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The Connection Between Ho'oponopono and Psychological Safety

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Abstract— *This paper explores the potential connections between the Indigenous Hawaiian practice of ho'oponopono and modern constructs of psychological safety in teams. Ho'oponopono is a cultural tradition focused on conflict resolution through collective responsibility, repentance, forgiveness, and reconciliation. Psychological safety describes a group climate characterized by interpersonal trust, inclusion, and risk-taking. At first glance, these concepts may seem unrelated. Analysis reveals notable alignments between ho'oponopono principles and psychological safety aims of mitigating fear, restoring trust, and enabling participation after setbacks. However, thoughtfulness is needed when translating communal ho'oponopono practices into contemporary organizational contexts. While ho'oponopono holds lessons for psychological safety in society, careful adaptation and more research is needed on implementation. With sensitivity, the harmony and foundation of ho'oponopono could meaningfully complement techniques for cooperation in organizations and larger societal issues.*

Keywords— *ho'oponopono, psychological safety, team dynamics, reconciliation, organizational culture, organizational climate, conflict resolution*

INTRODUCTION

Ho'oponopono is an ancient Hawaiian cultural practice focused on conflict resolution, forgiveness, and relationship restoration (Moore, 2023). The practice itself involves accepting responsibility, repenting, reconciling, and moving forward. Psychological safety on the other hand describes a workplace climate where people feel comfortable expressing themselves and taking interpersonal risks without fear of negative consequences (Edmondson, 1999). At first glance, *ho'oponopono* and psychological safety may seem unrelated. However, deeper analysis reveals several interesting parallels and potential connections between this Indigenous approach and modern concepts of team dynamics.

HO'OPONOPONO'S FOCUS ON SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

A core tenet of *ho'oponopono* is collectively accepting responsibility and accountability, regardless of direct fault or blame, in order to make things right (Moore, 2023). This core tenet aligns closely with psychological safety's emphasis on moving away from finger-pointing when failures occur and instead adopting a systemic mindset focused on overall improvement (Edmondson, 1999). *Ho'oponopono* at its core provides a process for acknowledging

interdependence and assuming shared responsibility for correcting relationship problems or lapses in judgment. When groups practice this principle of collective responsibility found in *ho'oponopono* rather than identifying scapegoats, it can foster an environment where people feel psychologically safe to take risks, admit mistakes, and be vulnerable without fear of embarrassment or retaliation.

PROMOTING REPENTANCE AND FORGIVENESS

After accepting shared responsibility, the next phase of *ho'oponopono* traditionally involves reflection, discussion, confession, repentance, and making amends for harm caused (Austad & Rezentes, 2023; Moore, 2023). This reflects psychological safety research showing acts of forgiveness, repentance, and restitution can help restore trust and cooperation in groups after transgressions, mistakes, or interpersonal conflicts take place (Bradley et al., 2012; Dirks et al., 2009; Frazier et al., 2017). When team members adopt a mindset of forgiveness rather than getting stuck in cycles of blaming and punishing individual errors, it can significantly promote psychological safety by reducing threats to status, belonging, and inclusion that often deter open participation (Edmondson, 1999). The *ho'oponopono* process supplies a structured Indigenous framework to enable group repentance, making of amends, and forgiveness in the modern age.

RECONCILING AND STRENGTHENING RELATIONSHIPS

The final steps in *ho'oponopono* traditionally involve prayer, open dialogue, ceremony, and other rituals aimed at reconciling relationships, restoring harmony, and moving forward (Austad & Rezentes, 2023). There are clear parallels that can be seen here with psychological safety's emphasis and criteria related to maintaining a sustainable level of interpersonal respect, inclusion, and trust among group members (Edmondson, 1999). The relationship reconciliation practices found in *ho'oponopono* could potentially help teams to heal disconnects, process conflict, and renew shared understanding after setbacks or rifts occur. This in turn supports psychological safety by proactively addressing and mending ruptures or problems before they escalate in ways that might otherwise erode individuals' ability to comfortably be themselves or participate openly and honestly.

POTENTIAL SHORTCOMINGS AND IMPLEMENTATION CHALLENGES

While there are evident conceptual connections between *ho'oponopono* and constructs of psychological safety, it is important to recognize some potential limitations, risks, caveats, and implementation challenges. For instance, some contemporary practitioners and scholars have critiqued certain traditional elements of *ho'oponopono* for placing too much emphasis on personal confession, repentance, and responsibility while failing to adequately address larger contextual, systemic, or structural factors enabling harm (Browne et al., 2009). Additionally, an overemphasis on harmony and reconciliation without proper balance could potentially discourage constructive debate, dissent, and accountability.

Because *ho'oponopono* originated in the Indigenous Hawaiian cultural contexts of small, close-knit communities, adapting such communal practices to modern professional environments and organizational teams in Western cultural settings would likely require sensitivity and will pose some challenges (Browne et al., 2009). Leaders looking to incorporate insights from *ho'oponopono* into the workplace will need to carefully consider how to adapt traditional practices to employees' existing cultural norms. Directly imposing foreign concepts could backfire if seen as inauthentic or forced. Instead, a thoughtful approach focused on organic integration is recommended, preserving core principles while aligning delivery to modern contexts.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

In conclusion, there are noteworthy conceptual and philosophical parallels that can be drawn between the traditional Hawaiian cultural practice of *ho'oponopono* and modern research insights into team dynamics surrounding psychological safety. *Ho'oponopono*'s principles of collective responsibility, repentance, forgiveness, reconciliation, and forward movement closely align with and complement psychological safety's aims of reducing interpersonal fear, restoring trust, and enabling open participation after setbacks or conflict. However, for organizations to successfully translate insights from *ho'oponopono* into the workplace, wise and careful implementation will be needed along with further research.

The discussion presented in this paper only briefly explores the potential connections between the Indigenous Hawaiian practice of *ho'oponopono* and the modern construct of psychological safety in teams. Future studies are needed to establish best practices for respectfully and meaningfully adapting elements of *ho'oponopono* in ways that boost psychological safety while still maintaining accountability and constructive disagreement in modern organizational contexts. With thoughtful and empirically grounded application, Indigenous concepts of harmony such as *ho'oponopono* may hold valuable lessons to complement contemporary techniques for fostering workplace inclusion, openness, resilience, and cooperation. That said, our hopes in communicating the potential connections between the practice of *ho'oponopono* and psychological safety in this paper is to stimulate interest in future research to explore this conceptual framework in an organizational context or society at large.

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