

The past the present and the future: The New Zealand indigenous experience of social work

Wheturangi Walsh-Tapiata

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Wheturangi Walsh-Tapiata is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Work at Massey University Palmerston North. She is currently team leader of a three-year research project looking at the health and well being of Maori adolescents. This project is based within her tribal organisation Te Runanaga o Raukawa.

Greetings to the people of the land, the Kaurua people and thank you for allowing us to visit your place. You allow us to be here and you keep us safe while we are here. We acknowledge you as the indigenous people of this place with all of your stories, your history, your continuing struggles and the solutions you have within your own cultural context to attend to these struggles. Thank you to the organisers of this conference for inviting me to be a part of the conference, and for believing strongly that there needed to be an indigenous voice (or a number of them in this instance) speaking at this conference.

Tena koutou katoa, greetings to you all, from the Land of the Long White Cloud – Aotearoa or, as most of you might know it, New Zealand. Aotearoa is the name that the indigenous people have for our country and as the indigenous population of that country we call ourselves the tangata whenua – people of the land.

In my short period of time of talking to you today I have decided to look at how social and community work has impacted on the indigenous people of Aotearoa. We have a saying that goes something like, ‘by acknowledging the past and laying down the foundations for the future, past, present and future are brought together in one space’ (Marsden, 1990: 5).

Weaver (2001: 180) also says that the First Nations people of North America:

...have a sense of existing in a time continuum with both ancestors and children of the future having relevance for everyday life. Our ancestors planned for the well-being of people who exist today and those of us who are alive now have a responsibility to ensure the well-being of native people and communities in the future.

The one area of commonality that the three of us on stage (Australia, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand) have is that we are all indigenous to our country. That means that, according to Maybury Lewis (1997), as indigenous peoples we carry a sense of marginality, much of which has been the result of colonisation by groups who have conquered peoples who are racially, ethnically or culturally different from themselves. Indigenous peoples have therefore been marginalised as a result of conditions created by those who claim 'jurisdiction' over them. There are significant differences between indigenous peoples but it is possible none the less to identify shared realities, comparable patterns of development and common aspirations for the future. Many of the journeys of different indigenous peoples have been similar in that they lived for a long period of time where they were in tune with their natural environment which was then unfortunately followed by an abrupt change in direction, namely colonisation. With colonisation came, 'economic reform, education, new technologies and new foodstuffs, but also dispossession, high death rates, deculturation, and disease' (Durie, 2003: 183).

For social workers who work with indigenous populations it is critically important that they have a correct understanding of the history of that indigenous population and see the impact that history has had on them, much of which is still evident today. Personal troubles cannot be separated from the public issues and social workers need to understand how they have historically contributed to the colonisation process, but also how they can play key roles as social change agents. Social workers should ask themselves these questions: Are you an agent of control, an agent of compliance or an agent of change? Do you perpetuate oppression or attempt to change it?

The past

By looking at the past it enables us to confront the needs of today in order to build platforms for tomorrow (Durie, 2003: 4).

The narratives of my ancestors tell us that some of us traveled from Hawaiki in order to settle in Aotearoa, while others say that they have always lived there. There are many stories about the various migrations and settling into the new land, followed by the arrival of a new wave of settlers from the west that would lead to confrontation. They brought their new technologies and home comforts, 'but as the numbers grew, and the hunger for land increased, so too did the novelty wear off' (Durie, 2003: 19). Hence began a period of extreme deprivation. By 1857, the population had declined from an estimated 250,000 to around 56,000. Changes of diet and new infectious diseases such as measles, tuberculosis and influenza contributed to a swift and unrelentless decline in the population as the mortality rates soared. The very survival of the Maori population was under question. Accompanying this there was also large-scale confiscation of millions of acres of Maori land under the guise of government policy introduced during the land wars. (Orange, 1987; Walker, 1996) By 1900 out of nearly 27 million hectares,

only four and a half million hectares remained in Maori ownership.

Policies of the day sought to 'modernise' a backward people in need of development. Land was therefore redefined, a communal culture was converted to an individualistic one, new forms of leadership were encouraged, and education focused on removing from them their Maoriness. All of these ideas were influenced by colonisation and assimilation (Department of Social Welfare, 1988).

The New Zealand Herald (1874) was so convinced of the inevitability of the Maori demise, that there was this comment: 'The fact cannot be disguised that the natives are gradually passing away; and even if no cause should arise to accelerate their decrease, the rate at which they are now disappearing points to their extinction in an exceedingly brief period' (Durie, 2003: 19-20). Statesmen of the day talked of 'smoothing the pillow of the dying race.'

In order to contextualise these facts from our past, Maori and other indigenous communities often use narrative as a means of explaining their situation.

In my whanau/family we tell the story of my grandmother, who was born in the early 1900s. She talked of being sent away to boarding school where the only language was English. This meant for her, years of corporal punishment every time she spoke Maori, including a story she recounts of having to scrub the floors with a toothbrush. Eventually she learnt to speak very good English and because her parents (heavily influenced by the Church) also believed at the time that English 'was the bread and butter language', she lost the ability to speak in her own language and in her own dialect.

My nanny was also known in her family as a 'matakite' (a person who could predict events), however, due to the Tohunga Suppression Act in 1907 these practices were frowned upon. Therefore, she did speak publicly to us about this ability until much later in her life. Sadly this meant that such attributes have not been passed down through the generations.

My nanny also talked about how when communal title of land moved to individual title many Maori families lost their land. Rates and funeral expenses were paid for by selling land and, if they didn't lose their land in this way, many lost land under the Public Works legislation. Land is the life source for our people. A person without land is lost. My nanny used to have land shares in what was once called Athletic Park in Wellington. There were many attempts to get her to sell very small shares, including legislation which recommended that small shareholders should no longer have their shares. However, my nan would say never sell any of our land, even if it was only a blade of grass. Unfortunately in some areas of the country our family, like many other families no longer have any land.

Somewhat in defiance, however, the demise of Maori did not occur and while the effects of the colonising policies and laws of assimilation would continue to dramatically affect the Maori population, by 1936 the population had increased to 82,000 and by 1996 to 579,800 (Durie, 2003: 20). Maori now make up approximately 14% of the New Zealand population of four million. Similar to other indigenous communities, despite a legacy of cultural loss and violence, these communities have not been eradicated (Weaver, 2001: 180).

Many of the upheavals of the 19th century would, however, lead to Maori becoming increasingly dependent on the state, a state that was essentially committed to policies and programmes that would assimilate Maori into the prevailing systems of colonial New Zealand rather than respect their diversity and difference. Such policies and practices have continued right to the present day in an attempt to 'domesticate' Maori people and Maori culture.

Throughout this period of history social work practice (though they may not have been called this) with many of our indigenous communities on the whole maintained and upheld the practices of the government of the day. It is little wonder that Weaver (2001: 180) says that the image of a social worker in many First Nations communities is that of a child-snatcher. This is a concept familiar to many indigenous communities in the world. It should come as no surprise that many indigenous peoples are suspicious and distrustful of social workers and others associated with helping systems. Social workers must build trust with indigenous communities before any work can be accomplished.

From a structural perspective we cannot remove ourselves from the fact that many of the social problems in our communities have roots in colonisation, oppression and internalised oppression.

Until we are willing to look at these larger issues, we will only be putting bandages on festering wounds. This is not to say that it is not important to address problems such as poverty, violence and substance abuse, but, in order to work on these issues, we must address their fundamental causes (Weaver, 2001: 185).

Social policy as it has been practised in Aotearoa New Zealand has relied excessively on the norms of the majority falling well short of incorporating Maori needs and aspirations (Durie, 1998, Ihimaera: 2004). Disease, alienation from land, a changing economic climate and a loss of political control and authority marked our history as Maori leading into the 20th century, while more recently urbanisation and government assimilation policies have further undermined marginalised communities like that of the Maori. Such approaches have been particularly harsh on tribal structures and the fundamental social structure of the whanau or family.

The Present

The extent of disadvantage within society is inevitably a reflection of government policies. Compared to other New Zealanders, Maori experience higher levels of unemployment, are more likely to leave school with no qualifications, have lower standards of health and housing, lower incomes, higher suicide rates, higher adolescent pregnancy rates, higher conviction rates and a higher likelihood of joining gangs (Durie, 2003: 190).

However, Durie (2003) supports Weaver (2001) believing that it is far too easy to look at these statistics and assume that Maori and other indigenous communities are immersed in problems. While such problems should not be ignored or minimised, it is important to assess

the context in which they occur. For generations those in the helping professions have imposed their models of practice on those they are helping, influenced by their values and understanding of the world, and from our indigenous communities' perspective, with minimal success. Many of these approaches have utilised a deficit theory approach, effectively silencing indigenous approaches, or relegating them to the periphery or bringing them out of the cupboard only for cultural celebrations (Lynn, 2001).

Indigenous writers from Australia, North America, the Pacific Basin and Aotearoa all state emphatically that social work theory and practice has much to learn from indigenous peoples about the ways in which they help their own (Durie, 2003; Lynn, 2001; Mafile'o, 2004; Weaver, 2001). Mafile'o (2004: 240) states, 'if social work is to facilitate social change then it must encompass the social constructions of diverse cultural groups'. Further she adds if this was to occur then, 'ethnic minority peoples will move beyond being objects of social work and become active participants in achieving social justice'.

Such statements are now being strongly supported by various indigenous communities with solutions to many of their issues evolving from within their own communities. There is now recognition that indigenous communities have their own strengths and solutions to issues that derive from within their own traditional context (Munford and Walsh-Tapiata, 2001). Of course, colonisation has ensured that in many instances traditional knowledge has all but been lost and so the validation of these approaches comes with considerable struggle. Strengths within indigenous communities have enabled them to survive despite the many social problems they are faced with (Weaver, 2001).

Tino rangatiratanga/Self determination

Self-determination is viewed as a fundamental principle in social work but what needs to be clearly postulated here is the different understandings of self determination from different cultural perspectives (Ewalt and Mokuau, 2001: 1). While a Western perspective of self determination in the social work context places emphasis on the ramifications of client self determination, much of which is reflected in the literature, such an approach supports the prevailing middle-class American ethic of individualism.

Within many indigenous cultures, however, the emphasis of the collective perspective over the individual perspective on self-determination is paramount. Ewalt and Mokuau (2001: 1) use the case of cultures in the Pacific region where self determination is defined by values of collective affiliation rather than by individualism. While 'the Pacific' region is incredibly diverse it can also be acknowledged that there is a common emphasis on group and in terms of self determination this may mean fulfilling group obligations, not necessarily ridding oneself of them in this cultural context. The importance of community very much contributes to the well-being of the group. It is possibly why indigenous communities are primarily members of groups (e.g. clans, communities, nations) rather than individuals

(Weaver, 2001: 180).

When working with clients where they are working towards an aspect of self determination as a goal, this may mean that actions that are inclusive of the extended family would be most desired.

Indigenous models

Indigenous models of practice are now beginning to be acknowledged within some countries as well as at an international level. South Africa, Canada, Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand in particular are developing models in the area of collective decision making and partnerships with families in child and family welfare, youth justice and corrections, all of which are showing some signs of success in informing and transforming social work practice (Lynn, 2001). In this sense there is recognition of cultural difference as a strength, rather than a weakness, as a resource rather than a problem. There is, however, still considerable distance to go before indigenous forms of social welfare work practice are more fully recognised and valued as theory and practice that can inform and transform western social work practices and not simply be relegated to the 'other'.

Some ways in which this is happening very effectively in Aotearoa is the development of social services that have been developed by iwi/tribal and Maori organisations. Weaver (2001) says that similar developments have been happening in North America since the 1970s. While State organisations are still the major providers of social services to our people, there is growing recognition that in order to produce positive outcomes for the families that you are working with, it is necessary to work collaboratively with tribal and Maori organisations that often have the insider networks and practices necessary to work effectively with their own. For example, non-verbal behavior is culturally determined and can be misconstrued by people unfamiliar to that culture or the use of narrative as a guiding form for the teaching of children (Weaver, 2001). Such examples are indeed strengths that derive from our cultural communities but can be overlooked by well meaning outsiders who may only see the problems and not the solutions. As Weaver (2001: 186) puts it, 'while the extent of cultural tradition that remains varies across Native nations as well as within those nations, much still exists of these cultures once targeted for annihilation'. As well, cultures are not static; they change and grow over time and we should see this as exciting because we are adapting to the ever changing context in which we find ourselves.

Lynn (2001) on the other hand voices some concern that while the approaches to practice have ranged from adapting western concepts to local relationships and behaviors to building specific indigenous practice theory from their core values, beliefs and practices, such knowledge still primarily remains as local knowledge for a particular context rather than having a wider application. She appropriately reflects that there is still some distance to travel in seeing such approaches to practice validated alongside other social work

approaches.

Our Maori communities are now actively developing their own models of practice, with some of them being adaptable across a variety of contexts. Most importantly, many of the models recognise traditional cultural practices based on whanaungatanga (relationship building or connectedness). Such approaches respect the person's cultural and ethnic identity, language and religious or ethical beliefs and the importance and significance to the person of the person's ties to their family, whanau, hapu, iwi, all factors that contribute to a person's well being (Ihimaera, 2004: 19). From our cultural perspective the contributions to group interest ultimately strengthens the person as well as their cultural continuity in that community. Ewalt and Mokuau (1995: 4) also make similar statements from a Pacific Island perspective where they say that an essential element of their cultures is the 'affiliative nature of relationships'. The person is a locus of shared biographies and the relationship defines the person not vice versa. It is therefore this connectedness and the pronounced value of group identity and cohesiveness that is a major value and something which permeates their lifestyle practices. These values cannot be emphasised enough as core components of this cultural context and a genuine understanding of this in terms of the practice of the social worker is necessary in order to work effectively in these communities. An appreciation of these aspects can be acquired via the literature and learning at an educational institution, but only living and becoming intimately involved in these communities will give you a close understanding of these perspectives. 'Knowing' the other as an indigenous person and then 'doing' is what leads to positive long-term social change and Lynn (2001) suggests that this can only come about by being intimately connected to that community and in some instances to that experience. Cultural continuity and traditions are important strengths that provide guidelines for living that have served our indigenous community well for thousands of years.

A focus on how indigenous people help their own opens up possibilities for social work practitioners to think differently, to see the world differently and perhaps even feel differently.

Narrative

Many of our indigenous stories have all but been erased from the landscape of social welfare work. Minimised to positions of 'myth' much of the detail of our history has been lost and yet as oral cultures this was our means of transferring knowledge between generations.

Now as a part of revitalising our cultural contexts, our stories are being retold, rewritten and consequently recognised in terms of their importance as a tool in the social work arena. Within the stories are traditional methods that could positively influence our social work practice. There needs to be a recognition and respect of these stories and not a misappropriation and relegation to mere myth. Lessons emerge from these stories. They

contain the voices, authority and visibility that ensure indigenous peoples are a part of the landscape of social welfare work as participants in the dialogue about their own future (Moore 1996: 3, cited in Lynn, 2001). Story tellers are important in our country as they are the repositories of knowledge that carry this on down to other generations. It is important, therefore, that we think creatively about how it is that we transfer knowledge.

Empowerment like sovereignty is inherent and an internal strength, something that cannot be given by an outside entity despite what our governments might say. It is something that only those in their local communities can collectively work on. None the less empowerment is critical for confronting the continuing impact of colonisation (Munford and Walsh-Tapiata, 2001).

Current state for Maori in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Comparing the Maori living standards with those of non-Maori gives some indication of the gaps between Maori and other New Zealanders. As you may be able to predict there are no surprises. On almost any indicator, such as health, education, employment, offending, home ownership or income levels, Maori performance is substantially worse. However, Durie (2003) warns that measuring Maori progress by using Pakeha New Zealand as a benchmark does not really capture the dynamic state of Maori society and, therefore, the hugely significant gains that have been made this century. Certainly suicide rates have increased for young people, and a large number of Maori children are brought up in a family with one parent. While such negative images would presume that we are in a state of crisis the strengths are hidden which also characterise whanau/family in modern times. It is our skills and strengths which have allowed us to survive more than 160 years of colonisation (Durie, 2003).

Maori language revitalisation is higher now than it has been for more than five decades. In many Maori communities there are many localised positive initiatives that are enabling Maori to have a strong sense of who they are and the positive contributions that they can make to their communities. Maori are living longer, can look forward to a standard of living which would be the envy of their parents, and many make up substantive numbers in the sporting and entertainment industries.

Of worthy note as far as social work is concerned is also the increasing number of Maori that are now training to be social workers and who are insistent that their cultural reality is a foundation to any programme. Many of the educational institutions overtly appear to support such a focus, though some Maori still remain sceptical about the true intent of including cultural issues in any curriculum. In other words it is one thing to teach students about how to greet in Maori and to learn a waiata and maybe even a karanga, but where is the critical analysis required in order that the student acquires an understanding of the broader structural issues at various levels, necessary if social workers are to be true agents of

change? With the introduction of the Social Work Registration Act (2003) in Aotearoa New Zealand it is going to be an interesting time ahead for Maori social workers who have worked much of their lives in their communities but who are most likely to not have a social work qualification. This will be a real challenge for those who are implementing this legislation as there has been general recognition in our country of the tangata whenua and the need for the inclusion of the Treaty of Waitangi as a principle that should underpin social work practice.

Future

So where to for Maori and social and community work in the future?

We need to begin by having our own people define our reality, inclusive of both the strengths and the challenges of our communities. Too often, others look in from the outside and have made determinations about our needs and problems, failing to see the potential that is evident. Our major challenge is to understand the context in which our people live and to transform it. It is not only about surviving any more but about how we can be leaders of today and tomorrow.

In Aotearoa that means that we are about reclaiming our identity. I am not sure that we ever completely lost it, but the impacts of colonisation are such that many of us have felt lost from many aspects of our culture. One of the most obvious ways in which this reclamation is occurring is by the learning of our own language, therefore ensuring that future generations are able to not only maintain the Maori language but also the various dialects. Imagine in a nation where the language has all but been lost to have your children and grandchildren dreaming and talking in their sleep in their own language. The introduction of immersion education over two decades ago with Kohanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa is now producing generations of young people who strongly know who they are, who have strong links with their families and tribal communities, and who are making positive contributions to New Zealand society. Cultural legitimacy of Maori knowledge and values are being transposed into everyday practice, and while many of the social workers here from Aotearoa might question whether there has been a lot of substantial change in our Maori communities, I am hopeful that there is now more than a glimmer of light. These approaches are not ours alone in Aotearoa New Zealand as other indigenous nations in other parts of the world are also reclaiming their culture and passing these on to their children. I am a second language learner of Maori but I am proud to say that my children's first language is Maori. They only speak Maori to each other and to their friends and connected adults, including people of our grandparents' generation who are still the repositories of our traditional knowledge. Traditional values, far from being outmoded, can be a major source of strength in contemporary times.

Such developments are, however, very fragile and they can easily be marginalised. It will be important to not further devalue those whose voices have been absent. We need to

continue to develop new discourses and recognise ways in which we can celebrate our diversity while still maintaining our respective cultures. There are ways in which Maori communities can reach out to the wider world but not return to the imposition of monocultural constructs or the formulation of a universal approach, as if all New Zealanders were part of a homogenous one nation population. If Maori aspirations are to materialise, then we too cannot ignore the realities that characterise the modern New Zealand or the global influences that impact on all peoples (Durie, 2003).

We can reflect on the millennium just past, but need to consider the millennium that we have now moved in to. We have real opportunities here and need to maximise these. This is about not always waiting for the State to catch up with us (because let's admit it they don't want to) but about developing a ground swell of change in our respective communities. Our past does inform our future. What we have learnt is that no matter how many challenges have been put before us we are still able to determine our own destiny and the way we live our lives. This is our present challenge and the challenge for those who will follow in our footsteps – mo ake tonu atu.

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