
Executive Summary

Project Rise: Relational Insights for Systemic Empowerment

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The Core Problem	The Methodology	The Finding
Traditional AI architecture ignores the relational context (Vā) required for safe, vulnerable human interactions.	Four iterative builds—from surveys to a relationship coach—using a build-to-think approach grounded in Kaupapa Māori.	AI trust is borrowed from the human architect. Safety lives in the relationship, not just the code.

Project Rise: Relational Insights for Systemic Empowerment

Conversational AI is no longer sitting quietly in productivity apps. It has entered the most private rooms of human life, helping people process grief, navigate relationship breakdown, and find words for shame they have never spoken aloud. Yet almost every system doing this was built on Western defaults, by developers who treat cultural safety as a legal disclaimer, and who have never had to translate fluid thought into static text just to be heard. For Māori and Pasifika communities, that experience is not new. It is a digital continuation of a very old story: technology built without us, for us, to take from us.

This research set out to ask one question: How might we design ethical conversational AI for vulnerable interactions using Māori and Pasifika values?

What I found

Rather than study this from a distance, I built through it. Over 18 months, I designed and tested four conversational AI systems in a deliberate vulnerability progression. Each build increasing the emotional stakes, each one safer than the last because of what the previous one taught me.

Project Rise Digital Survey collected feedback through voice-first interaction across 167 conversations. Users on text-based interfaces disengaged within seven seconds. Those who switched to voice stayed for 14 to 18 minutes, and what came out was qualitatively different. Not opinions. Inner critics. Professional shame. Things that never survive the translation friction of typing.

Leadership AI Coach delivered 349 leadership coaching conversations to high-performing women. Participants were using the AI to regulate their nervous systems at 2 AM, what I came to call the Heroic Trap: pushing through burnout rather than resting, because the AI's infinite patience made it easier to keep going than to stop. Safety, I learned, is not just about what the AI says. It is about the lanes it holds.

Culture Meets AI was a 90-minute wānanga co-facilitated with researcher Lee Palamo, preceded by 45 pre-wānanga AI conversations (309.7 minutes total). Participants explored a genuine paradox: AI is simultaneously culturally dangerous (capable of making sacred things ordinary, mispronouncing te reo, extracting knowledge onto foreign servers) and potentially culturally healing (offering diaspora communities a judgment-free place to ask questions they're too whakamā to ask an elder). That tension was not resolved. Holding it was the point.

Ray was the capstone, a voice-first AI relationship coach designed for high-vulnerability interactions. The pilot generated 697 minutes of coaching across 59 sessions. Ray integrated Western relationship psychology (Gottman, Lerner, Brown) with Māori and Pasifika values (Vā, Mana Motuhake, Manaakitanga, Whare Tapa Whā) through a Two-Eyed Seeing architecture. Not as a theoretical overlay, but as structural logic governing every prompt, every database decision, and every refusal, including the decision to build no memory between sessions.

What I did

Three findings cut across all four builds.

Voice is a justice decision, not a preference. Text-based digital systems are architecturally inaccessible to oral-first communities. The seven-second vs. 18-minute engagement gap was not about motivation. It was about the cost of translation, the energy required to convert fluid, relational thought into static, performance-ready text. For communities whose knowledge has always lived in the breath and the voice, that cost is exclusion.

Cultural values must be structural, not decorative. The 30/70 finding from Ray made this concrete: only 30% of participants explicitly named cultural values like manaakitanga or aroha in their feedback. But 100% praised the exact behaviours those values dictated: the pacing, the somatic grounding, the non-judgment, the care. The values were felt without being named because they were in the logic, not the label. Cultural safety is produced in the database schema, the prompt architecture, and the design decisions about what the AI refuses to do. It cannot be produced by putting te reo Māori in the welcome message while leaving a Western reasoning engine underneath unchanged.

The Human Proxy Theory. AI does not create vā (relational trust). It borrows it from the human accountability structures surrounding it. Participants were willing to be vulnerable with Ray not because the AI was trustworthy, but because they knew me, the human behind it. "I know the person who is responsible for the research, so that makes a difference" (W-18). This reframes the entire question of AI trust. It is never "is this AI safe?" It is always "is the human behind this AI visible, accountable, and known to this community?"

The pilot delivered concrete outcomes alongside the theoretical ones. 80% of Ray reviewers reported a tangible shift in relationship behaviour: booking GP appointments, setting new family boundaries, increasing empathy for partners. Over 85% said they would use Ray again. These numbers are not proof the AI worked in the clinical sense. They are evidence that the architecture held, and that people left the space with something they could use.

A fourth finding emerged from the Ray model-switch moment. When budget constraints forced a switch from Claude Sonnet to Gemini Flash, Insight scores dropped from 4.9 to 3.1. The system became relationally unsafe, interrupting users and collapsing the vā. This is the Equity-Safety Paradox: the communities who most need high-quality relational AI are the least resourced to demand it. This is not a technical problem. It is a political one.

What It Means for Practice

Three things I would tell any practitioner building in this space:

Tend the vā before you extract the data. No conversation can begin with a question. It must begin with a welcome, a grounding, a genuine invitation to arrive. The State Before Story protocol, where Ray addresses the user's nervous system before engaging with any conflict narrative, is not a UX feature. It is a relational obligation.

Silence is sometimes more ethical than performance. When my TTS model began mispronouncing te reo Māori, I removed it entirely: from every prompt, every greeting, every line of code, and published a transparent statement. Choosing silence over performance was the most culturally responsible decision I made in this entire project.

Every line of code carries a safety opinion. The Incognito Mode I built into the Leadership AI Coach (a toggle that structurally blocked all data logging for truly private sessions) was Mana Motuhake made real in code. The stateless architecture of Ray was the same. Your database schema is your ethics declaration.

For the full methodology, findings, and artefacts, see lianpassmore.com/project-rise.

What Comes Next

Ray will not be commercialised in its current form. To be safe and sovereign at scale, it requires community-governed infrastructure, not digital tenancy on US-based servers. What this research points toward is not a better bot. It is Māori and Pasifika communities building their own tables: designing the reasoning engines, owning the data, governing the values. For me personally, it begins with reconnecting with Samoan community before the next build starts. Not alongside it.

The vā between builder and community is where ethical technology lives. It must be tended before a single line of code is written, and it takes years, not sprints.

This project is the beginning of that kōrero.

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