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INVISIBILISED COLONIAL NORMS AND THE OCCLUSION OF MĀTAURANGA MĀORI IN THE CARE AND PROTECTION OF TAMAITI ATAWHAI

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Abstract

Māori children are uplifted by the New Zealand government at disproportionate rates compared with tauiwi children. The removal of tamariki from culturally embedded networks exacerbates intergenerational trauma created by colonisation. Placements into unsafe contexts mean that additional instances of harm and cumulative trauma are common, and tamaiti atawhai are not positioned within fullness of their cultural being. This article draws on a broader Kaupapa Māori project involving semi-structured interviews with kaiāwhina Māori across the North Island. Using thematic analysis, this article discusses collisions between settler-colonialism and Māori culture experienced by kaiāwhina. State disengagement with Māori culture poses harm to Māori staff and constrains the utility of tikanga Māori through the unquestioned dominance of Eurocentric approaches while enacting harm upon whānau. This work positions radical structural overhaul of existing state care systems as imperative while seeking to illuminate elements of settler-colonialism that prevent care and protection systems from incorporating mātauranga Māori.

Keywords

health, Indigenous, Māori, service design, youth

Introduction

Within Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori feature prominently within deficit-framed colonial representations of social, economic and political issues. Through formalised structures and processes derived from colonial epistemologies and ontologies, contemporary practice within the state care and protection system of Aotearoa is deprived of culturally embedded Māori ways of being, relating and knowing in relation to child wellbeing. Currently, more than 70% of children in state care are of Māori descent, despite Māori making up only 17% of the population of Aotearoa (Oranga Tamariki, 2018). Contexts

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of state care provide dissonant spaces for Māori understandings of tamariki and taitamariki Māori who are fostered or adopted, sheltered and protected by the kindness and care of Māori, as tamaiti atawhai (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). This raises questions about how we might illuminate normalised elements of the existing system, formulated within the dominant settler-colonial sociocultural context. These elements often go unquestioned, regarded as the status quo rather than being located within a culturally embedded system, with attendant ways of being and making meaning. In this article we name these identified elements *invisibilised colonial norms* because their normalisation actively conceals their ability to constitute the systems they are applied to, inherently positioning mātauranga Māori as the racialised *other* (Smith, 2012). These elements are identified by kaiāwhina Māori working in this system, speaking to their lived experience of encountering barriers to using mātauranga in daily practice with tamaiti atawhai.

In its current iteration, state control over tamaiti atawhai and their whānau is exercised by Oranga Tamariki (OT), established in 2017 in response to outcry over failures within earlier articulations of state care services (Kenny, 2016). Structural critique and failures within OT remain, evident in contemporary investigations surrounding disparities between the outcomes for Māori and tauiwi tamaiti atawhai, as well as the changes needed to reduce disparities and meet obligations within Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Boshier, 2020; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021; Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020). Previous claims speak to the need for absolute reformation of services that fail to create positive outcomes for Māori, recognising that services need to be located within te ao Māori and held accountable to Māori metrics and priorities if services are to be responsive to Māori conceptualisations of wellbeing (Cram et al., 2019; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020).

Existing disparities are understood to be perpetuated by misinterpretations and segregation of mātauranga Māori, appropriation of Māori terminology, and the enforcement of colonial understandings that excuse and affirm the privileging of western constructs within Aotearoa (Barnes et al., 2009; Keddell, 2017; Keddell et al., 2022; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; Smith, 2012; Tauri, 2017; Tauri & Webb, 2012; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021; Webb, 2017; Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020). Therefore, care and protection of tamaiti atawhai is shaped and constrained by neoliberalism and systems of governance that operate in opposition to social justice (Hyslop, 2018; Watson, 2019). For kaiāwhina Māori working in this context, remaining firm to tikanga Māori and attempting to provide positive outcomes for whānau are cantilevered against their roles and the Eurocentric nature of professionalism required of public servants (Te Momo, 2015; Watson, 2019). Further, kaiāwhina are placed in contexts where their cultural values, practices and beliefs are appropriated and tokenised, leaving them unable to provide culturally appropriate care, under expectations of educating co-workers about tikanga Māori (Te Momo, 2015; Watson, 2019). How are collisions between settler-colonialism and Māori culture experienced by kaiāwhina? In what ways do settler-colonial norms, implicit in state care systems and processes, constrain the space for kaiāwhina to practise?

Methodology

This article was conceived within the context of a Kaupapa Māori methodology, a paradigm specific and responsive to our colonial context (Smith & Reid, 2000), and the mana of kaiāwhina and the intended research audience. This research aims to address issues pertinent to kaiāwhina who work with tamaiti atawhai to ascertain the barriers to providing responsive, culturally embedded interventions that facilitate healing in challenging contexts. Understanding how mātauranga Māori can be continually undervalued by the status quo in turn places an important focus on critical theories, analysing dominant practices and assumptions, particularly in rejecting claims of *objective* knowledge and "absolute" truth (Le Grice et al., 2017). We situate kaiāwhina as experienced knowledge bearers (Smith et al., 2016) by directing questions to them about the importance of their work, how they understand their role, and the barriers they face. This ensures that the validity of mātauranga Māori is assumed and centred, while also attending to creative ways that kaiāwhina rework this knowledge to inform their capacity to provide healing contexts and interventions for tamaiti atawhai. Further articles developed as part of this project, the first author's master's thesis will explore how mātauranga Māori is used to shape care for tamaiti atawhai within the fullness of their cultural being in ways that are responsive to intergenerational and relational trauma.

Researching and writing about the dynamics of settler-colonial dominance and marginalisation of Māori requires a reflexive engagement by the producers of this knowledge, in terms of how

their positionality has shaped their approach. All authors of this article are Māori who have been shaped, sheltered and supported by elders and communities that this research has been developed within, with experience growing up in whānau that included whāngai and atawhai, but without lived experience of state care. The first author was born in Australia and raised in Tāmaki Makaurau with access to private school education, far from her turangawaewae throughout the Waikato, Rangitoto-ki-te-Tonga and Te Tairāwhiti. It is important to acknowledge here that her upbringing and experiences as a teen mother, while shaped by the same intergenerational trauma and impacts of colonisation as the kaiāwhina who shared their knowledges with her and many of the mental health services that tamaiti atawhai encounter, were devoid of contact with state care systems.

Recruitment was led by the first author, who sought kaiāwhina working adjacent to, but not within, the state care system due to the logistics of gaining approval from OT and the time sensitivities of this project. Participant recruitment was enabled through processes of whakawhanaungatanga throughout preliminary scoping work with Ngāpuhi Social Services, supervised by the second author. We presented findings to Ngāpuhi Social Services and VOYCE Whakarongo Mai following phase two of the study. Alongside later discussion with social service providers in the Ruapehu District, feedback from these community-based organisations helped shape the focus of the current project and provided networks to assist with recruitment. Of the kaiāwhina (n = 14), some volunteered or were recommended by service providers who helped shape this project, and snowballing was employed to ensure kaiāwhina felt comfortable in highlighting the contributions their peers had made. These kaiāwhina offered insight as non-governmental employees constrained and defined by state contracts with knowledge of state processes, norms and values. Kaiāwhina included kaumātua, teachers, caregivers, psychologists, advocacy workers, residential workers, social workers, researchers and policy advisors from Te Tai Tokerau, Tāmaki Makaurau and the Ruapehu districts.

Semi-structured interviews with kaiāwhina were conducted by the first author between June 2019 and January 2020. Semi-structured interviews were used for their flexibility in allowing kaiāwhina to approach relevant topics in nuanced ways. The interview schedule began with broad questions aimed at eliciting stories embedded within their practice-based experience, foregrounding aspects that were pertinent for kaiāwhina themselves. Questions became more defined to encourage kaiāwhina to engage deeply with concepts they signposted as important. Personal accounts were shared within relationships built through whakawhanaungatanga processes, creating āhurutanga in which kaiāwhina felt comfortable drawing from stories, experience and knowledge. This dynamic sought to respect and support their experiences in the context of culturally relevant understandings, without decontextualising these narratives (Lee, 2009; Smith et al., 2016). These interviews were analysed by a reflexive thematic approach (Braun & Clarke, 2023) that sought to explore patterned meanings across the full set of interviews. Drawing upon a Kaupapa Māori-informed social constructionist epistemology and critical realist ontology (Le Grice, 2014), we analysed kaiāwhina descriptions of their challenges, successes and strategies in ways that sought to locate these within a sociocultural context informed by settler-colonialism and the revitalisation of Indigenous knowledge.

Results

Kaiāwhina described how invisibilised colonial norms shaped disconnections between patterns of practice anchored in te ao Māori and the way they were taken up within the state care system. These understandings were situated across three themes—*State Disengagement with Māori Culture*, *Tokenised Māori Faces* and *Distrust and Coercive Leverage*. Participants spoke of how dominant settler-colonial paradigms remain immovable in the face of efforts to create change while simultaneously preventing deep engagement with, and understandings of, te ao Māori. Within this section, we draw on quotes from kaiāwhina kōrero, accompanied by brief descriptions of what these quotes highlight.

State disengagement with Māori culture

Throughout the data corpus are sentiments expressed by kaiāwhina that state care processes and structures keenly segregate Māori culture from practice. Many kaiāwhina spoke to experiencing this first-hand, when the limited expressions of Māori culture made accessible and permissible by state care systems constrained how such practices should be viewed and anchored in deep and contextual conceptual meanings. This created patterns in which Māori understandings were positioned as translations of western constructs, belying the culturally distinctive, expansive and nuanced concepts ensconced within the kupu

Māori used. Within the following extract, and across all interviews, kaiāwhina spoke to the ways they felt and experienced these cultural collisions. Often, such barriers were surmountable through significant additional labour on behalf of Māori practitioners. This is described by a kaiāwhina:

> I've found sometimes . . . some of our European counterparts, they think differently, they've been brought up differently. They've come from different worlds, I mean *different* [emphasis added] worlds. In a European model, you are the centre of everything, you need to compete, by yourself, and you need to be the best. Te ao Māori perspective . . . you're in the centre, but you've got all of these people supporting you. You've got generations upon generations of ancestors who have fought for you to be in the position that you're in. (tane, advocate)

An individualised focus within state care systems embeds settler-colonial logic that can justify isolating and severing whakapapa connections between tamaiti atawhai and whānau, hapū and iwi, ignorant of how these networks facilitate wellbeing. Similarly, this creates spaces, where tikanga are restricted in their utility and kaiāwhina are held to invisibilised colonial norms with Māori names. In the following quote, a kaiāwhina describes the tension between being accountable to senior management and the responsibility of upholding and maintaining the integrity of culturally embedded processes:

> [We do] a mihi and whanaungatanga process when we meet with young people like trying to build a rapport, that's what they call it in Pākehā. Other than that, it's real hard for us to stick true to tikanga and true to Māori customs and stuff if we're being held back by the white whakaaro. (wahine, service manager)

By positioning settler culture as the unquestioned default, state services constrain the inherent richness of tikanga Māori and the capacity for culturally embedded understandings to be used to their full extent. This in turn creates uncertainty around tikanga, isolating Māori practitioners from dominant structures and the safety of culturally embedded practices, as described by this kaiāwhina:

> [One] thing I've learned working in some of these places with government is that it's awkward. The space is so Westernised that you don't even know how to greet people. "I wonder if they're gonna do a karakia." You don't know. And that's another thing that I found fascinating about interaction with government and research—relating it to that middle group that I've been telling you about, what the western call acculturated Māori—they'll know, they'll just do what they'll do, right? And what that means in a space you've created for Māori, by Māori, with Māori. Something no one talks about is the different tikanga between iwi. No one even talks about that at all. But there are people in between and that creates anxiety, like "Oh, what do we do in this space?" (wahine, social science)

Here, this kaiāwhina reflected on how state disengagement with te ao Māori invisibilises tikanga, creating tensions in its application, movement and function. Despite the fluidity in tikanga between different iwi, kaiāwhina spoke about how this was often misunderstood in colonial spaces as uncertainty. Through the above description, it becomes clear that such uncertainty can disperse across broad elements of working life. Accordingly, it is unsurprising that ongoing colonisation enacted through the state's selective engagement with Māori culture leaves Māori adrift in spaces that have leveraged optics that position our flourishing as central. This unwillingness to engage with te ao Māori in state spaces has led to diluted enactments of tikanga that are felt keenly by those engaging with the system.

Tokenised Māori faces

Through the misappropriation and dilution of tikanga, state services constrain the use of mātauranga Māori. For kaiāwhina, whānau and tamaiti atawhai, this constrained application of tikanga can constitute encounters where Māori service providers are perceived as not having had, or having given up, access to cultural values and practices. The invisibility of mātauranga Māori among Māori staff could be interpreted as evidence of the encompassing tendencies of institutions for staff to come to reflect and be constituted by the core cultural norms and practices of their employers, considered by some to be "selling one's soul" (kuia, rural kaumātua):

> I find that Māori within institutional settings are certainly often able to express their Māoriness in many ways, but the institution is also very present. The institution has these incredibly encompassing tendencies, you start to reflect the needs of the institution. . .. We work within these institutions, we're shaped and formed by them, even when we resist elements, we're likely to align very strongly with other elements. That's just what happens. (wahine, justice sector)

Eurocentrism isolates Māori. Notions of individualism foreground participation in western systems as *the only way* to flourish in these spaces. Here, Māori culture and the attendant cultural practices, ways of being and making meaning are subjugated in favour of the roles inhabited by, and for, the system. The marginalisation of tikanga, combined with the embodied nature of institutionally assigned roles, can trap those at the receiving end of state intervention in contexts where Māori individuals within the system appear to be weaponised against their communities. Kaiāwhina are incredibly complexly configured within an intricate state services web, encountering predictable and routine institutional barriers and restraints. Through prolonged exposure to state environments, kaiāwhina can find themselves enacting processes that depart from culturally embedded understandings, cantilevered against Māori colleagues, and in state-crafted culturally unsafe contexts for both themselves and the whānau with whom they work. Speaking from witness testimony of the uplift of a newborn Māori baby, this kaumātua articulates the struggle within a system that requires kaiāwhina to enact child removals:

> Her baby doesn't even know her now. I saw what happened when baby came in, her baby cries when she sees her, doesn't know her mummy. And so, you know, she carries that, and she's got such hate for CYFS [Children, Youth and Family Service]. So, did I, I didn't think I could hate anybody as much as I did—two in particular. Two Māori. And how could you do that? You may work for them, but you give up your soul to keep your job. (kuia, rural kaumātua)

Describing the painful reality of Māori kaiāwhina working within the state care system, this kaumātua then elaborated on the various kaiāwhina—Māori police officers, social workers and nurses were deployed as utilities by the state. This kuia described how the perceived intent was to placate the community into believing the state had benevolent intentions. While whānau, hapū and iwi members, who had indicated their willingness to shelter and care for this newborn and their mother, were distracted, along with the mother, in meeting with OT, this newborn Māori baby was covertly and brutally uplifted. Traumatic encounters like this cantilever Māori working within the system against their whānau, hapū and iwi encountering the state care system.

Through the encompassing nature of institutional roles, Māori kaiāwhina are not only constrained by the systems they operate within but assume the individualising imperatives of their institution—where western approaches are favoured at the expense of Māori cultural understandings. This has clear implications for the provision of culturally responsive care. It cantilevers Māori service providers from their communities, creating harmful, violent encounters that perpetuate and exacerbate perceptions of the state as a mechanism of marginality, building increased distrust of state services.

Distrust and coercive leverage

In search of wraparound support, many whānau become intimately acquainted with a diverse and excessive array of unresponsive state services, which can extinguish hopes of constructively participating in state-sanctioned interventions. The visceral impact of the punitive treatment of whānau is described by this kaumātua, about the same story regarding the baby who was uplifted:

> She got to the door of the hospital room. She screamed, and she was running, and I got up, and we get outside and ... as soon as I got to the door, all I saw were police cars. They had a police van across the hospital gate. They had five police cars and were carrying baby out. . .. She was screaming, this was her baby—had just been born the day before in our truck. Her brother was in there, and he said, "I didn't know until the doors [gestures] like that." They came in, they had tasers in their hands and told him to stand aside, and they just . . . took the baby. (kuia, rural kaumātua)

The above quote draws on the harrowing lived experience of a state-sanctioned uplift of a newborn Māori baby. The mother in this case had been subjected to previous trauma at the hands of the state when her first child was uplifted. The uplift of a subsequent child was deemed a situation risky enough to involve extensive use of police resources weaponised against whānau in precarity. This is described as informing a reluctance to engage with OT, by the following kaiāwhina:

> Sometimes when kids open up to me, I don't want to take it further to Oranga Tamariki, because I know they're going to just be another number, they're just going to be another case, nothing's going to be done to help the whānau, the kids are just going to be taken away. So sometimes I think, "Why go to Oranga Tamariki when they're not going to help them anyway?" . . . I'm looking now for more Māori networks, so that I don't have

> to go into the Pākehā system for these kids here because some of them I know that if they did open up to me, straight away kids will be gone. (wahine, caregiver and kaiako)

The above quote demonstrates a common distrust of state services by Māori in precarity, demonstrating how many state services are understood as punitive mechanisms that further marginalise those in need of support. For some, like this kaiāwhina, a refusal to engage with state services is justified by deliberate efforts to network and facilitate *support* in ways that the state cannot, thus creating supportive environments that adequately meet the needs of whānau Māori, facilitating positive changes for tamaiti atawhai, within their communities. This kaiāwhina also alludes to further concerns about how state agencies' narrow view of whānau Māori can function to individualise and isolate tāngata Māori within complex systems that are difficult to navigate:

> People get agency overload. For a lot of our young people, you're talking about you know, 20–14, I think. They're very young, and more often than not . . . they don't have a mama and papa at home. They don't necessarily have someone who's saying, "by the way, when you have that social worker show up at your door, and you've been home alone, you've already had your first child uplifted and you're 19 now with your second, and they're saying to you 'can we come in', you don't have to let them come in." (wahine, advocacy service manager)

While agencies are set up to help families in need, these agencies may come to be understood as agents of harm by the youth they encounter. This navigation is made harder by an overabundance of agencies that are difficult to interact with, laden with settler-colonial assumptions, and legacies of enacting harm upon our communities and whānau. Kaiāwhina reflected compassion and understanding when speaking about the whānau they work with, making clear their solidarity with understandings that position the state as an arbiter of physical, emotional, mental and cultural violence. The above quote draws stark attention to the harm of individualising youth within a western service model. Rather than treating taitamariki with compassion and helping them navigate complex systems, the state is positioned as a punitive force that expects individuals to know their rights and entitlements before they encounter the systems that constrain these. Taitamariki in contexts of this kind are likely to already be in situations of precarity, where their age is used as an indicator of their vulnerability to predatorial services, rather than an avenue for increasing knowledge, autonomy and parenting skills.

Discussion

State disengagement with Māori culture

Te reo Māori is frequently used within state systems, often as window dressing—providing a Māori façade to initiatives that are formulated within a western worldview, undermining the perceived legitimacy and mana within te reo, tikanga and mātauranga Māori (Boshier, 2020). Settler-colonial paradigms like individualism permeate structures in Aotearoa, as a subset of the broader individualism that pervades assumptions of social life in settler-colonial contexts and western countries (Hyslop, 2018). This is referred to as the collision of being a kaiāwhina Māori within social services and creates expectations that Māori staff walk between worlds and educate their tauiwi colleagues to facilitate their engagement with Māori ways of being and making meaning (Keddell et al., 2020; Watson, 2019). In this way, the state's selective engagement with mātauranga Māori is positioned as well-meaning ignorance, rather than an assertion of the self-styled superiority of western approaches (Te Momo, 2015). Simultaneously, this functions to allow the ongoing colonial project of Māori assimilation to continue unabated, as witnessed in past colonial approaches to the treatment of tamaiti atawhai Māori (Durie, 1997; Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2018; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). By failing to acknowledge and fully grasp culturally responsive practice and the consequences of culturally unresponsive governmental policy, the systems in place actively contribute to negative outcomes (Atwool, 2019; Cram, 2012; Keddell et al., 2022; Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016; Stanley, 2017; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021).

Māori individuals with perceived autonomy in their roles remain constrained by dominant cultural paradigms that only engage with tikanga that align with Eurocentric constructions of professionalism and propriety (Te Momo, 2015). Subjugating tikanga Māori in deference to the *superiority* of practices sourced in European contexts mimics the valorisation and supremacy of white cultures within our settler-colonial system (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). Here, kaiāwhina with extensive experience in te ao Māori and western domains of knowledge remain beholden to meeting the expectations of western metrics and values (Masters-Awatere & Nikora, 2017). Neoliberal

notions of accountability position social investment as a key rationale behind the allocation of resources based on measures of risk, as opposed to measures of need (Hyslop, 2018; Keddell, 2011; Keddell et al., 2022). Through taxpayer funding, governmental organisations deploy notions of social responsibility—using social investment calculations to remain accountable to taxpayers about the allocation of resources, exacerbating untrue social perceptions that whānau in precarity who receive assistance from the state are distinct from tax-paying citizens (Hodgetts et al., 2012).

Existing child protection reforms have been based on comparative analyses between tamariki who have been in contact with the state care system and those who have not. This obscures the myriad experiences of tamaiti atawhai and the importance of identifying stressors beyond prior encounters with child protection services (Keddell, 2017; Keddell et al., 2020; Keddell et al., 2022). Operating at the expense of providing culturally competent and safe care exacerbates deep-seated inequities and disparities (Cram et al., 2019; Hyslop, 2018; Keddell et al., 2022). This creates unnecessary strain on Māori staff, who have to reconcile misappropriated tikanga with their own sense of cultural integrity, compounded by expectations that Māori staff will guide and educate others through this process (Moyle, 2014; Watson, 2019).

Privileging western worldviews and qualifications places kaiāwhina in contexts that are incapable of acknowledging or incorporating Indigenous knowledges to their full extent (Te Momo, 2015). State services have continuously assumed superficial understandings of tikanga Māori, without engaging with what these practices are designed to do and support, or how these practices assist services and service providers (Waitangi Tribunal, 2021; Watson, 2019; Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020). This context is made more unsafe by systems that constrain the utility of tikanga Māori by holding kaiāwhina to western standards (Te Momo, 2015). By positioning te ao Māori as an add-on to Eurocentric structures, current systems function to negate and fail to recognise Indigenous perspectives in favour of settler-colonial culture. Through this selective engagement with culture, state services perpetuate ongoing colonisation by reifying the legitimacy and perceived superiority of imported approaches undermining the rights of Indigenous peoples to be able to access culturally embedded practices and obligations under Te Tiriti o Waitangi (United Nations, 2007; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021)—for both kaiāwhina within the system, and the tamaiti atawhai with whom they work.

Tokenised Māori faces

Often workers were understood by themselves, Māori colleagues and the whānau they worked with as being the *token Māori face* unleashed upon Māori clients while enacting processes antagonistic to understandings within te ao Māori. These kaiāwhina are placed in competing contexts where they are responsible to their role within state services, *and* their embodied reality as tāngata Māori responsible for the continuation and integrity of mātauranga and tikanga Māori, leading to burnout and exhaustion for many Māori practitioners (Watson, 2019). Constructing social services within individualist colonial worldviews creates dynamics where services are responsive to institutional mechanisms, rather than being responsive to whānau Māori (Keddell et al., 2020; Rolleston et al., 2020). This echoes critique of state systems that loosely refer to the special status and needs of tamariki and whānau Māori without explicitly crafting or attending to obligations within Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Te Momo, 2015).

Kaiāwhina spoke about the ways that institutions shape the scope of individual actions and behaviour. Recognising the perceived supremacy of imported constructs within institutions that shape and inform the daily realities of kaiāwhina is imperative for understanding how these systems create compromising, unsatisfying and self-defeating contexts for Māori service providers (Watson, 2019). Similarly, this focus indicates the surface-level engagement with notions of *child-centred* practices, in which whānau who require ongoing support from the state are positioned as failures, rather than provided with intensive family preservation services (Keddell, 2017; Keddell et al., 2020; Keddell et al., 2022). There are significant implications for kaiāwhina Māori working for the state in their own rohe—due to assumptions and expectations that they will be able to support the flourishing of their communities (Watson, 2019). As evidenced by these kaiāwhina accounts of their lived experience working in state care systems, the appropriation of diluted cultural concepts places kaiāwhina in complex situations where their institutional training is prioritised over their embeddedness as cultural beings (Te Momo, 2015).

Distrust and coercive leverage

Legacies of colonial abuse have caused many Māori to distrust state-mandated support structures,

particularly when whānau are exposed to, or threatened with, violence enforced by police and other social service providers (Hodgetts et al., 2012; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; Rua et al., 2019). The removal of newborn babies foregrounds how sudden disruptions affect wairua, tinana, hinengaro and ngākau while accumulating over time, bringing the coercive control of the state through violence into sharp focus (Gilchrist, 2017; Pihama et al., 2014). This is a very tacit example of how encounters with the state can then be used as evidence for increased state involvement and surveillance (Hodgetts et al., 2012). With consideration of the tapu of wāhine in the context of childbirth, as the physical fatigue of childbirth, the violence of the state is not only physical violence, but an attack on culturally embedded understandings surrounding the importance of childbirth, the importance of women and the importance of children within te ao Māori (Cameron et al., 2013; Durie, 1997; Eruera & Ruwhiu, 2013; Le Grice, 2014; Le Grice & Braun, 2016; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020).

The impact of cumulative violation severs the connections between Māori whānau and Māori working within the system, creating distrust between members of the same community, iwi, hapū and whānau (Te Momo, 2015). The ongoing trauma inflicted by the state is well understood within Māori communities, who witness firsthand the cumulative trauma enabled through systemic racism and how Māori are treated by systems of power that enforce colonial dominance (Gilchrist, 2017; Keddell et al., 2022; Office of the Children's Commissioner, 2020; Pihama et al., 2014; Whānau Ora Commissioning Agency, 2020). The distrust of the state informing the perspectives of many whānau Māori living on the margins is shaped by lived experience of repeated violence. Communities may prefer rallying behind families to ensure care is provided rather than alerting the state, out of fear of removal, inaction and retraumatising tamariki, and whānau (Watson, 2019).

This distrust is worsened when whānau are nestled within a web of service providers who have differing and competing demands (Rua et al., 2019). Whānau Māori are over-represented in state services that deploy punitive power, and create multifaceted axes of marginality and systemic abuse, leading to landscapes of despair for those on the receiving end (Hodgetts et al., 2012; Keddell et al., 2022). Consequently, they are disproportionately exposed to violence at the hands of police and social services. While tamaiti atawhai are removed from whānau, these contexts are invariably arbiters of severed whānau, hapū and iwi connections based on misinterpretations of whānau contexts spurred by institutionalised racism that positions Western contexts of child-rearing as superior to Māori culturally embedded practices (Keddell, 2011; Keddell et al., 2022). This motivates a call for genuine compassion to inform state care contexts, to create support networks that are culturally embedded and responsive to need (Keddell et al., 2020, 2022).

Conclusion

Understanding the constitutive and normalised impacts of an invisible dominant culture is key in foregrounding systemic barriers to kaiāwhina being able to use Māori-informed interventions. Through this article, we have described how *state disengagement with Māori culture* creates contexts where kaiāwhina Māori are pushed into a space of being understood as *tokenised Māori faces* unleashed upon their own communities. The tensions created by the state's selective engagement with, and undermining of, te ao Māori in service contexts are underscored by colonial history and *distrust of the state* by whānau Māori. Distrust was understood as a direct response to the *coercive leverage within state systems* that enacts both individual and collective violence on tamaiti atawhai, their whānau and their wider communities. This is notwithstanding the need for interventions aimed at helping tamaiti atawhai mitigate harm experienced within or external to their time in state care. Making dominant cultural practices that underpin existing systems visible allows ongoing patterns of marginalisation to be interrogated and challenged, forging new pathways and possibilities for genuine collaboration. By refusing to make attempts to meaningfully engage with, fund and resource approaches derived from te ao Māori, existing systems are wholly incapable of meeting their own legislated imperatives. These understandings highlight the importance of services rooted within te ao Māori, by Māori for Māori, and make visible colonial assumptions that maintain existing barriers to appropriate care.

Through lived experience as Māori operating within settler-colonial structures, kaiāwhina keenly felt the conflict between two culturally embedded frames of reference that are often unnecessarily positioned in opposition to each other. State services are frequently unable to recognise and interrogate settler-colonial culture, creating unnecessary distance from full engagement

with te ao Māori. The net effect of this disengagement is diluted appropriations of mātauranga and tikanga Māori in state-sanctioned practice, under the guise of biculturalism. Transforming āhuatanga Māori for a settler-colonial framework leaves both Māori service providers and clients feeling isolated and uncertain in contexts where their Māoritanga should hold them firm in their identity and capacity. Through the encompassing tendencies of institutions, and the appropriation of mātauranga Māori, individuals within the state care system are seen in opposition to tikanga Māori, often assumed to be tokenised representatives of the Crown. These understandings exacerbate pre-existing, legitimate distrust of the settler-colonial state that is only reified further through unresponsive services.

Use of taxpayer money within state care services is deployed as motivation to conceptualise sociocultural stressors as economic burdens. This reorientation is in turn weaponised against whānau Māori due to economic rationale that seeks to reduce instances where support is given to those deemed *unworthy*. Given the failure of state systems to provide education regarding structural barriers to be faced, these isolate Māori in precarity even further, by rendering services inaccessible. Despite understandings of reiterative evaluation and management in a governmental space, the creation of space for fully Māori-informed interventions is positioned as a threat to colonial power.

The normalisation of settler-colonial culture within Aotearoa has been an ongoing project, over the course of Aotearoa's colonial history, despite Māori and international critique. In line with the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007), tāngata Māori have a right to practise our traditions whenever *we* want to. The same applies in the context of state care—our children have a right for our traditions and understandings to be as accessible and normalised as interventions shaped by western philosophies. Similarly, following Te Tiriti and an understanding that sovereignty was never ceded, it is wildly immoral that kaiāwhina across communities are prevented from providing culturally informed care aimed at healing and recovering from trauma inflicted through ongoing colonisation. Discussion of biculturalism aside, the cumulative effects of the failure of our current systems put tamaiti atawhai, whānau, hapū and iwi at risk. Foregrounding the impacts of invisibilised settler-colonial culture occupying a position of normalcy over other ways of being, understanding and relating, kaiāwhina clearly identified the need for radical constitutional transformation, often referring to recommendations made in Puao-Te-Ata-Tu (Ministerial Advisory Committee, 1988) and echoing the suggestions of Matike Mai (Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016).

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Glossary

āhuatanga Māori	a natural feature; the normalisation of culturally embedded practice in the lives of Māori people
āhurutanga	warmth, comfort, a safe and supportive space
atawhai	kindness, generosity, liberality, kindheartedness, benevolence
hapū	subtribe
hinengaro	mind, thought, intellect, consciousness
iwi	tribe
kaiāwhina	helper, assistant, contributor, counsel, advocate
kaiāwhina Māori	Māori working to support children under the care and protection of the state
karakia	incantations, prayers; used to enable people to carry out daily activities in union and safety
kaumātua	elders of status within Māori communities and social units
Kaupapa Māori	an approach that privileges the perspectives and protocols of Māori
kōrero	speak, talk, discuss; discussion
kuia	female elder of status within Māori communities and social units
kupu Māori	words within the Māori language

mana	prestige, authority, control, power, status; the inherent dignity all people hold
Māori	the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand
Māoritanga	Māori culture, practices and beliefs, Māoriness, Māori way of life
mātauranga	knowledges
mātauranga Māori	an ever-evolving underlying body of knowledge rooted in ancient practices
Matike Mai	The report of the Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation
mihi	speech of greeting, acknowledgement, tribute
ngākau	seat of affections, heart, mind, soul
Oranga Tamariki	Ministry for Children
Pākehā	New Zealander of European descent; distinct from other non-Māori groups, acknowledging the specific privileges that come with European ancestry and Eurocentric notions of normalcy
Puao-Te-Ata-Tu	report written by the Ministerial Advisory Committee on a Māori Perspective for the Department of Social Welfare
rohe	districts, regions, territories; often used to define tribal territories with distinct practices
taitamariki	young people, teenagers, adolescents
taitamariki Māori	Māori young people, teenagers, adolescents
tamaiti atawhai	in this document, referring to Māori children under the care and protection of the state to affirm Māori aspirations for sovereignty over child-rearing and protection systems
tamariki	children
tane	male, man
tāngata Māori	Māori people
tapu	sacredness, under the protection of deities
tauiwi	non-Māori; literally those without tribes; all non-Māori
te ao Māori	the Māori world, including Māori practices, ways of being and relating with people, places and the natural environment
te reo Māori; te reo	the Māori language
Te Tiriti o Waitangi	the constitutional founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand signed between representatives of some tribes and the Crown
tikanga Māori; tikanga;	protocols, culturally embedded ways of enacting processes that are just and fair, which vary across tribal boundaries
tinana	the physical body; actual or real
turangawaewae	place where one has the right to stand—where one has rights of residence and belonging through kinship and genealogy
wahine	female, woman
wāhine	women
wairua	spirit, soul, refers to the spiritual nature of people that exists beyond death and is non-physical
whakaaro	thought, opinion, understanding
whakapapa	genealogy, ancestry, familial relationships
whakawhanaungatanga	the practice of using relational processes built on identifying and positioning oneself in relation to another within shared relational networks
whānau	family networks; the act of being born; a much broader and nuanced concept than Eurocentric constructions of nuclear or extended families
whānau Māori	Māori families
whāngai	culturally embedded practices of collective child-rearing underpinned by love and reciprocal respect

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