

KĀRE Ā-TINANA, ENGARI, Ā-WAIRUA: TE MANA O TE KARERE

Re-thinking Indigenous postgraduate whanaungatanga

*Ashlea Gillon**

Kiri West†

Yvonne Ualesi‡

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting lockdowns in Aotearoa New Zealand have been a source of change, of uncertainty and of anxiety. The ways in which we engage with each other as Indigenous people have had to change drastically and suddenly; our ways of being, of sharing space, of being present, have all had to be adjusted. For Indigenous postgraduate students, COVID-19 and lockdowns have meant a re-shaping and re-thinking of how we come together as a community that supports each other within Westernised institutions and along our academic and research journeys. This situation report delves into some of the Indigenous postgraduate students' realities and experiences, and the ways in which (whaka)whanaungatanga has been fluid during the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns. This discussion highlights the resourcefulness of Indigenous postgraduate students and the ways in which we operate from spaces of aroha ki te tangata.

Keywords

Indigenous, Māori, Pasifika, whanaungatanga, Zoom, postgraduate students

Introduction

COVID-19 and the Aotearoa New Zealand lockdowns have illustrated to us, Indigenous postgraduate students, how institutions continuously fail to support us in multiple, complex ways. During this time, we have seen the exacerbation of inequities for Māori and Pasifika, and Black and Indigenous peoples worldwide (Johnson & Buford, 2020; King et al., 2020). Despite Aotearoa

New Zealand having one of the most responsive, life-saving approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic, as Te Rōpū Whakakaupapa Urutā have highlighted:

We are still operating under the fallacy that one size fits all. A national programme, while necessary, will exacerbate health inequities. While things are being done for the general population, they don't

* Ngāti Awa. PhD Student, Te Wānanga o Waipapa, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.
Email: a.gillon@auckland.ac.nz

† Ngāti Marutūahu. PhD Student, Te Wānanga o Waipapa, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

‡ Mulivai Safata, Pu'apu'a, Savalalo Samoa, Fakaofu Tokelau, Ovalau Fiji. PhD Student, Te Puna Wānanga, University of Auckland, Auckland, New Zealand.

have an equity lens, which is essential from the beginning. (Reid, 2020)

What has been evident for us within tertiary education, however, is that Māori and Pasifika postgraduate students, much like iwi and wider Indigenous group responses, have established numerous new ways to engage and support each other through these uncertain, inequitable times (Enari & Matapo, 2020). This discussion centres the ways in which Indigenous postgraduate students have protected ourselves from harm and re-thought whanaungatanga. Ko wai mātou? We are Indigenous doctoral students in our third and fourth years of PhD research. Nō Ngāti Awa a Ashlea, nō Ngāti Marutūahu a Kiri, nō Mulivai Safata, Pu‘apu‘a, Savalalo Samoa, Fakaofu Tokelau, Ovalau Fiji a Yvonne.

He aha te mana o te karere, te mana o te whanaungatanga hoki?

What is the power of a message, of connection? A text, a call, a Facebook message, a Tweet, tagging someone in a meme on Instagram, a social Zoom, a lying-in-bed-having-a-nap Zoom, a writing Zoom, a venting Zoom? What is the power of a message?

Following the announcement of the first COVID-19 lockdown in Aotearoa, Ashlea sent messages to Indigenous postgraduate students, friends and whanaunga, who replied, “you’re the only one who’s checking in on me”. To clarify, we raise this example, not to be whakahīhī or to suggest that as Indigenous postgraduate students we are unsupported by our supervisors. We have been and continue to be supported by our supervisors. However, Indigenous postgraduate students wear multiple hats, as do our Indigenous supervisors, who have been responding to the wider needs of Indigenous peoples during this pandemic. We see this, we know this and we recognise our need to create places to tautoko each other in new (virtual) ways and allow space for our supervisors to undertake important kaupapa for all of us as they always do. This is, however, to highlight how Indigenous postgraduate students have re-thought and re-done whanaungatanga and to show where this COVID-19 situation originates. Those words have resonated since we heard them in March 2020. They have stuck and reflect the realities that as Indigenous postgraduate students, our lives are complex and full, and sometimes we may only have one other person checking in on us. While we are well aware of the emotional and mental burnout we are collectively experiencing (Tiatia-Seath, 2020), it is not to say that there is an expectation

on us, Indigenous postgraduate students (or any Indigenous person for that matter), leading full and multiple lives, to be constantly messaging everyone we know, everyone we love and everyone we care about, as this would undoubtedly perpetuate that burnout. It is, however, to explore the power of a message, and methods we have utilised to come together to support each other as colleagues, as whanaunga and as friends (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Gillon, 2020; Tiatia-Seath, 2020).

As Indigenous peoples, and in particular, from our perspectives as postgraduate students, whanaungatanga is central to all that we do. It centres the importance of relationships and the ways in which we share space, experiences and cultural nuances, often in person. Exploring whakawhanaungatanga, Rata and Al-Asaad (2019) noted that:

Whakawhanaungatanga provides a framework for intercultural interactions that does not force people of colour to make out their silhouette against the backdrop of Pākehā culture, but rather, allows peoples of colour to define themselves in relation to and build relationships with one another. (p. 220)

This whanaungatanga also naturally incorporates our spirituality as an aspect of our distinctiveness and the ways in which we can operate from differing, mutually respectful spaces.

What we have seen, however, are the ways in which whanaungatanga have transformed during this time and how virtual spaces have become a more permanent fixture in our lives. As Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2020) has highlighted:

We know that Māori don’t fall apart in a crisis. We know that we come together, and we’re quite good. The problem with that is living from crisis to crisis is bad for our health. It’s not good for our wellbeing, and it takes energy away from really trying to do the positive, transformative things that we want to do.

COVID-19 and the lockdowns have been another outlet for us Indigenous peoples to utilise and enhance our survival abilities, which, although they have become a necessary part of our lives, their continuous application is yet another distraction from our individual and collective kaupapa.

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, it has been very apparent in Indigenous realities that we are continuously required to be resilient (which we know is a complex way of understanding our responses to systemic failures—even resilience

needs to rest) and address how institutions continuously fail to support us or include us (Akuhata-Huntington et al., 2020; Jones, 2020; King et al., 2020). There is no doubt about the abilities, capabilities and tenacity of Indigenous peoples; nor is there any doubt about the fluidity and adaptability we embody. What we have done, as new and emerging Indigenous researchers, as Indigenous peoples in relation with each other, is come together, in virtual ways to fill that gap and address the unmet needs.

As Indigenous postgraduate students, our experiences of COVID-19 differ from those of undergraduate students. There are levels of autonomy and agency we have within our own research projects—we are, for the most part, undertaking self-directed study and research. Krushil Watene (2020) noted that “we [Māori and Indigenous] know in times of crisis, generally, relationships matter the most, good relationships, enabling relationships, resilient relationships matter more in these times”. We recognise the strength and importance of relationships on this journey, and as Indigenous postgraduate students we organised very quickly and determined our need for whanaungatanga and for connection, which required creating digital space for each other (Koya Vaka‘uta, 2017). We created a Moana-based space that allowed us to (re)connect (H. Smith & Wolfgramm-Foliaki, 2020).

One of the ways in which this occurred was through regular Zoom spaces (often referred to as Zui or Zono, combinations of Zoom and hui and Zoom and fono) centred around different things we needed at the time. We scheduled writing Zooms, to hold space for each other to work on our different writing pieces, to see someone else’s face staring at their screen, to feel like we were not working in vain, or in silos, to hold each other accountable, writing five words or 500 words. We scheduled venting Zooms, spaces to come together and just share our frustrations, our concerns, our fears, with other Indigenous postgraduate students who understand how challenging this journey is normally, without the global trauma of COVID-19. We scheduled social Zooms, spaces to relax, to have a drink and eat together, to have time away from our work with our friends who understand the challenges of the Indigenous postgraduate journey. We had Zooms watching movies, Zooms while we laid in bed having a nap, Zooms for cooking, Zooms for living our lives and sharing those aspects with others, now virtually.

This may not seem like much. However, koirā te mana o te karere, te mana o te whanaungatanga

hoki, the power of these spaces, these messages, these Zooms, these relationships, is not to be minimised or discounted. Neither is the energy and effort that goes into maintaining a visual, mental, emotional and physical presence online for our whanaunga (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Koya Vaka‘uta, 2017; Tiatia-Seath, 2020). We are re-writing the ways in which we understand Indigenous postgraduate and research relationality. We are adding to how we understand whakawhanaungatanga (Gillon, 2020). The importance of establishing and maintaining that relational space via online methods needs to be noted (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Koya Vaka‘uta, 2017); while as peoples our praxis is often kanoiki-te-kanoiki, and our tikanga is fluid and adaptive, and seeks to uplift and keep people safe. The utilisation of online spaces reflects our ingenuity and our desire and abilities to meet the needs of our peoples in progressive, safe ways.

As Indigenous postgraduate students on institutional timelines, we have been able to reflect together on what being a good whanaunga looks like and what being a good Indigenous researcher looks like to us (L. T. Smith, 2012). We have had to re-define this (Akuhata-Huntington et al., 2020). At times, it looks like staying home, not attempting to undertake research interviews via Zoom during various levels of lockdown, not travelling to be with our whānau. It looks like having a Zoom with other Indigenous postgraduate students venting our frustrations, venting our concerns about institutional limitations; it looks like inviting each other into our homes, into our spaces of rest, sometimes into our literal beds via our webcams and crying together on video, having a nap on camera. It looks like being there ā-wairua, ā-pū whakaahua, ā-kuputuhi, ā-Pukamata, ā-Tihau, ā-ahatanga hoki.

Concluding comments

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2020) noted that our ethic of celebration should centre re-claiming opportunities to experience joy and honour each other. This joy can be seen in the ways we re-think and re-claim what whanaungatanga looks like during a pandemic for Indigenous postgraduate students. Our ways of forming and maintaining relationships have changed. Our ways of relating to each other, of supporting each other, have shifted from in person to virtually very suddenly. We have addressed our needs for community through various means. Whanaungatanga is just as fluid as we are as peoples of the Moana (Gillon, 2020; H. Smith & Wolfgramm-Foliaki, 2020), and our

actions, our karere, our messages, our Zooms, our social media interactions and our care for each other on our postgraduate journeys reflect the different ways in which we can aroha ki te tangata and have joy. The variety in how we have come together shows not only our resourcefulness but also the ways we are constantly re-shaping and re-thinking relationships with our Indigenous whanaunga while occupying Westernised institutions (Gillon, 2020). In summary, we stipulate: kāre ā-tinana, engari, ā-wairua.

Glossary

Māori

ā-ahatanga hoki	via whatever method
ā-kuputuhi	via text
Aotearoa	New Zealand
ā-Pukamata	via Facebook
ā-pū whakaahua	via camera
aroha ki te tangata	love for people
ā-Tihau	via Twitter
ā-tinana	in person, in body
ā-wairua	in spirit, via soul
hui	coming together of peoples, meeting, gathering
iwi	tribe
kanohi-ki-te-kanohi	face to face
kāre ā-tinana, engari, ā-wairua	not in person or physically, but in essence, spirit and soul
karere	message
kaupapa	purpose, plan, principle, topic, agenda, issue
koirā te mana o te karere	that is the power of a message
ko wai mātou?	who are we?
moana	ocean, sea
Pākehā	New Zealand European
rōpū	group of people
tautoko	support, advocate for, accept
te mana o te whanaungatanga	power of relationships
tikanga	protocol, principles, practice, plan, values, belief system
whakahihī	vain, arrogant, smug
whakawhanaungatanga	building relationships, building connections
whanaunga	relation, connection, relative, kin

whanaungatanga relationship, kinship, a sense of connection

Samoan

fono gathering, meeting, coming together of peoples

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