I just graduated—now what? A wero to social work education's settler colonialism and White supremacy

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ABSTRACT

This article examines settler colonialism and White supremacy within social work education and practice in Aotearoa New Zealand through two social work graduates' perspectives; Māori and Pākehā respectively. Despite the profession's stated commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, biculturalism and Pūao-te-Āta-tū (The Māori Perspective Advisory Committee, 1988), settler–colonial structures persistently shape and constrain it. For example, Pākehā frameworks are favoured over mātauranga (Māori knowledges), tikanga (customs) are settler colonial, cherry-picked, financial barriers limit minoritised social worker efforts and supposedly colour-blind health approaches conceal institutionally racist harms. Our wero to social work educators and regulators demands they choose between modern, colonial, tokenistic acknowledgement of mātauranga and non-Pākehā frameworks, or rejecting White supremacy and embodying biculturalism. We posit decolonisation demands not curriculum tweaks but biculturally advised reimagining and restructuring of how power operates within the social work profession. The future of ethical social work practice demands unflinching collective resistance to systems that perpetuate settler colonialism, uphold White supremacist ideologies, and continue to marginalise racialised communities.

Keywords: Settler colonialism, White supremacy, social work

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We are two graduates of social work education, and one researcher and lecturer, from different cultural backgrounds, but united in our concern for social work's education and direction. We offer both personal testimony and critique of the current landscape. Our distinct experiences converge on a shared understanding: meaningful change within the profession requires honest confrontation with White supremacy's and settler colonialism's ongoing influence in the field, and the dismantling of systems that perpetuate settler-colonial dominance under the guise of professional practice.

We are placing a wero in the way that Smith et al. (2022) described in their critique of higher education's White fragility and institutional racism. To *wero* is to challenge visitors via casting a small spear or dart (taki) to the ground before them (Smith et al., 2022). The manner in which someone picks up the taki reveals their intent for visiting: taking it by the handle suggests confrontational intent, while carefully lifting by the blade demonstrates humility and openness to dialogue (Smith et al., 2022). We cast our wero at the feet of those involved in Aotearoa New Zealand social work, inviting reflection on their deeds, where their alliances lie and refocusing (much as Hone

Heke and Te Ruki Kawiti of Ngāti Hine did during early Crown–Māori conflicts) their efforts on snuffing out settler-colonialism and White supremacy over any individual privileges (Webber & O'Connor, 2022). Heke obtained chief Kawiti's assistance in resisting settler-colonial attacks after he gifted Kawiti a greenstone pounamu smeared with tutae (human excrement), which—without words—symbolised the British Crown dishonouring Māori nationwide (Webber & O'Connor, 2022). Token acknowledgements of mātauranga and karakia are not sufficient to address this wero; rather, what is required is an enduringly motivated workforce and educators that meaningfully equip upcoming and existing (and particularly non-Pākehā) social workers to reject institutional racism and White supremacy. Further, an honest commitment to biculturalism is necessary to address the severe inequities our nation experiences.

Ko Ranginui Logan Belk ahau, he uri nō Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Rereahu, Ngāti Hine. I am Ranginui, a descendant of Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Rereahu and Ngāti Hine. Despite now being permitted to practise as a bicultural social worker with my BSW Honours qualification, I believe I will struggle to achieve social work's professed ethical aims under Te Tiriti as informed by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Work (ANZASW) without being (intentionally and unintentionally) mistreated by my employer because the values of the state and association are opposed (2019). This opposition can be most powerfully seen in almost two centuries of state misrepresentation and misrecognition of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Tiriti) (Boulton et al., 2020). After my first year of undergraduate study, I grew to understand that Aotearoa New Zealand social work aspires to practise biculturally (in a Te Tiriti-led fashion), but rarely does. Concerningly, I felt that there were few Aotearoa New Zealand social workers intending to do so. Despite constant reminders in social work settings of negative statistics across the

social drivers of health for Māori (and no concomitant examination and questioning of Pākehā as over-represented in positive statistics), te reo (Māori language) acquisition and promotion of non-Western social work frameworks remains underfunded and scant amongst the profession (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). Acknowledging this deficit, I supplemented my social work education with 3 years of full immersion te reo courses and whānau/iwi (extended family/Māori tribe) based wānanga (learning).

I am Allanah Petrovic, a Pākehā woman with Serbian and Scottish heritage, born and raised in Tāmaki Makaurau. My recent completion of a Master of Social Work (Professional) catalysed a shift in my Pākehā-dominated worldview, deepening my appreciation for He Whakaputanga (1835) and Te Tiriti (1840)—both as someone living on colonised land and as an equity advocate working in communities. Throughout my academic journey, I encountered a troubling reality: social work education fails to adequately centre the transformative social justice work necessary to tear down, or even merely question, the institutional systems perpetuating Māori oppression in Aotearoa New Zealand. This critical oversight means that the profession often continues to uphold colonial power structures and White supremacist ideologies while attempting to profess alliance to te Tiriti-based biculturalism.

I am Eileen Joy, a Pākehā woman whose English working-class ancestors settled in Taranaki in 1842. My journey as a social worker, educator and researcher has meant a critical examination of my ancestral heritage and Whiteness alongside a deepening appreciation and understanding of my role as Tangata Tiriti. My teaching role allows me to walk alongside, encourage, unsettle and even be *unsettled* by students such as Ranginui and Lana.

Our writing therefore presents a wero to social work educators and to others in

the field. This challenge has taken on a newfound urgency in light of recent political developments. The controversial Treaty Principles Bill (2024) as proposed by the ACT party exemplifies the very settler-colonial mindset that we have identified within social work settings. The ACT party asserts that the bill's intent is to offer the same rights and duties for all New Zealanders but has instead emboldened White supremacist anti-Māori rhetoric to alarming degrees across multiple media and social media sites (Hattotuwa, 2024). Despite the profession's stated ethical commitments to Te Tiriti and bicultural practice (ANZASW, 2019; Social Workers Registration Board, 2014), the field remains deeply entrenched in settler colonial structures that privilege Western knowledge systems and methodologies (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024; Hollis-English, 2012). We posit that settler-colonial outputs and norms can, and are, deterring Te Tiriti-centric social work graduates from joining the profession and increase and perpetuate burnout experiences of existing practitioners.

Defining settler colonialism and White supremacy in New Zealand

Local institutional racism may be invisible to Pākehā (Crawford, 2016). To best explain this racism, we invite readers to consider Aotearoa New Zealand through the lens of settler colonialism and White supremacy that necessitates our wero.

Settler colonialism can be defined as the actions of an immigrant group displacing, impoverishing, marginalising and assimilating an Indigenous group through land conquest, historic amnesia, myth-making and imperialism (Wolfe, 2006). Indigenous cultures (Māori) have suffered and continue to suffer under such regimes (Mutu, 2019; Walker, 2004; Wolfe, 2006). In this supplanting of Indigenous culture, foreign oppressive systems are imported, further erasing Indigenous epistemologies. For example, patriarchy informs gender roles, working in tandem with settler colonialism such that Pākehā women are worse off than in traditional Māori society (Glenn, 2015; Mikaere, 2013). The "worthlessness" of women under settler-colonialism layers oppression for wāhine Māori, i.e., racial sexism, and sexed racism (Mikaere, 2013).

In the Aotearoa New Zealand context, intergenerational privilege and nepotism for Pākehā families has ensured Māori and other racialised groups remain comparatively and intergenerationally disadvantaged (Borell et al., 2018). Māori lead consistently across statistics of negative social determinants of health, and have done so for generations (Borell et al., 2018). Perhaps the chief determinant of settler colonial *success* is the extent to which the coloniser believes in their cause: for it is almost impossible to defame, hide and deliberately plan for later generations to forget multiple sites of mass murder due to settler-colonial war by leaving them unmarked and even building roads over them without believing their cause was justified (Belich, 1997; O'Malley & Kidman, 2018). Pākehā histories position themselves as master, implicitly and explicitly privileging their bloodlines over Māori, rendering Māori as savage, sanctioning genocide, torching their homes, and profiting from stolen lands (Borell et al., 2018). Colonial violence is painted as honourable—as something to celebrate (Belich, 1997; Borell et al., 2018). The settler-colonial belief that Māori need to be managed continues to permeate successive governments who disable and break down Māori efforts to preserve and uphold tino rangatiratanga (absolute sovereignty) (Eketone, 2024; Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024).

Due to the falsely translated English version of the Treaty of Waitangi (1840) that successive settler governments have mythologised to legitimacy, Māori were cheated (and are being cheated) out of exercising their tino rangatiratanga (Mutu, 2019). Governments have done so while accepting international praise given to

Aotearoa New Zealand based on being the epitome of cultural relations between two distinct peoples (Belich, 1997; O'Malley & Kidman, 2018; Tecun et al., 2022; Walker, 2004). The continuance of the Te Tiriti mistranslation serves to maintain illegitimate power and protect White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018; Tecun et al., 2022; Walker, 2004). Deeper still, rather than acknowledging distinct, nuanced and myriad Māori iwi (tribal) structures, the Pākehā–Māori binary has been enforced to better maintain their settler-colonial hoax (Belich, 1997; Tecun et al., 2022). Despite the violence of colonisation, Pākehā New Zealand often refuses to meaningfully acknowledge racial disparities. We believe this is because of White fragility (DiAngelo, 2018; Smith et al., 2022), making Pākehā afraid to acknowledge and reflect on White privilege for fear they may forfeit said privilege, have their expertise questioned, or, at a minimum, experience guilt and shame. Aotearoa New Zealand's history of settler-colonialism and the contrasting hesitance (and often refusal) of Pākehā to bear discussing or accepting the inhumanity of their historic (and ongoing) crimes has created a nation that struggles to understand its own identity (Eketone, 2024; DiAngelo, 2018; Tecun et al., 2022).

White supremacy and settler-colonialism are interconnected systems. Love (2022) described White supremacy as the societal and systemic expression of White people's superiority, allowing them to assert control over other races, both in social interactions and within systems. These repeated assertions range from passive acts, such as claims that Māori are *disconnected* from their culture (without naming the disconnector) to acts of violence such as the continued over-representation of whānau (Māori families) in child removal statistics (Hyslop, 2017; Keddell & Hyslop, 2019), and contribute to the maintenance and upholding of White supremacy (Love, 2022). White supremacist stigmatisation and othering has led to existing as colonisers (presenting as Pākehā in Pākehā-oriented Aotearoa New Zealand)

being easier than existing as your ethnic self (Tecun et al., 2022).

How settler colonialism and White supremacy manifest within social work in Aotearoa New Zealand

Social work in Aotearoa New Zealand is built on Western values related to settler colonialism (Beddoe, 2018). Our wero is perhaps difficult to palate for social work because the profession itself is colonial; there was no equivalent for Māori pre-colonisation (Beddoe, 2018). While Māori worked socially together for prosperity, that is substantively different to formalised social work. Effectively, Aotearoa New Zealand facilitates a social work workforce that welcomes Pākehā, minoritises others and leaves bicultural, anti-discriminatory, intersectionality-aware practice to the exceptional, often racialised, overworked social worker (Moyle, 2014; Nayak, 2022). Racialised social workers continually navigate oppression in Pākehā (settler-colonial) society (Nayak, 2022). While Pākehā social workers can choose when to practise biculturally, the racialised social worker (particularly Māori social workers) always walk between both worlds to secure the best results for their racialised clients (Moyle, 2014; Nayak, 2022). Unceasingly walking in both worlds produces an underappreciated-by-colonisers worldview and remains a key reason for high Māori practitioner turnover and the scarcity of Māori social workers (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024; Moyle, 2014).

Cultural competence is often presented as a solution to Pākehā ignorance; however, such competence can be misleading (Tascon & Gatwiri, 2020). The implied classifying and categorising of whole ethnic value systems via cultural competence as things the social worker can master constructs an oppressive confidence within even well-meaning Pākehā (Crawford, 2016; Nayak, 2022; Tascon & Gatwiri, 2020). Pākehā social workers can practise biculturally, but it is continually

challenging to overcome and wrestle with the shame and guilt associated with historic Pākehā decisions to marginalise the peoples they now serve (Crawford, 2016). The mental burden of Pākehā colonial history (*and* the present) can be heavy, and some practitioners may dwell in their own feelings rather than mature towards humility (Borell et al., 2018; Crawford, 2016).

Settler-colonial attitudes stain Aotearoa New Zealand child protection such that they often perpetuate whānau harms (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). These are reflected in Oranga Tamariki's higher risk assessments of whānau Māori than Pākehā, and that child protection decisions are made more often for Māori than Pākehā (Keddell & Hyslop, 2019). This disparity suggests the need for social workers (especially Pākehā) to be conscious of bias; to reflect on and resist the oppression their Whiteness perpetuates; to pick up the taki by the blade (Crawford, 2016).

Aotearoa New Zealand's settler colonial legacy and current machinations position social work as the servant of institutionally racist governments built upon confiscated land and the trauma of the once thriving and abundant Māori (Borell et al., 2018; The Māori Perspective Advisory Committee, 1986). The current state of deficits for minoritised groups and the complexities they present demands a plethora of social services that can competently serve their needs; services which the current government actively works against (Hattotuwa, 2024; Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). For example, there is a clear need for age- and ethnicity-differentiated access to bowel cancer screening—however, the present government chose to ignore official advice and apply a 'colour-blind' rule, thereby privileging Pākehā and oppressing Māori (Ellingham, 2025). The need for culturally sensitive services was expressed in Pūao-te-Āta-tū (Māori Perspective Advisory Committee, 1988), an enduringly relevant report whose recommendations have never been genuinely enacted (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). After

exposing abundant institutional racism towards Māori and minoritised peoples receiving child protection services, the report recommended actions to decolonise them. Pūao-te-Āta-Tū can be considered the mother of our profession's *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019), both of which hold great unrealised promise. Paradoxically, settler colonialism has generated a society requiring social work to respond to the significant gaps in cultural provisions it has historically enabled. Consequently, our society continually fails Māori and will continue performing so until the institutional racism as identified in Puao-te-ata-tū is dead (Boulton et al., 2020).

One way that White supremacy manifests in Aotearoa New Zealand social work is through the elevation of Western frameworks (medical and biopsychosocial models) over Indigenous knowledge systems. This privileging of colonial approaches marginalises holistic mātauranga Māori models, particularly in medical settings (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). Such structural privilege reinforces power imbalances, undermines Indigenous knowledge, and ultimately perpetuates the social inequalities that social work ostensibly addresses (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). We can see this in the way that Indigenous frameworks are distorted when forced into Western paradigms, reflecting White supremacist privileging of Pākehā knowledge systems while systematically devaluing and constraining the Indigenous (Tascón & Ife, 2019). For example, this misalignment is evident with concepts like wairuatanga or manaakitanga, which lose their meaning when Westernised, as Māori concepts rarely align with Western epistemology despite surface appearances to the contrary (Magallanes, 2011).

We therefore wonder: how can Aotearoa New Zealand social work graduates exercise the ethical responsibilities of our *Code of Ethics* (ANZASW, 2019) and Pūao-te-Ata-tū? We question the capability of statutory services or those receiving funding from the

government to honour these commitments, and warn practitioners, educators, and policy makers alike against stepping over this wero: we need to meaningfully and effectively embody these principles when structural constraints and colonial legacies continue to shape the environments we practise within.

Our journey within social work education and what we believe is not working

In our experience, clinical, face-to-face social work (mostly child protection) is heavily prioritised in the curriculum, often at the expense of considering macro structures and community work. Because of this, we believe social work students often are not encouraged to explore the tools needed to change the systems that we will work within. Now, more than ever, we need a thorough understanding of how to effect change at structural levels. Most recently, the violent discourse surrounding Treaty Principles Bill (2024) and previously the repeal of 7AA (Cox, 2024) demonstrates the crucial nature of staying informed about political attacks that directly impact social work, and how social workers can actively challenge these macro systems of oppression (Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024). For this reason, social work education in Aotearoa New Zealand must evolve to equip practitioners with advocacy skills and community organising strategies that address and deconstruct root causes rather than focusing on dealing with the symptoms. Without this macro-level focus, we risk perpetuating the very inequities we aim to resolve through our individual casework.

This issue is worsened by significant equity concerns within social work programmes and as enforced by the Social Workers Registration Board. The rigid requirements and unpaid placements create a system where only those with considerable privilege can survive and thrive enough to graduate without hardship (Beddoe et al., 2024). Students juggling full-time employment, whānau responsibilities, impacted mental health, and financial

constraints face overwhelming barriers, leading to burnout, poverty, or abandonment of their studies altogether (Beddoe et al., 2023). This structurally reinforces inequity within the profession, which contradicts the values the profession claims to uphold (ANZASW, 2019).

Additionally, over the course of study, students encounter troubling contradictions when it comes to Te Tiriti education. For example, in our (Ranginui and Lana) first year, we were taught the oversimplified "partnership, participation, and protection" model of Te Tiriti, only to later discover through more critical courses that this framework does not adequately represent Te Tiriti obligations and relationships (Mikaere, 2013). We believe that social workers need to deeply understand and incorporate Te Tiriti beyond the simplistic principles framework to begin to effectively demolish settler colonialism and White supremacy. The same criticisms can be applied to the inconsistent application of tikanga (customs) Māori throughout study. Students experience varying levels of te reo proficiency and adherence to tikanga amongst staff, with some papers rigorously incorporating practices like karakia and waiata, while others approach tikanga whimsically, only implementing them when prompted by students. Compounded by a lack of representation of Māori academics in tertiary institutions more generally, this inconsistency confuses students and exposes the bogus centrality of biculturalism amongst social work educators in Aotearoa New Zealand and does not reflect professional te Tiriti obligations (Eketone & Walker, 2015; McAllister et al., 2019).

When we examine the financial barriers to social work education that disproportionately impact Māori, Pasifika, and other marginalised students, we can clearly see how colonial exclusion practices continue to shape who can access, and who can succeed within, social work education (Bartley et al., 2024). This perpetuates a predominantly privileged Pākehā workforce that does not

reflect social work service users, who often lack much of the understanding necessary to serve diverse communities, thus leading to sometimes dangerous practice (Crawford, 2016; Tascon & Gatwiri, 2020).

If settler colonialism is not uprooted, if the wero is left on the ground, social work education will continue to produce practitioners who, despite good intentions, graduate and social work as agents who reinforce rather than dismantle the systems of oppression they should ethically address. True decolonisation of social work requires not just a reform in curriculum but a fundamental shift and reconfiguration of what knowledge it values, how social work education is structured, and the power imbalances perpetuated by the requirements of our professional regulator (Beddoe et al., 2024, Haydon & Ruwhiu, 2024).

Conclusions

Pātai:wero to social work education—where to next, what can be done better?

Picking up the taki by the blade is acceptance that Aotearoa New Zealand privileges some ethnicities—primarily Whiteness over others—is necessary before the public and therefore social work, can best navigate cultural difference and progress toward a decolonised Aotearoa (Mutu, 2019). This is an achievable goal that has been blueprinted since Te Tiriti was signed, well before Pūao-te-Ata-tū (Māori Perspective Advisory Committee, 1988) was necessary. The enduring trend, seemingly, in the wake of successive government attacks on Māori (the restructuring of Māori education towards manual labour; removing environmental protections; criminalising Māori health practice) is for White supremacists to mute discourse and defund non-Pākehā experts that detract from the settler-colonial White supremacist regime (Eketone, 2024).

Aotearoa New Zealand social work education issues are direct manifestations of ongoing settler colonial structures and White supremacist ideologies embedded within our social services systems (Hollis-English, 2012). Ethical social work education and practice demands radical transformation of how future social workers are prepared to practise, specifically in ways that actively challenge settler colonial structures. This transformation must begin in our educational institutions, where practice foundations are laid. Educators must intentionally radicalise students through creating learning environments where students develop the courage and the skills to advocate for structural change within organisations and policies. The transformation of social work education must extend beyond graduation and into practice settings—through ongoing funded professional development where supervision models centre decolonising practices. Ultimately, radical social work education must prepare practitioners who see their role, not just as service providers, but as agents of transformative change who are committed to restoring tino rangatiratanga through collective action and systemic reform. This, therefore, is our wero to social workers, social work educators, and social work regulators: you must reimagine the profession's relationship to power, privilege, and the political dimensions of practice within a society where settler colonialism and White supremacy continue to operate as dominant forces, and through that reimagining, whakamanahia te wero—honour the challenge.

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