Pūao-te-Āta-tū: Informing Māori social work since 1986

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Abstract

The Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report (1986) is the founding document of Māori social work in Aotearoa, second only to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840) in its significance for Māori social workers. This article presents the influences of Pūao-te-Āta-tū over the past 20+ years on Māori social work. The Report promoted significant changes to social work; in particular, the development of social work practices by Māori, with whānau Māori. In light of its significant nature, research was undertaken with eight Māori social workers to engage them in discussion on the influential nature of Pūao-te-Āta-tū on their social work practice. This article presents the participants’ comments, and emphasises the impact Pūao-te-Āta-tū had on Māori social work practice methods (Hollis, 2006).

Introduction

When I was a young and enthusiastic social work student, one of the messages I picked up along the way was that the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report (1986) was instrumental in shaping Māori social work. However, a conflicting message that resonated with me at the time was its lack of implementation, acknowledgement or even awareness by many social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand. The similarity between this and the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) shocked me as I was about to launch into my own career as a Māori social worker. Unsurprisingly I focused my postgraduate research on Pūao-te-Āta-tū and the implications for Māori social work practice. This article draws heavily on this research and presents the views of Māori social workers in order to develop an understanding of the true impact of the Report on their practice methods since the 1980s. Eight Māori social workers from various organisations participated in this research. The findings show that while the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report was instrumental in changing the social service environment and some elements of practice, rather than changing Māori practices, it validated the use of tikanga in the social services (Hollis, 2006). Of particular importance is the high level of support Māori social workers have for the Report, even though their colleagues have not similarly embraced it.

Research background and literature

This research has a dual focus. At a structural level, the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report has been selected because it was the first official government document that acknowledged Māori social work methods and recommended their use. It validated the Treaty of Waitangi and
sought an end to racism within the Department of Social Welfare (Keenan, 1995). In his discussion of some of the exciting and the frustrating aspects of the Pūao-te-Āta-tū journey, Walker describes its importance:

There seems to be little point in giving a point account of where and why I think Pūao-te-Āta-tū has been assigned to the back-water. The important thing is Māori have not and will not forget it. It is truly a policy document of the people. It will not go away (Walker, 1995).

The Report’s influence on Māori social work development has been at both an organisational (meso) level and an individual (micro) level. This encompasses both the use of traditional Māori practices by workers and by organisations, as well as the introduction of contemporary models. Around the time the Pūao-te-Āta-tū was introduced, social work models developed out of a general recognition that there was an absence of procedures and forums that encouraged whānau and their communities to support each other through state services (Pitama, 2003). Thus, Māori social workers and academics developed models and ‘best practices’, blending ancient and modern Māori knowledge into coherent narratives (Hemara, 2000). Traditional Māori belief systems provide the foundation of a Māori paradigm in a contemporary setting as well as in classical times (Hakiaha, 1997).

**Research methods and methodology**

This project was guided by Constructivism and Kaupapa Māori theory. Constructivist theory is a process in which one’s interpretation of the world is constructed through interactions and transmitted throughout society (Bruner, 1990; Crotty, 1998; Huitt, 2003; Mahoney, 2004). Similarly, Kaupapa Māori theory is an ever-evolving praxis that developed out of Māori communities as a way of interpreting, resisting and transforming the negative results of colonisation. It is a theory of change that focuses on Māori having the power and control over research and other interactions with Māori, such as in social work practice (Bishop, 1996; Smith, 1999; Kiro, 2000; Glover, 2002; Smith, 2003; Walsh-Tapiata, 2003; Walker, 2005).

Qualitative and Kaupapa Māori research methods guided the research process and acted as a ‘code of conduct’ for myself as a Māori researcher (Bevan-Brown, 1998; Smith, 1999; Eketone, 2008). Ruwhiu (2001) states that tikanga could be described as the legal system in which all dealings within Māoridom operate. Tikanga is the overarching protection or the cultural paradigm in which researchers, social workers, or anyone who identifies with Kaupapa Māori should function.

The principle of tuakana-teina has been described as paramount when researching within a Māori context. This gives the participant the status of the Tuakana/elder sibling, acknowledging their role as the ‘expert and classifier’ and values their knowledge as tapu (Walker, 2004). As a researcher, I chose to take the role of the mokopuna, where the participants are the kaumatua. Through labelling myself as a mokopuna as opposed to the teina I am acknowledging my age and social work experiences. I chose this stance for this particular project because it adequately reflects the status, long-term experience and knowledge of the research participants. The knowledge contained in this article is not a commodity; its ownership will always be with the participants for the benefit of Māori social work and whānau Māori.

Interviews were held with Māori social workers that are currently working in a social service organisation and have done so since the 1980s. Their roles differ and in many cases have changed over the years. They vary from having once been a client themselves, to
having foster children living in their homes. They have also been social workers at CYF, in mental health settings, at hospitals and in Māori, iwi and community-based organisations. Participants were cultural advisors, lecturers, played significant roles in the establishment of Kura Kaupapa and Kōhanga reo, and in some cases, were on the trust boards of social services. Following a whakawhanaungatanga process, the participants were asked open-ended questions about the Pūiao-te-Āta-tū Report as well as its influence on their social work practice. Their kōrero are presented here and reflect the significant themes from the interviews. These themes have been presented in two groups, first the themes that relate to the ‘micro’ or social work practice methods, and second those that relate to the ‘meso’ or organisational changes. The themes are: traditional Māori concepts and practices, surrounding influences on Māori methods of practice, changing methods for working with Māori whānau, improving support for Māori social work methods, changing social service organisations, and struggles that arose during the changes.

**Traditional Māori concepts and practices**

The majority of participants responded that the first practices they used when working with Māori clients in particular, but also non-Māori clients, were the rituals of encounter, whakapapa and whakawhanaungatanga. ‘When you are working with our people you need to go with whakawhanaungatanga first. You are getting to know them as a person, not getting to know their troubles straight away’. Māori social workers need to know their own whakapapa and knowledge of the community in order to develop whakawhanaungatanga with whānau. ‘It’s about how you identify, you have to know your whakapapa … each of us brings with us our tūpuna’. However, participants acknowledged that due to colonisation and urbanisation many Māori have lost the ability to make these connections.

A second theme that emerged from the interviews was the notion of aroha, compassion, respect or empathy. This context has been described in two ways, the first being a reciprocal respect given to colleagues and whānau without discrimination. The second is described here: ‘when our old Māori people came into the office, they were spoken to in Māori. They were taken aside and recognised for who they were’. This form of respect or compassion requires additional skills and processes that take into consideration age, status and situation. The use and fluency of Te Reo Māori was fundamental to all Māori social workers interviewed and was described in different ways. There was a general agreement that knowledge of Te Reo Māori was vital for the understanding of tikanga Māori and when working with Māori people, the greater one’s knowledge of the reo is the better they are at incorporating tikanga into their practice.

Participants stated that the concept of kanohi-ki-te-kanohi is about giving the client respect by going to them, being there in person and hearing their side of the story. This is done without making assumptions or false conclusions. As a whole, participants agreed that the methods they use draw on traditional Māori practices and reflect a Māori worldview: ‘At the time, we did not use te whare tapa whā or te whare … because those models were not written. They were still the dreams in the minds of guys like Mason Durie. So you would just draw on what you thought were Māori ways to view the world’. Participants agreed that contemporary Māori models of practice are greatly needed and each participant supported theorists and writers on Māori models. It was also noted that no participant claimed to use a contemporary model: rather, they described the use of tikanga and traditional practices as being of primary use in their everyday practice.
**Surrounding influences on Māori methods of practice**

One area that was significantly influential to participants’ practice methods was the positive influence of a kuia or kaumātua who guided their learning and inspired them to develop their knowledge and use of tikanga Māori. As a young social worker, support from their elders was fundamental to the participants’ development of their Māoritanga and as social workers. One participant stated: ‘I was strongly influenced by my own kaumātua … That’s how I was brought up so it was easy for me to rapport with them, be in their korowai’. Another participant described how he worked with a kuia who was like a mentor to him. He described how spending time with her was actually a fundamental time of learning where he gained knowledge of Māori issues and the history of the area in which they lived. One participant said: ‘I was ‘buddied’ up to a kuia and we utilised a number of community linkages, connecting with other kuia and koroua … so that was quite influential for me to be working alongside a kuia who came with a lot of traditional knowledge that she brought from the haukainga’. The majority of participants also spoke of how these kaumātua developed into long-term mentors and played significant roles in their learning. Another participant commented: ‘I have endeavoured to listen to their counsel because they have been critical in my own growth’.

A second, and just as significant factor to influence Māori practice methods, was the changing political climate of the 1980s. There was a growing awareness that in order to better support whānau Māori, organisations needed to implement Māori approaches. Around the time of Pūao-te-Āta-tū, organisations began to employ Māori social workers, eight of which were the participants in this research. While the participants were employed before the report, it was not until after the report that Māori methods of practice were encouraged. One participant stated: ‘Looking back to the 1980s when Pūao-te-Āta-tū came into being, the environment was becoming really political in relation to services towards Māori’. Participants stated that they could now use Māori practice methods, while these had not yet been ‘defined’, but they could do so freely without ‘getting into trouble’ and no longer needed to ‘break the rules’.

**Changing methods for working with Māori whānau**

There was an overall consensus that the principles behind Māori social work methods of practice have not changed in the last 20 years. Processes such as whanaungatanga and whakapapa remain the same for Māori social workers and have not changed greatly over time. If anything, the way tikanga processes are used within the social services have been enhanced since Pūao-te-Āta-tū: ‘When you talk about traditional concepts, we did it all the time, whanaungatanga, that’s how we work. We haven’t changed our way of working, it has just rubbed off on the other staff’. There was a general feeling that although they might not have known the ‘labels’ for what they were doing, methods have fundamentally stayed the same. One participant stated that after Pūao-te-Āta-tū social workers could treat elders with the respect and dignity they deserve without ‘getting a rap on the knuckles for taking an hour to talk to someone’. Therefore, one’s use of this method has increased as a result of its acceptance, and some participants would argue that they haven’t changed – they have just been enhanced and refined.

Participants agreed that the use of whakapapa connections has been consistently an important aspect of Māori social work throughout time and a vital aspect of this is knowing one’s own whānau, hapū and iwi. One participant said: ‘well if you don’t know where you are from and what you are doing then you can’t deliver that to our people’. Pūao-te-Āta-
tū validated and encouraged the acceptance of Māori family types, parenting styles and practices. Many participants agreed that one of the more practical changes after the Report was the acknowledgement of whānau, hapū and iwi into the 1989 Children, Young Persons and their Families Act (CYPF Act).

**Improving support for Māori social work methods**

One of the significant changes that happened as a result of the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report was the beginnings of support for Māori social work methods within the Department: ‘with the introduction of Pūao-te-Āta-tū that is when things really changed … the Ministry started having to realise that there was more to dealing with people than their way’. The predominant theme in this section of the interviews was that the Report created huge changes for Māori social workers, in terms of their identity and their practice. Not only were organisations actively employing Māori but their methods were also being validated, which encourages the acceptance and understanding of Māori ways of doing things.

The notion of being validated in one’s practice was important to participants: ‘It broke the barrier for me, all of a sudden I felt good about being Māori. When Pūao-te-Āta-tū came out, one participant was ecstatic because the report stated ‘our way of doing things is professional and it is no longer second best. It felt really good to be considered an expert in your own arena’. Therefore, the Report promoted the normalisation of being Māori and a social worker.

The overall view that positive change was to come out of this report meant that participants recognised Pūao-te-Āta-tū as being responsible for new initiatives that benefited Māori whānau, clients and workers. One participant added that they were able to provide culturally appropriate settings for their work to take place, rather than the same ‘Pākehā’ setting ‘I’m not saying it’s right or wrong, I’m just saying that in a Māori world, that is where they can identify’. So the possibilities were open for Māori social workers to use Māori methods and develop them in a way that Māori whānau could relate to and felt comfortable in.

One participant commented that following Pūao-te-Āta-tū social service organisations started to recognise people’s ability to kōrero Māori. The use of powhiri or mihi whakatau was introduced in the workplace and enabled Māori social workers to welcome new staff to the job but also impact upon the cultural environment of the office. ‘After Pūao-te-Āta-tū came out that is when we started having formal welcomes … and they started calling on the expertise within the staff to whaikorero’. Participants stated the introduction of a pōwhiri meant that Māori methods were being acknowledged and accepted.

One of the major implementations at the time was the establishment of Māori teams within social service organisations. Through these teams, in some organisations called ‘Roopu teams’ they were able to gain support from each other in the development and enhancement of their Māori methods and to support each other through difficult times. This system functioned successfully when Māori managers and supervisors were also employed to support and maintain the groups.

**Changing social service organisations**

As previously stated, social service organisations before Pūao-te-Āta-tū came out were fundamentally monocultural. One participant said: ‘I started in the 1970s and it was just a
real Pākehā world … there really wasn’t any notice taken of other people’s customs, not just Māori, everyone was treated the same’. Participants said that there were very few Māori social workers and in certain parts of the country there were no Māori social workers. Instead, social workers were predominantly ‘white, middle class’ and lived outside of the communities of the families they worked with.

Others commented that they were forced to suppress their ‘Māoriness’ and assimilate into the mainstream system: ‘Before Pūao-te-Āta-tū you did whanaungatanga but not a great deal, it was a sterile environment’. One participant said that he always used Māori methods with Māori and non-Māori clients but chose not to tell anyone what he was doing. Therefore, the changing political climate meant that participants could use methods that came naturally to them, as opposed to repressing or disguising their Māori processes.

Participants stated that the processes of dealing with children and young people before Pūao-te-Āta-tū were alien compared to traditional Māori concepts of whakapapa and kanohi-ki-te-kanohi. They stated that within social services there was a perception that policy makers were founding their policies upon western theories rather than considering what the Māori community wanted. This included a feeling that policy makers were assuming what ‘a Māori’ was like and were not taking a Māori perspective or regional issues into account. ‘One thing that was really noticeable was that if you were a ‘white’-looking person you were classed as Pākehā. They didn’t realise that a lot of those white-looking people were actually Māori’. Before Pūao-te-Āta-tū was released it seemed that policy makers were judging what it was to be Māori based on their views of a minority group of Māori representatives, such as government officials. Participants said that the people advising policy makers were perhaps too detached from the real needs of the community and that the target group was not actually being reached.

Because of the obvious difficulties for Māori social workers before Pūao-te-Āta-tū, the majority of participants felt a strong sense of ‘us and them’. One participant said: ‘at the same time there was a real underground ‘us and them’ thing. There was the department and then there was us’. There were other versions of ‘us and them’; in some cases it was ‘us and management’ and in others cases it was ‘us and government’ and in many cases it was regarding ‘Māori and non-Māori’. Generally there was mistrust of western theories and social work methods and of the hegemonic, monocultural atmosphere within social services.

**Struggles that arose during the changes**
While the Report had positive implications for Māori social work and whānau, the implementation of the Report into policy and practice was not without its issues. Participants said that at the time, some social workers felt threatened by the changes that occurred within social service organisations. A few social workers, Māori and non-Māori, resisted the changes and for whatever reasons, disagreed with them. They said that many colleagues accepted and embraced the changes, or at least some changes, while others chose to ‘push back’, to maintain a monocultural stance; and others chose to leave the social work profession.

Another issue with the implementation of Pūao-te-Āta-tū was that while the document was well loved and supported, the recommendations were never fully implemented. Participants questioned the approaches that some organisations undertook to include Māori methods into the organisational environment. They stated that some Māori practices such
as the use of Te Reo Māori were accepted but the way it was implemented did not always benefit the whānau: ‘They think they are doing Māori a favour by putting [Māori] names on everything. They are not doing us a favour’. The participants followed on to state that a more useful way to implement the Reo was when organisations encouraged all staff to practise and master the pronunciation of Māori names.

While participants said that Pūao-te-Āta-tū resulted in huge improvements to organisations through introducing the powhiri process, it was problematic in some cases. Tikanga conflicts arose between Māori and Pākehā processes, where Māori staff were called upon to implement the process but for one reason or another it clashed with the norms of the non-Māori members of the organisation. Other issues arose as well between staff from different iwi groups and those with limited or variable levels of knowledge on tikanga. One participant said that it became like ‘dial a pōwhiri’ where organisations, in some circumstances, lost the true purpose of the powhiri and were using the process too often, for the wrong reasons. This resulted in overworked Māori staff and a sense that the pōwhiri was undervalued and overused.

There was a general sense that Māori social workers are still waiting for the Government to address the recommendations made by Pūao-te-Āta-tū. Participants agreed that the Government still has a long way to go to achieve what was intended by Pūao-te-Āta-tū. They stated that they were still supportive of the implementation of Pūao-te-Āta-tū and felt less inclined to align themselves with more recent documents such as the Te Punga Report (1994) and later legislation. In order for the Government to fully commit to meeting the needs of Māori whānau, participants stated that Pūao-te-Āta-tū needed to be resurrected and maintained. In order to ensure its maintenance, social workers need to keep being taught about the values that underpin the Report so they that continue to advocate for its acknowledgement. Participants agreed that the education of young social workers was vital so that the passion for Pūao-te-Āta-tū can be passed down through generations who may not have been around in the 1980s.

Conclusions

This research highlighted a number of key points, all of which emphasise the importance of the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report for Māori social work practice and the betterment of Māori whānau lives. The findings presented in this article reflect the kōrero from eight Māori social workers, all with extensive social work experience. They comment first on what their Māori social work methods are, then reflected upon the influences of the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report on these methods, as well as other key influential factors. Māori social work practices are underpinned by tikanga and it is the use of tikanga practices that most effectively empower Māori whānau. While the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report made significant changes to social services, Māori methods remained the same, grounded in tikanga, although these methods were validated, supported to a limited extent and sought out within organisations. They then described the influence of the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report on social service organisations in general. It was found that the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report made fundamental changes to many aspects of social services: policy, procedures and attitudes. Māori social workers note that the implementation of the Pūao-te-Āta-tū Report was insufficiently done but that it set a benchmark for where social services should aim. While this is merely a brief description of their views, they reflect a depth of experience in the social services before, during and after
the Report of 1986. Many conclusions can be drawn from their comments, but what has stood out is that the Pūiao-te-Āta-tū Report is a report of the people, belonging to Māori social workers and, they hope, will not be forgotten.

References