Whāia te Ara Ora: Understanding and healing the impact of historical trauma and sexual violence for Māori

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The book *Whāia te Ara Ora* is a carefully woven whāriki which draws together mātauranga Māori from tūpuna, atua, whānau, healers, care providers, and the Māori and Indigenous worlds to explore the potential pathways for recovery from sexual violence and historical trauma for whānau Māori. The book explores the historic origins and development of family and sexual violence within whānau Māori in Aotearoa; and what survivors, whānau, and care providers believe will work to heal from these issues and prevent them in the future. This book powerfully exposes the colonial myth-making that surrounds so much of the discourse on Māori social and health issues, and continually draws the connections between historic and ongoing colonisation, capitalism, and racism and the impact of these in the lives and futures of whānau Māori. *Whāia te Ara Ora* is one outcome of the wider *He Kokonga Whare: Māori Intergenerational Trauma and Healing Research Programme* (Te Atawhai o te Ao, n.d.). This book stems from a kaupapa Māori research project within this programme that used both interviews and a survey to understand Māori experiences and understandings of sexual violence and healing (Te Atawhai o te Ao, n.d.)

The authors frame the narrative of this project with the pūrākau of Niwareka and Mataora, which in te ao Māori is the genesis of family violence and collective whānau restoration. The use of this particular pūrākau is both a literary device and an illustration of the central importance of traditional knowledges in kaupapa Māori conceptualisations of, and responses to, social issues. Pūrākau, whakataukī and whakatauākī, whakapapa, whaikōrero and oral histories are used alongside the whakawhiti kōrero of research participants and contextualising information to create a thoroughly *Māori* exploration of these 'wicked problems' and their potential solutions. The overall narrative of the book weaves in and out of historic and contemporary time, from service providers to survivor-storytellers to the words of tūpuna and tōhunga and back again. This is not a research text borne from a Western academic paradigm, this is kaupapa Māori enacted on the page.

In *Whāia te Ara Ora*, the content chapters of healthy relationships; historical and intergenerational trauma; the context of sexual violence in Aotearoa; historic and ongoing colonial disruptions to traditional Māori ways of life and relationships to self, others, and whenua; and pathways to healing are all explored in relation with each other. Both the authors and the research participants themselves clearly linked contemporary experiences of perpetrating, and being subjected to, sexual violence to wider structural violence. Particularly striking to me were the links made in the text between sexual violence and the violent imposition of Western colonial gender

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norms on whānau Māori; the subjugation of mātauranga and tikanga Māori through both assimilation and invasion; and the confiscation and degradation of Papatūānuku as an ongoing action of white supremacist, gendered violence. In contextualising historic sexual violence in the colonial era within the wider structural violence of colonisation and genocide, one participant said that "what was intruded upon was our soul and our spirit and our attachment to the land and to each other …" (p. 120). This whakawhiti kōrero is illustrative of the both broad and deep whakaaro that is drawn on for this book. The authors deftly weave the threads of individual experience with the broader systems and structures that have shaped generations of Māori lives for the last two hundred years.

As important as the rigorous contextualising of family and sexual violence among whānau and hāpori Māori as an outcome of colonial violence, is the exploration of approaches to healing. The final content chapter of the book is rich with whānau reflections on the aspirations of tikanga and kaupapa Māori-based restoration for survivors, perpetrators, whānau, communities, and hapū and iwi Māori. The research participants and authors discuss with clarity the transformative potential of kaupapa Māori violence prevention and healing programmes that utilise the strengths of whānau, whanaungatanga, and mātauranga Māori. The barriers to implementation—among others, a largely monocultural neoliberal funding environment—are also thoughtfully examined. Again, the authors continually return us to the interconnected nature of the individual- and whānau-level problems *and solutions* to the structures that (re)produce them. The book clearly positions tikanga and mātauranga Māori, whakapapa, hapū and iwi, and tino rangatiratanga as the solutions to family and sexual violence. The authors remind us that Māori communities have the knowledge, skills, and experience to support better outcomes for Māori, in ways that are appropriate for, and responsive to, Māori cultural and spiritual needs. What has been taken by force is the power to define what Māori needs and Māori outcomes look like in individualised and prescriptive health and social services, and the resources to make those potential futures a reality.

I first read *Whāia te Ara Ora* while practising in a Māori mental health service. The book mirrored the narrative understandings many of the whai i te ora wāhine had of their own experiences as survivors of family and sexual violence. Many of the wāhine I worked with consistently understood individual experiences of harm and trauma within the context of the historic and modern structures that create hardship, isolation, and an ensnarement in child protection and justice systems that often punish women and mothers, and remove the hope of restoration and balance to family and community relationships. The second time I read this book, it was while teaching social work students about the ongoing violence of colonisation and racism in Aotearoa, and the strength and ingenuity of Māori resistance. In both instances, reading this book breathed life into the idea of what kaupapa Māori research and services can look like.

For social workers in Aotearoa, this book prods and pulls at our espoused professional values of social justice, advocacy, and the liberation of oppressed peoples. In its unrelenting grounding of contemporary problems as the descendants of historic and ongoing processes of colonisation, the book challenges us all to work towards the redress of the physical, psychological, and relational violence of colonisation. For social workers in the global context, there will be echoes of the same work needed in your back yards: continued struggles within, or in solidarity with, Indigenous self-determination and anti-racism movements, and a reminder of the importance to strive for culturally responsive practice in political and funding environments that often prioritise monocultural and overly prescriptive social work services. *Whāia te Ara Ora* is an

essential text for understanding the historic and structural roots of contemporary Māori and Indigenous social issues.

References:

Te Atawhai o Te Ao. (n.d.). *Impact of sexual violence on Māori. https://teatawhai.maori.nz/research-projects/he-kokonga-whare/the-impact-of-sexual-violence-on-maori-project/*

Glossary of te reo Māori terms:

Whāriki – woven mat

Mātauranga Māori – Māori knowledge and knowledge systems

Tūpuna – ancestor(s)

Atua – god(s), preeminent ancestor(s)

Whānau – extended family

Pūrākau – important story or narrative

Te ao Māori – the Māori world

Whakataukī – cultural proverb where the author is unknown

Whakatauākī – cultural proverb where the author is known

Whakapapa – genealogy or lineage

Whaikōrero – formal oratory

Whakawhiti kōrero – dialogue, in this case from research participants

Tōhunga – expert(s)

Kaupapa Māori – Māori approach or agenda

Tikanga Māori – Māori cultural practices and ways of being

Papatūānuku – Earth mother, ancestor to all Māori

Whakaaro – thoughts or opinions

Hāpori Māori – Māori communities

Hapū – tribe

Iwi – grouping of tribes with ties to a common ancestor

Whanaungatanga – reciprocal relationships between whānau or other communities

Tino rangatiranga – absolute and enduring authority – the power of self-determination

Whai i te ora – people who utilise mental health services

Wāhine – women

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