 Underpinning Guiding Principles

Two primary principles drawn from Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika practices guided this study; *respect* and *reciprocity* (HRC, 2014; MHC, 2001). These principles were at the forefront of this research from its inception to application through to the conclusion of this thesis. These principles are relevant in both Māori and Pasifika research contexts, and their inclusion was a priority that I felt compelled to embrace.

As a health practitioner and novice researcher I felt it necessary to conduct this study in a manner which was respectful of cultural practices and reflected cultural perspectives. This was achieved by incorporating these guiding cultural principles to underpin the methodology and adopting methods/tools with collective community involvement throughout the research process. These included; research design, Māori academic advisors, Pasifika Research Advisory Group (RAG) members, Hui/Fono (cultural

gatherings/meetings), karakia (prayer), koha and kai (cultural gift/donation and traditional food). These cultural inclusions were a critical element of this study.

“Cultural values shape Indigenous peoples in their ways of knowing and being and represent the elements of a society that are valued for creating and sustaining community” (Te Ava & Rubie-Davies, 2011, p. 119).

Employing these methods and principles were at times challenging. Nevertheless, this navigation was made possible by guidance from both my Māori supervisory team and Pasifika RAG members. These helped ensure findings were interpreted in a way that enhanced mana (to honour, have authority, presence or prestige) for all participants and positively contributed to Māori and Pasifika health aspirations. Maintaining these shared values of respect and reciprocity (while remaining cognisant of cultural nuances often overlooked or misinterpreted by a Western lens) was crucial towards positioning this study correctly (HRC, 2014; Manuela & Sibley, 2013; Singh & Singh, 1998).

3.11 Background of Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika Core Values

Within Kaupapa Māori (Māori values) there is a core value that recognises that knowledge is steeped in ancient tradition while adapting to ever changing environments (Durie et al., 2017). Thus, there are fundamental values which guide Māori ways of practice and how they navigate their world. Mātauranga Māori (defined as knowledge, comprehension, or understanding - synonymous with Māori wisdom) directs our understanding of these core values (Durie, 2015; Smith, 1999). Similarly, for Pasifika people, four principles in particular have been outlined by academic literature, as a foundation to Pasifika values; communal relationships, reciprocity, holism and respect (Curtis, 2016; HRC, 2014; Naepi, 2015).

Within this research my relationship with participants was reciprocal. This involved exchange of services, trust, loyalty, and social goodwill (Singh, et al., 1998). I provided the context/space and resources, while participants offered knowledge, experience and wisdom by sharing their stories and kōrero with me. This reciprocity provided a way of establishing good harmonious relationships, while respectfully preventing exploitation of their cherished knowledge and expertise from harm (Keung, 2018; Ngawati, 2013). Consequently, I had a responsibility to respect and adhere to specific cultural principles highlighted by Māori scholars, outlined in ‘Te Ara Tika – guidelines for Māori research ethics’ and those of Pasifika Health Research Guidelines. Additionally, I was cognisant

throughout the research process that I have been gifted the opportunity to share athletes' kōrero. Therefore, this must be presented respectfully and reflective of their knowledge, experiences and lens. Values and principles I kept in mind were: Collective family/community-focus, respect of wisdom and age, the importance of genealogy and family and the importance of tikanga (customs and traditional values and knowledge) (Curtis, 2016; HRC, 2014; Naepi, 2015). For Indigenous people, their cultural values and directing principles are more than cultural constructs or words – they are living principles (Keung, 2018; Kovach, 2015). The following figure presents a schematic representation of the research design, its chosen methodology and underpinning cultural principles.

Figure 3-1

Schematic Overview of Methodology



Note. This figure demonstrates the schematic overview of the cultural principles used to guide the methodological framework. It also demonstrates how narrative inquiry was blended with storytelling as a medium drawing on Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika principles.

3.12 Research Design

The design of this study employed a qualitative approach through a mix of semi-structured focus groups and individual face to face interviews. An inductive thematic analysis was performed to analyse the data, guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework.

3.12.1 Research Setting

Initial discussions began mid-2018, by approaching the Vodafone Warriors Club to determine whether they would be open to participating in a study. This was followed by numerous discussions with members of the football department (head coach, managers, mental skills coach, welfare/well-being departments etc.) to determine the exact nature of the proposed study and its context. This was supported by several meetings with NZRL to gain their wider backing with the project.

Once confirmation from all parties was obtained, it was deemed appropriate to establish a Research Advisory Group (RAG) which includes; members of the respective organisations (Vodafone Warriors & NZRL) to take an active role in the direction of the study, study context, research questions, participate in the design and facilitate the acquisition of participants. Their inclusion allowed for the respect of cultural research practices to be upheld and the guiding principles of respect and reciprocity to be given. Three members of RAG were established; Nigel Vagana (NZRL-Well-being and education manager), Jerry Seuseu (Vodafone Warriors-Welfare/well-being manager) and Tony Oldam (AUT-Sport psychology). Further meetings with the Vodafone Warriors CEO and football staff were conducted to establish terms of the research, scheduling demands, data collection, location etc. At this phase, it was agreed that no staff members would be privy to the identity of participant athletes other than members of RAG and my academic supervisors.

A formal research overview presentation hui/fono (cultural gathering/meeting) took place in August 2019 to the Vodafone Warriors NRL playing squad and wider training group. During this session, Kai was provided in keeping with cultural customs. This session was opened and closed with a karakia. Athletes were given an overview of the proposed research, given an opportunity to ask questions as a collective group and invited to take away a research overview booklet which included research topic, information sheets and consent forms (Appendix B). Players were invited to leave their details for the well-being manager (RAG Member) if they were interested in taking part in the study.

Following this overview presentation, well-being manager/RAG member Jerry Seuseu undertook purposive sampling to solidify interested players who had put their names forward. This involved contacting each player who had attended the research overview presentation hui/fono (who had left their written details with the primary researcher showing potential interest in taking part in the study) being contacted individually to discuss the matter further in more detail.

3.12.2 Procedure and Sampling

Initial contact with interested participants was made by email or phone call from RAG member, Jerry Seuseu. This was requested by AUT ethics committee not to be undertaken by the primary researcher due to the already existing working relationship of a Sport Therapist with players and the potential coercive power imbalance this could cause as the primary researcher. Once a full list of interested and eligible participants was established, the primary researcher along with RAG members made arrangements to schedule semi-structured focus groups or individual interviews, depending on convenience for players. During the period between the overview presentation through to completion of the data collection and analysis, the primary researcher had a stand-down period (from other employed contact or club duties with any players) to reduce contact with potential participants leading up to interviews. Twenty-two of the eligible 24 athletes expressed interest in participating in the study. Due to training schedules, contractual commitments, and travel obligations (as noted in Chapter 4 findings), 18 athletes in total participated in the study.

3.12.3 Participants

Eligibility was based on the following criteria: (a) self-identified as Māori or Pasifika, (b) a full-time professionally contracted player of a top-tier NRL club, (c) be 18 years or older, and (d) have NRL match-play experience. This criterion aimed to include only those already familiar with the pressures (both physically and mentally) of elite level NRL match-play. This can be different from those experienced at levels below top-tier NRL grade. As a result, how NRL athletes manage and maintain their well-being may have different constraints (professional expectations, outside media scrutiny, player contractual/financial pressures on performance levels, physical demands/injury etc.) to those athletes at the lower grade levels due to different internal and external pressures/expectations.

All participants volunteered and were not individually approached for inclusion. (As noted above athletes attended an over-view presentation of the proposed research and were free to leave their details if they wished to be contacted regarding potential participation). Those who agreed to participate self-selected a focus group time, or individual interview session. This allowed for flexibility around their individual training and game day commitments. It was also felt this flexibility gave opportunity for athletes to choose which interview setting and location they were more personally comfortable with. This approach was in keeping with Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika cultural practices. It provided for participants to choose their environments and preference of data collection styles. Subsequently, there was a mix of players, experience and backgrounds in each of the focus groups and individual face to face interviews.

3.12.4 Data collection

Narrative inquiry allows for a number of different data collection methods. This study utilised focus groups and individual interviews to collect a broad range of perceptions, emotions, feelings, expressions and insights on the research topic (Stewart & Shamdasani, 2015). As the primary researcher, I wanted to explore the lived experiences of mental well-being and seek individual and collective knowledge from the athletes. It was felt these methods could allow for discussion amongst participants and the researcher while providing a broad range of data from narrative storytelling (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005).

As noted in the findings, data collection was undertaken over a three-week period during August/September 2019 NRL season. The following table represents this procedure.

Table 3-1***Data Collection Groups***

Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group 3	1:1 Interviews
Participants (n=9) (P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8,P9)	Participants (n=2) (P15,P16)	Participants (n=2) (P17,P18)	Participants (n=5) (P10,P11,P12,P13,P14)

Note. Table presents an overview of the data collection focus groups participants and 1:1 interview numbers.

After the initial focus group, it was felt that nine participants in a group was too high, so efforts were made to decrease numbers in subsequent groups in line with recommendations from Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This resulted in two smaller focus groups and five individual interviews. Conducting smaller groups offered a relaxed space for individuals to have more opportunities to express thoughts and feelings regarding the topic in question (Krueger & Casey, 2014).

3.12.5 Storytelling

Utilising storytelling as a form of data collection permitted a holistic understanding of Māori and Pasifika athlete's experiences and provided insight into how Indigenous and Pasifika peoples socially construct their world (Keung, 2018; Lee, 2009; Smith, 1999). Within Kaupapa Māori, the term *whakawhanaungatanga* (process of establishing links/making connections) is used to describe the act of getting to know an individual or group and building familial connections. Its aim is to create a safe, trusting and respectful environment, thereby bridging the gap between the researcher and participants (Smith & Reid, 2000; Walker et al., 2006). Adopting this approach, allowed my overarching principles of respect and reciprocity to be realised during data collection.

Applying narrative storytelling, the data collection method aligned with the conversational/oratory ways in which many Māori and Pasifika people share knowledge (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011; Glasgow & Remeka, 2017; Vaiolati, 2006). It also provided a deeper exploration of attitudes, views, lens and individual player experiences of mental well-being.

3.12.6 Kai and Koha

During each data collection session, shared traditional Māori and Pasifika kai (food) was provided. This was received well by all players, probably because of the extra efforts I had made to prepare and share a traditional home cooked meal. Koha (gift) was also threaded throughout the study. This occurred by continual reporting back to the Vodafone Warriors Club and RAG members respective organisations and management, as well as providing a gift (movie vouchers) to each participating athlete on completion of this study.

3.12.7 Reflective Journal

A reflective journal was also used throughout the research process. This is encouraged and common practice in qualitative research (Ortlipp, 2008). Fundamentally, it provided the opportunity to embark on my own ‘sense-making’ process throughout this study. Hertz (1997) remarks that “a reflective researcher does not simply report the facts of the research but actively constructs interpretations and then questions how those interpretations came about” (p. viii). Thus, employing a reflective journal helped provide rigour and trustworthiness within the research process, while offering an opportunity for theming as data was collected. It also helped to audit my position and biases throughout data collection and adapt questioning accordingly (Berger, 2015; Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Additionally, it provided transparency and integrity throughout the study (Berger, 2015; Bryman, 2016; Ortlipp, 2008).

3.12.8 Semi-Structured Interview Guide

The principal advantage of semi-structured interviews is the scope and depth of information obtained and the ability to standardise initial prompting questions to increase data reliability and research replicability (Barron, 2020; Qu & Dumay, 2011). Furthermore, these authors suggest that semi-structured interviews or focus groups allow the researcher to discern and interpret phenomena and meanings attached to the interviewee’s responses. This is followed by the reconstruction of identified themes and categorisation to make comparisons and contrasts between emergent patterns to make sense of them (Opdenakker, 2006). Mindful to this, Opdenakker (2006) suggests that semi-structured interviews can be characterised by synchronous communication in place and time, with interpretations functionally applied to a systematic coding process of classifications, theming, or pattern identification. This then can be later reported Barron (2020) remarks.

In line with semi-structured interviewing approaches, initial questions were used to guide and prompt the conversations with the athletes in their groups or individually. Throughout the interview process I was able to lean on my familiarity with the cohort and pick up on earlier focus group themes. These guided questions in later sessions or elicited deeper understanding from topics which arose in the initial focus group.

The interview guide (Appendix C) consisted of loose semi-structured open-ended questions which focused on athletes portraying how their mental well-being ‘looked’ to them and what informed that view. The subsequent table reflects the guiding questions employed for all focus groups and interviews.

Table 3-2

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Questions:	Prompting questions to elicit storytelling:
1.	Define mental well-being?
2.	What does mental well-being look like to you?
3.	What values are important to you?
4.	How do you manage your mental well-being?
5.	How does family/whānau/aiga contribute to your mental well-being?
6.	Do faith and cultural practices affect your mental well-being, and in what ways?

Note. Table provides an overview of the promoting questions used to elicit storytelling/conversating with participants during focus groups and 1:1 data collection sessions.

All data collection sessions were recorded with a digital recorder and transcribed verbatim by myself. Simultaneously the reflective journal was also utilised to aid additional notes during recorded sessions and for reflections post interview. All transcripts were then re-read while listening to the audio recordings, to ensure the accuracy of the transcription. Additional reflective journal submissions were added to their corresponding transcripts for deeper understanding and ‘sense-making’.

3.12.9 Location

All data collection sessions were held at the Vodafone Warriors Club Auckland in private meeting rooms. Several locations were offered to each participant. Due to time constraints, this was their preference and least disruptive to individual schedules.

3.13 Data analysis

Thematic analysis was used to analyse data from all focus groups and individual interviews. It was used as a “method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data” (Braun & Clarke, 2006, p.79). Themes or patterned responses are threads found in research data which capture important narratives specific to the research questions (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The primary themes generated were based on recurrent dialogue which continuously emerged relevant to the research questions, as opposed to their selection based on quantifiable measures as in the process of content analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013; McKenzie, 2019).

Data threads initiated the start of coding for theme development and these codes were later used to bring explicit meaning to that data (Terry et al., 2017).

The following table outlines the phases of thematic analysis undertaken, the analytical processes and its pragmatic application in this study (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Table 3-3

Phases of Thematic Analysis

Phase	Description of Process Used
1.Familiarising yourself with data threads:	Transcribing data, reading and re-reading data, noting down initial ideas/concepts. The primary researcher transcribed and edited all transcripts to ensure accuracy, by repeated listening to and reading each focus group/1:1 interview and taking notes simultaneously. Extra notes were also added at this stage from the primary researcher's reflective journal as they corresponded to specific narrative threads. This ensured the primary researcher was fully immersed in the narrative data.
2.Generating initial codes:	Application of codes against interesting features of data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code. Data was transcribed into a word document. Data was then coded descriptively based on the content of transcriptions.
3. Searching for themes:	Manually collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme. Codes were then assembled into relevant categories based on their description. For example, all codes relating to athletes' feelings/experiences around culture, respect for their elders, connection to identity and where they come from, were collated into relevant categories based on their descriptions. Upon generating the larger codes, they were referenced with each other to cross-check for common threads across categories. For example, the connection between athlete and coach relationships was interrelated to coaching style/philosophy, while athletes' value of time spent at training and with their family also corresponded to athlete-coach relationships and their specific individual values.
4. Reviewing themes:	Checking if themes work in relation to the coded extracts (Level 1) and the entire data set (Level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis. During the theme creation process, there was triangulation of analysis as the primary researcher and two supervisors reviewed the data codes

and discussed their relationship to themes, checking for consistency and connectedness.

5. Defining and naming themes: Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, generating clear direction, definitions and names within each category with continued cross-checks from the supervisory team. Once dominant themes were identified and finalised, a meeting was held between the researcher and the supervisory team for final theme approval. All coded extracts (Level 1) and full data sets (Level 2) were reviewed, and a consensus was reached that identified the primary dominant theme clusters and their corresponding codes within each category.

6. Producing the report: The final phase of analysis. Selected extracts relating back to the research questions and literature were reviewed. These were presented in a written report with amendments and edits from the supervision team for final review. This allowed movement between codes and narrative data threads to be highlighted to solidify the primary theme categories based on recommendations/communication with supervisors while drafting the approved Findings Chapter. For example, players having a voice in relation to training and coaching style was linked to autonomous behaviours and trust relationships. While data sets around faith and spirituality were re-categorised under navigating cultural differences. This reflexivity within the final analysis review provisioned for primary themes to be clearly refined and coded data emphasized plainly within the final findings write up.

Note. Table adapted from Braun & Clarke (2006, p.87) and McKenzie (2019, p.22-23).

^a Please note, within this framework, it is not a requirement to fully complete one phase prior to the commencement of another. Hence, the above phases of analysis were at times non-linear. This non-linear movement between phases provided a fluid and dynamic process within the analysis. It afforded flexibility to move backwards and forwards between phases as necessary (McKenzie, 2019; Terry et al., 2017). This proved a useful application within the analysis process and finalising results, with last minute revision of data threads incorporated into primary categories/themes.

During the compilation of findings (presented in Chapter 4) and compilation of discussion critique (presented in Chapter 5), we took note as a team that these themes were disseminated in a culturally reflective manner. We remained, as a group, conscious of the epistemological and ontological values shared between both Māori and Pasifika athletes. Specifically, how this could be transcribed and discussed in a way that reflects their cultural perspective pertaining to mental well-being.

3.14 Ethical Approval

Ethical approval for this study was granted on 6th August 2019 by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (Appendix A).

3.15 Respecting Te Ara Tika

Upholding kaitiakitanga (guardianship, stewardship and trust) to protect and safeguard knowledge from ancestors while protecting new stories told by the athletes was an important consideration within this study (Hudson et al., 2010). A fundamental principle I sought to uphold was the willingness to relinquish traditional Western ideals of researcher control and ensure that participants felt empowered to lead the narrative discourse.

Additionally, upholding tikanga (customs and traditional values) was an essential concept incorporated into the methods to reflect the whakapapa (relationships), tika (research design), manaakitanga (cultural/social responsibility) and mana (justice and equity) for all involved. Keeping these principle values in mind while maintaining the overarching guiding principles of respect and reciprocity, ensured best practice outcomes could be realised (Curtis, 2016; Hudson et al., 2010; HRC, 2014; MHC, 2001; Naepi, 2015).

3.16 Informed and Voluntary Consent

The Vodafone Warriors Club and representatives from NZRL were both fully involved in the design of this study. They helped shape the research questions, study trajectory, and actively participated with full voluntary consent throughout. Furthermore, each participant was given an overview of the research study, and an insight into the trajectory and background of the research development process. Athletes were presented with a personal account of my interest in the chosen topic area, and why, and what potential value their insights would bring. Athletes were given the opportunity to openly discuss as a large group (inclusive of NRL, top 30 players and wider training squad, approximately 45 in attendance) any questions or concerns. The style of this overview presentation was designed to be an informal, relaxed discussion while still observing my desire to uphold and build on the guiding principles of respect and reciprocity throughout the research study.

All participants were 18 years or older and able to give informed consent. All eligible participating athletes completed a consent form (Appendix B) prior to the commencement of data collection and had the right to withdraw at any phase of data collection.

3.17 Confidentiality and Anonymity

No athletes' names or match-play experience have been quoted within this study. This was to ensure all participants remain anonymous. Every effort was made to maintain confidentiality throughout the research process. Those athletes who participated remain anonymous to the Vodafone Warriors football department and coaching staff. While there were many schedule adjustments which had to be made to accommodate facilitation of this study, the football management went over and above all requests to accommodate the research team. Only one staff member, a critical RAG member, helped to gather consent forms, contact players for interview times and assisted with player schedule management. All other Club personnel were not privy to attendance at the overview presentation or in attendance at any focus groups or interviews.

3.18 Power Dynamics and Potential Conflict of Interest

The potential 'issues' relating to power dynamics in this study are noteworthy. As the primary researcher, I had an existing professional relationship with the majority of club athletes and staff (coaches, specialist practitioners and management), having worked as part of their medical rehabilitation team for the past six years. This afforded a unique position of knowledge, insight, and personal friendships with participants I may not have otherwise had.

Researcher positioning was a critical element within this study as presented earlier in this chapter. From a Western perspective it may be viewed as a constraint and potential conflict. However, I strongly felt that with the inclusion of appropriate support throughout this study and acknowledgement of potential conflicts, my familiarity with participants and the organisation would strengthen the research. My exclusive positioning afforded (an already established) mutual respect, trust and safety for all athletes prior to data collection. This also allowed the guiding principles of respect and reciprocity to flourish. Creating strong working relationships/friendships prior to data collection was both culturally fitting as a protocol, and felt appropriate for this study (HRC, 2014; MHC, 2001).

Ultimately, the control of stories, experiences and transferred knowledge lies with the individual participants. To ensure this research was a collaborative process more than a full year of preparation and establishment of my exclusive positioning was undertaken with those involved. Collaborative partnership discussions were on-going throughout all phases of this study. The collective desire to provide pragmatic, club-specific outcomes to enhance working club practices were at the core of my motivation for this study.

In acknowledgement of any power imbalance due to my unique researcher positioning, there was a three-week stand-down period from any club duties. This was important to change the context of my presence around the players away from the rehabilitation space, into a collaborative partner for research. Furthermore, for personal ethical protection, supervision from an outside psychologist (not affiliated with the research supervision team) was put in place. This helped mitigate any ambivalence about researcher ethical practices, as well as providing psychological support throughout the data collection.

The focus of this study was intentionally on mental well-being and the positive holistic attributes that maintain it, (rather than mental health and clinical components of mental illness).

3.19 Te Tiriti o Waitangi

As this study was completed in Aotearoa, I was especially mindful of Te Tiriti o Waitangi and its inclusion within this research. The three principles which informed the research design were; protection, participation and partnership (Hudson & Russell, 2009).

Throughout the research process, all participants and associated members (players, coaches, club staff members and research team members) had the right to privacy, anonymity and confidentiality (Health Research Council, n.d.). Ethical considerations were: Players' health and well-being throughout the research process, safeguarding participant vulnerability as employees of the NRL team organisation. A mutual understanding that there must be no negative repercussions for players as a result of the information generated from their kōrero during this research. This assurance was given by club management verbally and in a formal letter which accompanied the ethics application for this study (Appendix D).

The ethical considerations and study design was managed by on-going discussions throughout the research process which involved: Coaches, club staff/management,

consultation with past and current players, on-going input from academic research supervisory team and RAG members. All aspects of the research process were explained to participants by the primary researcher during the initial overview presentation and later in detail by RAG Member (Jerry Seuseu) individual discussions with each participant by phone and or email.

Focus groups and individual interviews were held at the Vodafone Warriors Club. This reduced interference with training schedules, contractual commitments, and time and travel restrictions. This also provided athletes with a safe and familiar environment away from outside influence, media intrusion or family interruptions. Participants were free to withdraw from the study at any stage. This was clearly identified in the information sheet (Appendix B) as well as verbally before each interview/focus group. All discussions remained confidential and were not discussed outside of the allocated data collection sessions. This enabled participant protection and honesty, without fear of repercussions.

A full list of the services participants could access during the research process for support was also provided in the participant information packs (Appendix B). Players were offered a review of all their individual transcripts and given the opportunity to have quotes, phrases and narrative dialogue excluded from the report findings. The extended Warriors family will also be offered control of any final published results and data after submission of this thesis. Further disclosure of any findings is subject to their consent.

3.20 Summary

This study was designed to answer the primary aim and objectives outlined at the start of this chapter. To do so, qualitative narrative inquiry methodology, underpinned by Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika principles, was implemented. Guiding principles shared by Māori and Pasifika of respect and reciprocity were used as an umbrella for this study. Their inclusion offered the platform for participant athletes' voices to be heard, valued, understood and communicated through their lens and perspective via a culturally responsive design.

Within this study I looked to extend a traditional Western paradigm into a contemporary space, applicable for research with Māori and Pasifika NRL athletes. This study and its manner is the first of its kind, to research current professional NRL athletes

based in Aotearoa (Alder, 2015; Erueti, 2015; Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Marsters, 2017, Panapa & Phillips 2014).

It is hoped the research approach, framework and design will offer a platform for future research and underpin evidence-based practice for further NRL studies. Insights and learnings can be drawn upon to inform sport organisational framework development and organisational competencies, while providing insights for current and future RL players and their communities.

The following chapter presents the research findings and introduces four primary themes which were identified through the thematic analysis. Each theme is broken down into more complex findings from the narrative coded threads. Corresponding sub-themes are presented as they interrelate to each primary theme. Transcript extracts have been threaded throughout to provide evidence to support the findings.

Chapter 4 Findings

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents findings from semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews. They are arranged and presented thematically under four primary categories with their corresponding interlinked concepts. Each primary theme is broken down into sub-themes within each category. These categories have been structured in accordance with the study objectives, outlined in Chapter One. Participants' definition of what mental well-being 'looked like' to them are presented. Identified themes which impact their management of mental well-being both on and off the football field are then explored. Some of the recurring recommendations from players for sport organisations and NRL clubs will be referred to in this chapter, however, a more expansive list of recommendations from participants is outlined in the appendix section (Appendix E).

4.2 The Study Sample/Participants

A demographic overview of the research participants is presented in Table 4-1. The inclusion criteria for participation included: (a) Self-identified as Māori or Pasifika, (b) a full-time professionally contracted player of a top-tier NRL club, (c) be 18 years or older, and (d) have NRL match-play experience. Purposive sampling was used to recruit players from the Vodafone Warriors NRL club. The club's top 30 players inclusive of the wider training squad were invited to a study overview information session. Of the top 30 players, 24 athletes matched the study eligibility criteria (80%). From the 24 possible participants, 22 expressed interest in taking part in the study. However, due to training schedules, media, travel and other contractual obligations, (during rounds 22-25 of the 2019 NRL season), a final number of 18 players, (75%) of the eligible 24 players, took part in either semi-structured focus groups or 1:1 semi-structured interviews. Pseudonyms, P1 – P18 are used for all 18 participants in replacement of names or other identifying features.

Table 4-1***Demographic Summary of Study Participants***

Age Range	Samoaan	Māori	Fijian	Tongan	Mixed Polynesian (PI & Māori)
19-33 years	N=6 (33.3%)	N=5 (27.8%)	N=2 (11.1%)	N=2 (11.1%)	N=3 (16.7%)

Note. Table 4-1 presents a summary of the ethnic heritage of study participants and numbers which make up each cultural group.

The ethnic makeup of participants comprised of those who self-identified as Pasifika (PI), Māori or Mixed ethnicity from multiple Pasifika nations combined with or without Māori. All participants had current full-time NRL contracts and previous match-play experience with a minimum of one professional top grade NRL match played. Athletes self-selected time slots to participate in focus groups or 1:1 interviews. Due to the nature of the professional season, player time schedules and breaks were very limited. This resulted in the inability for the research team to categorise the participants into specific demographic groups, age and/or playing experience, or allocate consistent numbers of participants to each focus group. As a result, the data collection was adaptable to the ever-changing professional sport environment.

Table 4-2***Data Collection Groups***

Focus Group 1	Focus Group 2	Focus Group3	1:1 Interviews
Participants (n=9) (P1,P2,P3,P4,P5,P6,P7,P8,P9)	Participants (n=2) (P15,P16)	Participants (n=2) (P17,P18)	Participants (n=5) (P10,P11,P12,P13,P14)

4.3 Primary Categories/Themes

Four primary categories identified through the thematic analysis were: (1) Defining mental well-being - *the ways that players define what mental well-being is and what it 'looks like' to them*, (2) navigating cultural differences - *the task of living and working environments that challenge cultural perspectives and managing multi-*

dimensional relationships within those environments, (3) player-coach relationships - the way in which athletes perceive their working relationship, coaching practice philosophy and its impact, and (4) trust and autonomous behaviour - how athletes view their environment and their individual roles to keep their mental well-being in balance.

Secondary, lower order themes also emerged within each primary category. Corresponding lower order categories were the balance and maintenance factors which impacted each topic. These themes are presented under each primary category with corresponding headings. Recommendations that players put forward, where they had direct advice, and recommendations for sport organisations, are not included in this chapter (unless they relate directly to the themes identified) but are included in the appendix section (Appendix E).

4.4 Defining Mental Well-being

The majority of athletes associated mental well-being with keeping life in a good state of balance, free from stress and pressures from their professional world. Most remarked, in one way or another, that mental well-being was the ability to encompass, spiritual, physical and mental aspects of life. It encapsulated every aspect of who they are, how they feel, think and see their environment and the challenges to maintain that balance.

When I think about it [referring to mental well-being], it's about how things are at home, how you are feeling at trainings, which then leads into how you're feeling leading into a game, and those sorts of things (Participant 10).

Another player noted:

My mental well-being is my headspace, how I handle stress, how I deal with it, how I overcome stuff, and how I go about my business every day, to make sure I'm not mentally frustrated, I'm happy, the family's happy. I'm balanced, so yeah that's how I see it (Participant 13).

Others remarked that mental well-being includes having someone around to check up on you, for both mental and physical needs.

For me [mental well-being] it's like when I go to talk to someone, it's not for them to necessarily give me the answers, but it's for them to just listen, some people listen to learn, and some people listen to reply. But I don't need a reply, I just need someone to listen, you know be that ear, hear what I say and learn from it (Participant 5).

Numerous players echoed the sentiment that being heard, and their voices acknowledged, was a key component of mental well-being.

Well-being is being who you really are, having that faith your family have your back and yeah, your voice is heard even when you're being yourself (Participant 3).

Others expressed that mental well-being was about knowing the real person. Away from the spotlight, the media, and from public opinion or pressures.

I think it's [referring to mental well-being] just how you are, how you really are, and there is two people, the person they see on tv and the kid that stays up at night [worrying about the pressures]. You got to know who is the real person, not what the world paints you as, but who you really are (Participant 1).

Many participants commented that the perception from media and public pressures affected their mental well-being and alluded to those pressures extending onto their loved ones. Although some had learnt to handle these external pressures, it still weighed heavily on family members. In some cases, they felt tremendous pain as a result of their family's exposure to public scrutiny and scapegoating.

Probably for me the biggest stress to my well-being is the outside noise [public pressure and media]. I guess it is through my family as well, so it affects me, which then falls straight onto my shoulders. Because I don't like hearing from them getting upset. I'm easy to just block it out, but yeah it affects them which is hard (Participant 17).

Another stated similarly:

Especially when the media are adding to it. I know my parents are really into that, and so my dad replies to all that shit, and gets caught up in it, and I guess that's what drives me so mad (Participant 18).

However, other players summarised their mental well-being as strongly linked to strength of identity and happiness within themselves.

Mental well-being and welfare for me is mostly feeling comfortable in who you are, and I think if you know who you are, then your well-being is quite fine! But I'm still trying to learn, change, evolve, and now that I'm back home, I think because I'm closer to where I belong, I feel like it's my right to understand who I am and be more connected to my culture (Participant 15).

Similarly, many players felt mental well-being was associated with who they are as a person and was related to a shared cultural identity with teammates.

You know we are all pretty much coming from the same cultural beliefs and that, so yeah that's pretty much most of our team, well over 90% are Poly, so it's good. It keeps us tight, there are similar cultural beliefs there for all of us, we know what's expected of us from our families (Participant 12).

Connection to heritage, ancestors, culture, whakapapa (genealogy), aiga/whānau (extended family) and ultimately who they are as Māori and Pasifika athletes was highly important.

I reckon I'm a bit more distant this year because we have a lot of new faces here, whereas last year there was a lot of familiar faces that had been around a while, so I was more comfortable with everyone. I guess, felt safer in the environment, but we also have lots in common. Where we are from, our people, our history, the struggles growing up, are all pretty similar (Participant 14).

4.5 The Connection Between Home and Work Life – Navigating Mental Well-being

4.5.1 Faith and Family

The daily challenges that impact the athletes mental well-being were from a combination of both external and internal environmental factors. For many, connection with family and collective spirituality within varying faith denominations were strong factors in maintaining well-being and a balanced outlook on life. Faith and family were shown to provide helpful perspective during challenging times.

My family's quite strong and we talk about faith, we are Christian, so I think that side of things, being in-tune with it, with the spirituality, definitely helps me stay focused, it keeps me balanced (Participant 16).

Numerous participants kōrero revealed their parents provided primary counsel, guidance, and support towards helping keep life pressures as an NRL athlete in perspective.

I mainly go to my family, mum and dad, I guess I just revert back to them if I need help, or I'm stressed about stuff. Yeah, they are my primary person for sure (Participant 13).

Another athlete stated:

Family is everything, they keep you grounded. You just know they are never going to judge you on anything you do. So, no matter what the situation you are in they still have your back. And when you are in public, you don't know if those people have your back [referring to outsiders] (Participant 3).

Notably, for those who had partners/wives, their partners were very much the primary constant in their lives. They offered stability, accountability and grounding, while shouldering many of the outside stressors and pressures on their behalf. A few participants noted that partners were responsible for keeping them in check and many athletes had been with their partners or wives since high school.

My wife takes all the stress for us to be honest and keeps me in check (Participant 15).

Another remarked:

We got together back in high school, so we were young. I was [young] we had three kids under three years at one stage. Still being quite young looking back, I don't know how we did it mentally. I was probably all over the shop. I base everything around my family, so without really knowing it I just do it naturally. That's who I am. Protecting them is everything. They keep me balanced, the trust is always there, no matter what, that maintains my well-being (Participant 10).

Feeling safe within a trusting environment, surrounded by family, for majority of the participants was key to maintaining a balanced state.

4.5.2 Pressure and Obligational Responsibility

On the other hand, numerous athletes also advised that family pressures and expectations from partners/wives, parents and/or extended family members could be contributing factors towards stress.

Sometimes when I go home and then your partner keeps reminding you about the little things, you start to get overwhelmed, you start to doubt yourself, then everything starts coming in your mind. Like what's happening, what am I going to do, why am I doing this, who am I doing this for (Participant 5).

Living up to cultural responsibilities or expectations could often be an added stressor.

When I need to perform, I don't need to have those pressures from home life or whatever. When I was living at home with my partner, I always felt the pressure from family, their expectations. But now I have my own family and moved out from my parents, so not feeling as much pressure (Participant 16).

Another added:

My parents maintain me, but that's why for most of us we have soft spots for our parents, and so when they ask for stuff it can be hard. But they don't probably realise but most of the boys' families are from the Islands, and they don't really know or understand [the pressure/expectation they place on us]. But they are still living in the Island ways, but we are here in New Zealand (Participant 17).

When asked whether athletes felt pressured to live in the traditional cultural ways many responded:

I think 100%, yeah, I think it's the biggest thing [referring to cultural pressures and obligations impacting mental well-being] I think its possibly the only thing, you know, it's like bridging two worlds in a way and how do I manage that? (Participant 15).

4.5.3 Social Environments - Home and Work

Maintaining mental well-being was strongly associated with social environments and connection between home and working environments. Maintenance was provided by partners or wives, extended families and their respective NRL organisation.

I think when it comes to well-being, I think it's the care and background of a player, where you know I see it as the Well-being Manager [referring to the clubs well-being support] you know, someone to check up on us, and that can be mentally or physically, where if we are struggling in those areas, I think mainly for us, it's well-being at home, that's the biggest one (Participant 11).

It was further noted:

Decisions that I make [referring to maintenance of mental well-being] I guess are always based around the family, but I suppose apart from that, I've also been to a lot of talks over the years [facilitated by NRL clubs], so I've sort of picked up things along the way, tools to help me [these included ex-player mentorship, player-lead leadership groups, educational trainings as part of NRL welfare programmes], here and through other clubs too, I suppose not all of them worked out for me, but along the way I figured it out (Participant 10).

Additionally, many players felt that separating home from their organisational employment world was healthy but noted both environments could negatively impact one another. It was stated that pressures from home environments could mentally weigh heavy when preparing for a game.

If I'm upset, with my partner or we have a disagreement before a game, then that sort of thing really bugs me before playing. Because I want to have a clear mind (Participant 18).

Additionally, challenges and stress from club environments and public pressures could creep into homelife.

I think I've been guilty of really taking it home [referring to work related stress], yeah, I guess over time I got over it, as I started to get older, I've slowly learnt to deal with it better, manage it and process things better (Participant 10).

4.6 Navigating Cultural Differences -Two Worlds

4.6.1 Varying World Views

For all athletes participating in this study there was a recurrent thread in their stories and experiences that referred to navigating cultural traditions in the modern Aotearoa and professional sports league. These narratives arose from athletes who were all rooted by their connection to aiga² or whānau³ and whakapapa⁴. Examining individual narrative threads, each grappled with operating in a landscape where varying world views, expectations and behaviours interacted.

You know when you are younger, you're a Poly [Polynesian] boy, you're a bit shy to speak up, but we are all encouraged here to do it, because we want to hear from everyone and what they think and feel. Yeah, and to make sure everyone has a voice, no matter what. But I know its real hard, because they are so shy and that's what they have come from, to stay quiet, to not speak out [a cultural mark of respect for elders] to do as your told out of respect [even if they disagree] whereas here they [referring to club staff] want you to speak up. But that's not who we are (Participant 14).

Athletes spoke about grappling to maintain their connections and traditions, while traversing a Western environment and preserve a Western perspective of professionalism and employment expectations. The challenge others had in understanding cultural differences, its role towards how individual athletes think, feel and respond to their environment was often misunderstood from non-Māori or non-Pasifika individuals who were working or living with the participants.

² Aiga- Samoan word for family

³ Whānau-Māori word for family

⁴ Whakapapa- a line of descent from ancestors; genealogy

I think just sitting down and getting to know us better (referring to club football personnel) and understand our backgrounds and where we come from, because most Kiwis have similar backgrounds, especially the Pasifika and Māori boys, like all similar upbringings. So, I think, if they just sat down and understood what it's like at home and how we have been brought up, and get to know them better, there would probably be a bit more respect there. I mean I wouldn't say they don't respect us, they definitely respect the boys, but I just think they don't understand us from where we come from, they come from a different world, different perspective, different views (Participant 14).

4.6.2 Lack of Cultural Understanding

There was particular reference towards a lack of knowledge from Pākehā/Palagi⁵ wives or partners, often resulting in the root of many disagreements relating to cultural expectations, financial responsibilities and the values and principles of faith and respect before loved ones. These struggles arose around concepts that were often conceptually hard for Pākehā/Palagi partners to understand. These pertained to cultural values where whānau and aiga (not reserved to the traditional Western nuclear family) needs are placed before your own and at times your own wife or partner and children.

Yeah, I don't think people really know, that understanding that we like play for the family. Yeah, I don't think people really know or understand. Like they say you know you play for your mum and dad, but no, we literally play to feed the family, like literally. And it's not at all like just feed my kids, I don't even have a lot of kids of my own yet. I'm not even the oldest in my family, but I had to, but I literally had to provide like that (Participant 13).

When players were asked to explain some of these cultural barriers they encountered regularly, there was some deeply rooted kōrero and experiences of hardship recited.

⁵ Pākehā/Palagi- a white person

For guys like myself if Māori or Pasifika and you have white partners or even Australian, when it comes to understanding culture, I think it can be really hard for them to understand, which then puts pressure on us more. Well look, I'm a bit older, I can deal with it, but I think it puts a bit of stress on, or added pressure on the younger ones, depending if you have a partner. If you've not grown up here, you don't understand how the culture works, and you're not living and breathing it. So, when it comes to say family stuff, it's a lot harder for those kinds of things for them to understand or wrap their heads around [they come from a different value system and different understanding of family structure or responsibility to provide] for us providing for the family never stops (Participant 15).

4.6.3 Cultural Obligations - Fa'alavelave

Pressure to provide for family are sometimes exacerbated by significant responsibility towards financial and cultural contributions. These responsibilities are deeply embedded, particularly within the Pasifika culture. Therefore, the concept of fa'alavelave⁶ or cultural giving, had significant narrative discourse for many athletes. They viewed it as a responsibility, often misinterpreted through the Western lens as a burden. However, that concept was refuted by many. Rather, it was a sense of responsibility to their family, a duty, respect for their elders and cultural obligation that they humbly obliged. Consequently, many regarded it as a gift to be able to give back but had at times felt it weigh heavy.

She [the participant's partner] used to talk about why does everyone put so much pressure on you, why do you have to do this, give that, or give to this, give to them, they should be looking after their own. But I was like, well for you, you might see that, but for me it's different. I see it like I've been blessed with the opportunity to do this for my family, and my brothers and sisters they love it, they always say no to me we are good, but I love to do this for them. You know we have a good system going now, but yeah that was a big cultural difference with my partner and I (Participant 13).

⁶ Fa'alavelave- cultural financial responsibility and giving.

Another explained:

I just think for myself because I was the oldest, I just felt responsible to do that, so until I guess you stand on your own two feet and stand up to it, you'll just keep doing it [referring to constantly financially supporting extended family members out of duty, obligation and respect]. It feels like that's your responsibility anyway, because that's how you are brought up, you know what I mean...if you're the oldest son, you look after your family, you do whatever it takes, yes you help to give them [your family] a better life. So, they come to me, you're the first one they go to, you know what I mean. So, I think when it's like that, it's a bit tough to manage sometimes (Participant 15).

For some, there were elements of shame that they didn't talk about or have the courage to seek advice for. At times, some players noted it had taken years building strength and understanding to openly speak with elders about cultural contributions and financial giving. There was a sense of hardship and hesitation towards such conversations and negotiating family expectations towards this cultural obligation.

A lot of the boys they want to say it, but then I don't think they have the confidence to open up about it. Where I think I'm ashamed, or maybe not so much ashamed but yeah, it's really hard. It's a private thing you know, and they don't want to let it all out where someone might say something. (Participant 11).

4.6.4 Respecting Ones' Family Obligation

The cultural emphasis is that the individual sets aside their personal needs to serve the wider needs of their parents and wider families, and fulfilling this responsibility underpinned many of the athlete's intrinsic motivation as NRL professionals. When asked about how their role as an NRL player was viewed and whether their profession was a passion, or a job, there was robust discussions amongst players.

Over the years it's changed for me. You know when I played my first NRL game it was probably the same, because it was a goal I'd set out to achieve for so long. So, to be able to achieve that, I felt like I was doing my family proud. And then I got that feeling again when I got to play for New Zealand for the first time. So, I think naturally over time as your goals change, your feelings change towards it. When you play NRL I feel like you're representing them [family], but not necessarily for yourself. Everything is about the team, naturally you want to do well, you're part of that team, but when you do put on a Māori or Kiwis jersey for me, you really feel like you are representing yourself, who you really are, your family, your people (Participant 10).

There were mixed responses with regards to how the athletes perceived and viewed an NRL player's role. Many regarded it as a job, while others still carried that burning desire cultivated as a youngster. One player encapsulated the pressures of playing NRL and highlighted the mixed emotions between wins and losses.

Yeah, I think our families as Polynesians I don't think they really see the bigger picture of this world. This is our job we try to enjoy it and you know earn a little bit more, and they can get those benefits out of it, but I don't think they get the big picture. Where you can come back from a loss and think you are all good, you're on a contract, but you constantly play with fear over you. All the time because a lot of players over the last year you know, maybe didn't perform or didn't get the opportunity to perform, that can play a big impact in your career. I've talked to other boys, you can see it on the field too, where they don't have the care, or drive, or motivation to try and play good, but it's always there in the back of your head. We play for them [referring to family] to provide for them (Participant 11).

Another player explained:

When I play, I always go hard whether its Rep footy [playing for your country] or NRL. But it's about doing it for myself and for my family, they are relying on me to provide (Participant 12).

4.6.5 Faith, Spirituality and Identity

A final element of navigating cultural differences related to practicing faith and spirituality in environments where faith may not be supported. Most of the players were involved within their respective faiths and worship practices. A small group had been raised with faith-based values but were not practising members within any religious denomination. Faith and culture were often intertwined in discussions, particularly for Pasifika participants. For the majority of participants, they were strengthened by cultural and faith values.

I think it's a lot easier here for players than in Australia. When I left, I was 16, I lost a lot of my way. I knew my culture, I knew who I was, but I left the church behind, I left my identity, I left a lot, but still I was like I'm Māori, I'll keep living that as long as I live in Australia. But I do feel when you come back here, then you start feeling like you're connected to the land, connected to where you live, and you find out a lot more about yourself. Because that's who you are, but when you are over there, you push it away because you don't want to be different (Participant 15).

Another athlete commented:

I think it's just about being comfortable in what you believe. I am not ashamed of my faith in any way, and I'm comfortable doing it in front of the boys or showing it in front of them. But they also have to be comfortable with me doing it in front of them, the respect for each other, to respect each other's different values and faith (Participant 11).

Faith was strongly connected to cultural obligations and financial giving, through tithing contributions to their church (financial contributions) and financial obligations to their families. For Pasifika and Māori communities, these cultural obligations are the cornerstone of aiga/whānau collective community care and responsibility. They are closely tied to concepts of cultural identity, cultural obligation and responsibility and living in the traditional ways.

You know it's how my parents grew up and then passed it down to us, where they love to give [referring to financial contributions and service work to their communities] and not receive, so with that comes blessings (Participant 11).

Other participants spoke about the blessing of prayer sessions, which helped unite players together and cope with everyday stressors and pressures of the NRL season, while maintaining connection to collective cultural and shared faith-based values. Regularly sharing in spiritual fellowship facilitated by player-organised prayer sessions, aided management of mental well-being. This not only unified players together, but collectively personified and bonded them through living faith-based principles.

You know we all pretty much come from the same cultural beliefs and that, so yeah that's pretty much the whole team, well over 90% are Poly, so yeah it keeps us tight, we know what's expected of us culturally, plus we have our connect groups [player-led prayer groups] with the boys. So, we can help each other, we have the same cultural beliefs (Participant 12)

4.7 Player-Coach Relationships

The player-coach relationship is a complex and multi-layered concept. Within this category a number of underlying secondary themes arose. The following data highlighted; authenticity, coaching philosophy/style, player debrief and post-match review, value of time, player motivation and individuality as key components within the player-coach relationship.

4.7.1 Authenticity

Athletes expressed the importance of authenticity as a component of mental well-being management. The ability to be your true self, rather than the person people expect you to be.

Some of us have to be really different here to what we are at home (Participant 3).

There was discussions amongst the focus groups whether athletes wore a metaphorical 'mask', in fear their true identity would be less favourable or deemed to lack professionalism. This narrative was closely linked to athletes opting to behave differently around their families, than in their workplace environment.

Yeah, for sure, it's really around everyone at the club, we have to be professional, which is different from who we probably are (Participant 8).

Another said:

I think a lot of boys are different around the coaches because it's quite hard because obviously, especially for the team side of things, you want to be playing NRL first grade every week. So, if you're doing something that they don't approve of and see you doing it, then it bloody jeopardises your position in the team, or in the club. So, when we are doing things away from the coaches, you're always going to be different because you feel safer around the group of boys because you can really be yourself (Participant 15).

4.7.2 Coaching Philosophy/Style

A further thread within the player-coach relationship category was around coaching style/philosophy and communication. Several athletes expressed a desire for coaches to be athlete centred, more individual focused with tailored training approaches and more holistically orientated.

We are all individuals, so we need to work on individuals before the team. So as a club and organisation, they need to break it down [training structures re-considered] into little squads, coming at different times [individually focussed] (Participant 13).

Another athlete commented:

I don't think they [referring to coaching staff] take into account that everyone is different, different body-shape, injuries etc. So, you as individual player in your role is still going to be different to somebody else who's playing the same role or position, how you both see the game is different. We are unique. So, it would be good to train our individual strengths, work on ourselves more, work our bodies specifically to our individual need, be a bit more holistic, work on our individual areas we need improving, that might be mental or physical [referring to coaching style/philosophy and club organisational focus being open to a different approach] (Participant 10).

Within this lower order theme, athletes underscored the importance of personal connections between players and coaches as a driving component for team unity. Players expressed it was difficult at times approaching coaches and voicing their struggles.

I think what it was for me was at the time I felt like I was trying but I felt like I wasn't getting the answers of what I needed to do to improve. So, then I probably stopped knocking on his door, it's a hard one, just the environment, it's not a regular environment. I think what stopped me a lot of times was I don't want him to think I've got a bad attitude, because yeah it may come across like that, but ultimately, I'm just wanting to seek guidance or answers, or for goals to get better (Participant 10).

4.7.3 Player Debrief and Post-Match Review

Player feedback/debrief and post-match review delivery across the NRL was a topical debate. There was a real divide amongst this cohort whether collective group post-match review and individual player feedback/debrief should be delivered in their current forms. Current NRL practice/feedback delivery structure predominantly delivers post-match reviews as a large playing group, rather than kept to individual coach/player communication.

Yeah, it puts fear into them [referring to other players, particularly the younger less-seasoned players]. But yeah, it's hard, but it is also just part of the game. You have got to be accountable for your actions. And while you shouldn't be thinking about it when you're playing (referring to the post-match review sessions), that's also how you learn (Participant 14).

However, another athlete stated:

The thing that players need to understand, is that coaches' jobs are on the line for the things we do on the field. So, if players can't except when a coach is pointing out the wrongs, then yeah, they shouldn't be really playing the game. But I understand that if the coach is hammering a guy, to the point where there is no confidence, then yeah, it's understandable for guys to stress about stuff before-hand. But if coaches are doing that, you are definitely going to get issues (Participant 18).

4.7.4 Value of Time

Unravelling within player-coach relationships was a lower order secondary theme around time values. Exchanges around the value of time from a coach's perspectives and the player's value of down-time to recover mentally and physically was debated. It was contended that time needs to be afforded to engage with their families, separated out from 'no physical training recovery days'.

I think because our days are so full on, we go home and those are supposed to be our recovery days. But obviously a lot of us have families and kids, where it's then not a recovery day because it's just another active day at home. It's draining as well, rather than it being an active mental or physical recovery day. I think they forget that because we have not come in, they think well we have had a day off, so just going to sit at home. But we have families, they want to go out do things, keep the kids happy, you can't just sit indoors. So that side of things then pushes you to lose your focus or stress out and that affects us a lot to our well-being (Participant 18).

There was some concern that the lack of time spent around family had reflected badly on the players themselves, adding more pressure.

Time has a big impact on my kids [referring to time spent at trainings and overseas travel]. It models they can't depend on me or me to be there. So, it has a massive backlash and I guess I haven't really thought about it in this way before, but it can be massive for how my kids depend on me or start to think they can't (Participant 10).

Other athletes shared the following sentiment:

If we lightened the load a little, I think we would be more stress free. The more we are at the club environment the more you stress out, knowing I have to do so much, with so many expectations, it's never enough. So, when it comes to game day and you don't perform, then it just implodes, and everything is just dragged out. Whereas if you are at home more with your family, you're more at peace with yourself and that just helps to let go of everything (Participant 11).

4.7.5 Player Motivation

Player-coach relationships were also associated to intrinsic and extrinsic motivation and specifically to both player and coaches having mutual cultural understanding for one another. Within this concept the narrative threads highlighted the importance of coaches being able to tap into each player on a personal level, having taken the time to know that player, be empathetic to the varying pressures they are under from both their home environment and performance expectations. There was suggestion that coaches need to take more time to fully understand and learn about each player and what things have a motivating impact. One player confessed:

I mean over here it's a bit different now from when I was playing in Australia. My Mrs came to all our games, was introduced to the coach and staff, so we all had a close relationship with each other. But over here we haven't done that, no real specific reason, I guess we just have a lot of kids now, we are more private. I guess I just get on with the things I have to do, but they don't really know me like they did at my previous club, so if there was stuff on my mind, I keep it private and try block it out (Participant 12).

Another player explained:

A great example is this year and how our season has gone. You know we are up and down. We had a lot of expectations of making the top eight or top four, and then it goes the other way and you kind of lose sight and the enjoyment of the game and then you start to see it as a job. Then you start to wake up and don't want to go in today. You need that reminder from people around you, to get your focus back [referring to coaching staff] (Participant 11).

However, another summed up their motivation by stating:

It's about when things are tough, that yes you might lose four games straight, then a win is only a week away. Then it changes your confidence, it changes your belief, it changes the way you feel, it changes your energy, but it's about trying to make those boys who struggle believe that. And when you have five or six losses in a row, that's when you start feeling it. It becomes a job because nothing has changed, nothing is changing at the club, you feel like you're doing the same stuff, you're working really hard, but nothing is changing on the field, and you're not getting the results. But a win is only a week away. So, it's up to the coach to help you find that motivation to help you get back on track (Participant 15).

While others agreed that motivation came from family, but coaches need to understand that and work with it:

It's about family, they keep us grounded, they keep us motivated, coaches just need to understand that, then it's not hard to find what to say to us when we need it (Participant 2).

4.7.6 Individuality

Lastly, within this category, athletes commented that programmes need to be specific to each individual player. There was a strong call from athletes for organisational governance to understand that each player's body is unique, has sustained specific past injuries, and subsequently has varying strengths and weakness both mentally and physically.

I'm a big believer in focussing on us and focussing on our own strengths. Because ultimately when you get to the back end of the year [end of NRL playing season into final play-off rounds] you want to be able to perform to your strengths consistently and you can't do that unless you develop yourself. So as a team and club that needs to be the focus and supported from the top [referring to upper management and governance] (Participant 10).

Reflecting on coaching styles it was emphasised a desire for coaches to believe in them as individuals, and as a team.

The one that sticks out the most is coaches believing in who you are and the way you play and then adapting to that style [coaches being flexible in their coaching philosophy to suit the players they have in their squad]. A coach once said to me, mate, you do you, you play your way and I'll make sure people around you can support you. So that gives you self-belief in your ability, it keeps you accountable. Then you know the coaches believes in your ability and trust what you do so autonomy to do what you want to do and play to your full ability (Participant 15).

4.8 Trust and Autonomous Behaviour

The fourth primary category identified proved to be fundamental to athlete's overall mental well-being. Trust and autonomy were critical elements that needed to exist in all areas of the athlete's lives and within their respective NRL club environment. Trust and autonomy were interlinked to player performance on the football field, individual perceptions of their voices being valued and heard, and their ability to be self-directed in the performance environment.

4.8.1 Reciprocal Trust

Athletes' expressed the need for reciprocal trusting relationship with coaches, managers, and teammates. Without trust, an open transparent loop of communication between players' and coaches was unattainable.

What you do in your own time is up to you, if you're not a professional athlete and you don't want to be a part of the team, you won't then make the sacrifices to do whatever it takes to be ready. So, you need to put it all back in the players hands [referring to trusting players on and off the field], if you don't want to do it, then you're just not in the team, simple! (Participant 15).

Others echoed this sentiment by stating:

And then it comes down to accountability, if you're not accountable then you're not going to be doing the right things, then it shows anyways, you can see it. So, then you just go, well we will put someone else in that role that actually wants to be here. So that's mostly a big element, is making sure everyone is accountable for their actions on and off the field (Participant 16).

Players all agreed that without reciprocal trust, performance outcomes were not achievable.

Trust and openness, yeah, I think that would help [with relationships to the coaches]. But it all comes down to a player and his experiences and pressures he's under personally. Because some players may be going through way more, or have bigger responsibilities and obligations to their families, so it really depends on that. And some boys put a mask over their faces and act like they are not bothered by situations [at home or at the club environment]. But really, they have a lot to deal with they just don't want anyone else to know about it. You know, deep down they are going through a lot, that affects you in a game on the field and in your home life, but mostly we keep it private. It can be detrimental if we let the coaches know [referring to fear of losing their spot on the playing roster if they are not seen to be mentally coping] (Participant 11).

4.8.2 Autonomy

The participants expressed a desire for each voice to be individually heard, valued and considered. There was the suggestion that honesty and player review had greater impact for change when given by fellow team-mates as opposed to coaches. Accountability to their team-mates was also far greater and motivation to correct mistakes to aid the collective team performance was increased if players were afforded the opportunity to autonomously lead performance strategy and reflective reviews.

It's way harder in front of the boys [referring to speaking out and not taking ownership of individual accountability], because you are on the field with them, you know you go through a lot with them. You go through pre-season trainings and the bond is there. So, it's way harder to get it from the boys [referring to getting pulled up for mistakes or poor effort] than if the coaches blow you up. It gives me confidence to know its ok this is what I did wrong when I hear it from the boys, this is what I need to fix, this is what I want from me, this is how I will do it. I'm willing to do it because it's for them, they are the ones I'm on the field with. Whereas when you hear it from the coach, yeah, your head goes down, you shut down (Participant 11).

Other comments showed frustration that upper management and coaches asked for feedback but would not action player recommendations.

When we voice our opinions, they need to be heard. Give us the chance to action it, to lead ourselves. No point asking for our opinions then not listening or allowing us to change things (Participant 1).

Others expressed irritation around not being afforded opportunities towards individual leadership and self-governance on the football field, this in turn affected their motivation and ultimately players perception of how much trust the coaches had in each of them and as a team.

If they don't believe in us [referring to opportunities to lead the decisions of play on the football field] then it's not going to help our motivation. Coaches need to trust and believe in the group as a whole, allow us to make decisions and lead ourselves (Participant 15).

4.9 Summary

This chapter examined findings from semi-structured focus groups and individual interviews with 18 Indigenous Māori and Pasifika professional NRL male athletes. It provides a summary of the research participant demographics and offered definitions of mental well-being from a player's perspective through their cultural lens. Four primary categories were presented that arose from data analysis, with players' viewpoints captured via recited narrative stories. Dialogue has been introduced that encapsulate the cohort's definitions of mental well-being and the areas that impact the maintenance of that, both positively and negatively. The four primary categories

identified were: (1) Defining mental well-being, (2) navigating cultural differences, (3) player-coach relationships, and (4) trust and autonomous behaviour. Each category was individually introduced and associated secondary lower order themes were presented within the scope of their respective categories.

Chapter 5 Discussion

5.1 Introduction

This chapter dives into each of the four primary themes and critically discusses their relevance in relation to existing academic literature. Additional recommendations, directly from participants are also documented and further contained within Appendix E. These additional threads are highly valuable for future NSO's and NRL club organisations to consider but resided outside the scope of the four primary themes. Therefore, they are offered as an additional appendix.

The purpose of this study is to explore professional Māori and Pasifika RL players' perspectives of mental well-being and how players manage it. Imbedded throughout this discussion is the sub-theme - player motivation. It was found to be interconnected to many of the primary themes throughout our data. Therefore, it is presented throughout this discussion via interweaving threads as and where applicable. It is hoped that this discussion will aid future researchers and sport organisations to better understand, respond to, and work with Māori and Pasifika NRL players. Following the discussion, study limitations are presented and recommendations for future research offered prior to the final concluding chapter.

5.2 Defining Mental Well-being

The World Health Organization [WHO] (2014) defines mental well-being as part of an over-arching definition of complete mental health. This definition provides a generalised overview of holistic health but does not necessarily encapsulate a wide range of world views (cultural lens) or varying epistemological and ontological positioning. The findings of my study suggest that this cohort of Māori and Pasifika athletes, saw mental well-being as keeping life in a good state of balance, free from excessive stress and pressures. For these participants, mental well-being was reflected in the links between: Personal identity, performance environments, social connections, relationships, states of happiness and concern for loved ones (i.e., partners, children, family members and their associated cultural communities). These findings suggest that even mental well-being (as a component of holistic 'health') is not easily quantifiable and includes attributes contributing to the complete human character. This aligns with Durie's (2011) thoughts, affirming well-being is relational, in terms of connection to all aspects which make up the human experience. These findings also align with Marsters'

(2017) discoveries among Pasifika athletes, that positive mental well-being is directly impacted by social connections and a collective orientation to family and the individual athletes' community.

For Māori and Pasifika people, identity of self is often viewed in relational terms as a collective community group, rather than a singular individual, as outlined in previous chapters of this thesis (Anae, 2010; Durie, 1994; Mo'a, 2015; Ngawati, 2013; Tamasese et al., 2005; Tuagalu, 2008). Ngawati (2013) reports key factors for Indigenous development are predicated by how Indigenous people are informed, which she asserts is dependent on unique structures and functions specific to the relational tribal community - i.e., what informs the tribal communities' epistemological and ontological positioning or cultural lens. Therefore, Ngawati (2013) determines success for Indigenous development is achieved when objectives focus on advancement of the Indigenous community's collective health and well-being aspirations. Additionally, Keung (2018) and Stanley (2020) both remark there is a common misalignment between Western perspectives of individualised-identity and collective orientation for Māori and Pasifika, in elite youth sport development. Interestingly, although our cohorts' kōrero highlighted the need for collective orientation in their performance setting (similar to what other research has suggested), our participants also highlighted the importance of individualised athlete-centred approaches. Our data suggests that for Māori and Pasifika, individualised and collective structures need to co-exist within the performance environment to support their holistic needs. Subsequently, how our cohort of athletes view their mental well-being, was both from an individualised position and a collectivist community orientation. Therefore, to appropriately define, measure and manage mental well-being for both Māori and Pasifika in the high performance (HP) domain, requires acknowledgement and understanding of Māori and Pasifika world views. Durie (2006) embraced this sentiment stating:

There is no single measure of well-being; instead, a range of measures are necessary so that the circumstances of individuals and groups, as well as the relationships, perspectives, and assets can be quantified and monitored (p.15).

Despite our cohorts many shared commonalities and cultural backgrounds with one another, I'm cognisant that each athlete within this cohort have varied experiences, realities and views (Keung, 2018; Stanley, 2020). Therefore, mental well-being should be viewed as such; multifaceted and unique to each individual. But it is informed by

each athlete's social environment, cultural identity, individual's collective communities, as well as their ontological and epistemological lens.

5.2.1 The Connection Between Home and Work Life – Navigating Mental Well-being

Similar to Marsters (2017) and Keung (2018), our study reports the relationship between family and spirituality are strong factors in maintaining well-being and a balanced outlook on life. Faith and spirituality provides helpful perspective to our participants, as well as wisdom and direction in times of challenge. Horton (2014) acknowledges spirituality is a strong feature in the lives of Pasifika athletes and an important part of maintaining connections to community. Marsters (2017) corroborated this finding and affirmed spirituality was a key factor towards maintaining positive mental well-being for Pasifika athletes. Likewise, Manuela and Sibley (2013), Gordon et al. (2013), Panapa and Phillips (2014) all assert similar findings in relation to Pasifika peoples and the importance of faith and family for Pasifika communities. Alder (2015), Durie (2011), Hokowhitu (2012), Keung (2018), Erueti and Palmer (2014) and Ngawati (2013) all come to similar conclusions pertaining to Māori. Jointly, these studies affirm spirituality and faith practices (regardless of which denomination or practice they align with) are integral to Indigenous and Pasifika cultural value systems. They inform their world views and are a foundation of their collective well-being.

Within our study's findings, faith and cultural identity were intertwined concepts. Athletes' often discussed culture and faith synonymously with each other. This aligns with suggestions from Lakisa et al. (2019) that faith and culture are often closely linked to one another. Numerous players in my study expressed how they had collectively come together in 'connect groups' which met weekly with outside Christian ministry support. However, this was not observed by everyone within the playing squad for varying reasons. For many, such organised sessions conflicted with individual family obligations, location and travel constraints, as well as individual schedule conflicts to name a few. Furthermore, other members of the cohort expressed their desire to keep their spiritual practices away from the club environment to the comfort of their family or community worship gatherings. In a recent systematic review, Noh and Shahdan (2020) reviewed existing literature on religion/spirituality in sport from the psychological perspective. Fifty-Six studies met their research criteria. Findings indicated that religion/spirituality can play a significant role among athletes in numerous ways, for example: Alleviating anxiety, coping with uncertainties, and

building team cohesion. Although spirituality is often overlooked in sport psychology, Noh and Shahdan (2020) conclude; religion and spirituality can have positive effects on mental health and contribute to achieving better sporting performance, team unity and individual athlete performance output.

While some athletes in my study did not regularly attend formal faith gatherings, they still practised daily prayer rituals and almost all expressed a strong connection to faith as a core foundational value, as part of their cultural identity. But the importance of faith to many Māori and Pasifika athletes can provide challenges in a professional sport setting. For example, former New Zealand All Black Michael Jones', whose Christian faith and Samoan culture are well documented, highlighted in one documentary, the challenge and cost of juggling career commitments, and his unwavering reliance and adherence to his faith (Hamilton, 2015). In Jones' case, he publicly vowed to be unavailable for match-play on Sundays. Looking back retrospectively he is quoted as saying:

I'd always been brought up that Sunday was the Lord 's Day, it was the day we were always at church and with our family. There were a couple of times when it was tough, there was 1992 in Australia when there were a lot of injuries in the loose forwards and it was a Sunday game and I was fit and healthy, sitting there in the stands. They are your family when you're on tour and you're dying to be out there, but because of that conviction, you feel like you're letting people down. It was difficult, but I had to hang tough and stay true to what I was called to do as a Christian. It did tear me apart (Hamilton, 2015, para.14-16).

Our findings suggest that Pasifika athletes were more likely to talk openly about their spiritual reliance. However, given the cohort numbers and ratio of Māori to Pasifika participants, we do not endeavour to measure whether a foundational faith practice was 'more or less' entrenched in any of our cohort members.

Parents were also identified by our athletes as a primary source of counsel and support when managing the challenges of NRL life. Keung (2018) suggests that parents were seen to be more pivotal for guidance and support in the youth development years. She also reports a strong push from both Māori and Pasifika athletes' wanting to repay the sacrifices and the support their parents gave them through their playing development years. Unlike our study's findings however, there was no evidence that parental support

shifted from being a motivator to a stressor with youth athletes transitioning into a professional NRL career. Subsequently, our study supports Keung's (2018) findings, suggesting that parents and/or close family members were still regarded as the primary guidance and support for players at elite NRL level, as was similarly reported for youth development grade levels. It appears from the discussions with our participants, that the support from parents may be more sought after than the NRL club provisioned welfare/well-being assistance, regardless of the player's age or professional experience.

Additionally, partners and or wives, alongside parental support, seemed to offer a strong foundational anchor or primary constant in the lives of those athletes who weren't single. From our cohort, parents and partners were described as providing stability, accountability and grounding, while shouldering many of the outside stressors and pressures. In alignment with our findings, Marsters (2017) reports that spouses or significant others, were a primary factor towards positive mental well-being. Panapa and Phillips (2014) who looked at ethnic perspectives and understanding the lived experience of Pasifika men within the NRL, suggest that family provides social structures based upon loyalty and service, obligation, reverence, compassion, love and respect. These findings align with our cohorts' *kōrero*. Family (in the broad community sense) are the providers of a foundational structure. They are the sources of guidance, love, reciprocal trust and respect. These elements were seen to be essential towards the maintenance of mental well-being from our athletes' perspectives.

Conversely, Middleton et al. (2020) research investigated the ever-changing role played by the families of elite immigrant athletes during their acculturation into HP environments. They assert families play an important role in the development of elite athletes but suggest little is known about the unique role subsumed by the families once professional levels are realised. Our study does not look to address such questions directly, but from our cohort of Māori and Pasifika athletes' perspectives; family support continue to be one of the most constant stabilisers for maintaining mental well-being at the professional NRL level.

In sport psychology literature the concept of 'spill-over' (the resultant effect of potential negativity and or interference from athletes' performance demands of competitive sport and the efforts to maintain positive relationships with their partners) was examined. Jowett and Cramer (2009) assert findings indicated that trust, commitment and communication, were not strongly related to spill-over effects on

performance. However, they noted, that mechanisms linked to perceived negative transactions, impacted athletes' mood satisfaction and or associated depression. This was found through spill-over effects. Jowett and Cramer (2009) argue, personal relationships and sport are likely to contribute to athletes' overall performance success and well-being. These conclusions resonate with our participants' *kōrero*. We affirm family and positive personal relationships are integral components to performance success and well-being balance.

5.2.2 Navigating Organisational Environments

Additionally, mental well-being balance was also seen to be related to the club organisational environment. This aligns with Keung (2018) who argues organisations have a responsibility to provide support for athletes - emotional, mental, or physical well-being. Likewise, Marsters (2017) and Horton (2014) both noted the role those social systems within NRL clubs play in contributing to athlete welfare and well-being. Lakisa et al. (2019) in their review of past NRL players' experiences from both Māori and Pasifika heritage players, state that social environments within club organisations are critical to fostering kinship amongst athlete playing groups. They further remark, cultivating cultural identity was also found to be vital for players' happiness and performance motivation. This reiterates our assertion that there is a delicate balance between home and work environments, which are critical components towards athlete mental well-being and maintenance.

5.2.3 Team Culture

In a study which examined the success of a professional Aotearoa rugby team (2014 ITM Cup Champions), the Manawatu Turbos, Cole and Martin (2018) looked at organisational culture in theory and practice to investigate winning team culture environments. Key findings stated, a need to formally recognise culture, including establishing and reinforcing values. Moreover, they conclude that team management requires an organisational structure which harnesses collective leadership to allow a winning team environment to flourish. Additionally, organisational culture is an emerging topic in sport psychology as well. Recent literature has argued that creating and maintaining HP cultures is a key function of sport organisations. In an article which investigates intervention strategies aimed at creating a winning team culture, Henriksen (2015) remarked such interventions require motivation for change, learning/designing new strategies and collective team values to be embraced. Henriksen (2015) reports

implementing these values into a team structural HP environment is the foundation for creating a HP team culture. Therefore, we can hypothesise based on our data, that the connection between athletes' home and professional environment is a critical area to navigate. Subsequently, how each athlete manages their mental well-being is dependent upon their home and work environments, support provided in both settings, their team culture and shared collective values with fellow team-mates.

5.3 Navigating Cultural Differences-Two Worlds

Cultural differences can be complex for athletes, their families, coaches and management to navigate. This was a strong primary theme which came through our thematic analysis. Hodge et al. (2011) emphasised the importance for organisations to have an understanding of the world view in which its members operate and be attuned to their needs. In the Aotearoa context, this requires cultural competency. This is formed by developing a basic understanding of te ao Māori (indigenous worldview) and tikanga (culturally appropriate practices and ways of doing things) and Pasifika cultural perspectives, to aid in navigating differing world views, particularly in sport (Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Hanrahan, 2004; Schinke & Hanrahan, 2009; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999).

A recent report from Sport NZ (2019) (the governing body of sport in Aotearoa) highlights the importance of cultural competency in sport practice. The report asserts that sport organisations should be encouraged to include cultural competencies specifically to Māori, to meet Te Tiriti O Waitangi obligations and the needs of Aotearoa sport landscape at large. In a similar vein, two recent government reports (an evolving plan and living document) focus on psychosocial and mental well-being recovery plan for Aotearoa along with a primary mental health, addiction and well-being service provision report. Collectively these documents draw specific focussed government efforts to increase Māori and Pasifika mental health and well-being services amidst the Covid-19 pandemic recovery Ministry of Health [MHO] (2020a, 2020b). Both reports lean towards positioning a collective government framework with the health sector and crown agencies. The aim is to provide a recovery plan that directly addresses multi-level interventions, community-led initiatives, uphold Te Tiriti O Waitangi, achieve improved equity, protect human rights, collaborative lead and a specific focus towards Māori and Pasifika cultural needs/values for improved well-being.

Additionally, Hodge et al. (2011) encourage cultural approaches towards sport consulting, as a way of ensuring key Māori aspirations are honoured and celebrated. Durie (1998a) and Mead (2003) support this argument asserting many Māori do not wish to follow a non-Māori ideology. Subsequently, a good starting point requires unpacking and comprehending the complex nature of navigating cultural differences. This is supported by Keung (2018) and Stanley (2020), who both recommend implementation of culturally inclusive and pragmatic procedures, to meet the multiple landscapes that athletes navigate daily.

Schinke et al. (2013) investigated the concept of navigating two world views in relation to migrant athletes embedding into another societal HP environment. They contend it is a fluid process. Athletes navigate between their home life, community and the HP environment. They argue this navigation could be one-directional (where the athlete was left alone to navigate) or two-way (where the host organisation provides support). The latter best aligns with our study's findings. Collective efforts are needed to support athletes to effectively navigate both cultural home environment, cultural responsibilities and professional sport organisational expectations.

Erueti and Palmer (2014) looked at how elite Māori athletes negotiate living in both te ao Māori and Te Ao Hurihuri (the world at large). Their findings indicate that Māori athletes have adapted to the dynamic and ever-changing context of Aotearoa. This presents a positive direction for the exploration and self-representation of cultural identity within HP sport practices. However, we suggest this requires organisations to acknowledge that they have a responsibility to support their athlete's cultural perspectives. More explicitly, kōrero from our data suggests that athletes are asking for their HP environments and organisational systems to adapt - to fit their Māori and Pasifika cultural values, needs and aspirations. Subsequently, Erueti and Palmer (2014) affirm that diverse strands of athlete's identity, when viewed as a collective part of a team and whānau, can result in enrichment of individual experiences and overall well-being. Our study draws parallels to support this. We assert; athletes feel more grounded, better supported, connected to heritage and culture, when afforded environments to openly share cultural values, principles and identity with team-mates. Our transcript dialogue supported this position by stating:

I think here at the club, there is some structure, but they need to build it a bit more around us. Yeah, I think they can support us a little more, around all of us as a group. I think it's hard for them to give us that environment here at the club, because they don't always understand our culture properly so it's hard to help. Plus, a lot of the boys they want to say things, but then they don't think they have the confidence to open up about it. Plus, they are shy, but also you know, it's a cultural thing, respect your elders, don't make a fuss. (Participant 11).

Another transcripts extract highlighted the need to feel connected to home and their identity here in Aotearoa:

I think it's a lot easier here for players than in Australia. When I left, I was 16, I lost a lot of my way. I knew my culture, I knew who I was, but I left the church behind, I left my identity, I left a lot, but still I was like I'm Māori, I'll keep living that as long as I live in Australia. But I do feel when you come back here, then you start feeling like your connected to the land, connected to where you live, and you find out a lot more about yourself. Because that's who you are, but when you are over there, you push it away because you don't want to be different. (Participant 15).

Hapeta et al. (2019) argue that a focus on Indigenous values of perspective, privilege, politics, protection, and people would be beneficial for overall sport praxis. Thus, any endeavours by sport organisations attempting to influence mental well-being need to be informed by cultural philosophical perspectives, to provide a culturally inclusive HP environment. This requires a need to challenge dominant/privileged perspectives. Therefore, organisations must value cultural equity. Athletes' testimonies throughout our data collection highlight a desire for the HP environment to fully embrace their cultural heritage and position club structures/strategies inclusive of these.

In our study, athletes perspective of what mental well-being is, was greatly informed by their cultural values and principles. Therefore, cultural equity should be given the platform it deserves in the HP space. Perspectives inform the way one thinks and acts and are deeply rooted within the athletes' psyche (Gorinski, & Fraser, 2006; Keung, 2018). Fa' alau (2016) suggests that values are developed through experiences, rather than specific instructions. Contrary to this, data from our study suggests that athletes' values and understanding of identity was cultivated by the influence and

direction of taught instructions from their parents and cultural communities. These foundational principles are imparted from childhood, and over time become ingrained in the individual as a way to see and navigate the world around them. For our Māori and Pasifika athletes' such deep imbedded values of love, respect, reciprocity and family, were cultural teachings they mentioned. These inform how they view and navigate the world around them through their cultural lens.

5.3.1 Importance of Family

From our data, key relationships such as parents and family members were found to be critical at all levels of sport practice. This finding is corroborated by numerous scholars who reported similar conclusions (Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017; McKenzie, 2019; Stanley, 2020). Additionally, family relationships both aid in and hinder players' mental well-being. For example, Lakisa et al. (2019), investigating retired NRL players, and Horton (2014), both found that professional players can be hindered by family expectations and cultural obligations - causing stress and anxiety. Our data also suggested that family pressures and cultural obligations were at times stress-provoking. Players suggested that this could contribute at times to feelings of anxiety around performance expectations, making the family proud and providing stability and financial security. But 'the family' (inclusive of the extended community) were also viewed as a very necessary support for all the athletes within our cohort. Additionally, they were regarded as pivotal to maintaining a balance of life stressors and overall mental well-being. Subsequently, family support was considered essential to maintaining cultural identity from our athletes.

In addition, athletes' highlighted the pressures that came with living in the traditional cultural ways or in meeting cultural obligations. Narrative data-threads depicted such feelings:

I think providing would be one of the biggest obligation pressures, especially financially. They [referring to their family] see us as NRL players and we have a great opportunity. They see a lot of things out there in the media and what not, what the boys get paid etc. but in reality, you only get 3-10% of it, but yeah most of it goes to our families, sent home. (Participant 11).

In Marsters (2017) and Keung (2018) investigations both remark that providing financial support, stability and making families proud are central aspects of psychosocial development and positive mental well-being. However, this at times comes with added

pressures to traverse cultural differences and maintain obligations, particularly during times of set-back or difficulty. This was confirmed by Horton's (2014) work which acknowledged setbacks for athletes can result in consequences that effect the athletes and their families. Injury, being dropped from playing rosters, uncertainty of playing contracts, and the burden of losing financial contracts all impact the entire family. Other studies involving Pasifika athletes concluded a deep desire to reciprocate familial support was a strong motivator for athletes (Lakisa et al., 2014; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013). Subsequently, this was found to be a strong source of motivation to become a professional footballer, for our participants. Our findings revealed from athletes' testimonies, that obligations and family responsibility are both motivators towards mental well-being balance, but can at times, be a reason for stress and imbalance of mental well-being as was similarly reported by Lakisa et al., (2019).

5.3.2 Establishing Key Relationships

Our results support Keung's (2018) suggestions, albeit her study focused on youth athletes. She asserts; development of Māori and Pasifika players are in-part dependent on the establishment of reciprocal relationships and critical to athletes being able to navigate the complexities of Western-underpinned talent development (TD) systems. This resulted in athletes' successes subject to navigating psychosocial aspects of mental well-being. In support of this, our data suggests that professional NRL players success like their youth counterparts, is underpinned by establishing key relationships within both worlds (home and professional HP environments).

5.3.3 Cultural Identity

The HP environment can be difficult to traverse at times. Lakisa et al. (2019) affirms the importance of staying connected to one's cultural identity in the HP domain. They argue that athletes are constantly weaving or negotiating their identity across both public and private spheres but remark that cultural identity was viewed by retired Māori and Pasifika RL footballers as "sacred" (p.1104). Former athletes have spoken out regarding the challenge of negotiating cultural identity. Testimonies have highlighted athletes' experiencing at times, racialised assumptions or profiling (based on physical appearances). Lakisa et al. (2019) reported further that a number of former Māori and Pasifika NRL athletes had experienced racialised profiling and or mis-placed cultural identity/heritage based on physical appearances while playing in Australia. Former NFL player Emmanuel Acho's recent online discussions echo this sentiment. Acho (2020)

contends that in order to address inequities and unconscious biases within our societies and or workplace, “we must embrace diversity and cultural inclusion. One cannot attempt to fix a problem, with refusal to acknowledge its existence. If Western institutions are the problem, they also provide the pragmatic solutions” (Acho, 2020). Likewise, our data revealed athletes perceived the responsibility to build culturally inclusive frameworks within the HP environment needs greater support from club organisations. Indigenous scholars have somewhat different views – i.e., that the solutions should be led by Māori and or Pasifika (Chilisa, 2020; Durie, 1994; Mead, 2019), but supported by the organisation. Kōrero within our data suggested that players are willing to build collaborative solutions, but solutions require organisational support to activate culturally relevant frameworks and resolutions. However, we assert this may be complex, as organisations may not be equipped to meet their cultural organisational competency needs. Therefore, we assert collaborative partnerships with the athletes and their communities would go a long way to reposition such frameworks. Erueti (2015) suggest Māori athletes are continually oppressed by the dominant Euro-centric society, while Marsters (2017) suggests Pasifika athletes have to negotiate Euro-centric environments which can impact their well-being. This places unique demands on mental well-being, which are unlikely to be understood when viewed through a solely Euro-Western lens.

5.4 Player-Coach Relationships

This theme uncovered multiple sub-themes pertaining to the player-coach relationship. Of these, the most dominant were: Authenticity, valuing the player and the person, player debrief/post-match review and finally the value of time.

5.4.1 Authenticity

The data uncovered the importance of authenticity in the maintenance of mental well-being – The ability to be your true self, rather than the person people expect you to be. Kōrero across the data strongly indicate that, at times, athletes wore a metaphorical ‘mask’. This was in fear that their true identity would be less favourable or deemed to lack professionalism. This finding is not unique to our study. Erueti and Palmer’s (2014) research saw athletes navigating between a Western performance environment and trying to maintain cultural identity. They assert this may or may not be in keeping with perceived organisational expectations, their public image or outside assumptions or

persona. Narrative threads from data sets highlights this kōrero which saw many athletes' express a real concern and pressure to be or act in a particular manner:

There are two people, the people they see on tv and the other... you gotta know who the real person is, not what the world paints you as and try to be that person (P1).

Some of us have to be really different here to how we are at home... be professional... there are lots of rules, expectations on us... we have to act a certain way... we all have our own ways of dealing with it (P8).

Lakisa et al. (2019) study which interviewed retired Māori and Pasifika NRL players support this concept of athletes unable to fully present their whole cultural self, at times. They state, “In a sporting context, discovering or rediscovering one’s ethno-cultural identity can cause athletes to ‘weave’ or ‘negotiate’ their identity across private and public domains” (p.1105). Moreover, they further assert that, “Pacific Islander in Australia, is authenticated and negotiated through certain behaviours and perceptions of self and others” (p.1105). Such dialogue highlights that many athletes of Māori and or Pasifika heritage, are faced with the daily challenge of meeting public and organisational expectations of professionalism. Subsequently, what an NRL athlete ‘looks like’ or ‘behaves like’, may at times be far removed from the authentic athlete behaviours or outward cultural expression of the individual.

Coaching landscapes and organisations need to provide an environment which allows athletes to authentically operate, with free expression of their true cultural identity. Keung (2018) supports a notion of creating nurturing environments around athletes, where reciprocal trust is at the heart of the relationships and performance landscape. Our summation is further verified by Alder’s (2015) research, who reported on an intervention strategy that was created to be trialled for the NZRL World Cup campaign, “For high performance sport managers, the most crucial performance impacting activity is to identify, recruit and harness cultural allies and architects on both the playing team and management” (p.180). Such interventions require reciprocal trust between the player-coach relationship and organisational partners. This can then provide a performance environment where cultural awareness and expression can be embodied and expressed. In Alder’s (2015) study, utilising culture was the foundation

for creating a framework for a winning performance team strategy and mindset for the NZRL World Cup men's campaign.

Erueti (2015) examined how organised sport has become a social phenomenon within Aotearoa for Māori and Pākehā (White/European descent). He suggests that the allure of sport provides Māori specifically, a path in which to escape deep-rooted colonial ideologies that marginalise Māori. Interestingly though, Hokowhitu (1994) suggests, sport is also a channel where colonial ideas are perpetuated. Talking of his childhood years as a Māori boy in Aotearoa, Hokowhitu states:

I was raised in a masculine culture where it was necessary for both Māori and Pākehā males to demonstrate their physical aptitude. In my hometown of Ōpōtiki, physical conquests, especially in sport, gave me confidence and allowed me to strive for success without facing ridicule. In contrast, academic achievement was at best acknowledged but usually derided. Males had to be extremely confident in their physicality or face social ostracism. So embroiled in this masculine culture was I, that I believed it defined all New Zealand men, both Māori and Pākehā. Looking back, however, I realize that while physicality was a common definer of New Zealand males, Māori boys often faced barriers to the nonphysical realm that Pākehā boys did not. (p.259)

While the field of sport is a flourishing area of scholarly study, Māori athlete participation in elite sport with regard to Māori identity, is limited (Erueti & Palmer, 2014), though Erueti's (2015) scholarly contributions looked to address this. Key findings from Erueti (2015) are relevant to the data from this study. These are: Māori athletes expressed a direct link to their identity through tūrangawaewae (sense of identity/independence associated to home) and/or whakapapa, yet some demonstrated an acute self-awareness that they fail to exhibit this outwardly. Secondly, Erueti's (2015) participants highlighted the impact of expressing mātauranga Māori (Maori knowledge and cultural practices), during competition in team environments, and noted it offered a sense of solace and pride. Additionally, these evoked feelings of connection, belonging and national identity. Similarly, the use of mātauranga Māori or cultural practices was also expressed by members from our study. They remarked on the positive experiences of cultural expression and practices observed when in camp environments with their national representative squads (such as New Zealand Māori, Rugby League Samoa and Mate Ma'a Tonga national teams). Such examples were

highlighted through our players' kōrero where rituals such as, daily karakia (prayer) prior to the start of each training, or meeting with cultural elders (kaumatua) to learn and develop deeper understanding towards the importance of traditions were fond memories many players noted. Likewise, leadership of whānau and how that can translate to their performance setting was another valuable lesson taught from elders during national team camps. The sharing in kava ceremonies (traditional Pasifika plant-based drink) was another highlighted memory that helped the expression of cultural identity, unite players together in their culture and be authentic.

Our study reports that cultural identity within HP praxis is pivotal to athlete mental well-being. Therefore, player-coach relationships provide a foundation that underpin an athlete's ability to outwardly express their authenticity. Subsequently, the athlete-coach relationship becomes a strong influence on the outward expression of cultural identity. Thus, reciprocal relationships of respect and trust, both within the player-coach relationships and the HP environment is essential for Māori and Pasifika athlete's mental well-being to flourish.

5.4.2 Valuing the Player and the Person - Coaching Holistically

Coaching 'holistically or with a humanistic philosophy' is defined as a consideration 'of the whole person' which therefore must include, mental physical, spiritual, social, political and the cultural being (Cassidy et al., 2016). Subsequently, to coach holistically we assert is to coach with these considerations in mind. Data from our study uncovered a call for coaches and NRL organisations to look holistically at players and teams. A key message that came out from our players' kōrero, was to recognise that all players are different and therefore a one-size approach does not fit all. Such perspectives could be viewed as a step away from a collectivism approach which is an important shared cultural principle for both Māori and Pasifika (highlighted in earlier chapters). On the contrary, such progression does not negate the importance of working within a collective orientation within the RL environment. But rather positions a framework that speaks to all aspects of the athlete. While Māori and Pasifika often come from a collective whānau/community orientation, each athlete views and navigates that space from their own lens.

Kōrero from transcripts highlights this shift of perspective:

I don't think they [referring to coaching staff] take into account that everyone is different, different body-shape, injuries etc. So, you as individual player in your role is still going to be different to somebody else who's playing the same role or position, how you both see the game is different. We are unique. So, it would be good to train our individual strengths, work on ourselves more, work our bodies specifically to our individual need, be a bit more holistic, work on our individual areas we need improving, that might be mental or physical [referring to coaching style/philosophy and club organisational focus being open to different approaches] (Participant 10).

Coaching literature has underscored the value of holistic coaching. However, it has tended to remain at a level of generalisable support and rather abstract thought, as opposed to pragmatic application (Cassidy, 2010; Cassidy et al., 2016). Lyle (2010) asserts it is a delicate balance of all factors pertained to performance outcomes and athlete welfare. In pragmatic terms, coaches therefore utilise an amalgamation of all holistic factors, while simultaneously providing technical coaching competencies with intellectual thinking. Therefore, within a cultural context, coaching, learning and performance execution, is both a social process (collective approach) and individual obligation between the player-coach relationship (Cassidy et al. 2016; Langley, 1997). Therefore, our data suggested that coaches and organisations should consider leaning towards a holistic framework - place each athlete at the centre both collectively within their team environment and individually to meet the 'whole' person's needs.

Furthermore, kōrero from our transcripts highlighted a strong call for organisational governance to understand that each player's body is unique, sustained specific past injuries and subsequently has varying strengths and weakness. From a cultural perspective, discourse within Indigenous frameworks recommend utilising collective oriented approaches alongside individualisation (when working with Māori and Pasifika), which may better align with their shared epistemological and ontological positioning (Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017; Manuela & Sibley, 2013; Mead, 2019; Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Smith, 2012). Thus, the apparent conflict between individualised support and collective orientation likely means that HP environments needs to reflect the shared collective orientation, while also provisioning for the individual athlete's holistic needs. Hawkins and Turner (2020) argue that coaching by its very nature is dialogic and

relational. In other words, two or more parties make new meaning, simultaneously co-create new thinking and ways of being, to be able to negotiate the world around them.

5.4.3 Player Debrief/Post-Match Review

Player debrief/post-match review was a topical debate amongst the study cohort. There was a clear divide across the datasets whether collective group post-match review and/or individual player feedback/debrief should be delivered in their current format. Middlemas et al. (2018) assert player-debrief is generally coach-facilitator driven and result-focused, allowing for player engagement and a balance between reflection and preparation. From our data transcripts, debriefs were generally delivered as a large playing group meeting 24-48 hours after game-day. Kōrero amongst the cohort centred around whether this should be less autocratic, or player led. There was constructive debate amongst participants how this session is perceived, particularly for younger, less-experienced players. It was stated, players could be, and were at times, fearful of the process and or intimidated for being called out in front of fellow team-mates. The consensus amongst the cohort was; it is standard procedure across the NRL and something you became accustomed to. This feedback highlights some discrepancies between Western HP practices, cultural sensitivity towards player individuality and positioning, and cultural leadership behaviours (Erueti, 2015).

Our study's data suggests a re-framing of such procedures is warranted. There was significant discussion regarding this process, and the current delivery approach seemed to lean more towards a Western construct. Players' largely felt an athlete-centred approach should be utilised to facilitate debriefs and reviews. Subsequently, for individual player reviews, a one-on-one approach, away from the rest of the team, was perceived to be more favourable as highlighted below:

I think having more one on one with your coaches and developing your skills, or your playing styles individually is needed. So maybe they could show some video clips to the group, where the group needs to be better but not the individual. Rather go upstairs to do that one-on-one stuff to discuss what needs to change from the individual side. Keep that away from the team stuff (P16).

Player debrief takes its roots from clinical psychology. Mitchell (1983) was the first to formulate a structure around crisis intervention to create a procedure to execute group meetings - often termed Critical Incident Stress Debriefings (CISD) or

psychological debriefing as noted by Jambois-Rankin (2000). Since then, literature specific to rugby de-brief practices is somewhat limited (Middlemas et al., 2018), and there is a significant gap in research specific to NRL practices and competencies on such matters (Horton, 2014; Marsters, 2017; Lakisa et al. 2019 & 2014).

However, player-feedback was investigated in both elite football (Soccer) players and academy players in Europe (Wright et al., 2016). They report levels of player debate and interaction varied greatly during video feedback sessions. Central to player self-reflection and learning was the use of video analysis. The level of engagement with self-reflection varied across both academy and elite players but interestingly, most athletes preferred some delay between 24 and 48 hours before receiving video feedback. These results aligned with our findings specific to elapsed time frames prior to feedback. Additionally, Wright et al. (2016) remarked further contemplation should be given to the level of interaction during feedback. They assert a willingness and ability of a coach to engage a player in discussion regarding their performance and analyse introspectively, hinges on players' self-reflection process.

Therefore, our data supports further scholarly investigation with a specific focus towards cultural positioning and the potential reframing of de-brief practices warrants investigation. Narrative transcript threads summarise the player de-brief, also noted in Appendix E stating:

It needs to be player-led for sure, but you will know if you've done something wrong. But this day and age is a lot different from when I first came through. Boys are a lot more sensitive, take criticism differently, and individually. So most probably would rather not be shown in front of the full group but pulled aside and spoken to from the coach's point of view separately. To show why and how we need to change or improve. So, I think today's day and age is a little bit different from the traditional way it has always been delivered [in a large group setting, coach driven with little player feedback] (Participant 15).

5.4.4 Value of Time

Three areas were identified within the context of time value, these were: (1) Coaches value towards time, (2) impact of absence away from family members and how this is perceived, as well as its impact on cultural responsibilities and obligations, and (3) importance of down-time/rest and physical/mental implications associated with the lack

of time. Players' kōrero revealed their strong foundational cultural values influenced their prioritising of personal time spent towards: Career expectations, time at the football club, pursuit of professional competencies/developing playing skills, execution of performance outcomes, their ability to balance home life, family and cultural obligations/expectations, and how they manage their mental and physical recovery away from the professional environment. From the data there was a strong sense that autocratic coach leadership styles (coach driven) took precedence in all aspects related to time athletes spent in the HP environment. For example, how long training sessions lasted on any given day, how early athletes had to arrive and what time off was permitted between trainings. This inadvertently impacted athletes' schedules and time management, football operations and an impact on individual athlete's home and professional life. Players' felt that there was an expectation that NRL athletes needed to devote all time necessary to the pursuit of professional success. On occasions, this came at the expense of personal time away from family members, responsibilities as a parent, cultural obligations, as well as effecting mental and physical recovery.

Both Marsters (2017) and Keung (2018) note the importance of time spent with family and the significance of down time, while Lakisa et al. (2019) highlights a need for sustained recovery away from the professional environment for both physical body healing and mental re-charging. Marsters (2017) further emphasised the importance of negotiating effective time management, to living a healthy-balanced life. A balance between professional organisational expectations and family obligations, commitment to education, friends and upskilling individuals, were reported to be fundamental to reducing stress levels and supporting positive mental well-being (Masters, 2007). Jones and Lavalley (2009) echoes this stating, social relationships with parents, peers and coaches have a positive influence on how athletes' cope with time demands. Cosh and Tulley (2014) remark that assisting athletes to frame time away from a rigid construct towards a fluid process (which they can control), resulted in the experience of a healthier life balance and personal agency. Therefore, if athletes are to negotiate the management of their mental well-being - underpinned by the ability to manage time - this requires an open framework (flexible/collaborative schedule). In other words, coaches and management must appreciate the many demands for athletes' time (outside of their NRL commitments), and the trickle-down effect to athletes' mental well-being. Horton (2014) and Marsters (2017) both report such pressures on time and the inability to pursue

activities outside of the professional area can have implications for long term physical and mental ill-health.

The impact of professional expectations and the subsequent time away from cultural obligations at home, can be a contentious area to navigate especially for Pasifika athletes (Horton, 2014). Lakisa et al. (2019) affirms this notion for both Māori and Pasifika athletes, suggesting the very foundation of athlete identity is underpinned by the value of time with loved ones. Subsequently, one can postulate, provision of time spent on the pursuit of sporting perfection is neither sustainable nor in keeping with the cultural values. This conflict we can hypothesise is a result of the differing cultural value system shared by both Māori and Pasifika in contrast to a Euro-centric foundation. In a cultural context, faith and family are the first priority, over and above any professional aspirations. Erueti and Palmer (2014) affirm this notion and argue athlete identity is far more concerned towards upholding manaakitanga and tikanga, than it is towards Euro-centric success measures on the sports field. Thus, a holistic approach to time management would re-position organisations to meet the needs of better mental well-being balance.

5.5 Trust and Autonomous Behaviour

Past literature underscores the importance of trust and autonomous behaviour within sport. Indeed, several studies have discussed the relationship between upper management, coaches and athletes in relation to varying power dynamics amongst parties. Foucault (1980 and 1988) discusses the significance of exchanges between individuals, groups and institutions how this can impact productivity and performance output. Within the NRL team environment, players' felt a strong need to direct on-field 'play-making' decisions, lead tactical discussions and provide reflective feedback and accountability to their team-mates. At times, players' acknowledged agitation that player voices were not always heard or actioned. These findings demonstrate that Māori and Pasifika athletes strongly desire the opportunity for sharing power dynamics. Excerpts from the transcripts highlighted the request to be afforded occasions to self-govern on and off the football field. Specifically: Game-plans, player feedback, individual accountability, and individual player responsibility, were all called for during focus group discussions.

Yeah, there needs to be a lot more ownership given to the players. You know, we need to run more of the sessions on the field but also other sessions, especially Captain's run [referring to the last training session before a match]. They say we can have more input but then when we turn up to the session, it's already set up,

so then we never actually run it or take the lead. So yeah, I've been pushing for that since I arrived at the club. (Participant 13).

Literature is scattered with similar findings within the youth sport development context. McKenzie (2019) reported similar findings related to Secondary Schools 1st XV rugby players' perceptions of coaching environments. He states:

At times coaches used autonomy-supportive behaviours, for the most part controlling behaviours were used which lead to examples of player dissatisfaction, lack of understanding and reduced enjoyment of their sporting experience. (p. ii)

Cushion and Jones (2006) noted resistance against controlling coaches and power dynamics between athletes and coaches in youth football. Purdy et al. (2008) revealed fight back behaviours against autocratic leadership amongst rowers in resistance to coach driven behaviours. In some cases, young children (6-12) were found to exert power by ignoring coaches side-line instruction during match play (Walters et al. 2015). Interestingly, O'Rourke et al. (2014) contend parent-initiated motivational climate was a significant predictor of autonomous regulation, self-esteem, and trait anxiety, over and above coach-initiated motivational landscapes. This finding is noteworthy considering the important role parents/family played for our cohort. However, one cannot hypothesise this assertion, as it may have different dynamics for professional grade athletes than their youth counterparts. Nevertheless, this notion does speak to our assertion that parental and family support are key figures towards player motivation. Which could at times take precedence over coach-driven behaviours.

Incidentally, prominent Māori scholar, Mason Durie's (2006) lecture series - the measurement of Māori well-being – stipulates autonomy as a core component for Māori existence within their collective iwi and hapū. He contends autonomy is critical in terms of navigating organisational movements within communities and the outside world. Therefore, athletes need to be afforded the ability to co-exist in reciprocal trusting relationships within their workplace, and afforded opportunities to autonomously lead. Interestingly, our results lean towards athletes at times, preferred to be more accountable to team-mates over and above coaches. Additionally, performance motivation was seen to be increased in many instances, when player-feedback was delivered by fellow team-mates as opposed to directives from coaches. Alder (2015) states collaborative contributions to performance outcomes can enhance organisational performance while

nurturing athletes simultaneously. Thus, embracing Māori and Pasifika leadership on and off the football field could help promote the maintenance of mental well-being.

Subsequently, understanding how Māori and Pasifika athletes' view and engage in leadership, in both collective and autonomous driven behaviours, would be beneficial. Shilbury and Ferkins (2020) postulate organisations should consider utilising cultural frameworks, to influence and lead club performance policies. This they assert could beneficially impact cultural leadership and organisational sport governance practice. In reviewing leadership styles globally, Jackson and Parry (2011) affirm there are many benefits for governance and leadership approaches when engaging with organisational followers (in this case the athlete cohort). Analysis of datasets revealed the current organisational structural approach appears to be more positioned towards a more leader-centred or transactional orientation.

Subsequently, the findings from our study support the notion that coaches and organisational management should begin to lean towards a follower-centred approach, embrace collective leadership frameworks and or transformational leadership. This methodology is more follower-centred (members-driven/athlete-driven), and better aligns with Indigenous and Pasifika approaches to leadership, inclusive of cultural views, values and beliefs. Thomas and Inkson (2004) investigations into 'cultural intelligence' within leadership theory state, that knowledge of culture and its underlying principles go far beyond basic understanding of etiquette. They assert managers need to practice mindfulness and pay close attention to cross-cultural cues, situations and develop a strong repertoire of behavioural skills. This Thomas and Inkson (2004) remark will aid in organisational cultural intelligence, to better cope with cultural challenges with increased confidence. Subsequently, building cross-culture capabilities and organisational cultural intelligence could bring positioning of NRL organisations within a cultural framework. This in turn would result in organisational leadership approaches that are more reflective of the cohort of athletes (Jackson and Parry 2011).

Shilbury and Ferkins (2020) contend HP environments demand reflective, empathetic stewardship, which requires a multi-dimensional leadership approach. Parties from the ground up (athletes) and upper management downwards, collaboratively lead the space. This approach was effectively implemented by Alder (2015) in NZRL (NSO). Using an ethnographic action research study Alder (2015) sought to understand organisational team culture and the power dynamics within NZRL (NSO) system. This

research investigated a story of people in a unique sport context, making meaning and or new learnings from managerial efforts to change their organisational unit to expand performance. While the primary interest of this study was to improve organisational understanding and practices, it provided rich stories, experiences and positive insights. This helped inform personal and contextual understandings of organisational culture and change in a NSO specific to RL. The outcome resulted in improved sensemaking and organisational insight to avoid future prescriptive, episodic change models.

Alder's (2015) study effectively demonstrated that leadership can be a collaborative process that acknowledges and includes member athletes. It encouraged autonomy, fostered better performance outcomes, lead to greater player engagement, positioned individuals informally and formally to collectively govern and lead, and likely influenced players' mental well-being.

5.6 Recommendations for Sport Organisations

Schempp and Oliver (2000), remark that coaches require development and understanding towards ethnic heritage to facilitate positive coaching practices. Subsequently, having appreciation of values of Māoridom and Pasifika world views are significant when working with Māori and Pasifika athletes. Understanding the importance of manaakitanga (showing kindness, hospitality and respect), whanaungatanga (families) wairua (spirituality), aroha-ki-te-tangata (love of fellow man) and awhinatanga (helping/assisting) are fundamental to working within the Aotearoa cultural context as remarked by Cassidy et al. (2016) and Erueti & Palmar (2014).

Despite considerable contributions Māori and Pasifika communities already give to the talent pool across the NRL and the game of RL internationally (Keung, 2018; Ng Shiu & Vagana, 2016; Panapa & Phillips, 2014), there remains a significant gap in Māori/Pasifika representation within management, education and leadership (Keung, 2018; Lakisa et al., 2019; Marsters, 2017; Manuela & Sibley, 2013; Panapa & Phillips, 2014). As a result, this discrepancy may have a compounding effect on the practices, processes and tools that are employed by coaches, support staff and NRL organisations, and the policies they employ. Efi (2003) states:

If you seriously want better outcomes for Pacific and their families, then policy settings that influence them need to be congruent with this world. You need to be drawing upon the strengths, understandings and meanings of this world. (p.62)

In Aotearoa, the multi-demographic nature of HP sport is spread with migrant Pasifika athletes, Kiwi-born mixed Pasifika and/or mixed Māori heritage athletes, and Indigenous Māori athletes (Erueti & Palmer; 2014; Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017). Therefore, it behoves sport organisations to strongly consider cultural competencies to provide pragmatic frameworks to better meet the needs of Māori and Pasifika athletes. These should include but are not limited to: Affording a multi-cultural lens towards leadership frameworks. This requires multi-cultural leadership member positioning within all organisational structures (as opposed to one that doesn't include Māori/Pasifika members or perspectives at the leadership table), provide educational forums for support for both club staff and athlete home environments (deliver a footing to understand cultural values and principles), and provide financial literacy and support pathways (culturally inclusive of financial obligations around Fa'alavelave).

Furthermore, coaches, management and their organisations need to invest in more coaching education and should seek to understand athletes' intrinsic and extrinsic motivation from a cultural positioning. Additionally, findings from our research suggest, applying pragmatic understandings and structures which nurture athlete's faith, spirituality and cultural identities within sporting environments. This requires shifting parameters and comprises of positioning mental well-being towards a new knowledge system. Comprehension of mental well-being from a cultural perspective is required – one that is not constrained to sit within dominant Western mental health parameters.

5.7 Study Limitations

This section provides an outline of the encountered study limitations and some self-reflective analysis that I have learnt as a result of undertaking this research.

5.7.1 Researcher's History and Perspective

As a Pākehā shaped by a European upbringing albeit living in Aotearoa, this could be viewed as a study limitation. While I (the primary researcher) had both insider and outsider positioning (from a professional working perspective and some personal insider positioning within both cultural communities), this however cannot compensate or negate for a likeness/shared cultural lens or positioning to our cohort of athletes, had the primary researcher been Indigenous Māori, or of Pasifika heritage. Notably, I acknowledge as the primary researcher that the pre-existing close working relationship with the cohort and organisational management, aided in my ability to undertake this research amid the high pressured NRL season. Under different circumstances, this may otherwise have been

prohibited, but was approved on the basis of my pre-existing relationship with the organisation and the athletes. Additionally, I acknowledge every effort was made by the supervisory team and RAG members to support the research process in this regard to ensure the correct and respectful positioning of the athletes' testimonies. Transcribing and delivery of data analysis was supported by academic supervisors to utilise an appropriate lens, tone and manner to better reflect participants kōrero.

5.7.2 Methodology

The methodology for this research was complex. An overview of both the Western methodology and underpinning cultural guiding principles and tools have been presented. Given the size and time constraints pertained to a master thesis, it was deemed fitting to utilise a Western criterion underpinned by cultural research principles. It is acknowledged that combining Western research, Kaupapa Māori and Pasifika research guidelines is no easy undertaking. Therefore, I assert with more experience in this domain, a deeper methodological framework could have been adopted.

5.7.3 Data Collection

The original intention was to utilise focus groups as a medium. However, due to the ever-changing nature of the HP environment this could not be exclusively facilitated. It was determined by the research team and RAG members to provide an adaptable alternative. This resulted in participants selecting their preferred method of data collection (i.e., large focus group session, face to face interviews or a small two to one focus group - two athletes plus primary researcher). Consequently, the research team had no opportunity to select groupings for the cohort, pre-select demographics into specific categories, or place player experience levels into specific groups. However, it did provide flexibility, creating a player-led empathetic environment for data collection during critical match-play phase within the athletes' calendar. This approach may be construed as a limitation, but in practice it provided a fitting process where athletes were given the freedom to self-select groupings and times, while having personal control over data collection methods (Smith, 2012).

5.7.4 One Cohort

This study employed one NRL playing group. This provided a robust setting for data analysis as this cohort has the highest demographic of Māori and Pasifika players collectively, than any other team in the NRL (National Rugby League, n.d.). However,

collecting data from one team only, prevents the ability to compare or mitigate variables pertinent to the findings. Had the research obtained data from multiple teams, (situated in different positions on the competition roster), there may have arisen varying outcomes towards player management of mental well-being. Additionally, balancing mental well-being could have produced differing variables and findings if collected during numerous phases of the competition or from another team. We cannot attempt to predict or speculate on these variables. Nevertheless, as there is only one professional NRL team residing in Aotearoa, this positions this cohort with this team's cultural demographics, a unique perspective that is otherwise unattainable from any other NRL team within the competition. Therefore, it is likely that this data will have value for the performance landscape specific to Aotearoa and can inform professional competencies and practices for sport organisations within Aotearoa. Specifically, provide understanding for those organisations who engage with Māori and Pasifika athletes both domestically and those further afield with similar cohorts, such as Australia and United Kingdom.

5.7.5 Professional/Organisational Conflict

Due to the sensitive nature of this research, I felt a burden of responsibility as the primary researcher to conduct the study authentically while navigating organisational interests and maintaining participant athletes' privacy. Due to the potential damage and sensitive nature of the findings, this required careful triangulation throughout the process with both academic advisors and RAG members to report findings correctly, with the appropriate tone and language obtained during kōrero sessions. Additionally, misinterpretation or disclosure of some findings could result in an athlete's and or organisational personnel to come under public scrutiny. Subsequently, particular dialogue threads had to be redacted from transcripts and remain outside of the reported analysis. This was in order to protect the professional aspirations of the organisation (due to their public platform), as well as the individual athletes concerned. There was a duty of care to ensure the maintenance and mental well-being of the cohort involved to the extent that is/was under our influence, was upheld throughout. I acknowledge that the mental well-being of the athletes and the club organisational aspirations must be kept as the priority at all times. Moreover, the protection of kōrero specific to individual athletes in some instances, was omitted from the thematic analysis due to the potential ramifications of disclosed personal information into the public domain.

5.7.6 Change in HP Management

Due to the nature of professional sport, changes in organisational management, football staff, coaches and governance are common practice. Many changes have occurred internally within the organisation since the data was collected during the 2019 NRL season. This ultimately affects and impacts players', organisational structures and practices and, as a result, potentially changes data findings and variables. We advocate these findings are relevant to the time and place in regard to the 2019 NRL season. If this study was undertaken in another season, under different management or coaching parameters, there is no way to determine or predict what the variables and potential data findings would produce. Therefore, these findings are pertinent to the Aotearoa NRL context. Subsequently, they should be viewed in accordance with the 2019 NRL season, which had many different constraints and variables as opposed to the 2020 and 2021 NRL Covid-19 season restructures.

5.8 Recommendations for Future Research

5.8.1 Practical Implications

We urge HP governance, management and leaders to step back and assess their current practices. Do they represent the athletes' voices and the lens from which they navigate their world? A good starting point to answer such questions could be inviting Māori and Pasifika to share experiences and position them at governance and leadership tables. This would provide a footing to actively engage, serve, drive and direct organisational change, through collective leadership, and cultural positioning. Ultimately, Māori and Pasifika need the space to impact their fellow athletes directly. This will better meet the needs of their communities at all levels of sport practice. This requires both formal and informal cultural leadership opportunities.

5.9 Summary

This discussion focused on a critique of the findings in relation to existing literature. Each of the four primary themes which derived from the thematic analysis are discussed in detail with their associated sub-theme categories. Narrative data threads have been added in areas to highlight athletes' kōrero and provide direct athlete-driven perspective. As a research group, our intention is to honour and bring to the forefront athletes' perspectives of what mental well-being looks like to them. Simultaneously, we have utilised the academic literature to support our participants' perspectives. We urge readers to honour the athletes' testimonies and learn from their brave insights and

experiences. The four primary themes discussed were: (1) Defining mental well-being, (2) navigating cultural differences, (3) player-coach relationships, and (4) trust and autonomous behaviour. Recommendations for sport organisations have then been offered. This was followed by the study limitations and finally practical and theoretical implications for future research was discussed.

Chapter 6- Conclusion

E hara taku toa I te toa takitahi, engari, he toa takitini

My strength is not as an individual, but as a collective

This study looked at the lived experiences of Māori and Pasifika professional RL players, their perspectives on mental well-being, and specifically how they manage it. The primary research question asked: “What are Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players’ perspectives of mental well-being?” Within this question a broader focus sought to unpack this aim and meet the following objectives: (1) Define and understand what mental well-being looks like from Māori and Pasifika NRL players’ perspectives. (2) Understand how Māori and Pasifika players manage their mental well-being.

Chapter’s one and two (introduction and literature review) showed that there remains limited research into mental well-being and the lived experience of Māori and Pasifika athletes. However, some work has started in Australia to support Pasifika players (Horton, 2012, 2014; Lakisa et al., 2014, 2019; Panapa & Phillips, 2014; Rodriguez & McDonald, 2013). Here in Aotearoa, there remains a small offering of scholarly works specific to Māori and Pasifika elite athletes. These investigations lie within mental well-being, mental health clinical practice, cultural identity, team culture and or youth development foci for Māori and Pasifika in elite sport (Alder, 2015; Erueti & Palmer, 2014; Hodge et al., 2011; Keung, 2018; Marsters, 2017; Stanley, 2020). This study hoped to address this paucity and provide further support to the small offering of existing literature in this space.

The key learnings as a result of this study’s investigation were:

1. Mental well-being of athletes is complex but must be better understood by organisational management, coaches, staff (and spouses/partners) to have happy, healthy, performing athletes.
2. Cultural values are an important part of managing mental well-being and needs to be understood better by coaches, management, staff and spouses/partners. This requires an environment where open expression of culture, it’s principles and values can influence athletes to manage and navigate their mental well-being.

3. This and other research have suggested this, but now it needs to be pragmatically implemented (and further research is needed to understand how best to execute this to support best industry practice in this regard). Our study does not outline how that is to be done but has highlighted the pressing need along with previous studies which may be embedded into the Aotearoa sport sector.

Understanding culture, obligations, and player responsibilities (in this regard) is critical to creating a performance environment which nurtures athletes. Open expression of cultural heritage and cultural identity in the performance arena is fundamental to maintaining, sustaining, managing, and supporting mental well-being for Māori and Pasifika athletes. At its core, mental well-being was found to be determined by whether athletes' personal expression of cultural identity, values and practices, were permitted, or aligned with their performance environments expectations, rules and mandates. In this light, mental well-being is one component which is shaped by cultural identity. Organisations need to become culturally attuned to their athletes. Explicitly, protocols, procedures and practices that are inclusive of cultural values and principles must be developed. Athletes need to feel safe so cultural values can be nurtured and openly expressed, thus allowing mental well-being to flourish.

Additionally, organisational personnel within the high performance (HP) environment need to take the time to learn and understand each player's background, and cultural values. Our findings call for organisations to look at each player individually and holistically. Specifically, to this cohort, a preference to be surrounded by personnel' who are of Māori and or Pasifika descent, who understand culture and its many specific social nuances, while embracing players' individual cultural identity is needed and strongly called for.

Some comments during kōrero with participants suggest increased female personnel in all aspects of football departments, would benefit these athletes. This aligns with Sport NZ's strategic plan. In support with the current government strategy, Sport NZ (2019) advocate the need for industry reform and gender equity. Specifically, provision for meaningful engagement for women and girls at all levels of the sport sector. More specifically, this study suggests that Māori and Pasifika athletes would benefit from having Māori or Pasifika aunty/mother-like figures around players

performance environments, to help provide support and balance. Such calls from this cohort are quite different from advocating gender equity (while much needed) in sport generally. These dialogue threads related to increased female presence in the performance environment are provided in Appendix E as they fell outside of our primary four themes.

This study is the only research to-date that specifically explores current, Aotearoa-based Māori and Pasifika professional NRL athletes' perspectives on mental well-being. It adds to the very small body of research that exists in this field. Moving forward, sport sector guidance and implementation of cultural reform should be prioritised. Pragmatic application of cultural protocols, policy and practical upskilling on cultural principles and values for sport personnel are needed at all levels of sport practice and management.

From an organisational point of view, mental well-being must not be viewed as a static or fixed entity, but rather a fluid process. Mental well-being is just part of a thread which weaves together aspects of the HP environment and the individual athlete's cultural identity. Culture informs individual identity and allows the athlete to navigate the world around them through an authentic lens. When nurtured, it provides the space for relationships to blossom and the shared principles of trust, respect and reciprocity to be given. When culture is afforded a platform to be openly expressed and valued, mental well-being flourishes. Therefore, organisational personnel should view mental well-being as an integral part of organisational support, uniting HP team structures and the holistic nurturement of athletes' together.

For example, collaborating with NZRL and the Vodafone Warriors, Le Va have begun to roll out 'Mental Wealth' programmes across the RL community. The aim of this initiative is to equip young people and their families with knowledge, skills and tools to reduce stigma, improve well-being, spot warning signs of mental distress, and enhance access to care and support when they need it ([Mental Wealth NZ](#), n.d.). Such will equip both staff and athletes to cope with HP expectations and pressures, while understanding cultural responsibilities and obligations with genuine empathy.

Increasing demands and stress on the population at large and individuals, has resulted in corporate NSO's and professional sport clubs acknowledging they have an unprecedented duty of responsibility to their employees and associate members (Sport

NZ, 2019). This concentration and focus provides a new platform for mental well-being to take centre stage in all areas of sport practice: Player welfare, sport leadership, team culture, coaching development, strategic corporate management and sport governance.

So, commercial sport governance, sport leadership and management require greater strategies to build sound well-being competencies in the heart of their organisations. Making mental well-being a key pillar of an organisation can develop and result in constructive social competencies, while increasing domestic and international capabilities (Sport NZ, 2019). Additionally, this strong focus can lead to robust, empathetically positioned, culturally reflective developmental strategies within sport organisations. This then can positively impact and enable all associated athletes and club staff to build lasting, cultural, social capabilities and legacies within Aotearoa HP sport, commercial sport organisations and NSO's.

Lastly, I close this thesis with a departing karakia. The words are fitting, as they position faith to guide you in all things. This concept was an integral aspect of the foundational value system observed for the Māori and Pasifika athletes' in this study. The following karakia was also recited at the end of each kōrero storytelling (data collection) session to draw meetings to a close.

Kia tau ki a tātou katoa

Te atawhai o tō tātou Ariki, a Ihu Karaiti

Me te aroha o te Atua

Me te whiwhingatahitanga

Ki te wairua tapu

Ake, ake, ake

Amine

May the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,

and the love of God,

and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you all

Forever and ever

Amen

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Appendices

Appendix A- Ethics Application



Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

Auckland University of Technology
D-88, Private Bag 92006, Auckland 1142, NZ
T: +64 9 921 9999 ext. 8316
E: ethics@aut.ac.nz
www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics

6 August 2019

Isaac Warbrick
Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences

Dear Isaac

Re Ethics Application: **19/198 Professional Maori and Pasifika league players' perspectives of mental wellbeing**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 5 August 2022.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the [Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research](#) and as approved by AUTEC in this application.
2. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date, using form EA2, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
3. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project, using form EA3, which is available online through <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
4. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented. Amendments can be requested using the EA2 form: <http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics>.
5. Any serious or unexpected adverse events must be reported to AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.
6. Any unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project should also be reported to the AUTEC Secretariat as a matter of priority.

Please quote the application number and title on all future correspondence related to this project.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval for access for your research from another institution or organisation, then you are responsible for obtaining it. You are reminded that it is your responsibility to ensure that the spelling and grammar of documents being provided to participants or external organisations is of a high standard.

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz

Yours sincerely,



Kate O'Connor
Executive Manager
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: tem5006@autuni.ac.nz

Appendix B- Participants Information Sheet

The logo for AUT (Auckland University of Technology) is displayed in white text on a dark grey rectangular background.

TE WĀNANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKĀU RAU

Participant Information Sheet

FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS AND 1:1 INTERVIEWS

Date Information Sheet Produced: 29th July 2019

Project Title: Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players' perspectives of mental wellbeing?

An Invitation:

Kia ora, Talofa lava, Mālō e lelei, Nisa bula vinaka & Greetings to you all:

You have been invited, as an elite NRL rugby league player to participate in a research project. This project is being undertaken by Laura Ehlen from the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences. Participation in the project will involve engaging in a focus group or 1:1 interviews with the researcher for 50-60 minutes. Quotes from this focus group/interview may be made part of the final research report. Under no circumstances will your responses, name or identifying characteristics be included in this report.

Your participation is completely voluntary and you may withdraw at any stage of the study without adverse consequences.

What is the purpose of this research?

Laura is undertaking this research for her Masters thesis in Sport and Exercise at AUT-University. This particular project will help to lay the foundations which hopefully will provide the ground work to inform her PhD research which will continue after this project in 2020. She anticipates that the results from this research will have far-reaching benefits for the Vodafone Warriors athlete welfare and education, and better support understanding towards mental wellbeing for all athletes, as well as the rugby league community, especially with regards to high performance NRL environment and mental wellbeing. Laura hopes to publish the findings at conferences and in academic and professional journals.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited to participate in this research, as you are a current NRL elite rugby league player for the Vodafone Warriors and self-identify as Māori or Pasifika.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You are able to withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to:

- Sign a participation consent form.
- Engage in a focus group or 1:1 interview at Mt Smart Stadium, in the Players' Lounge or appointed convenient location at AUT South Campus.
- It is anticipated that the focus group/1:1 interview will last 50-60 minutes. The session will be audio-recorded and notes will be taken, with the permission of the participant.
- Data collected from the interview will be used only for the purpose of research and will be kept confidential by Laura Ehlen.
- Audio recordings will be transcribed verbatim and sent to the participant to verify accuracy of information.
- Attend a second optional informal session (Hui/Fono) to verify transcripts 50-60 minutes.

Optional Informal Hui/Fono Session

You are invited to attend a second optional informal gathering with your focus group peers to review your transcripts and make any amendments and or omit any information from the data at your discretion. This session will be a closed session with only yourself, your fellow focus group members/or 1:1 (at your discretion) and Laura the primary researcher. This informal session is intended to give you the opportunity to screen Laura's transcripts from your specific focus group session and verify that she has articulated and understood your testimonies correctly.

This session is not compulsory but is offered to you if you wish. It is designed to give you the opportunity to view your transcript dialog prior to any other of Laura's supervisors or Research Advisory Group members having access to the data. This session will not be recorded but Laura will take meeting notes.

Who is part of the supervision team?

Laura is supervised throughout this research project by a number of individuals with varying expertise and experience. The Primary and Secondary Supervisors are; Dr Isaac Warbrick (AUT) and Dr Sierra Keung (AUT). Laura has also enlisted a Research Advisory Group (RAG) to help assist her throughout her studies to help guide the direction of the topic and assist with compiling her findings and results and work in a collaborative partnership on behalf of the Vodafone Warriors and NZRL. These members are as follows; Dr Tony Oldam (AUT Sport Psychology), Jerry Seuseu (Vodafone Warriors) and Nigel Vagana (NZRL).

Is this research endorsed by your employer?

Yes Laura has been given full backing by the Vodafone Warriors football department, Welfare department and CEO Cameron George. Vodafone Warriors have been a collaborative partner throughout this research process and have given their written approval for any of their athletes who wish to participate in this research their full support.

Are there any confidentiality risks?

While individuals who participate in the study will not be identified, the published finding will identify the organisations namely Vodafone Warriors and NZRL. The primary researcher, supervision team, RAG members and the Vodafone Warriors management and coaching staff are all collectively working to ensure that findings and outcomes are beneficial to all parties. Therefore, the provision of pseudonyms are given to all participants during transcription of data. Supervisors and RAG members will review all data and findings post focus group interviews and optional secondary informal Hui/Fono sessions have been completed. Prior to formal thesis submissions and any publications, consent from all parties including participants and the CEO of the Vodafone Warriors Organisation will be sought. Participants are free to remove any

data/dialog from transcripts prior to data analysis via the informal Hui/Fono session. Furthermore, this ensures that participants privacy and anonymity is upheld throughout the data collection. Throughout the research process the only parties privy to the identity of the athletes included in the research are; the primary researcher, primary and secondary supervisors, and Jerry Seuseu (x1 Rag Member) to allow for athletes schedules and training commitments to be managed. The Vodafone Warriors organisation has also given written consent that all information gathered during the research will not result in any negative outcomes for participants, with regards to player standings, team selection, favourability etc. The Vodafone Warriors have provided full endorsement for any of their players to participate in this research study. You may request a copy of this statement.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Any discomfort or risk is unlikely. However, the focus groups will require participants to reflect on their understanding of mental wellbeing, draw on past and current experiences around mental wellbeing, and how they manage/maintain their mental wellbeing. Participants are not expected to experience discomfort or embarrassment through this study. As this research is a collaborative process, it is hoped that the participants have a positive experience and are enthusiastic to add direct input into future understanding and potential new protocols. As a result of this study, it is hoped that findings will directly impact the management and inform organisational practices towards culturally reflective future wellbeing and welfare protocols.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

You will not be required to answer any questions that cause discomfort and are free to withdraw at any time. You will have the opportunity to review the transcript from your focus group discussions and amend or withdraw comments during the optional informal Hui/Fono session.

Throughout the study you will be supported by Vodafone Warriors welfare department from Welfare Manager Jerry Seuseu, as well as have continued access to a number of support systems should you require this. Three provisions are in place if you require extra support:

1. All participants are free to engage with the Vodafone Warriors Club registered Psychologist at any phase on request throughout the research process by contacting the primary researcher or the primary supervisor to arrange this external supervision.
2. All participants have access to a private external counselling support who has no affiliation to the Vodafone Warriors Organisation. Participants are free to access this support via contacting Home and Family Support Services which specialise in counselling support across Auckland region for Maori and Pasifika peoples (334 Mount Eden Rd, Auckland, <tel:096308961>). If this is desired participants have access to contact Kyrin Bhula (Counsellor) at this facility free of charge.
3. Participants have at their disposal access to call for psychological support from LifeKeepers Counselling Support Services 24 hours a day, 7 days a week (on <tel:1737>).

What are the benefits?

By taking part, you will help to increase knowledge towards mental wellbeing of NRL athletes while providing better understanding for future protocols and or development of tools to support athletes mental wellbeing both at your club and potentially NZRL and NRL Australia. In particular, it is hoped that a culturally sensitive model will be able to be formulated and presented to Vodafone Warriors, NZRL and wider audiences interested in athlete development and management of mental wellbeing. Your participation will also help the researcher to obtain her Masters in Sport and Exercise and be the ground work for her future PhD thesis.

How will my privacy be protected?

Your personal details will be kept confidential through the duration of this study. Specifically, your name or identifying characteristics will not be included in any reports or data recorded from this study. Quotes from the focus group session may be made part of the final research report. Under no circumstances will your responses, name or identifying characteristics be included with those excerpts. If you have any concerns in this regard, we can provide examples where this has been done previously. Your focus group interview data will be held on a password-protected computer held by Laura Ehlen and stored at AUT School of Sport and Recreation research data facility SPRINZ Millennium facility.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no monetary costs involved in the participation of this research. It is expected that participation in this research will require no more than 50-60 minutes of your time for the focus group/1:1 interview and an optional secondary informal Hui/Fono session.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You are requested to consider and respond to this invitation within one week. You are welcome to ask any questions that you may have; please direct them to Laura or her primary supervisor Isaac (contact details below).

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes – an executive summary will be sent via email if requested.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor.

Name: Isaac Warbrick

Email: Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz

Phone: 022 130 1208

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Name: Laura Ehlen; Email: bxm5006@aut.ac.nz Phone: 021 836 789

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Name: Dr Isaac Warbrick; Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz Phone: 022 130 1208

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on: 06/08/2019

AUTEK Reference number: 19/1

▲ Participant Information Sheet

OPTIONAL INFORMAL HUI/FONO

Date Information Sheet Produced:

29 JULY 2019

Project Title: Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players' perspectives of mental wellbeing?

An Invitation:

Kia ora, Talofa lava, Mālō e lelei, Nisa bula vinaka & Greetings to you all:

You have been invited, as an NRL elite rugby league player to participate in a research project. This project is being undertaken by Laura Ehlen, a Masters student from the Faculty of Health and Environmental Sciences. Participation in the project will involve engaging in a hui/fono with the researcher for 50-60 minutes. Quotes from this hui/fono may be made part of the final research report. Under no circumstances will your responses, name or identifying characteristics be included in this report.

Your participation is completely voluntary, and you may withdraw at any stage of the without adverse consequences.

What is the purpose of this research?

Laura Ehlen is undertaking this research for her Masters thesis at AUT-University. She anticipates that the results will have far-reaching benefit for the Vodafone Warriors, NZRL and rugby league community, especially with regards to mental wellbeing in the high performance NRL environment. Laura hopes to publish the findings at conferences and in academic and professional journals.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have been invited to participate in this research, as you are part of Vodafone Warriors NRL playing squad and self-identify as Māori or Pasifika.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

If you agree to take part, you will be asked to:

- Sign a participation consent form.

- Engage in ONE optional informal hui/fono at Mt Smart Stadium or appointed convenient location after participation in a focus group interview with the primary researcher.
- It is anticipated that the informal hui/fono will last 50-60 minutes. The hui/fono will not be audio-recorded, however meeting notes will be taken, with the permission of the participant by the primary researcher.
- Any changes or edits to data transcripts during this informal session will be subject to your approval and used during the data analysis with your consent. You have the opportunity during this session to omit or delete any transcript you do not wish included within the research data or kept private and confidential and not to be included into final findings which will be presented to your respective employer organisation namely Vodafone Warriors.
- Any changes will be private and confidential between yourself and the primary researcher Laura Ehlen.
- Focus group audio-recording transcripts that are not to be used in the data analysis and potential research findings will be shredded post hui/fono session.

What are the discomforts and risks?

Any discomfort or risk is unlikely as participants are invited to collaboratively analyse the transcribed data from their previous focus groups and add further discourse/understanding if they have not been accurately transcribed or interpreted. **Any dialog that you wish not to be included in existing transcripts for data analysis will be deleted.**

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

You will not be required to answer any questions that cause discomfort and are free to withdraw at any time. Throughout the study you will be supported by Vodafone Warriors welfare department from Welfare Manager Jerry Seuseu, as well as have continued access to the extra psychological provisions as outlined in your focus group information sheets.

What are the benefits?

By taking part, you will help to increase knowledge, understanding and development of NRL rugby league players views and experiences of mental wellbeing and its management. In particular, it is hoped that a culturally sensitive model inclusive of the current NRL players voices and experiences can be presented to Vodafone Warriors, NZRL and wider audiences interested

in athlete development and mental wellbeing. This research will also help the researcher Laura to obtain her Masters in Sport and Exercise and inform the foundation work for her PhD studies

How will my privacy be protected?

Your personal details will be kept confidential through the duration of this study. Specifically, your name or identifying characteristics will not be included in any reports or data recorded from this study. Quotes from this informal hui/fono session may be made part of the final research report. Under no circumstances will your responses, name or identifying characteristics be included with those excerpts. If you have any concerns in this regard, we can provide examples where this has been done previously. All data and approved edited transcripts will be held securely at AUT SPRINZ Research data storage facility at the Millennium facility.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

There are no monetary costs involved in the participation of this research. It is expected that participation in this optional informal session will require no more than 50-60 minutes of your time.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You are requested to consider and respond to this invitation within one week. You are welcome to ask any questions that you may have; please direct them to Laura or her Primary supervisor Isaac (contact details below).

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Yes – an executive summary will be sent via email if requested.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor.

Name: Dr Isaac Warbrick

Email: Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz

Phone: 022 130 1208

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEK, Kate O'Connor, ethics@aut.ac.nz, 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details:

Name: Laura Ehlen; Email: bcm5006@autuni.ac.nz Phone: 021 836 78

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Name: Dr Isaac Warbrick; Email: Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz Phone: 022 130 1208

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on: 06/08/2019

AUTEC Reference number: 19/198|

Appendix C- Consent Form

Consent Form

For use when focus groups are involved.

Project title: Project Title: Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players' perspectives of mental wellbeing?

Primary Researcher: Laura Ehlen, (m)021 836 789 (email) txm5006@autuni.ac.nz

Masters Supervisor: Dr Isaac Warbrick (m)022 130 1208 (email) Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz

- ☐ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated 16 June 2019.
- ☐ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ☐ I understand that identity of my fellow participants and our discussions in the focus group is confidential to the group and I agree to keep this information confidential.
- ☐ I understand that notes will be taken during the focus group and that it will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ☐ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ☐ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then, while it may not be possible to destroy all records of the focus group discussion of which I was part, I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of my data may not be possible.
- ☐ I agree to take part in this research.
- ☐ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐
- ☐ I wish to receive a copy of the transcript to verify what I have said (please tick one): Yes ☐ No ☐

Participant's signature:

Participant's name:

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on: 05/08/2019

AUTEC Reference number:19/198

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix D- Evidence of Consultation

AUT

TE WĀHANGA ARONUI
O TĀMAKI MAKAU RAU

Appendix H

Evidence of Consultation

Project Title: Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players' perspectives of mental wellbeing?

Primary Researcher: Laura Ehlen, (m)021 836 789 (email) txm5006@autuni.ac.nz

Masters Supervisor: Dr Isaac Warbrick (m)022 130 1208 (email) Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz

With whom as the consultation taken place with?

Cameron George – CEO Vodafone Warriors

What has been discussed?

The primary researcher has discussed the scope and procedures of the current study (Masters to inform later PhD follow-on research) with the football department and management team (i.e. purpose, expectations, timeframes, interview process, methods, sampling, accessibility to potential participants etc.) as well as the ultimate outcome and benefits of the study for the Vodafone Warriors, NZRL and NRL athletes.

Given the specific socio-cultural demographic of the study (Maori and Pasifika elite NRL rugby league players), different strategies have been discussed with regards to re-contextualising the current working relationship of the primary researcher with the athletes away from the rehabilitation space to a research role (e.g. stand-down hands on period, having a member of the RAG team sitting in the interview for moral support who are known to the athletes), as this will help re-frame the primary researcher's working relationship with the participant athletes.



Cameron George – Chief Executive Officer



Laura Ehlen – Primary Researcher

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Focus Groups/1:1 Interviews

Project Title: Professional Māori and Pasifika rugby league players' perspectives of mental wellbeing?

Primary Researcher: Laura Ehlen, (m)021 836 789 (email) txm5006@autuni.ac.nz

Masters Supervisor: Dr Isaac Warbrick (m)022 130 1208 (email) Isaac.warbrick@aut.ac.nz

With whom will the consultation take place with?

Vodafone Warriors Volunteer Athletes

Will other parties be present during Focus Groups?

Primary Researcher-Laura Ehlen

RAG Members- where possible RAG members are invited to attend all sessions to provide moral support for both the participants and the primary researcher.

Interview Guide

Semi-structured, open-ended questions to set the scene for the development of collaborative conversations between the participants drawing on past experiences and individual perspectives.

- Define mental wellbeing?
- What does mental wellbeing look like to you?
- What values are important to you?
- How do you manage your mental wellbeing?
- How does family/whānau/Aiga contribute to your mental wellbeing?
- Does faith and cultural practices affect your mental wellbeing, and in what ways?

Laura Ehlen– Primary Researcher

Appendix F- Player Recommendations for NGO'S and NRL Organisation

F.1. Introduction

Within this appendix the remaining recommendations which arose from direct analysis of the data sets are provided. These were left out of the Results Chapter as they did not fall within the four primary themes specifically, but it was felt they provide useful insight into potential mental wellbeing management and competencies which should not be overlooked. It was felt these serve as both culturally competent recommendations, while providing pragmatic insights (which NRL organisations and HP sport organisations/NSO's at large should consider for review and potentially implement), to better meet the needs of their Māori and Pasifika athletes. These recommendations come off the back of direct concerns raised by the athletes during data collection from this study. It would therefore be prudent for organisations to strongly consider these directives towards meeting their Māori and Pasifika athlete's needs. Subsequently, alongside these recommendations as a research team we strongly recommend NSO's and NRL clubs carefully review their current strategic management and governance policies towards their mental wellbeing programmes and organisational structural capacities. We suggest the data provided here is a good starting point and we favourably indorse these recommendations provided by the participating athletes within this study to action these steps within your organisations.

F.2. Player Recommendations Towards Mental Wellbeing

(a) Coaches From Similar Backgrounds

There was a unanimous narrative that for any NRL club dealing with Pasifika and Māori athletes it was important to have coaching personnel around them that really understood their backgrounds and upbringing. It was felt this could only fully be achieved if coaches were Kiwis or had Polynesian background. This component was fundamental to understanding how these groups of players worked, how to intrinsically and extrinsically motivate them and how to approach them in a culturally responsive manner.

Our coach is good, because he knows how to relate to the boys. Whereas in the past if they were Aussie style, yeah there was a lot of barking [shouting orders and rules]. He wouldn't sit down and try to understand if something was wrong [didn't understand their backgrounds, could not relate to them, how to speak to them in culturally reflective manner or understand cultural nuances of reciprocal respect and trust]. I just think, he's Kiwi himself [referring to their current coach], so he understands how the Poly boys work, when they need a boot up the ass at some stages but that there are different ways to approach us, understanding our backgrounds and our values [which is not necessarily the same as Euro-Western players perspectives] and what motivates us [intrinsic and extrinsic motivation is founded in cultural values, not win/loss margins of competition] (Participant 14).

(b) Female Presence

Also noted was the calming influence and presence of female staff surrounding athletes at all times could be beneficial. It was commented female influences would positively impact facilitation of club support towards mental wellbeing.

I think a Kiwi woman is needed, who understands how Poly boys and that roll, understands where we have come from, our families, what we have been through, our values. I think yeah, a few Poly Aunties [referring to mother-like figures] would be good. I just think them being around, always having someone to go to if you need someone (Participant 14).

It was felt this could provide a crucial element towards bridging home life and club environments. There was note that past presence of a female staff member in the wellbeing space at the club was well received.

She was naturally all about family, yeah so was really good with all the partners (Participant 18).

Another remarked:

I think for the partners it's really important [referring to having a female member of staff in the wellbeing department]. The partners want to help out as much as possible. But after a tough day at training, we don't want to go home and speak about training or whatever, we want to go home and just chill. And I guess having her here it's good that she can then explain to the partners that the boys have been through this or that today, give them a heads up. So then when we come home, there's no conflict, so then she knows sweet, he's had a tough day. It helps our partners understand, gives us support too (Participant 6).

It was also expressed that there is an opportunity for football operations to consider implementing a stronger female presence in all areas of football departments. To expand females' roles beyond current silos of medical, nutrition and wellbeing/welfare departments, as is current standard practice.

I don't think it's just someone you can just go get and put into a job. They need to be in the environment all the time, that you can talk to and trust and then go from there. I don't think they can just put anyone into that position. Like just go pluck someone out of somewhere and go, here you go, talk to the boys. She needs to be around us all the time, at trainings and matches, understand our pressures and responsibility, but also understand the game [NRL] understand the expectations from management and be able to talk with the coaches (Participant 7).

Another athlete explained:

Yeah, she just went over and beyond all the time for us [referring to the recent departure of a female staff member in the wellbeing department]. That's something that all of us took notice of, we really appreciated her and what she did for us, she was approachable, always there, she cared about our growth as an individual and our families (Participant 9).

(c) Post-Match Reviews

Post-match review was another topical theme from player recommendations. There were mixed feelings from players that NRL organisations need to consider the impact of how post-match reviews are delivered in the future, as well as ongoing player review feedback sessions. A strong narrative directed towards delivery of post-match reviews required careful consideration. Specifically, positive and negative feedback for individuals be pertained to individualised sessions, removed from the presence of the larger playing groups.

It needs to be player-led for sure, but you will know if you've done something wrong. But this day and age is a lot different from when I first came through. Boys are a lot more sensitive, take criticism differently, and individually. So most probably would rather not be shown in front of the full group but pulled aside and spoken about from coaches point of view separately. To show why and how they need to change or improve. So, I think today's day and age is a little bit different from the traditional way it has always been delivered [in a large group setting, coach driven with little player feedback] (Participant 15).

(d) Injuries

Another area of concern was for injured athletes. Many athletes felt that during injuries, staying connected to the team gave them a sense of value from their respective employers. Narratives around ensuring that coaches and football personnel continue to engage and show interest in athletes in the same manner as during times of good health was key.

I think their interest is genuine, but I know a lot of players feel like they are not included when they are injured, especially if they are not playing NRL first grade, but that's just how it goes I guess, it's the business (Participant 14).

Incidentally, injury was also a strong motivator for many athletes. It's a time where athletes have time available to work on themselves, who they are and reflect.

Yeah, the beauty of going through adversity like this (he was currently injured during data collection) it gives me a chance to step outside the box, step outside the bubble and you know really appreciate what we do, reflect on things, spend some time upskilling myself [referring to personal development, leadership training, mental skills trainings] (Participant 10).

(e) Player Leadership Pressures

It was noted that organisations should be aware of pressures/expectations placed on leadership players and senior athletes. There was some concern that senior players often suffer in silence without speaking out on matters towards both physical or mental health. These eluded from players perceived expectations from club personnel that seasoned players should have control and coping strategies in place or already have developed a toolbox of skills to cope with all the many pressures and be able to lead by example.

I feel like I'm an experienced player, especially in this squad. I mean I did reach out to some of the other senior players to see how they focus or stay on track, but apart from that, just because I am an older player within the team, I just felt like it wasn't right for me to be feeling like that, not coping and generally we don't talk about that stuff with each other or at home (Participant 10).

When asked about what role organisations could play towards helping athletes develop better understanding of strengths, weakness, personal values and conflict resolution, many participants felt further education in this area would be a helpful addition.

It all comes down to a player and his experiences and pressures he's under, how he views it and deals with it individually [this was dependant on cultural practices at home how much they talk about things openly]. (Participant 11).

Another player noted:

I think it's important that each player understands himself better. Understands what your core values and strengths are [understands their individual/cultural identity]. I think it's an area I need better understanding of and to sit down with someone [professional support from the organisation that is culturally reflective], because we as leaders should know how to respond, but it's an area where a couple of players do need to work on, how to deal with it, pressure or mistakes and our responsibilities. Not put your head down but understand how to deal with stuff better [how to speak up and ask for support] (Participant 14).

(f) Financial Advice

A noteworthy thread of data across the field of athletes remarked that organisations need be better equipped to facilitate financial discussion and workshops. Currently the NRL offer financial wealth strategy workshops to all athletes (nrl.com, n.d). However, numerous stories eluded that these lacked understanding of Pasifika and Māori cultural financial obligations or values. There was a general feeling from the players that delivery of such workshops needed a tailored approach from a cultural perspective of finance, rather than the current singular matrix from a Western lens.

I mean it just depends how you take it in. A lot of the boys just take it in a negative way [because they feel it doesn't apply to their personal situation], but if you find it helpful then you can put it into practice. Everyone was brought up in different ways [different world views on the value of money]. You would talk to a lot of boys, they said they held their cards [referring to bank cards], they get their money, and for them it's pretty easy [they have freedom to manage their own monetary fund's]. Because they can just take out whatever you want and, in some situations, give it to your parents. But for some boys their parents hold all their cards, literally. So, they can see what money is available straight away [after pay-day] and take it all [as is the cultural custom towards financial responsibilities to look after wider family members needs] (Participant 11).

These stories highlight the struggle that many players are not in control of their finances, nor given the freedom to use to their discretion. There was overwhelming agreement that organisational input early in athletes careers in this department to facilitate management and discussion of finances is a much-needed area for improvement.

For me providing for the family is my biggest pressure. My parents have never seen this much money before coming into the house, so they don't know any different. So, what do you do, give it all out or put it in the bank or buy a house. So that's what I'm trying to do now, teach my parents how to manage it better, but it's taken a long time (Participant 11).

(g) Evolving Performance Environment

Finally, narrative stories reverberated that sport organisations must be mindful of evolving professional landscapes and thus NRL policy and practices must adapt to keep up with changing demands and needs for individual athletes. Specifically, NRL clubs should look to adopt an athlete centred approach to their organisations, inclusive of cultural values and principles that places each individual athlete at the centre of the focus.

Without a doubt a focus towards individually tailored programmes in all areas, without a doubt, that's where the game has to go!!! That's where its already going! It's a different generation of players now and coaches are coming through, so that's where it's going and things have to change [coaches, management and governance strategies have to evolve]. The coaches and clubs need to stop living in the past, keep growing, keep evolving with new coaching theory and techniques. They need to get out of their own way to learn different structures [development pathways, talent identification processes, coaching strategies, leadership development], coaching patterns, techniques, philosophies. Anthony Seibold has gone out of his way to do different coaching but the rest of the NRL it's all the same (Participant 15).