

Locating my pou

Vanessa Oatley Registered social worker, Aotearoa New Zealand

The following is a critically reflective narrative describing the events that led me to begin my PhD research on how Pākehā statutory care and protection social workers can improve their practice with whānau Māori. Storying and metaphor are used to capture the framework of ideas that underpin and drive my research process.

“Okay, so tell me about how the Treaty of Waitangi fits into social work, what does that mean to you?” The sole wāhine Māori on the panel held my gaze as she asked me her question. She laid it down, a wero, a rākau whakaara, presented by the first challenger in the Pōwhiri process. The process is normally reserved for important visitors, which I, a middle-class, middle-aged, Pākehā woman, was not. She challenged me in this way because it was an important question, the most important question in my interview to enter the social work programme. “I think we’re not there yet,” I hedged, panicking and kicking myself silently for not being prepared. “What does that mean?” She laid down the rākau takoto, the second challenge. I took a deep breath, “I mean that Pākehā are not honouring the commitment made in the Treaty and that the Crown has never honoured it.” I breathed out. She laid down the final rākau whakawaha, “So?” “So it matters in social work because Treaty breaches continue to impact Māori whānau today.” She held my gaze. She didn’t smile or nod. Te Tiriti o Waitangi and my obligation as Tangata Tiriti became my first pou¹.

I was accepted to the programme

“You should all read Pūao-te-Ata-Tū. It’s a report published in 1988 that acknowledges the presence of structural racism in the New Zealand Department of Social Welfare,” the lecturer paused, looked out at the

predominantly Pākehā faces dominating the social work third-year lecture and sighed, “that is why I am still here, I can’t retire until something changes.” Of all the new knowledge I had learned as a ‘mature’ social work student: neo-liberalism, constructivism, ecological systems theory, attachment, positivism, utilitarianism, deontology, teleology, psychodynamics, and the list goes on, it is Pūao-te-Ata-Tū that has sat most heavily in my head, and on my heart since. In 1988 I was 10 years old, now I am 43. In 1988, we knew we had a problem, more than three decades later, we know we still have the same problem. The unrealised vision of Pūao-te-Ata-Tū is my second pou.

I graduated the next year

“I would trust her to work with my whānau,” my wāhine Māori colleague offered as a concluding thought to a job interview she was supporting me in. The interview was held on Zoom, amidst the Covid-19 pandemic lockdown², and much like Covid-19 itself, the comment has sat as a constant at the periphery of my thoughts ever since. If I was to hazard a guess about what many Pākehā social workers hearing a sentence like this would feel, I suppose they would feel happy. Satisfied that they have exhibited some magical combination of values, skills, and knowledge to “competently” work with Māori, and their efforts have been noticed. Ka rawe! What went through my recently graduated, middle-class, middle-aged, Pākehā perfectionist mind was, “I have work to do.” What if I’m not to be trusted? Why would you trust me? To me, this level of confidence from a wāhine Māori I respect professionally and care about personally moved me, beyond professional competencies and codes of ethical conduct. If I am to be trusted to

AOTEAROA
NEW ZEALAND SOCIAL
WORK 33(3), 79–81.

CORRESPONDENCE TO:
Vanessa Oatley
veeoatley@gmail.com

work with whānau Māori, then I'd better make sure I deserve that trust. This trust of my colleague, and other friends and whānau is my third pou.

I got the job

"Do you ever wonder whether the policy guidelines we are being asked to use in practice are right for Māori?" I dipped my toe in the water. "I mean, 'child centred' practice doesn't seem right if we understand the place of tamariki Māori within whānau." I dived in head first, I didn't check for rocks. "Well, I trust the guidance is correct and that behind what we are asked to do there are always good intentions," my statutory social work colleague smiled, my head hit the rock. Good intentions, a loud echo in my mind. Good intentions, the makeshift stitches for the gaping hole in the fabric of the most fundamental skill set of social workers, the ability to reflect and think critically. Since when do we leave the work of seeking equity and socially just outcomes to the enigmatic whims of good intentions? How do we do better when we aren't challenging the system? Is this even social work? Good intentions are not good enough is my fourth pou.

I left the job

These four pou: the obligations I hold as Tangata Tiriti, the unrealised vision of Pūao-te-Ata-tū, the trust bestowed on me by my Māori colleagues, whānau and friends to practise safely, and the understanding that good intentions are not good enough, have set in motion a process that feels fraught with anxiety-inducing moments of uncertainty; simultaneously exhilarating, and slippery. It is a fish barely hanging on the hook. The long and arduous road of doctoral study stretches out in front of me, and from my little office at the end of the university hallway, under the bright rainbow flag, it mostly doesn't feel real. It has taken me months to bait the hook

with anything even close to a research outline. I've landed on "exploring the epistemological assumptions underpinning the practice of Pākehā statutory social workers working with whānau Māori in the Aotearoa New Zealand care and protection system." It's a mouthful, more than a worm, leaves me short of breath. It sounds bombastic enough for a PhD, the rainbow trout of research projects. I've got some questions to ask Pākehā statutory social workers, about their views of their obligations to Māori whānau, about the knowledge, values, and skills that help to meet these obligations, and the social, cultural, and systemic factors that impact the work. But, what I really want to ask is simply, how can we do better?

I've started the research

Each time I think I have settled on a clear thought, the weather rolls in and the clouds of doubt obscure it. At best, I fear that my research will be seen as performative allyship, at worst, I will be called out as racist for exclusively studying Pākehā ways of knowing and being and doing. The irony of this fear that my own "good intentions" will be misconstrued is not lost on me. Colonial guilt, privilege, fragility, creeping apathy, and discomfort are now almost constant companions of mine, sometimes they are there as abstract concepts I can load into the microscope and study, separate from me. Sometimes they are there in the mirror staring right back at me. The threat of retreating into Pākehā paralysis is real. Also real are the negative experiences of whānau Māori in contact (often intergenerational contact) with the statutory care and protection system; the churn, the disempowering processes, the very real fear of having the fabric of your whānau torn apart and then stitched back together with good intentions. Real is the combination of institutionally racist policy and practice that leads to more reviews, more "practice shifts," more clip-on fixes to a system that has been described as "broken beyond repair"³. Real are my four pou.

Onward

Glossary

Wāhine – female, women

Wero – challenge

Rākau whakaara – warning baton

Rākau takoto – baton laid down

Rākau whakawaha – baton that clears the way

Pōwhiri – welcome ceremony on a marae, welcome.

Pākehā – English, foreign, European

Pūrakau – story

Whānau – extended family, family group

Te Tiriti o Waitangi – The Treaty of Waitangi

Tangata Tiriti – Treaty people

Pou – support, supporter, metaphoric post, symbol representing support

Pūao-te-Ata-tū – Daybreak

Ka rawe – excellent

Tamariki – children

Notes

- 1 The reo Māori word *pou* is being employed metaphorically as a symbol of support.
- 2 In March 2020, the New Zealand Government announced level four lockdown restrictions in order to safely manage the Covid-19 pandemic. More information on the restrictions at level four can be found here: <https://covid19.govt.nz/covid-19/restrictions/>
- 3 Lady Tureiti Moxon's second brief of evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal in the matter of the Oranga Tamariki Urgent Inquiry (Wai 2915) contained this statement "Oranga Tamariki is broken beyond repair, it destroys whānau and we have absolutely no confidence in it" (Moxon, 2020, p. 1).

References

- Department of Social Welfare. (1988). *Pūao-te-Ata-tū: Day break*. (The report of the Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare), 1–91. <http://www.msd.govt.nz/documents/about-msd-and-our-work/publications-resources/archive/1988-puoteatatu.pdf>
- Māori Dictionary. (2021). *Te aka online Māori dictionary*. <http://Māoridictionary.co.nz/dictionary-info>
- Moxon, T. (2020). *Second brief of evidence of Lady Moxon: Waitangi Tribunal* (Report No. Wai 2915, #A74). <file:///Users/oatva17p/Downloads/Wai%202915,%20A074-1.pdf>