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# **Welfare and Single Māori Mothers in the Media: Symbolic Power and the Case of Metiria Turei**

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Ahnya Martin

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## Abstract

This thesis explores the case of Metiria Turei (former Green Party co-leader) who sparked considerable media outrage when she announced publicly that as a single mother receiving welfare decades earlier, she had taken on flat mates without notifying Work and Income New Zealand. Metiria made this announcement in an attempt to highlight current problems in the welfare system and to promote the need for systemic change. The resulting media coverage offers an interesting case of how symbolic power is used within media spaces to shape constructions of issues of poverty and welfare, and the people involved. This study involved two main empirical elements. The first was a systematic analysis of 366 television, radio and online items that made up the media public controversy surrounding Metiria's admission. The media analysis documents how a hegemonic anti-welfare perspective came to dominate corporate news media coverage, which was contested via various social media platforms. I document how the growing pressure from conservative news commentators worked to silence both Metiria Turei and her supporters who were active on social media in promoting the need for structural changes in the welfare system. In the second element, I selected 12 key items from the media coverage of the controversy and presented these to two focus groups involving eight wāhine Māori (Māori women) who had been recipients of welfare (sole purpose benefit or domestic purpose benefit). The focus group analysis reveals how these participants challenged the narrow neoliberal framing of news coverage of Metiria Turei's admission. Participating wāhine readily identified and deconstructed the [ill]logic of the hegemonic perspective that was dominating coverage. These participants pointed to considerable problems in the welfare system that needed to be addressed, but which, despite a few notable exceptions, were not covered in any substantive way in the corporate news coverage as a whole. Overall, this thesis showcases the changing power dynamics between corporate news and social media regarding issues of welfare and morality today.



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## Chapter One: Introduction

Media are institutions. And as institutions, they can, and do, act both justly and unjustly. They can act unjustly by: denying or distorting the voices of others; by refusing airspace to the indigenous, the diasporic, the marginal and the minority; by systematically foreclosing for commercial or political reasons, on the alternative, or the critical or more simply on the uneconomic, the unpopular, or the ideologically offensive (Silverstone, 2007, p.144).

I begin with this quote as it encapsulates the symbolic environment within which the present research was conducted. It raises central issues of symbolic power, whereby the voices of indigenous groups, such as Māori (the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa) are often marginalised for political and ideological reasons in corporate news media (Nairn, McCreanor & Moewaka Barnes, 2017). I ground my engagements with these issues in relation to the events that transpired within the corporate news media coverage and corresponding social media debates over the former Green party co-leader Metiria Turei's admission of benefit fraud in 2017. This case acts as an exemplar for my consideration of broader issues around symbolic power regarding news and social media depictions of wāhine Māori who receive welfare support. I am particularly interested in the processes of hegemonic (dominant worldview or ideology) silencing that takes place during mediated public deliberations regarding issues of poverty and welfare that have an importunate impact on the everyday lives of low-income whānau (families).

This chapter provides the context and rationale for the thesis. First, I set the scene for the socio-economic positioning of Māori in contemporary society in relation to our histories of colonisation (Whyte, 2004). As I will show, such processes of colonialism impoverished whānau, resulting in many Māori having to rely on low paid insecure work, charity and later welfare provisions to feed and house themselves. Second, I provide a general account of the history of the welfare state in Aotearoa (New Zealand) and some of the early struggles of Māori to gain equitable access to support. Third, my attention shifts to the mediapolis, or the shared symbolic space in society created through the use of various media forms. It is in the mediapolis that issues of social concern such as welfare are deliberated upon and many responses are formulated (Silverstone, 2007). My focus is on how the exercising of symbolic power by the affluent and Pākehā (European settler

society groups) who dominate news media forms and whose ‘contributions’ to public deliberations displace the voices and worldviews of Māori. Fourth, this chapter ends with an outline of my research focus and brief previews for subsequent chapters in this thesis.

### **Colonisation and the impoverishment of Māori**

Central to processes of colonisation is the homogenising and denigrating of indigenous worldviews, institutions and ways of being (Hodgetts et al., 2010). These processes are also often couched in the language of paternalism. For example, in Aotearoa this involved the infantizing of Māori as uncultured, barbaric, and simple people who require supervision and protection by the colonial power (Nairn, McCreanor & Moewaka Barnes, 2017). This paternalistic orientation intensified over time and has become entrenched within the institutions of the settler society (Mikaere, 1999) including the welfare system. It was also used to mask activities such as land and resource confiscations that impoverished many Māori. In addressing issues of colonisation, this section sets the scene for the thesis and offers an alternative explanation for why many Māori are concentrated within the lower socio-economic sectors of society today. What is offered is by no means a complete history. I rely on insights from well-established accounts or secondary sources that relate directly to the topic of this research.

With the arrival of Māori and the development of our ways of being and organizing ourselves that were later disrupted during the colonial period, Māori are believed to have arrived and settled in Aotearoa between AD 800 and 900 (Walker, 2014). The discovery of Aotearoa by Māori was not fortuitous, it was the result of a series of long ocean voyages by our Polynesian ancestors who had successfully discovered and settled in various islands within the Pacific Ocean between AD 200 and AD 800 (Walker, 2004). Māori social formations established within Aotearoa took shape as a decentralized system of social organization, generally clustering along lines of waka affiliations and/or common ancestry (Te Awekotuku, 1996) (). These structures of affiliations can be understood as consisting of whānau (family of three or more generations) that sit within a broader social structure of hapū (system of kinship, made up of numerous whānau) which was loosely located within a broader social structure known as iwi (tribe) (Papakura, 1938/1986; Metge, 1967/2004; Te Awekotuku, 1996). It is important to note here that Māori tribes were

independent of each other during pre-European contact and thus held Tino Rangatiratanga (absolute sovereignty) within their own hapū (Orange, 2004). For example, hapū would be the most visible and economically distinctive social structure for Māori, functioning on the most part autonomously and living within their own guarded domain (Te Awekotuku, 1996).

It is important, here, to acknowledge the problematics involved in using the term ‘Māori’, as it often misrepresents the various socio-cultural structures in which Māori lived prior to colonisation by the British; structures that have been maintained in adapted forms in modern times (King, Hodgetts, Rua, & Morgan, 2018). Royal (2011) argues that the term ‘Māori’ is often misunderstood in contemporary times, as it implies a homogeneous and unified group of people that can meaningfully be referred to as ‘Māori’. The term fails to recognise and appreciate the rich and complex heterogeneity that exists between the various hapū and iwi structures that the indigenous peoples of Aotearoa affiliate with. Scholars such as Royal also propose that it is only within a European context that the term ‘Māori’ is meaningful. Within this thesis, I use the term ‘Māori’ in the context of its use in the settler society in Aotearoa today in an imperfect way to acknowledge the shared sense of indigeneity Māori have as colonised peoples, while also being cognisant of how such terms remain problematic in their over-simplification of Māori subjectivities (King, Hodgetts, Rua, & Morgan, 2017).

The 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries would see Māori encounter Europeans (Pākehā) for the first time (Walker, 2004). In 1769 a Pākehā explorer by the name of James Cook would arrive in Aotearoa. Cook encountered people from a range of tribal groups and some meetings were more harmonious than others (Orange, 2004). Over the coming years more Pākehā would arrive in Aotearoa, including seal hunters, traders, and timber exporters (Walker, 2004) who contributed to the initial establishment of Pākehā settlements. The period between the late 1700s and 1840 has been described by historian James Belich (1986/2015) as fairly peaceful due to the early trading relationships developed between Māori and Pākehā. For example, many Māori formed reciprocal relationships with Pākehā. Māori had the resources needed to resupply Pākehā ships, in turn Pākehā provided Māori with items such as tobacco, alcohol, firearms and other such technologies. However, the relative harmony seen within Aotearoa between Māori and

Pākehā would soon change. Māori became increasingly aware that they were at risk of annexation by France and the United States and in need of some sort of assistance from the British which inherently worked to bring their Iwi and the British Crown closer together (Moon, 2002; Walker, 2004; Orange, 2004).

Not only were Māori at risk of annexation from other countries, they were also facing difficulties with the rising number of Pākehā settlers, many of whom were ‘unruly’ and ‘wayward’ (Moon, 2002). Although trade was thriving at the time and several tribes were benefiting from new technologies and a diversification of crops, life was changing drastically for Māori. Many life-threatening diseases were introduced, culturally patterned systems of barter were being displaced by a monetary economy. These changes increasingly favoured Pākehā at the expense of Māori (Orange, 2004). In response to the increasing changes, thirty-five Northern Māori chiefs came together to create He Whakaputanga O Te Rangatiratanga O Nu Tirene 1835 (A Declaration of Independence of New Zealand). The intention of He Whakaputanga by Northern Māori was to assert their independence, sovereign power and authority in Aotearoa alongside Crown protection for Pākehā (Moon, 2002).

After the signing of He Whakaputanga, tensions continued to rise between Māori and the Pākehā settlers. Māori were subject to increasing pressure to sell land, particularly after The New Zealand Association Company was established by Edward Wakefield, who sought to colonise Aotearoa through buying Māori land ‘cheap’ and selling ‘dear’ (Walker, 2004). William Hobson, a naval captain who also had the goal of establishing a British colony, was sent to Aotearoa to investigate the rising tensions (Orange, 2004). Hobson was instructed to influence Māori towards surrendering their sovereignty to the British Crown. In return, Māori would be promised protection and a framework of law to govern Pākehā (Walker, 2004).

On 6 February 1840, after much contestation and deliberation, Hobson would present around 500 Māori chiefs (men and women) with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, consisting of a preamble and three main articles (Moon, 2002). It is important to note here that not all Māori chiefs were present or represented on or around 6 February. According to Orange (2013) a selective group of Māori chiefs was present at Waitangi, notably from the Bay of Islands. Yet, this legal framework would be imposed on all Māori within

Aotearoa over the coming years. The notion of the ‘Treaty’ was problematic from the onset. For starters, there were two versions, the Māori version, referred to as Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the English version, referred to as The Treaty of Waitangi, or simply ‘the Treaty’, that held different meanings in relation to key clauses in the documents. For example, from reading Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori believed they had given the British Crown the right to ‘govern’ the settler population and that Iwi would maintain the governance of their people, land and treasures. Conversely, from the Treaty of Waitangi, Pākehā believed that Māori had seeded their sovereignty to governance by the British Crown. Orange (2013) argues the main reason for this discrepancy is the translation of the word ‘sovereignty’ from English to Māori. The English version stated that Māori had ceded to the Queen ‘all rights and powers of ‘sovereignty’ over their territories’ with the Queen-guaranteed undisturbed possession of their land and treasures (Orange, 2004; Moon, 2002). In the English language, sovereignty implies ‘power’ or ‘authority’. However, the Māori word used to convey ‘power’ and ‘authority’ was a single word ‘kāwanatanga’, which is significantly different in meaning and does not convey to Māori the English notion of sovereignty (Orange, 2004/2013). Therefore, Māori thought they would retain Tino rangatiratanga and chieftainship over their people, lands, resources, and cultural treasures.

Emerging from this so called ‘agreement’ between Māori and the Crown at Waitangi, the newly formed New Zealand Government sought to obtain Māori land cheaply. In order to obtain land from Māori, the government would enact their perceived sovereignty by creating and enacting various new laws (Miller, 1966). These laws served to empower the newly formed government in Aotearoa to acquire Māori land and resources for the benefit of Pākehā (Orange, 2004). In one year alone, these laws included the Native Land Act (1863), the New Zealand Settlement Act (1863) and the Loan Act (1863). Not only were these laws a legal mandate for Pākehā to acquire Māori land, they also served to ensure Māori were economically and politically marginalised from broader decision-making processes.

The developments noted above and the subsequent intensive acquisition of Māori land and resources by Pākehā ignited considerable tension and conflict between these population groups (Walker, 2004) and resulted in a spate of land wars (Belich, 1986/2015).

However, the wars were not simply between Māori and Pākehā, they were also between independent Māori hapū and tribal groups, as well as Pākehā. Settler government aggression would be met at times with resistance from some Māori with efforts to preserve mana whenua (Māori authority over land) (Walker, 2004). Māori resistance to settler society aggression would see the lives of many Māori and Pākehā lost (Belich, 1986/2015). Although Māori had resisted heavily and fought hard to defend their lands, warfare, disease, unjust government legislation and intensive land purchasing practices would see Māori retain less than six percent of their lands by the 1930s (Ward, 1999).

The loss of life through disease and dislocation from tribal lands would prove devastating for Māori. The environment (*te tai ao*) is pivotal for Māori and their wellbeing, their connections to land are both physical and spiritual (Moewaka Barnes, Eich, & Yessilth, 2018). Land is not only for the growing and gathering of kai (food), but also for healing and connecting to ancestors. Māori soon realised that their existence after the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi was threatened to the point of annihilation. Māori had actually received little of the promised protection from the British Crown, and instead their economic and human resources had been depleted by the Crown (Durie, 1998). Further, efforts to resist colonisation that were led by leaders, such as Te Ua Haumene, Te Kooti and Rua Kenana were often met with extreme military force and many key leaders were imprisoned or killed outright.

During these ongoing processes of colonisation, the emerging state worked to assimilate Māori as civilized British subjects who would become ‘one people’ along with Pākehā. In order to silence Māori and their concerted efforts to challenge the colonial process, Pākehā would employ the tactics of cultural suppression, assimilation and denigration to assert their own dominance and ‘leadership’. These developments were supported by the introduction of the Native Schools Act (1867) and the Tohunga Suppression Act (1907), which functioned to dislocate many Māori from their traditions and cultural structures.

Denigration was utilised throughout the colonial process and, as I will demonstrate in this thesis, remains evident today. Denigration involves the dismissal of our traditional ways of knowing and being in the world, and the imposition of British cultural hegemony over Māori. From early in the process, Māori were often reduced by Pākehā to barbaric

savages, which was a far cry from the ‘noble’ status their British counterparts had proclaimed for them (Nairn, McCreanor & Moewaka Barnes, 2017). Such denigration is evident within early publications, such as the government-sponsored bilingual newspaper *The Māori Messenger – Te Karere Māori* (Keane, 2012).

In August 1860, *The Māori Messenger – Te Karere Māori* would report on a recent four-week conference held at Kohimarama. The conference was an attempt by the government to prevent further resistance to land confiscation and the uprising of Māori tribes as seen within the Taranaki land war (Orange, 2004; Walker, 2004). The conference was attended by 200 North Island chiefs and one South Island chief to discuss issues pertinent to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, the gathering did not represent all Māori as it excluded chiefs who were in opposition to the government, namely Taranaki and Waikato Iwi who would not receive invitations until after the conference had started (Orange, 2013). During this conference, Governor Browne would discuss many points in relation to Māori and the current land wars seen throughout Aotearoa, part of his speeches would be published within *The Māori Messenger*

Surely another day is dawning now for the Māori people! They will now give up their barbarous Māori habits for the civilised customs of the Pākehā...We desire to see the Māori people advance step by step on each succeeding year, so that they may become a great and prosperous community, united with the Pākehā and enjoying with him the full privileges of British subjects (*The Māori Messenger*, 1860).

As argued by Groot and Van Omen (2017) colonial notions of indigenous peoples, as outlined in the quote above, employ a common divisive strategy used against those who are not part of a dominant group. It has been well documented that such historical narratives pertaining to Māori employed a method of denigration to marginalise, control, and in turn silence Māori voices (Hodgetts, Masters & Robertson, 2004). Negative stereotypes of Māori imposed by Pākehā would include such things as lazy, dirty, dishonest and ‘slackers’ (Houkamau, 2010). Māori tāne (men) were often portrayed as childlike, unsophisticated, uncivilised and ‘abnormal’. In contrast Pākehā were described to be firm of character; self-controlled, protectors, who were civilised and ‘normal’ human beings (Hokowhitu, 2004). Such processes of colonisation would see wāhine Māori

positioned as uncivilised and in need of domestication in order to fulfil the role of subservient lower class Pākehā woman (Mikaere, 1999). Institutionalised examples of this can be seen in the church schools that served to train and assimilate wāhine Māori into Pākehā ways of life through teaching them domesticity. Despite the weight of such oppression, Māori resistance continued into the present aided by the leadership of not only tāne, but also influential wāhine, including Princess Te Puea, Meri Te Tai Mangakāhia, Mira Petricevich, Whina Cooper, Metiria Turei, and many more.

Today, the denigration of Māori can still be witnessed, particularly through news media representations of issues of poverty, crime and welfare, which disproportionately impact Māori when compared to Pākehā (Hodgetts et al., 2013). Māori are regularly depicted within corporatized news media as untrustworthy, financially inept, corrupt and violent (Narn, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2017). Such negative constructions are applied more to less affluent Māori, whereas Māori who are more affluent and engaged in the corporate or elite sports world are presented as fitting in as ideal citizens. These representations function to maintain the cultural hegemony of the settler society. In the following section, I will explore how the inequities that stem from colonisation became entrenched within the social welfare system of Aotearoa.

### The rise of the welfare state and Māori struggles to gain access

My attention now turns to attempts by Māori to access the emerging welfare system in Aotearoa as a means of subsistence. I begin with a brief account of the rise of the welfare state alongside focusing on the struggles of Māori to gain access to emerging welfare support. In doing so, I demonstrate the longstanding trends of the denial of support to Māori, which continues today.

In 1898 the Old Age Pension was established in Aotearoa by the first liberal government in response to the hardship caused by the ‘long depression’ of the 1880s and 1890s (Retirement Policy and Research Centre, 2012). The pension was provided to civilians who had few assets and who were viewed as being of ‘good moral character’ (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018). A good moral character was defined as one who lived both a sober and reputable life (Old Age Pension Act, 1898). The act would be the

first symbolic commitment to social justice and state provision of welfare in Aotearoa (McIntock, 1966; Whyte, 2004). The Act signalled the initial establishment of the welfare system in Aotearoa (Peet, 2012), which received international interest as a marker of a supposed ‘egalitarian<sup>1</sup> ethos’ (Retirement Policy and Research Centre, 2012).

Since the inception of the Old Age Pension Act, 1898, Māori engagements within the social welfare system were far from egalitarian. The processes and strict requirements that needed to be met in order for Māori to receive a pension were problematic and inherently discriminatory. To receive a pension, you had to go through a process of testing, which included proof of residency, age, income and property ownership (Ministry of Social Development, 2019). A clear example of the difficulties faced within the system of testing were underlying racist presumptions about how Māori lived, which positioned them as less deserving. It was thought that all Māori lived communally on adequately resourced marae (meeting grounds) and pā sites (fortified villages). As such the pension was ‘unneeded’ and would then only be misused by younger generations within the whānau (Whyte, 2004). As Māori were thought to have ready access to shared lands and resources, it was presumed that they only ‘needed’ a partial pension, and when successful in applying received less than the full rate of the pension (18 pounds) by 6 pounds to only 12 pounds (Ministry of Social Development, 2019; Thomson, 1998). It was particularly difficult to even access the reduced pension as many Māori did not have birth certificates and therefore could not legally prove they were aged 65 years or older (Whyte, 2004). Driven by misconceptions of Māori social life and moral standing, it has been argued that this process was established as an underlying tactic to make the process hard for Māori to receive pensions (Whyte, 2004).

With the early 1900s came a further increase in poverty and hardship (Aimer, 2006). In response, the Labour party was formed in 1916 and embraced a humanitarian focus and the related goal of representing both the working-class and impoverished within parliament (Aimer, 2006). In 1935, they would come into power and began to rapidly reform the pension system through extending existing pensions and introducing

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<sup>1</sup> Egalitarianism refers to the belief that all people are equal and should receive equal treatment surrounding economic status, religion, political views and gender (Easton, 2014).

many new benefits, resulting in the Social Security Act of 1938 (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 2018). The principle of the Act was to ensure every citizen had a reasonable standard of living and to protect citizens against economic hardship that they could not shield themselves from (Ministry of Social Development, 2019). At this point in history, the Act was seen as “the most liberal and comprehensive measures of its kind ever enacted” (Rockwell, 1939, p.3). It was believed that personal private resource needs could be addressed with public action. With the new act and growing state funded welfare system, a formal process of administration was developed at the national level to ensure consistency of provision and the central coordination of the government’s efforts to alleviate poverty (McClure, 2004).

The Social Security Act was promising for Māori, as many should be able to benefit equally within the social welfare system. However, the Act and resulting provisions of support would prove to be just as discriminatory and problematic as the original Old Age Pension. A loophole within the law would see Social Security Department officers continuing to pay Māori beneficiaries at a lower rate than Pākehā beneficiaries. Again, this trend would continue until the 1940s when Māori leaders from both Rotorua and Rātana communities politically challenged such inequities, arguing that all Māori within their communities did not receive their full welfare payments. Following such initial challenges, four years of political pressure ensued until benefit levels were adjusted and made equal for Māori (McClure, 2004).

At first, challenges by Māori appeared to have ‘fixed’ the unfair and prejudiced welfare system. Unfortunately, this would not be the end of discrimination towards Māori within the welfare system. In the mid-1940s following the voluntary participation of Māori in World War Two, the government were forced to ensure Māori family benefits were equal to Pākehā benefits, and in turn, their wealth increased. However, public debates would soon follow in which Māori were heavily scrutinised for how people were spending their benefit money. This trend would soon become prominent. The outcome of such scrutiny would see Māori stigmatised as ‘lazy and feckless’ and unable to spend their benefits wisely. Echoing the infantilization of Māori throughout the colonial project, Māori needed to be supervised like children (McClure, 2004). As a result, surveillance of Māori spending would become systematic and institutionalised and almost morally virtuous,

with welfare officers placed in Māori communities in the late 1940s to ensure Māori did not purchase items deemed to be ‘forbidden’ with their benefit money. These items included tobacco, alcohol and patent medicines, along with clothing for parents, soft drinks, biscuits, pickles and sauces, and also any food for a tangihanga (Māori death ritual) (McClure, 2004).

The discrimination experienced by Māori within the welfare system would be exposed by the Hunn report in 1961. This report drew attention to injustices and inequities Māori were facing in relation to socio-economic wellbeing at the hands of the New Zealand welfare system (Durie, 1998). Although the report uncovered the socio-economic disadvantages Māori were experiencing, institutionalised racism entrenched within government departments would continue to leave Māori significantly impoverished. The merger of the Social Security Department and the Child Welfare Division in 1972 aimed for a unified approach to welfare through one department, the Social Welfare Department (Ministry of Social Development, 2019). From the inception of this merger, the treatment of Māori within the welfare system needed to be monitored. The Māori Advisory Unit was established in 1985 to investigate and advise the Minister of Social welfare “on the most appropriate means to achieve the goal of an approach which would meet the needs of Māori in policy, planning and service delivery in the Department of Social Welfare” (Rangihau et al., 1988, p.5). The unit’s findings were published in a report named Puao-Te-Ata-Tu/Day Break. The unit found that “The Department was racist in the institutional sense; it was a typical, hierarchical bureaucracy, the rules of which reflected the values of the dominant Pākehā society” (Rangihau et al., 1988, p.16). Efforts would then be made to combat the discrimination outlined within the report; the results would be varied.

During the late 1980s, the Fourth Labour Government began to reshape New Zealand’s political and economic direction towards neoliberalism (O’Brien, 2012). Neoliberalism has been described as: “the deregulation of markets, privatization and minimal government intervention in business” (Ware, Breheny, & Forster, 2017, p. 3). Neoliberalism favours free market capitalism over government intervention and emphasizes individual over collective responsibility. Neoliberalism came to dominate public policy in Aotearoa New Zealand (Moloney, 2006) and was extended by the National

Party led government of the 1990s (Peet, 2012). This government restructured the welfare system, reducing the unemployment benefit and making it harder to access support (Masters-Awatere, 2017). This was the period in which a much more punitive approach to welfare that was designed to discourage dependency was introduced (King, Rua & Hodgetts, 2017). Penal welfare refers to “the shift in welfare from a universal system based on citizenship rights to one that is increasingly punitive” and is conditional on applicants complying with various behavioural codes (Hodgetts, Stolte, Chamberlain & Groot, 2017, p. 65). Central to penal welfare is the merging of the logic of a correctional system and the welfare system, so that welfare recipients are treated similarly to how offenders are treated by the correctional or probation system (Wacquant, 2001/ 2009).

The social welfare reforms of this time can be seen as resulting from the cultural hegemony held within the settler society, a hegemony that often puts forward the idea that dependency on other people or welfare is an immoral situation. Reducing long-term benefit dependency by pushing clients towards often low paid and insecure employment was presented as the best way to bring economic and social prosperity to low income families (Wynd, 2014). As stated by the Chair of the Working Welfare Group (2011):

The Welfare Working Group was asked to make practical recommendations on how to reduce long-term welfare dependency for people of working age, in order to achieve better social and economic outcomes for people on welfare, their families and the wider community (p.3).

The Welfare Working Group failed to consider the realities of the labour market at the time (2011) and the difficulties faced by people exiting the welfare system in terms of finding secure employment that paid enough to lift them out of poverty (O'Brien, 2012). Regardless, if welfare ‘clients’ failed to find a job or comply with increasingly stringent conditions or criteria for welfare support they then faced financial sanctions in the form of a reduced level of support or having all support discontinued ( St John, MacLennan, Anderson & Fountain, 2014; Ware et al., 2017). This punitive system was continued under the Helen Clark Labour led government from 1999 to 2008 and the subsequent National led government of 2008 to 2017. The latter introduced further reporting obligations and sanctions, additional work-testing requirements and an obligation that people had to re-apply for their benefit annually.

A further example of the increase of sanctions at this time can be seen in the case of single mothers who, after giving birth to their second child whilst receiving a welfare benefit, are obligated to enter the workforce one year after the child's birth (St John, MacLennan, Anderson & Fountain, 2014). This pressure for single mothers receiving welfare to enter the workforce assumed that any paid employment would improve the health, wellbeing and personal outcomes for families, effectively prioritising employment over caregiving (Ware et al., 2017). Alongside forcing beneficiaries into the workforce, the National led government of the time worked to "demonise benefit receipt and problematise beneficiaries themselves" through intense media propaganda (Cotterell, St John, Dale & So, 2017, p.29) that functioned to warrant a punitive approach to welfare dependency (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, & Tankel, 2014). The social welfare system would continue to prove discriminatory, as groups such as single Māori mothers would increasingly feature in anti-welfare propaganda (featuring appeals to public emotions such as hate towards beneficiaries) as targets for stigma and disdain and risks to the moral fabric of society (Hodgetts & Solte, 2017; Ware et al., 2017). For Māori, the punitive approach to welfare and associated Pākehā propaganda is nothing new and simply reflects the latest instalment in the longstanding tendency to punish and denigrate Māori in denying them access to adequate support.

### Media and welfare coverage: symbolic power in the mediapolis

My attention now turns to the function of media in public deliberations of welfare and determining who is worthy of support. At this point, it is useful to begin with a general conceptualization of how I use the term 'media' and then expand upon the implication of different media forms in the continued denigration of Māori through coverage of issues of welfare. This is followed by a focus on the issues of symbolic power in news media denigration of welfare recipients and the silencing of Māori voices of resistance in favour of voices of continued colonial dominance.

I use the term 'media' broadly within this thesis to encompass a wide range of media modalities, such as television, radio, and print media, as well as internet sites, blog posts, and social media platforms. The term 'corporatized news media' is used in this thesis to refer to outlets such as television news, newspapers and radio news bulletins.

The term ‘social media’ refers to platforms such as ‘Facebook’, ‘Twitter’ and online ‘Blogs’. As presented here, corporate news and social media would appear to readers to be separate entities and independent producers of their own content. However, corporate news outlets, for example, are increasingly engaged with social media forms, drawing on content and issues that are trending online. Conversely, many blogs and social media posts share and comment on news media coverage. These forms have become somewhat interdependent as outlets such as newspapers morph into online entities as well. For example, as of January 2019, the New Zealand Herald Facebook page had 942 thousand followers, with Stuff.co.nz closely behind at 786 thousand followers. A follower is an individual Facebook member who has ‘liked’ the page, from which they receive content from liked pages through a personalised newsfeed. When a member likes a Facebook page, they can view everything the organisation produces.

Central to how we might understand the role of media in welfare debates and the depiction of Māori women in such a multi-form mediascape is the concept of the mediapolis (Silverstone, 2007). This concept is helpful in developing our understanding of the role of news and social media forms in comprising a symbolic environment within which public deliberations regarding issues such as welfare are conducted. The concept of the mediapolis emerged in response to and as a way of understanding the presence of contemporary media forms within civic life. The term mediapolis itself derives from the ancient Greek word *polis*, referring to a common civic space where public deliberations, debates, and ideas were shared (Hodgetts, Drew, et al., 2010).

Silverstone discusses the mediapolis as “the mediated space of appearance,” which encapsulates all forms of traditional and contemporary media seen and experienced within everyday life. The mediapolis comprises the shared symbolic environment through which much of the outside world appears to the public and where people can often learn about others who are like them and those who are different (Silverstone, 2007). Depictions of different persons and groups can be supportive, understanding and humane as well as critical, unsupportive and disparaging. The mediapolis is a contested space within which hegemonic narratives regarding issues such as welfare and the underlying neoliberal ideology can be predominantly reproduced as well as contested or brought into question (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017).

Within my research, the concept of the mediapolis provides a useful conceptual basis for looking at the functioning of various media forms in the evolving debate regarding Metiria Turei's admission of benefit fraud. This concept orientates us towards the hegemonic and contested nature of symbolic representations of Māori women who access welfare more generally and how society should respond to poverty. We can chart links between corporate news coverage that has a history of denigrating welfare recipients and more contested social media spaces in which many Māori who have been forced through necessity to access welfare support can respond or talk back to Pākehā power. In reference to such social media activity, it is useful to consider the concept of prosumer. That is, social media users are now not simply receivers of messages from television or newspapers. Rather they are active participants in news cycles who use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter and online blogs to either support, recirculate or deconstruct and question news coverage of issues such as welfare (Blumler, 2011).

Negative portrayals of the poor that continue to populate the mediapolis are influenced by processes of symbolic power, or the power to name and define individuals and/or groups (Loto et al., 2006). The concept of symbolic power was developed by Bourdieu (1979) who examined symbolic systems to understand how they are implicated in constructing the reality of 'others', whilst failing to acknowledge social functioning (individual interaction within their social environment). As argued by Freiberg (1973), affluent groups wield considerable symbolic power within society, as a reflection of their socio-economic capital. In general terms, the worldviews and values of affluent groups are often cultivated as common-sense with a hegemonic basis within corporate news media coverage of issues such as welfare. Conversely, socio-economically subordinated groups have traditionally wielded less symbolic power to name and define themselves and the issues they face from their own experiences and worldviews (Hodgetts, Bolam, & Stephens, 2005; McKendrick et al., 2008).

The wielding of symbolic power has material implications for social welfare recipients in that it is used to warrant penal welfare (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017; Wacquant, 2001). For example, mainstream media reporting often depicts benefit fraud as rampant in Aotearoa. Such impressions are cultivated within the public through misleading headlines and ideologically driven coverage in an effort to rally support for

disproportionate sentencing of, and sanctions, to those who receive welfare (St John, MacLennan, Anderson & Fountain, 2014). Audiences are encouraged to believe that affluent representations are somehow ‘common sense’ understandings (Gramsci, 1971) and that they should be accepted within public discourse. However, as argued by Fiske (1994), such constructions work to maintain neoliberal dogma through hegemonic silencing.

The wielding of symbolic power by Pākehā commentators to name and define Māori beneficiaries sets up hegemonic, or dominant, constructions of Māori that the public are then encouraged to understand issues of poverty and welfare from. Such constructions are often presented as simple common-sense. The concept of hegemony derives from the Greek word *egemonia* or *egemo*, referring to ‘leader’ or ‘ruler’. Conceptually developed by Gramsci (1971), the concept of cultural hegemony refers to the use of symbolic, political and economic power by dominant groups to impose their cultural worldviews on society (Yu Huang, 2015). Within the context of Aotearoa, cultural hegemony is set and maintained by the beliefs, values, and worldviews of affluent Pākehā.

As a result, issues of poverty, for example, are conceptualized from the perspective of affluent groups rather than those directly experiencing hardship. This means that the focus tends to be on personal failings as the cause of poverty, rather than structural processes such as colonisation (Hodgetts et al., 2004). As argued by Barton and Davis (2016), such poor-blaming and poor-shaming is intrinsic to a neoliberal order, and mass media are central in perpetuating neoliberalism through their commentary of poverty. In Aotearoa, the media has been implicated in playing a significant role in the advancement of colonial cultural hegemony by perpetuating eurocentric values and culture as being somehow ‘common sense’. Such efforts act to support and maintain the power that dominant Pākehā groups have over society (Black & Huygens, 2016). The actions of individuals are put under intense scrutiny. If a person does not take up the subject position mandated by the hegemon, they are viewed as deficit and in need of control and correction. Associated punitive approaches to welfare are embedded through a fixation on supposed personal deficits among welfare recipients. This perspective is supported through the omission or marginalisation of alternative structural explanations for contemporary socio-economic disparities between Māori and Pākehā and the

disproportionate levels of poverty and need for welfare support experienced by our people. Such omissions can be approached as a form of hegemonic silencing whereby alternative perspectives from oppressed groups are silenced in favour of the perspectives of the dominant.

There is nothing new, process wise, in terms of the functioning of dominant media forms in promoting elite interests and silencing the voices of socio-economically marginalised groups. The silencing and vilification of people experiencing poverty has a long history across numerous societies that echoes through corporatized news media coverage today. The Romans, for example, are known to have associated ‘divinity with wealth’ and ‘sin with poverty’, a belief that was intensified by Augustine’s view of individuals as responsible for their own dire circumstances (Ward, 2013). The ‘Tudor poor laws’ in England during the 1500s distinctively categorised two groups of poor. There were the ‘deserving’ (children, the elderly and the sick) and the ‘undeserving’ (able-bodied adults who were often referred to as beggars, rogues and vagrants) poor (Tihelková, 2015). In Aotearoa today corporate news media regularly draw on such distinctions to frame issues of welfare and the evils of dependency by the undeserving poor, which function to vilify and stigmatise people in need (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017; St John, MacLennan, Anderson & Fountain, 2014). These negative portrayals also reproduce colonial narratives and paternalistic assertions regarding the need to control Māori (Narn, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2017).

These trends are particularly evident in terms of the focus in news coverage on activities such as benefit fraud by a minority of welfare recipients that is reported in a manner that feeds the public perception that the problem is much more pervasive than is actually the case. Headline examples include, ‘Benefit fraud grows and repayments trickle in’ (Heather, 2013) and ‘Benefit cheats: The \$22m rip-off’ (Savage, 2012). Derogatory terms used in such items refer to welfare recipients as ‘Cheats’, ‘bludgers’ and ‘Fraudsters’ (St John, MacLennan, Anderson & Fountain, 2014). Also following international trends, particular groups are often singled out as targets of hate in the reporting of welfare. For example, in Britain single mothers are often represented within ‘right-leaning newspapers’ as embodying a feckless lifestyle as workshy ‘welfare queens’ engaged in dysfunctional and irresponsible parental behaviours that come with being a promiscuous

and immoral ‘chav mum’ (Barton & Davis, 2016; Tihelkova, 2015). Such depictions often reduce complex life worlds to simplistic sound bites for public consumption. Similarly, Māori are also regularly portrayed as welfare dependent criminals and unproductive members of society who consume significant amounts of liquor and commit violent and sexual crimes (Mc Creanor et al., 2014).

It is important to note here that, although such trends continue in corporatized news media, they do not go unchallenged in the mediapolis. There are instances where such hegemonic trends are contested within news media coverage of welfare. Social media prosumption practices also reflect further developments in the contestation of symbolic power. As I will demonstrate in this thesis, some prosumers (right wing attack bloggers) continue and intensify the denigration of Māori who access welfare support while other prosumers (Māori with direct experience of welfare) challenge hegemonic news narratives and voice their own experiences of penal welfare and the problems it causes for them and their whānau.

### The present study

This chapter has explored colonisation and the resulting impoverishment of Māori, the rise of the welfare state and Māori struggles to gain access. Following this material was an examination of the role of the mediapolis and processes of symbolic power in the construction of issues of welfare and people who access it. This thesis will further explore these issues in relation to Metiria Turei’s admission of benefit fraud. This admission directly challenged the hegemonic Pākehā narrative regarding welfare. It sparked the exercising of considerable symbolic power by key media commentators to repair the hegemonic rupture Metiria had created. This was done by re-emphasizing an individualistic explanation for poverty and closing down any discussion of the structural causes of Māori poverty or the need to develop a less punitive system that is more responsive to the needs of welfare recipients. The Metiria Turei controversy also works as a case-based exemplar for exploring issues surrounding media depictions of welfare and single Māori mothers, as well as issues of symbolic power and hegemonic silencing in the contemporary mediapolis.

Specifically, this thesis documents the evolving controversy surrounding Metiria Turei's admission across corporatized news and social media platforms within the mediapolis. I pay particular attention to how symbolic power is used to reinforce Pākehā cultural hegemony and to silence, or at least marginalise, the voices of Māori who receive welfare. I also document how wāhine Māori experience and understand the evolving controversy as is evident in social media posts and the two focus group discussions.

In terms of weaving the various elements of this research into an overall report, the thesis is presented in five chapters. Chapter 2 provides an outline of the methodology and research orientation employed in this thesis. I present the case-based approach and how I attained and analysed the media coverage as well as accounts of wāhine Māori. Ethical considerations will be addressed within this chapter also. This is followed by Chapter 3, which presents the media analysis of the Metiria Turei controversy. The media analysis traces the evolving story from the initial speech by Metiria and press release by the Green party to subsequent newspaper, television and radio news reports. The analysis then extends across to social media reactions through particular prosumption practices via political websites, Facebook and Twitter. Following the media analysis, I present Chapter 4, which documents the experiences of eight wāhine Māori who have received and or currently receive a sole purposes benefit. This audience analysis explores participant's responses to particular items from the evolving media controversy and how different aspects of coverage relate to their own lived experiences. It is in Chapter 5 that the thesis is completed with a focused discussion on the broader issues addressed in the previous chapters. We reconsider key findings from my research in relation to relevant previous research and briefly explore what this thesis contributes to current knowledge regarding the functioning of symbolic power in the mediapolis, Pākehā cultural hegemony and penal welfare.



## Chapter Two: Method

This chapter outlines my Kaupapa Māori orientation to the research and the case-based approach employed to document the evolving Metiria Turei story as a symptom of broader concerns regarding corporatized news media depictions of single Māori mothers who receive welfare support. Of particular concern is how such portrayals are understood or made sense of by Māori mothers themselves. First, I offer a rationale for the approach I have employed within my research, which combines aspects of Kaupapa Māori Theory (KMT) and Research (KMR) with insights from narrative inquiry. Second, I provide a brief discussion of case-based research and explain why I have chosen to focus on the benefit fraud admission of former Green Party co-leader Metiria Turei. Third, I outline the media material I have collated for this case. Fourth, I review the two focus groups used to gather further wāhine reactions to the media coverage and to engage with how Māori mothers make sense of the controversy in relation to their own experiences of being Māori who access welfare in an age of penal welfare. Fifth, I briefly consider ethical issues related to my engagement with these focus group participants. The chapter is completed with an account of the analysis orientation and process employed in this thesis.

### Introducing Kaupapa Māori theory, research and narrative inquiry

The general approach I have taken within this thesis is a combination of Kaupapa Māori theory (KMT) and Kaupapa Māori research (KMR), informed by narrative inquiry. As I am of Māori descent and the participants were also Māori, it was important that I employ a research approach that was culturally consistent with Māori worldviews and tikanga (protocols and practices). As I will outline within this section, narrative inquiry has been employed within this study to gain an understanding of how symbolic power is exercised by mainstream media and how it impacts the accounts of single Māori mothers who receive welfare support.

Māori have been subjected to colonial research practices for some time now (Mahuika, 2008). The discipline of psychology is heavily implicated in such practices that often involve the imposition of a Pākehā worldview that emphasizes individualistic cultural norms, and which has functioned to displace Māori systems of knowledge production and more collectivist orientated understanding of history and what it means

to be a human being (King et al., 2017; Levy & Waitoki, 2016). The result of hegemonic Pākehā colonial knowledge production practices has been a fixation on the individualizing of what are essentially structural problems such as poverty. This results predominantly in social constructions of Māori as pathologized individuals whose personal deficits have resulted in their impoverishment and a raft of social problems (Bishop, 1999).

Māori scholars who are discontent with such knowledge production practices have responded, in part, by developing what have come to be known as Kaupapa Māori (KM) research practices. Kaupapa Māori theory (KMT) and research (KMR) better reflect Māori ways of understanding the world, engaging in knowledge production and the interpretation of research findings (Walker, Eketone, & Gibbs, 2006). For example, Smith (2012) contributed substantially to the development of Kaupapa Māori theory in order to open up spaces in which Māori could claim intellectual and academic legitimacy to produce knowledge about ourselves on our terms (Curtis, 2016; Pihamo, 2012). The development of Kaupapa Māori theory (KMT), therefore, enabled broader cultural expressions within knowledge production spaces that have been dominated by Pākehā throughout the history of Aotearoa (Durie, 2017). It is imperative for Māori to create our own theories and methodologies that are informed by Māori philosophies and relational practices. Doing so required Māori scholars and allies to challenge existing colonial enactments of power in the production of knowledge about Māori and the issues that shape our lives (Curtis, 2016). In this way, Kaupapa Māori scholarship provides Māori with a further means of resisting coloniality (Durie, 2012).

Kaupapa Māori theory is employed as the foundation for what is broadly known as Kaupapa Māori Research (KMR). KMR is comprised of enactments of Māori philosophies, principles and values that reflect '*the Māori way*' of doing things (Cram, 2009; Curtis, 2016; Durie, 2017; Henry & Pene, 2001). KMR comprises a key step towards tino rangatiratanga or self-determination in our knowledge production practices. As outlined by Cram (2009), KMR encompasses a number of key principles and practices that ensure cultural responsiveness in the conduct of research with Māori. These include, Aroha ki te tangata (respect people), He kanohi kitea (meet people face-to-face), Manaaki ki te tangata (share, host, and be generous), Kia tūpato (to be cautious, politically astute and culturally safe), Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata (do not trample on the "mana"

or dignity of a person) and Kia māhaki (be humble). The enactment of these cultural principles is central to KMR and allows for the adaptation of research orientations, such as narrative inquiry and case-based strategies for use with Māori populations.

Whilst informed by KMT and conducting my research in a manner consistent with the core principles of KMR, I also draw insights from narrative inquiry (Rappaport, 2000). This is appropriate given the cultural emphasis on story telling among Māori and the insight that human beings are storied beings who come to know themselves and their place in the world through the production of shared and personal narratives (Hodgetts et al., 2010). Narrative inquiry also offers a way for me to conceptually link the hegemonic media narratives surrounding welfare evident in this case with the personal narratives of participating wāhine. To do so, I have drawn on the work of Rappaport (2000) who also focuses on the links between dominant group narratives that dominate public deliberations about a marginalised community and how marginalised communities' story themselves in opposition to such hegemonic narratives.

Rappaport (2000) refers to tales of terror as the hegemonic stories that dominant cultural groups perpetuate regarding subordinated groups, which feature negative stereotypes, such as welfare queens, and which are often reproduced through corporatized news media coverage. These tales of terror are produced by those with the symbolic power to name and define others and which function to dehumanize and marginalise groupings, such as Māori who receive welfare support. In contrast, tales of joy are presented as community and personal narratives that marginalised groups tell about themselves, often in direct contestation of tales of terror (Rappaport, 2000). These tales of joy are often shared through alternative media platforms in which groups, such as Māori, can engage as prosumers who voice their own worldviews and experiences more on their own terms. Tales of joy are used by marginalised communities to question tales of terror. As such, tales of joy counter hegemonic accounts of who they actually are, where they come from, and what they are about.

This thesis draws on insights from Rappaport to document the multifaceted character of stories about Māori who access welfare and how such stories are contested to varying degrees across key platforms within the contemporary mediapolis. It is important to note here that, although tales of joy can be seen as resources that have the

ability to liberate Māori, they are also like currents in a river that is dominated by tales of terror that also impede the worldviews and needs of low-income Māori. Rappaport (2000) argues that narrative ‘currents’ are influenced and impacted by power differentials in society that are associated with factors such as ethnicity, social class and gender. As such, narrative inquiry offers a useful set of concepts that can be integrated into a KMR project in order to aid an analysis of the ongoing inequitable power relations between Māori and Pākehā that influence the kinds of stories that are told about single Māori mothers who receive welfare. I am able to show that tales of terror have more currency in corporate news media coverage of welfare to the marginalisation of tales of joy to the more contested spaces offered via social media platforms. This focus is important for understanding how we might further challenge tales of terror and replace these with tales of joy that more accurately reflect the realities of poverty today. These are issues that feature overtly in the case of the controversy surrounding Metiria Turei.

### Compiling the media case

Case-based research is an approach often used within qualitative research to investigate specific exemplars of a particular issue in depth (Gobo, 2018). Case-based research is also conducted on various scales with some cases focused on a single person, a group, an organization, a particular city or even a society (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). Regardless of the level of focus, case studies are always contextualized, or the particular exemplar is related back to the broader socio-economic and intergroup situations from which the case is constructed. For example, the examination of single cases provides an opportunity to explore the broader reproduction of power imbalances and intergroup relations within which the case is situated (Hodgetts et al., 2019). By exploring the case of the media construction of the controversy surrounding Metiria Turei’s admission, I am able to foreground issues of symbolic power and the silencing of the voices of groups such as wāhine Māori and historical and structural inequities that have impoverished many Māori in public deliberations regarding welfare.

A key element in case-based research is the collection of empirical materials from which to construct the case. It was important that I collected all the media items I could find on the controversy. This is because, from a narrative perspective, each news item, for

example, is not a story as such. Rather it is an instalment in an evolving mediated narrative about welfare in general and Metiria Turei's admission in particular. By tracing the evolving story across news items and social media responses, I am able to document the functioning of symbolic power and the tendency towards the hegemonic silencing of Māori along the way. As much as possible, I have preserved the chronological order of instalments in the evolving public narrative.

By way of general orientation, I began collating media items with a search for Metiria's initial admission of benefit fraud. This led me to the official Green Party website and the initial press release titled '*Mending the safety net – Metiria Turei's speech to the Green Party*'. Metiria's admission was presented in this document as an attempt to urge the Government and wider population of Aotearoa to recognize the inadequacies of the welfare system in terms of supporting single mothers. This revelation constitutes a hegemonic rupture as it brought into question the punitive orientation of the welfare system and adequacy of government welfare provisions. Metiria's disclosure would garner an immediate response by conservative media commentators via news media outlets, followed by further reactions via social media platforms from single Māori mothers who have had to access welfare themselves, as well as allied academics and other concerned members of the public. I shifted my search focus at this point to a systematic search using the terms 'Metiria Turei', 'benefit fraud' and 'fraud admission' to obtain news items and responses that had emerged across news outlets, political blogs and social media platforms. The outcome of this search helped me to narrow my focus to specific media outlets, social media platforms and online blogs.

These searches furnished me with 366 news items and various social media responses/threads. The resulting research corpus contained newspaper, television, radio items and press releases from tvnz.co.nz (n=46), nzherald.co.nz (n=45), stuff.co.nz (n=37), NewstalkZB (n=24), RNZ (n=24), newshub.co.nz (n=22), odt.co.nz (n=11), Māori television (n=6), Marae (n=4), The Hui (n=4), The Green Party of Aotearoa/New Zealand press release (n=3), Checkpoint (n=3), The Guardian (n=1) and The project (n=1). Once I had searched these prominent news outlets, I shifted my focus to the search of other news websites, political blogs and social media platforms using the same search terms as well as *hashtag threads*, such as #IamMetiria and #AvengeMetiria. This generated a number

of additional items from WHALEOIL (n=51), scoop.co.nz (n=26), The Dailyblog (n=20), msn.com/nz (n=10), waateanews.com (n=7), The Spinoff (n=8), Kiwiblog (n=3), Hardnews (n=3), Vice (n=2), Noted (n=1), The Pantograph (n=1), The Wireless (n=1), Pundit (n=1), and wordpress (n=1).

The materials I collected to inform my engagement with the Metiria Turei case were not limited to the news media items but also extended to various social media responses via Facebook and Twitter. I also engaged further with responses by Māori through the conduct of two focus groups with other Māori mothers who, like me, had direct experiences of trying to survive and support children with what support we could garner from the welfare system.

### **Engaging with other women like me: Relational and ethical concerns**

In keeping with conceptualisations of KMR by Bishop (1999), Cram (2009), Curtis (2016), Henry and Pene (2001), Pihamo, Cram, and Walker (2002), Smith (1997) and Walker, Eketone, and Gibbs (2002), my research was conducted by wahine Māori (me), with wahine Māori (two groups of Māori mothers like me), and for Māori (people who have been damaged by penal welfare). It is also important to note that, prior to my formal research engagements, I had pre-established relationships with participating wāhine and had engaged in less formal processes of whanaungatanga. As such, it is important that I engage in reflexive practice here (Groot et al., 2012) and recount my own relationship to the research topic as well as those of my participants. It is therefore important that I begin with a brief background outlining my whakapapa (genealogy) and history with social welfare in Aotearoa.

On my father's side, our whānau have whakapapa to two hapū in the Waikato, Ngāti Hine and Ngāti Naho. Our marae is Maurea, located in Rangiriri west, north of Huntly. My broader iwi affiliation is with Tainui, a North Island tribe within Aotearoa. On my mother's side, I am of Pākehā (English and Scottish) descent. I am also a Māori mother who has had to rely on welfare support at various points in my own life and face the stigma that comes with such situations. Within this section, I work to position myself within this

research in an effort to produce insights into wāhine Māori experiences raising children on welfare from an insider's perspective.

During my childhood years, I was in a precarious gang environment. As I grew up, our financial situation was hindered further by my parents' divorce. I then spent time with my mother who was reliant upon a domestic purpose benefit. For the remainder of my childhood and into my teenage years, I lived with my father who was a patched member of a South Auckland motorcycle gang, and who also received a domestic purposes benefit, which he used to support myself and my three siblings. Our financial situation deteriorated further when my father decided to exit gang life and to focus on raising his children outside of that environment. My father also worked odd, insecure jobs in both the formal and informal economies to supplement our income. We moved in and out of rental homes because of our financial situation and relied on social welfare to cover the cost of things such as school stationery and uniforms. I later became a solo mother at 22 years of age and received a domestic purpose benefit myself. This lived experience of being a child raised in a precarious environment to later becoming a single Māori mother receiving welfare assistance provides me with nuanced insights into the everyday realities faced by other wāhine Māori who live in similar situations.

I currently live in the Rodney district in Matakana (North Auckland). Through marriage, I am also linked to the local iwi, Ngāti Whātua. My husband and I moved to Matakana in 2015 to raise our children in his homeland. While studying towards a master's degree in psychology during this time, a requirement of this degree was to take part in a psychology practicum within the community. I was able to find a placement with Te Hā Oranga, an organisation run by the local iwi, Ngāti Whātua, who provide health services to people within the Ngāti Whātua area, not solely to iwi members (Rodney district).

During my time undertaking the practicum, I met with the manager of the Women's Centre Rodney at the suggestion of my supervisor at Te Hā Oranga. As they both work in collaboration with various community groups, my supervisor felt that it would be a good idea to go and meet with other organisations. The Women's Centre is a community organisation which was established in 1987 to provide a much-needed space for local wāhine. Their mission is to "support, empower and inform women" and to "encourage

community connections to reduce isolation and promote family well-being" (Women's Centre Rodney, 2018). The centre offers a range of services, from free counselling to drop-in services, such as pregnancy tests, contraception, telephone support and information for other community organisations. They also provide a range of courses from career planning to computer skills and flax weaving. The organisation hosts various groups that run each term. These are the Pasifika women's group, personal development group and the young mums' educational group.

When I met with the manager, we engaged in conversation surrounding the everyday running of the centre, the courses provided and the importance of the centre for local wāhine. I also shared my journey as a Māori mother and post-graduate student. I described my passion and desire to be involved within the community and my wish to one day utilize my education to support and improve the wellbeing of wāhine Māori. During this first interaction, I was offered a group facilitator position for the young mums' educational group. The role involved working with a small group of six young women ranging in age from 16 to 24 years of age who had preschool aged children. I would spend the next year working four hours per week with these women, providing educational sessions ranging in topics from parenting skills to healthy relationships, budgeting and cooking.

Over the course of the year, I developed close relationships with the young mothers themselves, the Women's Centre and related community organisations in the area. In sharing my experiences, I was not only the 'group facilitator' but also a person who shared many of the lived realities experienced by the women in the group. This helped me in building relationships with the young mums. It was through these relationships and connections to the Women's Centre that I identified my thesis topic and began to engage with some of these mothers as research participants. The young wāhine Māori in this group participated in one of the focus groups I conducted for this research. Before delving into the focus group element of the study let me also offer some context for the recruitment of wāhine for the second focus group.

For the past four years I have received scholarship assistance for my studies from Te Rau Puawai (TRP) – Māori mental health workforce development at Massey University. As I needed two focus groups for my thesis research, I approached my mentor, Byron

Perkins, who is also one of the co-ordinators of TRP, to ask if I could approach other current students and ask if they would like to participate within my thesis research. All of the students on the programme are considered to be part of a Māori study whānau, and during my time on the programme I have developed key relationships with many other students within this whānau.

Through meaningful and ongoing engagements with the Women's Centre and TRP, I felt culturally able to involve other wāhine Māori in this research. In doing so, I was attending to important concepts such as inclusion, participation and accountability that reflect the essence of KMR (Coombes, Denne, & Rangiwananga, 2016) which were inclusive as noted earlier within this chapter as Aroha ki te tangata (respect people), He kanohi kitea (meet people face-to-face), Manaaki ki te tangata (share, host, and be generous), Kia tūpato (to be cautious, politically astute and culturally safe), Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata (do not trample on the "mana" or dignity of a person) and Kia māhaki (be humble). The enactment of these cultural principles is central to KMR and allows for the adaptation of research orientations, such as narrative inquiry and case-based strategies for use with Māori populations.

Further to this point, developing and maintaining relationships between researcher, participants and community is a core principle of culturally responsive methodologies in psychological research (Berryman, Soohoo & Nevin, 2013). By engaging in research this way, I was able to work towards challenging the existing power relations that often occur in traditional research methodologies that mandates distance between the researcher and the researched. For me, like many other Māori scholars, relationships come first, and research comes second (Hodgetts, Rua & Te Whetu, 2015; Rua, 2015). According to Bishop (1999), collaboration, mutual storytelling and restoring are all considered to be part of the relationship condition that is foundational to Māori-focused research. That is, it is vital that people are known to each other and connected through meaningful relationships to ensure the ethical conduct of participative research. It can therefore be argued that knowledge is not just there for the researcher to gather and publish. Rather, the gaining of new knowledge in a "Māori context is to enhance the lives of all the participants involved. In effect, there is a strong cultural preference for research to be conducted in a participatory manner" (Bishop, 1998, p. 429). This quote

encapsulates the essence of how and why I have approached this research project in the manner I have. In doing so, I also attended to the core principles of Kaupapa Māori research noted above. It is important to note here that, although I have now moved on from my position as group facilitator, in maintaining my relationships with the Women's Centre, my role there has evolved into now being involved as a board member. What I have outlined in this section is what I consider to be an ethical approach to conducting research on a topic such as the one in which I am presently engaged which extends beyond important, but more routinized concerns with informed consent and anonymity.

Whilst we are on the subject of ethics, and before I outline my methodological application of a focus group technique with the two groups of wāhine Māori, it is useful for me to disclose that my research was screened using the low risk tool on the Massey University Ethics Committee website and was deemed to be low risk. As a result, it was my own and my supervisors' shared responsibility to ensure that I complied with standard ethical practices when recruiting and engaging with my participants. Central to my approach to ethics was a cultural dictate that I behave in a respectful manner towards my participants ensuring that they are fully informed of the intent of the research and what I will do with any information they provided (see Appendices A and B for the information sheets and consent forms utilized in this research). I also worked to construct an inclusive space when engaging with participants within which they could openly express any concerns or viewpoints they had and could be comfortable with talking through issues with the other participants. My research relationships also extended to ongoing conversations with my two supervisors and in particular conversations with Dr Pita King regarding Māori cultural concepts and processes that could aid me in the conduct of the focus groups, and later during the process of analysis. As a wāhine Māori, culturally I was accountable to ensure no harm to the participants throughout the study. From the relationships I had with the Women's Centre and TRP meant that I had the support of organisational leaders who were able to provide me with any further cultural support as well as being available to participants who might want to raise any concerns about my actions during the research process. This need did not arise.

In terms of the specifics of recruitment, I asked leaders within the Women's Centre and TRP to initially make potential participants aware of my research, the need for

participants, and that they were in no way compelled to participate. In this way, and through sending texts to women I knew from these groups as well, I was able to activate the ‘kumara vine<sup>2</sup>’, a culturally nuanced means of ‘spreading the word’ in order to access participants. The kumara vine is seen as a version of lived whakapapa, in which one or two wāhine were able to assist me with finding other wāhine who would be interested in my research. I then met with interested women and talked through the project further with them. Each participant was provided with an information sheet outlining the purpose of the study and what their involvement would entail (see Appendix A). Once they had read the form and I had answered any questions they had, a consent form (see Appendix B) was signed. I also assured the participants that they would not be identified personally in any reports or presentations from the study and that I would refer to their contributions to the focus group through the use of pseudonyms. Below, I outline the rationale for and conduct of the focus groups in more detail.

### **Focus group discussions**

As discussed throughout this thesis, symbolic power is used by those in dominant positions within society to maintain their cultural hegemony and silence the voice of wāhine Māori in mediated public deliberations regarding issues that populate our lives. My research was designed to engage with both the dominant and these marginalised voices. There are various reasons as to why I have chosen to employ focus groups for this purpose. Focus groups are commonly used in qualitative research to provide researchers with access to different perspectives on particular topics of discussion (Morgan & Hoffman, 2018). As argued by Walker, Eketone and Gibbs (2005), focus group interviews are useful when conducting research with Māori as they “fit more comfortably within a Māori way of doing things”. For example, Māori often engage in group storytelling processes (Berryman, SooHoo & Nevin, 2013). We are a talkative people in general. Most Māori enjoy conversing and engaging with others, especially other Māori who share similar lived experiences. Orally acquired knowledge remains a highly valued method of transmitting cultural information for Māori (Bishop, 1999). Through inclusive facilitation practices, such as ensuring that everyone has an opportunity to speak, focus groups can

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<sup>2</sup> Analogous to that of the ‘grape vine’ used within European colloquialisms.

also be used to promote participation by all group members, which is important to scholars conducting research in a manner formed by KMT and KMR.

As well as engaging in facilitative practices that encourage participation, consideration must also be given to the location of the focus groups to ensure comfort and open interactions between participants. For these reasons, I chose the Women's Centre as the location for the first focus group. It was a setting in which the participants were also used to interacting openly with me. My second focus group was held at the psychology building on the Albany campus of Massey University during the first gathering (hui, culturally patterned gathering of the year for TRP). This hui had been run in this space for years and it offered a comfortable and familiar environment for my research engagement with the TRP bursars. By conducting the research in person in these familiar spaces, I enacted the core KMR principal of He Kanohi Kitea (meet people face to face). He Kanohi Kitea comes from the Māori whakatauki (proverb): "He reo e rangona, engari, te kanohi kitea" that translates as "a voice may be heard but a face needs to be seen" (Cram, 2009, p. 300). Not only was it a cultural imperative that I interacted face to face with my participants, it was also important that I did so for the purposes of research as someone "who is known to the community and seen around the community (Cram, 2009). This is significant in Te Ao Māori (the Māori worldview), as the relationships which have been built and developed over time helped ensure that I conducted my research *with* rather than *on* the participants. In simple terms, this meant that they also had the opportunity to ask questions and raise issues that I had not anticipated. Having existing relationships also ensured that I was accountable to the participants as a fellow wāhine Māori (cf. Rua et al., 2020). From a Māori perspective, this accountability extends beyond the individual participants to also include levels of accountability to their whānau, hapū and iwi, and ancestors. In this way, I strove to inform my focus group practice in accordance with tikanga Māori.

To open the focus groups, I engaged in a more formal process, whakawhanaungatanga (building and maintaining relationships), which was enacted through an informal greeting, sharing a cup of tea or coffee, and the sharing of whakapapa in which we re-affirmed our locations within the Māori world. Being guided by tikanga (culturally appropriate conduct) and attending to the core KMR principal of kai tūpato

(Cram, 2009), I worked towards being open and cautious with others, fostering cultural safety and engaging in cultural reflectivity. This enabled me to provide a space for us to engage in open dialogue. As eating together is important for Māori, I ensured kai (food) was provided during the focus groups during which the sharing of food enabled me to enact hospitality and manaakitanga (to care for others) (cf. King, Hodgetts, Rua, & Te Whetu, 2017).

Following the introductions, I confirmed that participants were still willing to participate in the project. I then proceeded to open the discussion in terms of their awareness of the Metiria Turei case. We then discussed what they knew about the case and I subsequently provided a brief outline of the case to fill in a few details. To spark further conversation, I drew upon a semi-structured discussion guide that I had developed with my supervisors (see Appendix C). This also involved me presenting 12 media items that emerged from my media analysis as exemplifying key positions in the controversy (see Chapter 3). This enabled me to ensure a closer relationship between my media analysis and the accounts of participating wāhine. The first items shown and discussed included four news items in the form of online videos that were played on my laptop. Following each video, I guided the discussion by asking the participants what their thoughts and reactions were to each item. Following on from the videos, seven images and one blog excerpt were also shown.

In sum, employing the focus group interview method in the culturally informed way outlined above enabled me to also enact the KMR principle of ‘Kaua e takahia te mana o te tangata, to not trample over the mana of people’. The procedure adopted enabled me to also provide a space where the voices of wāhine Māori could be heard and respected. Drawing on the idea of ‘Titiro whakarongo.... korero - look, listen.... Speak’, I guided the conversation only enough to encourage conversation and was mindful not to create a space that was dominated by my questions as the researcher. Also guided by the principles of ‘manaaki ki te tangata –sharing and to host people’, and ‘aroha ki te tangata (respect for people) I consciously worked to treat wāhine in the groups as people first and foremost who deserve the utmost respect and kindness. To thank the wāhine for giving their time and sharing their stories and experiences, I also offered a koha, or a token of

thanks, in the form of a \$20 gift card, which functioned as a respectful way of signalling my appreciation for the time they had gifted and to close off the focus group.

### Analysing the media controversy and focus group responses

In terms of the overall analysis process that was applied to both the media corpus and focus group transcripts, I drew on the work of Strauss (1962) and the concept of ‘bricolage’. Working as a bricoleur involves creatively piecing together fragments of shared meanings that emerged from my engagements with the media items and focus group transcripts. In contrast to other forms of qualitative analysis, such as discourse analysis, which often present ‘data’ as if it somehow speaks for itself, my aim was to situate the media controversy and focus group participant korero (a conversation or discussion) as narrative constructions that emerged from a broader historical, social, cultural, and political context that render such insights meaningful (King & Robertson, 2017; King, Hodgetts, Rua & Te Whetu, 2015). Having first-hand experience in dealing with the welfare related issues being storied through the media and focus groups positioned me well to analyse these materials in both a culturally appropriate and humane manner. This process of analysis was also guided by Māori research literature and cultural concepts (Cram, 2009; Smith, 2012). I also drew from academic literature to make sense of and thus understand both the shared community narratives (Rappaport, 2000) and resistive readings (Fiske, 1994) which were prominent within the focus group narratives.

More specifically, once I had completed the focus groups, I went back to the media items and conducted that analysis first. I was also guided by the approach to news media analysis outlined by Hodgetts and Chamberlain (2014) which drew insights from narrative research and the concept of research as bricoleur. As such, I began by sifting through the news items and initially categorizing these into three main clusters: dominant or hegemonic narrative, counter hegemonic narrative, and mixed or contested. This enabled me to identify the overall editorial orientation of each news outlet as well as the positions of different political blogs and social media platforms. I had also been reading literature on media depictions of welfare and in particular single mothers, which provided the idea that each item was not a ‘story’ in and of itself, but was rather an instalment in an evolving public narrative (Hodgetts & Chamberlain, 2014). This insight led me to develop a plot

synopsis for the evolving Metiria Turei controversy and to see this case as a reflection of broader trends in the storying of welfare and welfare recipients. The production of the plot synopsis enabled me to position each item or instalment within the narrative timeline in which it appeared in the media. This synopsis was initially 20 pages long and has been edited down to five pages for inclusion in Chapter 3. It also enabled me to identify the key characters or voices in the evolving controversy, which voices were emphasized, and which were marginalised or excluded. This then became the basis for me thinking out issues of symbolic power and which voices were privileged in terms of being able to shape the direction of the evolving story. I then selected key items that exemplified prominent positions in the debate for further interpretation in Chapter 3. Reflecting my broader analytic shift from playing with, coding, and repositioning specific news items, I then drew on concepts such as the mediapolis in order to better understand the functioning of the media in public deliberations regarding welfare and the construction of wāhine Māori.

My interpretation of the focus group discussion was designed to speak to dominant trends in and omissions from the evolving media controversy. In doing so, I was able to relate the voices of wāhine to the media analysis whilst still privileging these voices as a source of insight into what was missing from the coverage and its implications for people who have been forced to rely on inadequate support from the welfare system. Because the focus groups were designed to speak to the evolving media controversy, I began by coding and exploring the initial discussion and what participants knew about the controversy and then moved on to participant responses to each of the 12 media items discussed during the focus group. I then compared the responses in the two focus groups and found that the sentiments expressed in both were highly consistent. After reading more literature on media coverage of poverty and welfare as well as the experiences of people in trying to access and survive on welfare, I settled on four main sections for the analysis. I then coded all the relevant extracts from the focus groups to each of these sections (see Chapter 4) and then continued the analysis process through writing these sections and relating key insights to relevant literature (Denzin & Lincoln, 2013).



## Chapter Three: Media Analysis

Television, radio, print and social media platforms comprise important sites through which moral orders are constructed and where the actions of particular groups are judged and regulated (Silverstone, 2007). As outlined in Chapter 1, social welfare recipients are often represented through the mediapolis (particularly on corporate news channels) in many OECD countries as being immoral, undeserving and criminal (McCorkel, 2004; Wacquant, 2001). Such depictions are often reinforced through processes of symbolic power in establishing a cultural hegemony fixated on pathologizing members of society who rely on welfare support. As such, corporatized news media outlets in particular, are often central to the policing of socially constructed borders between 'productive citizens' and 'unproductive' beneficiaries. The resulting coverage of issues of welfare and poverty is inadequate in terms of informing the general public about the difficulties people face when trying to access and survive on welfare support (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017).

The general public are presented with overly negative depictions of welfare recipients that draw on the assertion that the causes of poverty and welfare dependencies lie with the individuals concerned and their deficits and immorality (Hodgetts, Stolte, Nikora, & Groot, 2012). This focus deflects public attention away from structural inequalities in society and institutional violence towards people trying to make do with welfare support, which have been identified as key drivers of poverty and hardship (Hodgetts et al., 2014). My argument here echoes Silverstone's (1999) proposition that conservative news media outlets appeal to a common sense that is highly partial, ideologically loaded and acceptable to economically powerful groups. Such representational practices predominantly pervert public understandings of less affluent groups and, in doing so, can accentuate hostility from more affluent groups towards people in need (Silverstone, 2007).

It is important to acknowledge here that not all depictions of people who access welfare are negative. As argued in Chapter 1, the mediapolis is also a realm of contestation in the depiction of marginalised groups in society (Silverstone, 2007). What I have pointed to above are dominant trends in news coverage that at times are openly challenged (Hodgetts et al., 2010). One such challenge occurred when Metiria Turei attempted to disrupt the hegemonic news media narrative about welfare recipients by disclosing

aspects of her own history as a single mother and proposing that she had to commit fraud due to the inadequacy of welfare support. As I will show, this act briefly opened a counter hegemonic space for more realistic portrayals of groups such as wāhine Māori who remain in a similar predicament to Metiria. As I will outline in this chapter, this breach in dominant representational practices was swiftly countered by conservative commentators. In considering the case of the Metiria Turei controversy, I will focus on both how this story evolved through news media coverage as well as social media platforms. The latter can be seen as more contested spaces that feature both efforts to champion negative hegemonic representations of welfare recipients as well as efforts to question such representational practices and to offer alternative depictions of welfare recipients. In short, my focus is on the contestation over public constructions of wāhine Māori who access welfare support as is exemplified in coverage of the Metiria Turei controversy.

In today's intensified mediascape, it is vital to not only document and interpret news media representational practices, but to also consider the role of social media platforms in providing public access to dissenting voices and processes of symbolic contestation. In order to offer readers an overall sense of context for the storying of the case of Metiria Turei across both news and social media platforms, I will present a brief plot synopsis of the evolving media narrative. This synopsis presents Metiria's admission, corporatized news media responses, and various social media reactions in chronological order as these appeared within the mediapolis (corporate news and social media). I will then consider the hegemonic positioning that dominated in corporatized news coverage in more detail. This includes an analysis of the key characters, arguments and instances that conspired to close the hegemonic rupture that Metiria had opened. This section is then followed by an analysis of more even handed or balanced coverage on the fringes of traditional news media platforms. I then move on to an exploration of social media engagements as a key site for contestation that features symbolic resistance to the framing of the case by news media outlets. The chapter will be completed with a brief discussion of the main issues raised by this media analysis.

### **Plot Synopsis**

On 16 July 2017, the Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand held their annual general meeting (AGM), at which time they announced their families package. The then co-leader of the Green Party, Metiria Turei, addressed the AGM with a speech about the current state of the social welfare system. Metiria outlined a very personal time in her life when she was raising her daughter, Puipui, as a solo mother on the domestic purposes benefit (DPB). Metiria explained how the DPB was not sufficient to meet their everyday needs and placed her in financial hardship: “I knew exactly how much I had for bills, our rent, our food. But whatever way I split it, I still didn’t have enough to get by at the end of the week” “Mending the Safety Net – Metiria’s speech to the Green Party 2017 AGM” (*The Green Party of New Zealand, 16 July 2017*). Metiria then made the admission of keeping a secret from Work and Income New Zealand (WINZ) whilst receiving a single parent benefit: “Despite all the help I was getting, I could not afford to live, study and keep my baby well, without keeping a secret from WINZ”. Metiria proposed that the financial hardships she was experiencing at the time pushed her to lie to the welfare agency: “What I have never told you before is the lie I had to tell to keep my financial life under control”. Metiria went on to admit that she took in flat mates at three different flats during this period. This was a breach of the conditions of the Domestic Purposes Benefit. If WINZ had discovered that Metiria had taken in flat mates, she would have faced investigation and potentially been charged with fraud. Metiria was aware of this at the time and reported living in constant fear of being caught by the welfare authorities.

Metiria stated that she had decided to come forth with her benefit fraud admission to break the silence regarding New Zealand’s broken welfare system. She argued that the social welfare system is overly austere and keeps families in poverty, rather than lifting them out of it. Metiria blamed the National led government for the breakdown of the social safety net and outlined how the Green Party’s family package would repair the damage that had been done to the system, as she notes: “Nine years of National has ripped the guts out of it. We’re going to put the heart back into it”. The speech ended with Metiria reiterating how the Green Party would work towards changing the punitive culture within Work and Income New Zealand so as to prevent other people having to lie as she had. Metiria Turei’s fraud admission and the announcement of the Green Party

families tax package was met with an immediate hostile reaction from prominent corporate news media commentators.

From the onset, these conservative commentators ignored the mitigating circumstances and called for Metiria to repay the money and for her to face prosecution for benefit fraud. Initial items included: "Taxpayers' Union to invoice Metiria Turei" (*NewstalkZB*, July 18 2017) and "Former WINZ boss Christine Rankin calls Metiria Turei 'absolute disgrace'" (*Newshub*, July 19 2017). Such responses would take precedence over the next few days across various news outlets and aligned blogs. It was also reported at this time that Metiria was aware that her admission would spark controversy and responded with an opinion piece titled "I told a lie to claim benefits. Now I am an MP and I want to tell you why: Metiria Turei" (*Guardian*, 20 July 2017). In this online newspaper item Metiria writes:

...all the abuse and vitriol that beneficiaries face today, by the agencies and in private, is now being levelled at me, in public. That reaction was expected. And it has broken the silence about how awful life on a benefit really is (*Guardian*, 20 July 2017).

At this point in the story, Metiria also wrote a letter to the Ministry of Social Development outlining her compliance with any forthcoming investigations. This letter was released publicly and subsequently discussed in a *TVNZ* news item titled "Metiria Turei to be interviewed by MSD investigator over benefit fraud admission" (26 July 2017). Although Metiria had come forth with her admission and shown her willingness to cooperate with an investigation into her actions by the Ministry of Social Development, key commentators in the developing story appeared to fixate on criminal aspects of Metiria's admission and constructed her as a dishonest person. In doing so, they negate any reference she made to the dire state of the social welfare system. Reflecting their considerable symbolic power, the narrative promoted by these conservative commentators very quickly became the dominant narrative frame within the evolving media controversy.

In contrast to the criticism perpetuated by conservative commentators, hundreds of supporters would come forward online in support of Metiria. This support was most

apparent via social media platforms (Facebook & Twitter) and particular political blogs. It was then fed back into the evolving news story through items such as “Solo mothers say they understand the reasons for benefit fraud after Turei” (Dastgheib, 2017) and “Have you ever asked for help and hated having to ask? Then you can empathise with Metiria” (*The Daily Blog*, 25 July 2017). Such more contextually focused responses emerged beyond the gatekeeping of corporatized news media outlets and some of the perspectives were absorbed back into corporate news coverage, but only for a short period of time. During this time, Metiria’s daughter Puipui would also come forward in an exclusive interview “Green Party co-leader Metiria Turei’s daughter ‘I would’ve gone hungry’” (Miller, 2017). Puipui is quoted as stating: “I think I would’ve been hungry. It definitely would have been much harder for us – more hoops for mum to jump through and less time for her to focus on study and caring for me” (Miller, 2017).

As conservative news media commentators ramped up their efforts to denigrate Metiria, tarnish her reputation, keep the political pressure on her, and advocate her prosecution, her supporters continued to respond via social media platforms. However, the resistive narrative or Tale of Joy that emerged primarily among wāhine Māori online was not as powerful as the hegemonic Tale of Terror that was being constructed by key conservative commentators through corporatized news media outlets (cf. Rappaport, 2000). It is important to note that, alongside key characters (conservative commentators) attacking Metiria and her supporters, the evolving coverage also presented a few more balanced representations at this time. These items attempted to actually consider what had happened in Metiria’s case and her claims regarding the broken welfare system. For example, John Campbell interviewed Metiria on two occasions on Campbell Live. His interviews focused both on the criminality of her admission, and the contextual and systemic reasons for why Metiria acted as she did. Several more Māori news media programmes (e.g., Marae, The Hui, Māori TV news) also provided more balanced engagements with Metiria that afforded her an opportunity to tell her side of the story and why the welfare system needed to change. In several of these items, journalists were depicted venturing out of the office to visit lower socio-economic status communities and ask members of the public what they thought of Metiria’s admission. These journalists gained access to the stories of people with direct experience of poverty, rather than

relying solely on the opinions of conservative commentators. The balanced items afforded some space within the news for considering counter narratives, which did not pathologize people who access welfare. These items did not receive the same level of prominence on news sites as the attack items produced by conservative celebrity commentators, such as Mike Hosking.

On 3 August 2017, Metiria was reported to have met with a welfare investigator regarding her benefit admission “Metiria Turei meets with WINZ investigators” (Dexter, 2017). The meeting was conducted in private and would remain confidential. Metiria told *Newshub* “I’m very clear that I will certainly be repaying any overpayment” (Dexter, 2017). Metiria explained that the meeting went well. She also asserted that other beneficiaries might find such a meeting with the Ministry to be traumatic and would therefore need advocates or lawyers to support them. The then Prime Minister, Bill English, was approached at this time by *Newshub* and asked about Metiria Turei’s case on which he did not comment specifically. In response, he stated that he disagreed with the Green’s welfare policy and concluded that people would not find those meetings traumatic, as Metiria had suggested, “This is turning into quite a mess; Bill English refuses to give stance on if Metiria Turei should resign” (1NEWS, 8 August 2017). This was the point in the narrative where calls for Metiria to resign became more prominent.

As the story evolved, the pressure on Metiria to resign and characterization of her as nothing more than a fraudulent person intensified. Several news agencies engaged in intensive investigations into Metiria’s past and on 3 August 2017, new revelations were raised regarding how she was also guilty of electoral fraud. Metiria was questioned by a *Newshub* journalist about the address she had listed when registering to vote back in 1993 and 1994. The journalist confronted Metiria with evidence gained from the habitation index, which revealed that whilst on a benefit, Metiria was registered at the same address as the father of her daughter Puipui. Metiria replied, “I would have to look into that as I was living in Mt Eden at the time” “More questions raised about Metiria Turei’s living situation” (*Newshub*, 3 August 2017). Metiria was also questioned about living with her mother in 1996 and 1998. The journalist asked Metiria if her mother had been declared as a flatmate. Metiria responded that she would not be commenting about her relationships with other people.

Metiria would subsequently respond to these new allegations, confirming that she would not resign as co-leader of the Green Party as had been increasingly demanded by conservative commentators. Rather, she would not seek a ministerial position in a new Labour/Green led Government “Turei stands firm I won’t step down” (*Otago Daily Times*, 4 August 2017). Metiria stated that this is because she has been building a movement for the development of a compassionate welfare system that was central to ending poverty in New Zealand. She would remain in parliament to continue this work. She also reasserted her intention to speak about her past in order to open up a public conversation regarding the state of the welfare system so that New Zealanders could better understand what it is like to live on a welfare benefit. Metiria concluded by stating that she would continue working towards reducing poverty and pushing for a compassionate benefit system.

To this point, Metiria had met with WINZ staff, was forthcoming regarding the benefit fraud investigation, was willing to repay any overpayment, and admitted to being registered to vote at an address that was not her actual place of residence. Regardless, Metiria remained under intense pressure from conservative commentators to resign whilst remaining determined to promote an alternative welfare narrative that emphasized the need to reform the failing system.

On 7 August 2017, in protest against Metiria’s disclosures, Green MP’s Kennedy Graham and David Clendon resigned from the Green Party and parliament “Two Green MPs quit over Metiria Turei admissions” (*Stuff.co.nz*, 7 August 2017). Correspondingly, between 4 and 8 August, calls from conservative commentators for Metiria to be forced to resign as co-leader of the Green Party intensified. These commentators and the news outlets that employed them continued to pursue Metiria with persistent questions regarding her trustworthiness and investigations into further aspects of her personal life. They focused on criminality and lacked any willingness to accept the hardships people face in trying to survive on a welfare benefit. It remained at the forefront of news coverage and displaced more structurally focused and experientially based efforts to support Metiria. At the same time, the hegemonic rupture caused by Metiria’s initial disclosure was being closed.

The continued pressure on Metiria and her family became overwhelming and on 9 August 2017, Metiria Turei resigned as co-leader of the Green Party and would not seek re-election to parliament. Below is a quote from the press release given by Metiria:

I knew that by telling my personal story, it would help people hear and understand the reality of poverty. And that has happened – thousands of people have contacted the Green Party with their stories, and many have come forward to tell these in the media as well (The Green Party of Aotearoa New Zealand, 2017).

Whilst announcing her resignation, Metiria Turei remained focused on the need to reduce poverty and challenge the punitive culture of restraint that populated agencies such as Work and Income New Zealand (cf. Hodgetts et al., 2014). In response, many well-known New Zealanders would come forward and contest the need for Metiria to resign and to argue for the reform of the failing welfare system. Via social media, many supporters also expressed their sadness and sense of loss for a strong political figure who was advocating for more effort to be put into addressing issues of hardship and then needs of struggling New Zealanders. Affiliation with her stance was evident in the emergence of the hashtag #AvengeMetiria which circulated calls for Metiria's supporters to vote Green in order to reduce poverty in Aotearoa "Avenge Metiria" (Trotter, 2017).

### **Advancing the hegemonic position via corporatized news media**

This section presents media examples from conservative commentators and online bloggers who were prominent in driving the direction of the hegemonic narrative surrounding Metiria Turei. I will examine their use of symbolic power in the evolving narrative, and, in particular, the rhetorical strategy of foregrounding individual level blame and notions of the undeserving poor to reinforce a conservative cultural hegemony regarding the immorality of welfare recipients. I will also discuss how such strategies reflect the broader functioning of the mediapolis in Aotearoa to marginalise and silence the perspectives of low income or precariat Māori (Groot et al., 2017). The analysis will be broken down into three subsections. The first considers the disclosure of benefit fraud by Metiria and initial responses from conservative commentators. The second documents

the evolving story, looking at how conservative commentators reduce Metiria and her supporters rhetorically to being criminals and the ‘undeserving poor’. The third focuses on the intensification of pressure on Metiria, including increasing calls for her resignation evident through ongoing commentaries and investigations by news agencies.

#### *Early attacks and efforts to discredit Metiria*

Metiria Turei’s disclosure of benefit fraud created a hegemonic rupture in the hegemonic or ‘common sense’ position regarding welfare and the culpability of people who rely on such support. This left conservative commentators, who are predominantly Pākehā men and who are not used to having their beliefs challenged so publicly, having to work assiduously to close the rupture and reinstate their cultural hegemony. From the beginning of this controversy, Metiria attempted to expose the harsh realities of life on a benefit for single mothers that is caused by structural inequalities and failings in the welfare system. This is a version of events that is rarely given credibility or visibility within mediated public deliberations via the news. Rather, the portrayals of single mothers living in poverty within the media tend to reinforce negative tropes associated with the undeserving poor (Wacquant, 2002). In response, conservative commentators, including John Armstrong, Barry Soper, Mike Hosking, Patrick Gower, Duncan Garner, Jenna Lynch, Cameron Slater and David Farrar, exercised their influence to undermine and discredit Metiria and what she had to say. They all drew on aspects of the hegemony perspective that frames people who access welfare support as failed citizens, or denizens (welfare queens) who cannot be trusted and who require management (Bauman, 2004).

Conservative protagonists in the developing story produced news items and blogs that focussed on what they perceived to be Metiria’s immorality, criminality and individual deficits. As discussed in Chapter 1, the dominant culture within Aotearoa is inherently Eurocentric and prioritises individualistic ways of understanding people and their actions (Coombes, Denne & Rangiwananga, 2016). The individual is constructed to be responsible for their own actions, wellbeing and financial position. Therefore, if they are struggling in any of these areas, it is due to their own failings. There is little space devoted in the items produced by conservative commentators of the wider social contexts in which people live and how broader social structures shape people’s lives, restrict the options available to them, and reproduce aspects of colonisation that continue to impact

negatively on Māori. Let me provide some examples to illustrate how Metiria, and the women she represented, were characterized within dominant media commentaries.

On 17 July, the day after Metiria's benefit fraud admission, John Armstrong responded with an item titled: "The timing of Metiria Turei's benefit fraud admission stinks and so does her handling of it" (*TVNZ*, 19 July 2017). Within the article John Armstrong appears to challenge Metiria's early supporters by questioning her intentions, motivations and morality:

Those heaping praise on her for what they deem to be exceptional courage in confessing that she deliberately indulged in welfare fraud back in the 1990s are bestowing accolades she simply does not deserve (*TVNZ*, 2017).

In challenging Metiria's actions, John Armstrong goes on to state that Metiria's benefit fraud was 'deliberate' and 'indulgent'. This framing of the events contrasts to Metiria's assertions of a counter hegemonic structural explanation that her breaking the rules was necessary as welfare support was inadequate for meeting the basic costs of living. Such framing by John Armstrong functions rhetorically to discredit Metiria's initial assertion that her actions were necessary due to hardship. John Armstrong casts doubt upon her morality and intentions. In doing so, he reframed Metiria's actions from that of a desperate person who had to lie to make do, to a perspective in which Metiria was an immoral and dishonest person who lacks integrity. This framing works to close down any consideration of problems in the system and to focus instead on the perceived deficits of the individual concerned. In this context, John Armstrong offers his assessment of Metiria's motives:

She endeavoured to turn her breach of the law into a launching pad for her party's welfare policy. That is audacious. It is also the height of arrogance. It is also to enter very dangerous territory. It implies you are above the law. It says it is okay to break the law in order to try and change it (*TVNZ*, 2017).

Those standing alongside the Greens' co-leader might like to ponder another possible motive for her coming clean about her past — one which has little to do with the debate surrounding benefit policy and social deprivation. Turei has made

little secret of her ambition to be in charge of the Social Development portfolio in a Labour-Greens coalition government (*TVNZ*, 2017).

These extracts reduce Metiria's motive in coming forth with her disclosure as simply being about securing the Social Development portfolio for herself and to provide a platform in which the Green party were able to launch their welfare policy. They also imply that Metiria is an intentional lawbreaker who believes she is above the law. Further individualizing the issue, John Armstrong works rhetorically to shift the focus away from the lived realities of hardships faced by people, such as Metiria at the time.

Further reinforcing the assertion that Metiria is an immoral person, John Armstrong proposes that "It is difficult to reach a fair conclusion when it comes to casting moral judgment on her behaviour" (*TVNZ*, 17 July 2017). Through such statements, John Armstrong asserts rhetorically that he is trying to be fair handed in his assessment of Metiria's actions but is unable to do so due to what he is promoting as her immorality and criminality. Here, John Armstrong works to undermine Metiria's legitimacy to speak on issues of welfare.

Inter-textual linking between such news items and right-wing blogs, such as *Whale Oil*, are particularly central to the escalation of pressure on Metiria as the storying of her admission developed. For example, the initial article by John Armstrong was published on a television news network website and was then picked up by conservative blogger, Cameron Slater, on his *Whale Oil* website. Cameron Slater is a well-known conservative attack blogger who is presented on his site as an "Outspoken, controversial, but undeniably a major player in political views and news" (*Whale Oil*, 20 July 2019). Cameron Slater would respond to John Armstrong's article with a blog titled: "*Armstrong lashes self-confessed benefit fraudster Metiria Turei*" (*Whale Oil*, 20 July 2017). In doing so, he strategically copies particular extracts from John Armstrong's article, which he then comments on. Here is an example:

Those who have rushed to her side in lemming-like solidarity have done so largely for two reasons. First, they share Turei's deep distaste of the welfare "reform" agenda pursued currently by National and previously by Labour. Second, they feared that Turei's admission to welfare fraud was to invite her being crushed

under the weight of public opinion devoid of any sympathy for those on a benefit (*TVNZ*, 2017).

Cameron Slater responds:

There is no sympathy for her, not in the real world. In the cloistered and whacky world of pinkos though, she will be a hero, but for everyone else she is a scumbag benefit fraudster (*Whale Oil*, 2017)

Here, Cameron Slater builds on the item by John Armstrong to ‘other’ Metiria’s supporters as ‘cloistered, whacky pinkos’, implying that they are sheltered, peculiar individuals with left-wing/liberal views who are out of touch with reality. The derogatory term ‘pinko’ derives from the word ‘pink’, not the colour pink, rather a slur used by conservative politicians to identify a communist party member (pink member) whose orientation is collectivist and communal (Levin, 2001). Cameron Slater also imagines a moral majority and then positions himself and people with similar views within this majority as right-thinking people who are somehow more in touch with reality. Cameron Slater’s response continues in this vein. For example, from John Armstrong’s proposition surrounding moral judgement, Cameron Slater responds:

No, actually, it is pretty easy to cast a moral judgement. She’s a thief. She has no remorse. In fact, quite the opposite, she is proud of diddling the taxpayer. Voters will see this for what it is...shabby, venal, greedy and illegal. She should be prosecuted. Plenty of others have been (*Whale Oil*, 2017).

This extract exemplifies how Cameron Slater and other conservative commentators position Metiria as a criminal who is situated outside the moral envelope and who lacks remorse for her actions. The concept of the moral envelope comes from the social psychology of justice and refers to a shared moral space that marks citizen and inclusion (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Inclusion in the envelope is the basis of access to the rights of a citizen to fair or just treatment. People positioned outside the moral envelope due to moral transgressions and illegal behaviour are then positioned as denizens whose rights can be transgressed. Going further still, Cameron Slater calls for Metiria to be prosecuted. In an appeal to public decency from within the moral envelope, he proposes that other

people have been prosecuted for committing benefit fraud and Metiria should be treated no differently. In doing so, he is able to assert a degree of balance and fairness in his otherwise strident and highly personal attack on Metiria and the other ‘pinkos’. Cameron Slater clearly employs the propaganda technique of pejorative name calling to avoid engaging with ideologically difficult issues that Metiria has raised. His rhetorical strategy appears to be to dismiss the perspectives of people with opposing political views to his own by attacking their character and credibility.

More broadly, it has been argued that the rise of bloggers such as Cameron Slater has exacerbated attack politics within Aotearoa’s political environment (Hager, 2014). Since the inception of the Whale Oil Blog, Cameron Slater has found himself at the centre of many smear campaigns towards progressive people, including politicians, scientists and other members of the public. His actions reflect how the mediapolis is often used to promote particular agendas, such as the need for harsh welfare reforms, whilst silencing competing agendas, such as the need for more humane welfare reforms (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017). How this often works is a conservative journalist publishes a news item that is then commented on, taken further and ‘shared’ by bloggers. This enables more exposure for conservative perspectives and takes political commentary out beyond the traditional regulatory frameworks associated with political journalism.

Whale Oil also provides a space for the public to respond to particular posts and issues, which serves to keep issues alive in the public domain longer than might have otherwise been the case. For example, one respondent to Cameron Slater’s commentary on the John Armstrong item proposed that:

She's [Metiria] the worst kind of socialist hypocrite and a thief for which she must be prosecuted, ordered to pay back plus use of money interest over the 20 years, sacked from parliament and probably bankrupted (Contractor, 2017)

The strong reaction here reflects how John Armstrong and Cameron Slater are tapping into a vein of a ‘structure of feeling’ in society (Williams, 1961) that positions welfare recipients and aligned progressive politicians as being incompetent and dishonest outsiders. Through his attack blog, Cameron Slater and his supporters position themselves as the guardians of public decency and upholders of the law. They simply assume their

positioning within the moral envelope, and, from there, work to denigrate people that they position as the *other* outside the envelope (Hodgetts et al., 2020).

#### *Vilifying supporters and framing people in need as undeserving criminals*

In response to Metiria's admission, many other single mothers came forward on social media platforms (Facebook and Twitter) and progressive blog sites to disclose that they also had to lie to the social welfare agency in order to secure enough support to survive. As their support for Metiria gained momentum, conservative commentators stepped up their own reactions using their symbolic power to characterize these women as being ill-informed, morally suspect and undeserving of support. A recurrent feature of coverage from this point in the controversy was the positioning of Metiria's supporters as 'the undeserving poor' who should be more grateful for the support they receive.

On 25 July, a news segment aired on the evening TVNZ One news, which was then posted on the network's website "Metiria Turei keeping mum another solo mothers lies Work and Income" (Bradford, 2017). The segment focused on Metiria's knowledge of other mothers who were committing benefit fraud. Metiria was questioned in parliament about this by reporters and the item also included responses by a National Party member. The segment began with a brief introduction:

She didn't own up 19 years ago and now she's keeping mum about another woman's lies to Work and Income, Green's co-leader Metiria Turei has revealed last week that she was told about the women's deceitful situation, but she says she won't condemn her or dob her in (TVNZ, 25 July 2017).

This extract reveals how the segment positions women as criminals and implicates Metiria in the illegal activities of other single mothers. This is a characterization and story line that would be picked up by prominent conservative commentators. For example, from a stand-up interview featuring Metiria as she left Parliament buildings, Barry Soper positioned himself as taking her to task in an item titled "Metiria Turei vs Barry Soper: Listen to heated debate" (Soper, 2017). The clash between Barry Soper and Metiria was heated as he questioned the 'choices' she and her supporters made to 'rip off' the system. The language of choice used here reflects a conservative ideological stance that reduces

complex social issues to the decisions of individuals. In this item, Barry Soper positions Metiria as a person who is supporting criminal activity that she herself is implicated in:

The champion of law breaking Metiria Turei was sizzling on the media grill on her way into Parliament's bear pit when she beamed about the support she's got since admitting ripping off the system as a solo mum, illegally supplementing her meagre welfare cheque with secret flatmates. She's been mobbed in the street with well-wishers, not a word of complaint (Soper, 2017).

Barry Soper subsequently provides more details on Metiria's responses to his questions:

She then dropped another bombshell, telling the story about a flatmate of a solo mum who told her the young mother was doing exactly what she did as a young woman - but rather than seeing her as a lawbreaker, Turei said she was doing the best she could for her child. Mistake number one, asking her whether she was going to dob the woman in. It was as though the apocalypse had arrived (*NewstalkZB*, 2017).

Evident here is how conservative commentators such as Barry Soper position themselves as reasonable guardians of the system who are justified in questioning the character of women who transgress the rules surrounding the provision of welfare. During the interview in question, Metiria had argued with Barry Soper by foregrounding some of the failings of the social welfare system and how benefit recipients' have little choice but to sometimes act illegally in order to make ends meet. Barry Soper picked up on Metiria's use of the word 'choice' and appropriated it to vilify her supporters using a conservative sexist and classist trope that people who cannot afford to have children should not do so. According to this [ill]logic, women have no excuse for committing benefit fraud to support children they should never have had. These women are the undeserving poor, whose choices have actually led to the hardships they face:

Since we were talking about choice, isn't it the choice of a mother to have a child? It was put to her that she seemed to be saying you can make a choice to

have a baby but then it's okay to go out and rip off the system (*NewstalkZB*, 2017).

Barry Soper argues that it is simply a 'choice' to get pregnant and then a 'choice' to 'rip off the system'. In doing so, he denigrates single mothers receiving welfare as immoral individuals who deliberately defraud the system for financial gain and are responsible for their own hardships. As discussed throughout this thesis, his argument works to negate any structural cause of hardship faced by solo mothers receiving welfare. It reduces the human right to procreate to one's economic standing and ability to be self-reliant (Handler & Hasenfeld, 2006; Masters et al., 2014). This is an example of a stereotypical trope which serves to further impoverish public deliberations regarding poverty and welfare (Wilcock, 2014).

In this item, Barry Soper employs the rhetorical tactic of gaslighting, as he questions Metiria about the nature of her choices. Gaslighting is a form of psychological manipulation whereby an individual with symbolic power works to assert their perspective over another person through the use of dominant tropes, such as 'if you cannot afford children then you should not have them' (Simon, 2011). These tropes function to verify the correctness of the gas lighters own ideological position. Gaslighting is employed by dominant groups to shut down dissenting voices and to close off exploration of the complexities of issues such as poverty and welfare.

Another item from Barry Soper would spark a further response from Cameron Slater "Listen Barry Soper debates Metiria Turei" (Slater, 2017) who again, strategically repurposed extracts from Barry Soper's news item through his own commentary. He supported Barry Soper's adversarial approach by proposing that "It's about time some journos asked the tough questions" (Slater, 2017). Cameron Slater's response also included the doctored and highly offensive and degrading photograph of Metiria presented in Figure 1. The meaning of this image is intertextual in that it invokes another media controversy at the time of a young man who had been released from prison and who was struggling to find work due to a tattoo on his face featuring the word devastate (See Figure 2). Visually, the doctored photograph of Metiria functioned to reinforce the

positioning of her as a member of a criminal underclass and as a figure to be ridiculed in the way that the young man had been online.



Figure 1 Doctored image depicting Metiria a fraudster (Whale Oil, 2017)



Figure 2 Young man with devastate tattooed on his face (The New Zealand Herald, 2017)

Between 26 and 27 July, Cameron Slater would post numerous blogs commenting on news pieces by conservative commentators surrounding the Metiria Turei controversy. He effectively flooded his subscribers with a specific viewpoint that appealed to public decency and sanctioned the aligned efforts of other commentators, including John Armstrong and Barry Soper. These practices raise issues around the functioning of the mediapolis as a space of appearance, whereby judgements are made about particular persons and groups to which they belong (Silverstone, 2007). It also reflects long standing

trends by which people who rely on welfare support are not afforded the opportunity to define their own realities or selves (Tyler, 2013). Rather, they are defined by more affluent commentators who lack any real knowledge of what life is like in the lower socio-economic sectors of society. Omitted is any discussion of how such hardship shapes people's choices and actions.

Pertinent to this point is the concept of asymmetrical conflict, whereby there is an unequal distribution of power and resources in a conflict between the two parties. As such, conservative commentators are able to shape the symbolic field upon which a debate takes shape in an effort to deny or close down opposing voices through their dominance. Conversely, the resistance mounted by Metiria and her supporters (discussed in a later section) is denigrated and dismissed.

#### *The role of other conservative commentators in intensifying the pressure*

Cameron Slater would not be the only blogger to emerge during this time and weigh in on the Turei controversy, adding further pressure on her to resign. David Farrar provides political commentary on his blog named KiwiBlog. Like that of Cameron Slater, David Farrar has also been associated with conservative politicians and has worked for four national party leaders. Like Slater, Farrar strategically copies extracts from news pieces by conservative commentators and offers his own commentary. On 28 July 2017 Farrar wrote a blog "Commentators on Turei", in response to news articles from Mike Hosking: "Metiria Turei should know - knowledge of a crime is a crime itself" (Hosking, 2017) Barry Soper "What could Metiria Turei's admission do" (Soper, 2017) and Tim Beveridge "Turei fans set low bar for honesty" (*The New Zealand Herald*, 27 July 2017). Farrar describes Metiria as a '*fraud, dishonest, crook*' and goes on to write:

My response would be different if Turei was unequivocal in saying what she did was wrong, but she was desperate. But she is the opposite. She thinks she did nothing wrong. She thinks taxpayers wronged her by not giving her enough money to be a mother, study law and stand for Parliament at the same time (Farrar, 2017).

Farrar's commentary reinforces the same arguments proposed by all conservative journalists thus far; that Metiria is corrupt and criminal who lacks remorse. He also positions Metiria as separate to the audience of taxpayers he invokes. In doing so, Metiria

is positioned, as many wāhine Māori who receive welfare are in media coverage, as belonging outside the moral envelope' as a transgressor who has wronged the taxpaying public located within the envelope (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017).

Mike Hosking, another prominent conservative commentator would pick up on the storyline about Metiria's supporters who had also committed benefit fraud. He commented on this issue via his 'Mikes Minute' slot on *NewstalkZB* and the *New Zealand Herald*. One particular post was titled "Metiria's backing liars" (Hosking, 2017) which again focused on Metiria's supposed immorality and criminal conduct and to denigrate her supporters. The extract below shows how, in the absence of new material, key attack lines are intensified through repetition and elaboration:

To expand that dishonesty to protect other liars and cheats is an affront to (a) everyone who works and pays taxes and abides by the laws of the land and (b) more importantly every beneficiary who is in exactly the same position as Turei and her fellow thieves, but through hard work, diligence, and decency doesn't scam the system (*NewstalkZB*, 2017).

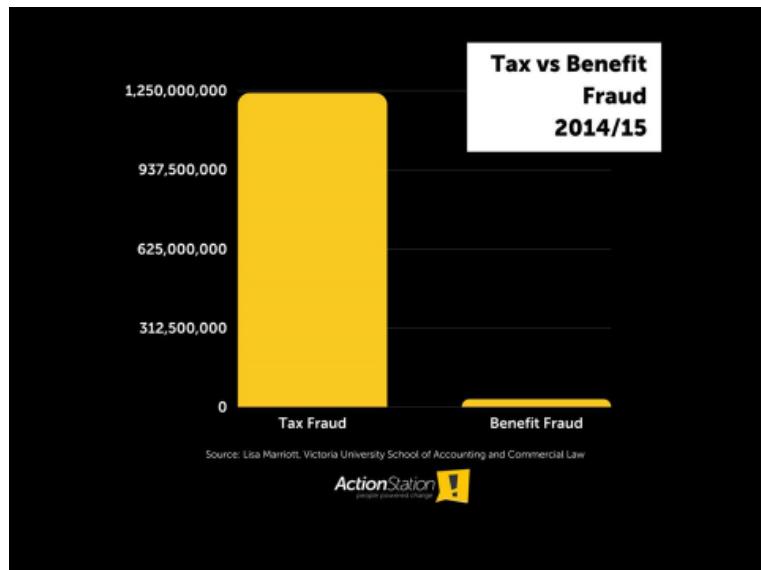
Evident within this extract is Mike Hosking's strategic use and categorization of the 'undeserving' (those who commit fraud) and 'deserving' (people who abide by the rules) poor. He achieves this by stating that those who do not 'rip off the system' are 'hardworking, diligent and decent'. This extract also intensifies the perceived moral transgressions of Metiria and her supporters (undeserving poor) by contrasting them with decent beneficiaries who play by the rules and are therefore deserving of support.

Further to the examples presented above there were also commentaries from two other well-known conservative commentators, Patrick Gower and Duncan Garner. These commentators added further repetitive instalments in the evolving narrative that functioned to keep the story alive in the news cycle. Again, they would employ the strategy of individual level blame to close off any discussion of structural issues in the welfare system. They appealed to what they saw as public decency in order to outgroup and marginalise Metiria and her colleagues as those who had morally transgressed against the taxpaying public. To keep the story alive and the pressure on Metiria, Duncan Garner interviewed Patrick Gower on the Newshub Am show. This interview was then posted on

the *Newshub* website and aired on the nightly news with the revealing title: “Metiria Turei’s political fraud is ripping off the New Zealand Public” (*Newshub*, July 26, 2017). The core ‘rip off’ attack line was a foundational element of the interview during which Patrick Gower stated that “Her big rip off in my view is that she is ripping off the voters and the New Zealand Public by trying to exploit that for political gain 8 weeks out from the election” (*Newshub*, 26 July 2017). The pair go on to discuss Metiria not being forthcoming or truthful about her actions and intentions and that she needs to be held accountable for her actions. Patrick Gower states that “Metiria Turei and the Greens are playing a game with the New Zealand public, and for that she has to be held accountable - she has to tell the taxpayer the truth about what happened all that time ago” (*Newshub*, 26 July 2017).

As is evident from the analysis above, it appears as if these commentators were working in concert and drew on the same tropes around immorality, criminality, the undeserving poor, and the aggrieved public to story Metiria as a corrupt person who has no place in parliament. In attacking the issue of benefit fraud, conservative commentators present themselves as the voice of fairness and reason. What is left out from such commentaries is the much larger problem of tax evasion and fraud among more affluent groups, which costs society a lot more money (Marriott, 2018).

To provide more detail, Figure 3 below compares the costs of Tax vs Benefit fraud in Aotearoa for the years 2014/2015 and shows a clear difference in the cost. To produce this graph, Marriott (2018) examined debt collection from government agencies in Aotearoa, Inland Revenue (Tax debt, student loan and working for families) alongside the Ministry of Social Development (Benefit fraud and benefit overpayment). Her work reveals a clear discrepancy in both the intent and application of collecting funds owed by these different agencies and the populations they manage respectively. The findings exposed how ‘white collar crime’, including tax evasion is less likely to be pursued. Yet conservative commentators would lead the public to believe that benefit fraud is considerably higher and costlier to the country than any other form of fraud. Marriott (2018) found that welfare recipients are more likely to be held accountable to repay debts, whereas those in more secure financial positions are more likely to see their debts written off.



*Figure 3 Tax vs Benefit fraud bar graph (Action Station, 2017)*

From the examples I have provided in the analysis above, it would also appear that conservative commentators have promoted moral outrage against Metiria and her admission of benefit fraud in order to warrant their calls for her resignation. As described by Cohen (2011), such moral outrage or ‘panic’ in news coverage occurs when a person is portrayed as a threat to the societal order and dominant interests. Romano (2017) also found that in the 1970s and 1980s, Britain engaged in an ‘anti scrounger campaign’, in which social workers went out on the hunt for those who had decided to enter ‘voluntary unemployment’. As a result, mediated coverage of welfare fraud during this time would become so intense that the term ‘scroungerphobia’ would be coined by Alan Deacon to capture what was happening (Romano, 2017). The promotion of moral outrage did prove relatively successful in positioning Metiria and the taxpaying public as being on opposite sides and for the conservative commentators to present themselves as the arbiters of moral decency.

In the end, the pressure on Metiria became so intense that she resigned a mere three weeks and three days after her initial disclosure of benefit fraud. Metiria had anticipated that conservative commentators would confront her. For example, in her initial disclosure she stated: “I was one of those women, who you hear people complain about on talkback radio” “Mending the Safety Net – Metiria’s speech to the Green Party

2017 AGM” (*The Green Party of New Zealand*, 16 July 2017). However, when the conservative media campaign against her began to focus on her whānau as well, Metiria succumbed to the pressure and resigned. As Metiria stated:

I also knew that it would open the way for people to criticise me - and I knew the risks of that - but the intensity of those attacks has become too much for my family, and they are now getting in the way of our ability to communicate our solutions - not just for poverty, but for water, climate change and the environment (*The Otago Daily Times*, 2017).

With this resignation, the hegemonic rupture caused by Metiria foregrounding structural inadequacies in the welfare system, which forced people to be dishonest in order to survive was repaired. The use of symbolic power to reinforce the hegemonic narrative regarding welfare as an individual issue far outweighed Metiria’s alternative framing of welfare as a structural issue. Dominating public deliberations regarding Metiria’s resignation, Mike Hosking asserted: “And not a moment too soon. What possessed Metiria Turei to hang on so long doesn’t matter. She clearly cracked and has finally, finally done the right thing”, ‘Mikes Minute: Metiria Turei’s resignation and not a moment too soon” (*The New Zealand Herald*, 2017). Patrick Gower proposed that: “If Metiria Turei hadn’t resigned just before we came to air we would be calling for her to go now”, “Labour Surges, Greens slump and media scrap over Turei’s scalp” (Manhire, 2017). Duncan Garner added that: “Turei threw herself out there, she got what all self-serving and ultimately selfish politicians deserve – a feral and feverish examination by the media. She failed spectacularly”, “Duncan Garner: Brick Bat for Metiria Turei, bouquet for Jacinda Ardern” (*Stuff.co.nz*, 19 August 2017). Again, the framing here is individualized with no considerations of the substantive issues that Metiria had raised about the state of our welfare system.

These extracts reveal the underlying agenda perpetuated by conservative commentators on dominated media coverage of the controversy, which was to discredit Metiria and her supporters, invalidate their concerns with the failings of the welfare system through omission, and create a moral panic with the goal of forcing Metiria to resign from politics. As is evident in my analysis above, the age-old conservative trope of the undeserving poor was central to this ideological process. In considering the actions of

conservative commentators, I was reminded of Silverstone's (2007) observation that the functioning of the mediapolis is highly political and dominated by elitist and exclusionary practices that often silence dissenting voices in order to maintain the status quo. This is not to say that more balanced engagements with the issues this case raised about Metiria's actions and the broader welfare system were not present in the mediapolis. It is to assert that more balanced reporting was drowned out by the dominance of conservative commentators who wielded considerable symbolic power.

### More balanced Media Deliberations

There were more balanced deliberations within the news media that took a broader perspective on a wider range of issues and sources than those offered by the conservative commentaries explored above. In contrast to coverage in spaces such as Newshub and the NZ Herald, many Māori-focused media platforms depicted Metiria as a heroic figure. The headlines of different items in these Māori platforms are revealing. Examples include "Metiria admits to lying to survive" (Kupenga, 2017) "When is benefit fraud -fraud or survival" (*Māori Television*, 10 August 2017) and "Beneficiary Bashing rife in this country" (*Marae*, 14 August 2017).

A news piece by the bilingual TVNZ current affairs show *Marae* "Turei is supported by rival Māori candidates on *Marae*" (*Marae*, 6 August 2017) provides commentary on events from a Māori perspective. A summary of the item was provided on the *TVNZ* website:

Painted as a Robin Hood figure by Māori media and vilified by mainstream media - Greens Party co-leader Metiria Turei has had a rollercoaster 3 weeks since she admitted she lied to WINZ. Although this was a part of the Tai Tonga electorate debate, Metiria drew sympathy from the two people she is standing against for the seat, incumbent MP Rino Tirikatene from the Labour Party and Māori Party candidate Mei Reedy-Taare (*Marae*, 6 August 2017).

In contrast to the adversarial approach taken by conservative commentators, Scotty Morrison, a well-known Māori news presenter, interviewed Metiria for *Marae* with an open and inquisitive tone, and at times used humour when discussing sensitive topics

related to Metiria's disclosure. This stance is evident in his opening question to Metiria, as Morrison asked the following question, they both laughed:

Metiria. You've made a lot of admissions this week about benefit fraud and false electorate addresses is there anything else you would like to tell us? (*Marae*, 6 August 2017).

Morrison would then go on to provide Metiria with the platform to answer his questions from her own perspective. The interview was conversational in style, as is evident in Metiria's response to one of Scotty Morrison's questions:

I opened myself up to this degree of scrutiny because this is what beneficiaries face every day, and people who can't fight back. We need to be talking about how terrible it is in life to be a beneficiary in this country and how it's been like that for nearly thirty years, so this happened to me twenty-five years ago. I mean nobody's life, when they're in their twenties, is going to really be able to deal with this scrutiny. But people are suffering from that now, and we can learn from that now and we have to stop it, and if we don't have an example that people can understand and hear about then I don't think we can ever get to the point where we can fix it for everyone (*Marae*, 6 August 2017).

This extract illustrates how it is possible for news items to allow people to discuss their own intentions and reasons for acting as they have without being constantly shut down by media celebrities with their own agendas. Although there were moments within interviews with conservative commentators where Metiria was able to raise points that she does in the extract above, she was continually spoken over, and her points were dismissed as irrelevant to the controversy. Metiria's response here also mirrors the discussion made in Chapter 1 surrounding the intense scrutiny and treatment faced by beneficiaries in Aotearoa. Māori single mothers have been targeted as deviant, irresponsible parents who are a risk to the economy for decades in Aotearoa (Ware et al., 2017). As a result, they are objectified within the dominant media narrative on welfare and are afforded little space to articulate their situations on their own terms (Cotterell, St John, Dale & So, 2017).

By engaging in the conversation surrounding the scrutiny and treatment faced by beneficiaries, Metiria was able to gain support from two Māori politicians from different political parties. This support was evident in Mei Reedy-Taare's (Māori party candidate) response to points raised by Metiria in the interview with Scotty Morison during the *Marae* segment:

This issue actually is, though Scotty, that there is probably another 1200 to 1500 other women, probably other young Māori women, who are currently facing prosecution by the state for benefit fraud, and they are the ones that we should actually be sympathising with and concerned about at the moment. Yes, this happened to Metiria, but it's exactly what's going on with women now, they will not only be going to face prosecution, but they will then be vilified and persecuted by people who have absolutely no compassion and do not understand the story (*Marae*, 6 August 2017).

Although from a different political party that was part of the conservative government of the time, as a wāhine Māori in politics, Reedy-Taare accepted that many other wāhine Māori are facing such issues. The emphasis in Reedy-Taare's account is also structural and focused on addressing problems in the system rather than simply vilifying Metiria and other wāhine.

Another news piece that offered some balance in coverage was titled: "Manurewa voters have their say on Metiria Turei's benefit fraud" (*RadioNZ*, 8 August 2017). This item was fronted by John Campbell on his *Checkpoint* programme. The segment was comprised of a series of interviews between news reporter, Mihingarangi Forbes, and local community members. Like the exemplar above, the John Campbell piece was introduced in a strikingly different manner to the majority of news items covering the controversy. This item was not introduced using the same denigrating and vilifying language towards Metiria that was evident in the items from conservative commentators. There was no reference of fraud, criminality or prosecution. Rather, there was an acknowledgement of the difficulties that come with poverty. Like the Scotty Morrison interview on *Marae*, Campbell's tone was calm throughout the item. He appeared concerned regarding the situations people face when living in poverty and their efforts in making do. This item also involved reporters engaging with people facing hardship:

Now Metiria Turei's stand was about poverty and, well, life on a benefit, so Mihingarangi Forbes, our Māori issues correspondent, and Bradley White, our camera man, went out to Manurewa, one of the country's poorest suburbs, to find out what people thought about Metiria Turei there and whether they would do the same thing that she has confessed to doing (*Checkpoint*, 8<sup>th</sup> July 2017).

Following the introduction by John Campbell, Mihingarangi Forbes was interviewing members of the Manurewa community as they left the Work and Income office. The persons interviewed came from a diverse range of ethnic backgrounds and included solo mothers and fathers, elderly people, immigrants and those suffering from chronic health conditions. This is noteworthy given that conservative commentators and aligned journalists did not interview such people and relied instead on middle to upper class Pākehā people or Māori politicians, such as Paula Bennett, who shared their ideological conservatism.

Below is an extract that reflects the town that Checkpoint interviewed in Manurewa, which includes a brief introduction from the reporter on the ground and response by a community member:

Mihingarangi We met Mel on her way out of a WINZ office in the centre of the suburb, she has recently had surgery and gets some assistance from the government, but her five children are grown up.

Mel With the expenses now my kids and me wouldn't have been able to do it, it was hard enough then, I used to have to go out and prostitute on the street, um sell tinnie's<sup>3</sup>, do what I could just to make extra money for milk and bread, not luxuries, milk and bread money, that's all we needed was food money... It was always trying to feed them, we never had enough to feed my kids, they would always eat noodles and like shit food, the kids will tell ya.

When asked about Metiria and her admission Mel replied:

---

<sup>3</sup> Small amount of marijuana wrapped in tin foil sold for \$20 NZD.

Mel            She's an inspiration to women, she's an inspiration to Māori and she should be patted on the back for getting an education and not on the fucking corner asking for a fucking cigarette.

This extract reflects how the Checkpoint item enabled a member of the public who had direct experiences of hardship to voice their own perspectives on the evolving controversy and underlying issues. In the extract above, Mel disclosed that she had to 'prostitute' herself and sell drugs to feed her children, effectively also committing benefit fraud. As Mel discussed her past, she became visibly upset when reflecting on the stress of raising her children and being forced into sex work to earn enough money to feed them. This is a forced 'choice' she would not have had to make if her income from the welfare system actually met their cost of living.

In drawing on the experiences of other people living with inadequate welfare support, the Checkpoint item gives space for an alternative and more structurally focused perspective on the actions of Metiria and other women who rely on welfare support. The accounts of hardship presented in this item challenge the stereotype of hardship being the product of personal deficits, including an inability to budget. Such challenges to the hegemony of the welfare narrative did not just come from women and were also evident in the accounts of men also depicted outside the Manurewa WINZ office:

Mihingarangi Tom is on the sole benefit raising his three-month-old daughter.

Tom    Everyone is struggling at the moment, I mean this is Manurewa, there's not much opportunity around here.

Mihi    Have you worked before?

Tom    Yes, I have, I've worked for like ten years.

Mihi    Can I ask about Mum?

Tom    Synthetics overtook her, overtook her judgement or whatever, so Oranga Tamariki gave the child to me.

Tom was subsequently asked about Metiria and her admission of benefit fraud:

Tom You have to find a way to live and she did for her and her child, and I'm trying to do that now, for me and my child, and it's pretty hard. If I had an odd job on the side and didn't have to tell these fullas then all good, more money for me and my child, but what she did, it's normal for us struggling.

Mihi So, if you did have an odd job you would do it and you wouldn't tell them.

Tom Yeah I would, I'll tell you I would.

Tom invokes general dilemmas faced by beneficiaries in trying to survive with inadequate support. He contextualizes his story and relates it to dilemmas he shares with people in similar situations. In contrast to conservative portrayals of beneficiaries, the viewing audience is presented with a context focused account of Tom's situation in a manner that does not present him as undeserving or attempting to rip off the system. Tom is presented as a person who was employed and had to leave work to raise a child on a sole parent benefit due to circumstances outside of his own control.

More generally, the accounts provided by characters in the evolving narrative, such as Mel and Tom exemplify how the benefits they and people like them receive do not provide enough income to meet the cost of living, which ultimately forces them to find other ways to supplement their incomes. The audience is presented with a shift in focus from the ideology of individual blame and stigma towards a focus on inadequate income levels and the problems caused by the rising cost of living (cf. Rushbrooke, 2014).

Another balanced news item was titled: "Auckland voters have mixed feelings about rogue Green MPs" (*Māori Television*, 8 August 2017). The article focused on the resignation over Metiria's actions of fellow Green MPs David Clendon and Kennedy Graham, and Metiria's place within the party after her disclosure. The segment balanced different viewpoints from those expressing support for Metiria. One member of the public is depicted proposing that Metiria had given a voice to Māori living in poverty, "Metiria is advocating for people like my family and Māori dealing with poverty" (*Māori Television*, 8 August 2017). Opposing views were also given with a member of the public arguing that Metiria should resign, "I think they should get rid of her. Someone else should step up, a leader to take her place" (*Māori Television*, 8 August 2017).

The examples provided in this section reflect more balanced representations within news coverage of the controversy. The audience was provided with both sides of the controversy from the onset. The journalists appeared open minded towards Metiria, who was afforded space to articulate her position without being silenced and disempowered. These items allowed for Metiria to provide a context to her story which in turn resulted in discussions focussing more on the failings of the social welfare system and its consequences. Journalists also interviewed politicians from opposing parties, and members of the public who were for various reasons receiving welfare assistance. These additional characters were given space to voice their perspectives, provide contexts for their struggles, and to discuss how they felt about Metiria's actions. Their accounts also reflected those of other people with direct experience of hardship through social media outlets.

### Mediated Resistance (Social & News)

Resistance to conservative media constructions in the Metiria Turei controversy became apparent across various social media sites (Facebook and Twitter) and online blogs within days of Metiria's disclosure. At times, these texts of resistance would also receive commentary from corporatized news sites (e.g. *The Hui* and *Newshub*). These posts reflect how people with similar experiences to Metiria Turei came forth in support of her to share stories of their own struggles with the social welfare system. Much of this activity was reflected in the use of the hashtag #IamMetiria on Facebook and Twitter. Metiria's supporters appeared to have found solace in her admission and their posts were widely shared among people's social networks.

The two examples I present here speak to the focus in many posts on the punitive culture within the welfare system and how WINZ is an institution to be feared and avoided when possible due to its dehumanizing and humiliating practices towards clients (cf. Hodgetts et al., 2014). Figures 4 and 5 present examples of people posting online about the problems in the welfare system. First, Camilla shares Metiria's argument that the social welfare system treats beneficiaries badly and that the welfare system needs to change.



Camilla Karehana added 3 new photos.

July 18, 2017 ·

...

#iammetiria twitter thread is powerful.

Throwback to 12years ago when I was forced to leave my job and return to NZ with my son or lose him because of custody dispute, we had nowhere to live and were forced to go to winz, where we were humiliated and dehumanised and walked out with NOTHING.  
#iammetiria

Figure 4 Twitter post sharing the hashtag #IamMetiria (Karehana, 2012)

The next exemplar, in Figure 5, was shared by another wāhine via Twitter. Here, the Twitter user reflects on the inhumane treatment she has received from WINZ. This post also shares the #IamMetiria to invoke how Metiria's story is reflective of the Twitter user's experiences. The post reflects an insensitive and potentially harmful interaction between a Work and Income staff members and their clients. It is proposed that the client was told by WINZ staff to stay in her relationship if she cannot afford to feed her child. The reason she wanted to leave her relationship is unknown. Reference to this interaction is used to support Metiria's proposition that there needs to be a cultural shift within WINZ, one which goes from a position of dehumanizing clients towards the provision of caring support (Rua et al., 2019).



leah @communismbarbie · 3 Aug 2017

When I split from my husband, WINZ told me it was a bad idea to leave him if I couldn't afford to feed my kid. #IamMetiria

4

5

29

Figure 5 Twitter post sharing solidarity with Metiria by sharing the hashtag #IamMetiria

Alongside personal posts, many organisations also used media platforms to share their support for Metiria. 'The Aunties', an organisation that functions as an interface between various community organisations and wāhine, as well as providing material and emotional resources within the community, posted two supportive tweets during this controversy (Figure 6). Both tweets reinforce the argument made by Metiria regarding the need for a significant culture shift within WINZ. The first tweet exemplifies how

wāhine who receive welfare need to be treated with understanding, respect and dignity. The second reinforces the negative culture experienced by wāhine when they interact with WINZ.

The first screenshot shows a tweet from 'The Aunties' (@whaeapower) dated 18 Jul 2017. The tweet reads: "Because she cares. Deeply. And that's what people need to see. Someone who care abt them and understands, bc they've been there". It has 25 likes. Below the tweet is a reply from Metiria Turei, which reads: "I will not let the women go to WINZ if we can avoid it. They've been through humiliation, not putting them through more #IamMetiria". This reply has 152 likes.

Figure 6 Twitter post by The Aunties sharing the hashtag #IamMetiria

Figure 7 presents a picture of Metiria with the word Mōrehu, which can be translated from te reo Māori into English as 'survivor'. This picture was shared on the twitter page of Kupu Hou, an organisation that promotes Māori language online. The picture is simple and positive. It depicts Metiria with a kind smile, which is in direct

contrast to the denigrating images used on sites such as Whale Oil that depict Metiria with a tattoo of 'fraud' across her face.



Figure 7 Image of Metiria as a survivor (Kupu Hou, 2017)

A range of other images and posts were also evident online. These included the illustrative cartoon presented in Figure 8, which depicts how other beneficiaries may have felt when Metiria spoke out about the failings of the social welfare system and represented them. Again, this image was shared widely across social media platforms and offers an alternative perspective to that which dominated the controversy via conservative commentaries.



Figure 8 Cartoon depicting beneficiaries after Metiria's disclosure (Morris, 2017)

According to Scott and Maryman (2016), social media provide platforms from which members of the public can share information, offer and build solidarity around issues, and challenge symbolic power. Social media offers sites for alternative narratives to be shared and for expanding public deliberations beyond the bounds set by conservative media commentators. In the production and sharing of these online posts and materials, we can see the functioning of the mediapolis as a contested space central to the negotiation of issues of social concern today. Posts such as those provided above also reflect how people can take to social media to create alternative news spaces of resistance towards the perspectives of conservative media commentators that now dominate the news landscape in Aotearoa. Contestation was particularly evident when commentators, such as Patrick Gower, shared links to their news items via social media platforms (Figures 9 and 10), which were then picked up on and in many cases challenged by prosumers who supported Metiria.



Patrick Gower

July 26, 2017 · Facebook Creator · ...

Metiria Turei is using her benefit fraud to get attention and try and manipulate the public 8 weeks out from the election.

She is doing this for one reason: to try and get votes.

She is ripping off the public - it is political fraud.

### Patrick Gower: Metiria Turei's political fraud is ripping off the New Zealand public

The Greens' co-leader is manipulating the public to try and get votes, says Patrick Gower.

[WWW.NEWSHUB.CO.NZ](http://WWW.NEWSHUB.CO.NZ)

Like

Comment

Share

528

[Top Comments](#) ▾

22 Shares



Enter your comment...



Will James At least she has the guts to tell it.  
Unlike your cunt mate paula.

43

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 29w

[View previous replies](#)



Will James I've got a great tip for your weight loss smally.  
Keep sleeping with your national mates and you will lose it  
in no time. Could help your mate Paula out too. Regards.

2

[View more replies](#)



Daniel Lovett Get fucked Paddy. 25

[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 29w

[View 3 Replies](#)

Figure 9 Facebook post by Patrick Gower commenting on Metiria's disclosure (Gower, 2017)

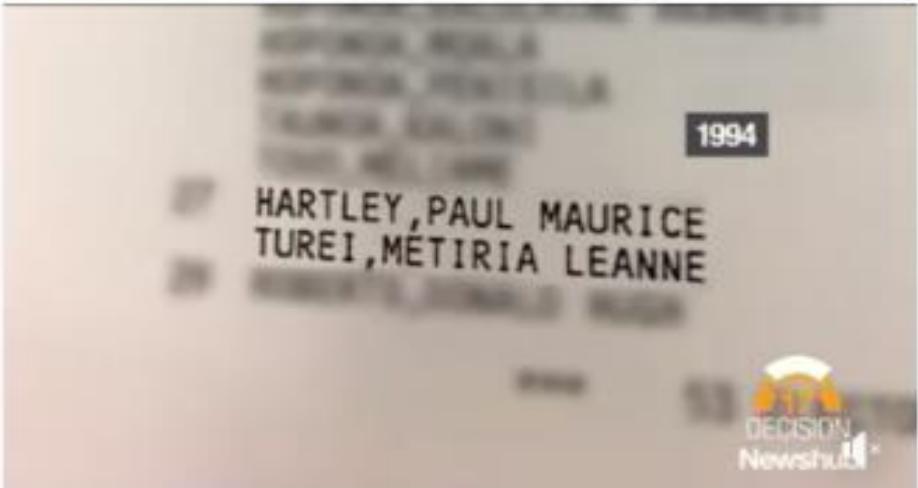
In the items displayed in Figure 9, Patrick Gower appeals to what he sees as public decency and promotes his conservative ideological perspective that draws on the hegemonic tale of terror that is evident in news coverage of welfare. Patrick Gower's post is then challenged by a Facebook user who refers to concerns about the behaviour of a National Party Minister (Paula Bennett) at the time and her own past behaviour whilst drawing a welfare benefit. Paula Bennett's behaviour had not been subjected to anywhere near the same level of scrutiny or denigration as was directed towards Metiria: "At least she [Metiria] has the guts to tell it, unlike your cunt mate Paula" (James, 2017). This comment was also made in relation to affiliations in perspective between conservative news media commentators and bloggers and the National Party (Hager, 2014).

Figure 10 (below) depicts an online post regarding another item from *Newshub*, which refers to a habitation index story considered earlier within this chapter, and a response from one of Metiria's supporters. Patrick Gower introduces the piece by congratulating the investigative journalist Jenna Lynch "Journalism, exceptional investigation and then questioning of Metiria Turei by Jenna Lynch" (*Facebook*, 6 August 2017). A supporter of Metiria replies: "Yeah what brave important journalism, what a noble heart hungering after justice! Feck off you bunch of privileged shits" (Farry, 2017). As noted earlier within this chapter, the functioning of the mediapolis is often asymmetrical in that those who wield symbolic power are able to dominate the narrative surrounding issues across both news and social media (Silverstone, 2007). However, with the exemplars provided in Figure 10 we can see instances of the refusal to accept the hegemony of the conservative welfare narrative and those who champion it.

 Patrick Gower shared Newshub's video.  
August 6, 2017 · Facebook Creator · [Share](#) [...](#)

Journalism.

Exceptional investigation and then questioning of Metiria Turei by Jenna Lynch.



19,680 Views

**Newshub**  
August 4, 2017 · [Share](#)

Green Party co-leader Metiria Turei faced a hard line of questioning from Newshub reporter Jenna Lynch this week.

See the full story: [#Decision17](http://www.newshub.co.nz/.../more-questions-raised-about-metiria-tur...)

[Like](#) [Comment](#) [Share](#)

 66 [Chronological](#)

[View 8 more comments](#)

 **Elizabeth Hills** Can't understand why the press let Ms. Bennett get off scott free.  
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 27w  3  
[2 Replies](#)

 **Joe Farry** Yeah, what brave, important journalism! What a noble heart hungering after justice! Feck off you bunch of privileged shits!  
[Like](#) · [Reply](#) · 26w  2

 Write a comment...  

Figure 10 Facebook post by Patrick Gower commenting on exceptional journalism (Gower, 2017)

Reflecting the breadth of resistance to the hegemony exercised by conservative news commentators (particularly after Metiria's resignation), many well-known New Zealanders came forward across Facebook, Twitter, online blogs and, to a lesser extent, corporatized news media outlets, to challenge the crusade that had been waged against Metiria Turei. Many expressed a sense of sadness, loss and anger in seeing a wāhine Māori leader being forced to resign in the way that Metiria had been. For example, prominent Māori academic, Leonie Pihama, wrote a blog titled: "Māori, woman, mother. #IamMetiria" ([LeoniePihama.wordpress.com](http://LeoniePihama.wordpress.com), 9 August 2017). Further reflecting processes of media cross fertilization, this blog would then be shared by Māori media platforms such as *The Hui* (10 August 2017). As seen in Figure 11, Pihama argues that the media attack was led by privileged white men (Figure 12) who lacked any real understanding of what it is actually like to live in poverty and have to engage with the welfare system. Leonie Pihama proposes that their intention was simply to destroy a wāhine Māori leader: "what we have is a clear attack that is grounded in the fundamental right-wing ideologies of race, gender and class that serve the interests of domination and which reproduce systems of inequality and disparities" (Pihama, 2017).

**The Hui** August 10, 2017 -

Maori, woman, mother: [#IamMetiria](#)

"But even more disturbing has been emergence in the past weeks of a kind of punitive, vindictive, mean-spirited media gang led by primarily privileged white men who have no idea what it means to live in a level of poverty that many in this country exist in every day"

<https://leoniepihama.wordpress.com/.../maori-woman-mother-ia.../>

**Maori, woman, mother:  
#IamMetiria**

I hate election year. I hate elections. They are the epitome of colonial control. A year when the height of white privilege is guaranteed to reign supreme in its effort to demean anything Māori. Na...

LEONIEPIHAMA.WORDPRESS.COM

Figure 11 Blog post by Leonie Pihama Māori academic (Pihama, 2017)



*Figure 12 Conservative commentators who covered the Metiria Turie disclosure (Daily Blog, 2017)*

The well-known Māori doctor, Lance O'sullivan, also voiced his opinion regarding the loss of Metiria in a blog piece titled: "Dr Lance O'Sullivan on what's been lost in the Metiria Turei controversy" (*Thespinoff*, 21 August 2017). Dr O'Sullivan also asserted the need for the development of a more compassionate welfare system, which had been lost in the dominant news framing of the controversy. He went so far as to refer to WINZ as "a sad and despondent place" (*Thespinoff*, 21 August 2017) and an organisation that needs to be transformed to embrace compassion and empathy towards people in need.

### **Chapter Conclusion**

Chapter 1 of this thesis was opened with a quote by Silverstone (2007) to showcase how media institutions act either justly or unjustly to represent or silence the voices of marginalised groups. The quote speaks to the mediated symbolic environment in which the Metiria Turei controversy took shape. It raised issues surrounding the use of symbolic power by the self-appointed guardians of public decency to silence and marginalise the voices of indigenous people for political and ideological reasons. The media analysis I have presented here confirms the essence of Silverstone's assertion that corporatized news media often unjustly deny or distort the voices of marginalised groups with whom they do not agree. In localizing such processes, my findings support the view that our mediapolis is dominated by a Pākehā elite who espouse a neoliberal worldview (cf. Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017; Narn, McCreanor, & Moewaka Barnes, 2017).

Within the presented analysis, I have also substantiated the assertion from Chapter 1 that contemporary public deliberations often play out in the mediapolis across various news, social media and blog spaces. These deliberations are not conducted in a democratic manner and are also subject to asymmetrical processes of symbolic power whereby some voices are rendered much more prominent than others. For example, with a few notable examples, news coverage reflected a clear lack of Māori voices and the perspectives of people with lived experience of economic hardship and the welfare system.

In championing the lived realities of hardship by linking the need for structural reforms with reference to her own experiences and those of other women, Metiria opened a hegemonic rupture to the dominant welfare narrative. This dominant narrative individualizes poverty by apportioning blame to those affected by it and by ignoring structural explanations. Metiria highlighted the dehumanising and penal welfare system, which often exacerbates the hardships faced by people who rely on welfare. Her perspective comprised a direct challenge to the conservative perspectives offered by conservative commentators. In response, conservative news commentators worked assiduously to silence her, close the rupture she had opened, and to reinstate their hegemony. The actions of these commentators also reflect Redden's (2014) assertion that the mediation of poverty is deeply embedded in neoliberalism and reliant on the longstanding, individualizing and moralistic tropes about the 'undeserving' and 'deserving' poor. Their coverage also reflects how news coverage of poverty and welfare rarely provides contextual information or structural explanations for poverty and the need for a welfare system (Redden, 2014).

As is evidenced by my findings, the activities of people who set out to undermine Metiria and promote the dominant welfare narrative were not restricted to corporatized news media outlets. The material they produced was shared by and reworked through the prosumption practices of conservative commentators via social media platforms such as Facebook and Twitter. As argued by Hager (2014) such political attacks are perpetuated via blogs such as Whale Oil and KiwiBlog as an anti-democratic tactic for pushing those who oppose or are critical of hegemonic power out of politics.

Finally, I have spent considerable time charting how news coverage and key social media platforms are used to promote a highly partial perspective on the actions of Metiria Turei and other people who receive welfare support. I have also presented notable instances of more balanced coverage that contain some hope for the continued existence of ethical journalism in Aotearoa. Such coverage was epitomized by items produced by *RadioNZ*, to a lesser degree *TVNZ*, and more consistently *Māori* media. It involved efforts to include the voices of people with direct experience of the welfare system who are often silenced in public deliberations. The inclusion of these voices offered audiences insights into the failings of the social welfare system that had been raised by Metiria and marginalised by conservative commentators. However, the inclusion of these voices proved to be only fleeting and were predominantly relegated to social media platforms. In the following chapter I will explore the marginalised voices of wāhine Māori who have lived experiences of poverty and the welfare system.



## Chapter Four Focus Group Analysis

As outlined throughout Chapter 1, the social welfare system has historically proven to be problematic for meeting the needs of Māori. It is also well documented that neoliberal ideology has informed welfare reforms in Aotearoa that were seen within the 1980s and 1990s (O'Brien, 2012; Wynd, 2014). These reforms worked to create a conditional welfare system, focussing incessantly on reducing welfare dependence through employment as a priority over providing adequate support to people (Working Welfare Group, 2011). This system has become increasingly punitive, with sanctions and penalties imposed upon those who do not meet their 'back to work' obligations. Missed in such a system are the complexities beneficiaries face when trying to make do and gain employment. Such reforms have been reinforced through news media coverage of welfare (Wilcock, 2014) including controversies such as that surrounding Metiria Turei (Chapter 3).

This chapter reports the findings from the two focus groups I conducted with wāhine Māori who had received a single parent benefit. This chapter is presented in four main sections. The first explores the initial reaction to Metiria's disclosure, paying particular attention to how my participants understood and empathised with Metiria and, in doing so, invokes the inadequacies of welfare provisions for meeting the rising cost of living. The second explores the reactions wāhine had to balanced media representations and how my participants openly discussed the ways in which punitive welfare creates significant barriers for wāhine Māori to access long-term employment and higher education. The third considers participants' responses to two news pieces from conservative commentators and how the focus group discussants interpreted these items as being inherently racist, highly gendered and lacking in any real understanding of the lived realities of wāhine Māori who access welfare. In the fourth section I consider participant reactions to four resistive social media posts that became prominent within social media replies to conservative commentators.

### Wāhine Māori respond to Metiria Turei's admission of benefit fraud

As outlined within the plot synopsis of the media controversy in Chapter 3, Metiria claimed that the social welfare system had failed her economically as a single mother. Metiria proposed that as a result, she was forced to act dishonestly, and that due to the

continued problems in the system, other single mothers were also being forced into untenable situations. The reactions to Metiria's admission by the wāhine within the focus groups would reveal two prominent threads. The first relates to participants expressing understanding and empathy towards Metiria in relation to the inadequacies of the welfare system in terms of meeting the cost of living. The inadequacies of the system were discussed in terms of the financial, housing and food insecurities that result from it. The second thread relates to how having to lie to WINZ is actually very common and functions as a survival mechanism of last resort to ensure that these wāhine and their children are fed and housed.

Let us begin by considering how the focus group participants responded to the admission of benefit fraud by expressing understanding and empathy towards Metiria. These participants relayed similar experiences to those disclosed by Metiria and that regardless of how hard they worked to ration the resources that they had available to them; they still did not have enough to cover all their living costs. A typical response included: "I think you get it, it's the broader situation... The benefit doesn't and probably will never cover what it costs to live" (Pania, focus group 2, Te Rau Puawai). Aroha then expands on Pania's statement and, in doing so, offers more detail of this predicament:

With the rising costs of everything as well, rent especially back home has skyrocketed. Yet the benefit has not gone up to accommodate for that either. So, I totally get where she [Metiria] is coming from and especially having to, you know, make sure you're still paying your bills. You're doing everything. I think a lot of that debt comes from when people are on the benefit and having to shift the money to make sure, you know, this week I've got to pay the rent or I can't because, you know. I've got to pay for school uniforms, or I need to pay for food, so her saying that she had extra flatmates I totally get it.

In this extract, the phrase 'you know' marks an appeal to shared experiences of having to struggle to survive and the need to juggle various costs of living on an inadequate income. Aroha proposes that it is common for beneficiaries to be forced into 'shifting' their money to cover basic living costs such as housing, food and school uniforms, which often leaves them in debt. In a recent welfare policy think piece, Rua and colleagues (2019) propose that when whānau have to make hard decisions and are forced to prioritize some

expenses over others, they then become further entangled into cycles of precarity. Further supporting Aroha's assertions, recent research that has found that rising costs, such as those associated with housing, have not been met with adequate increases in benefit levels or accommodation supplements (cf. Rushbrooke, 2014).

In Chapter 1, I cited evidence for how the rate of most benefits did not change during the period of 2010 to 2017. This systemic failure by the previous National-led government to ensure benefits were paid at a rate to meet basic material needs has exacerbated financial hardship and poverty for many whānau. To put this shortfall in perspective, the recent welfare advisory group investigated the costs of living in private accommodation for sole parents. They concluded that a single parent of one child who was receiving welfare support and renting a home privately, would automatically be in a deficit of around \$110 a week. For a single parent of three the deficit would rise to around \$250 per week (Whakamana Tangata, 2019). The current Labour-led government is also aware of these figures and has not yet done enough to address the shortfall.

My participants proposed that it is not surprising then that people on a low income have to find alternative ways to meet the increasing cost of housing in Aotearoa. In this context, Aroha's reference to 'shifting' money around to meet costs can be seen as an agentive practice that is developed by people responding to poverty (Graham, Hodgetts, Stolte, & Chamberlain 2017). As is also argued by Graham and colleagues (2017), the development of such practices constitutes an imperfect or flawed response to adversity and the restraints that come to such lifeworlds with inadequate resources. Such practices have also been interpreted as a means of gaining a sense of some control of the situation and so have some psychological benefits, but do not resolve the underlying issue of insufficient income (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, & Tankel, 2014).

My participants were all very aware that they needed to engage in such practices in order to respond to competing demands on their limited resources. It is through a discussion of such practices that these wāhine expressed empathy and solidarity with Metiria and her actions. Their own experiences resonated closely with Metiria's story. In doing so, they raised a number of insecurities in addition to housing. For example, food Insecurity was discussed as not only forcing them [beneficiaries] to try and access further resources from WINZ and food banks, which often results in experiences of dread,

frustration and futility (cf. Graham, Hodgetts, Stolte & Chamberlain, 2017). Outlined below, Ana Focus Group 1, (Women's Centre) describes below how she has to source food from food banks:

I know that I am like literally two steps away from being, well, how am I going to feed my children this week? And have been in that situation in the past. Like, we are going to have to go to the food banks this week. And going, well I've been to the food bank this week, can't go to the food banks next week because, you know, you've used up your entitlement so many times... Now what am I going to do? Work and income are going to go: "why haven't you been budgeting? blah blah blah blah." And you have budgeted everything out. There is no more budget, that is the simple situation. So yeah, you just do what you have to do.

Ana's account exemplifies the realities faced by beneficiaries in that food banks limit the number of times you can obtain food from them. When women then turn back to Work and Income for further assistance, their material needs that stem from the systemic under resourcing of benefits is transformed into a personal inability to budget. This reflects the neoliberal assumption that beneficiaries are deficient and lack budgeting skills. As the [ill]logic goes, they do not require more money, but rather budgeting advice and coaching. As argued by Hodgetts, Stolte, Groot, and Chamberlain (2017), the emphasis placed on budgeting in the welfare system reflects a lack of care towards beneficiaries who clearly do not have enough money to live. By focussing on the individual deficit of 'budgeting', the social welfare system fails to acknowledge inadequate benefit rates and silences alternative explanations for shortfalls in household resources.

The two focus group discussions explored how much effort wāhine put into budgeting, but that there is simply not enough to cover the most basic costs of living. As a result, food becomes a discretionary item in their households that is sacrificed when one needs money for other expenses like rent, the power bill or children's school supplies. Through the discussions, we can see how inadequate benefit levels not only create financial hardships and insecurities. Inadequate benefit levels also generate considerable stress and worry that comes with not having enough money to cover the basics of living. For example, Marama Focus Group 1, (Women's Centre) extends on the conversation surrounding insufficient income:

You know, I have two kids at school full time. I am going to school too. So, I have to survive on a balance less than \$300 a week. Everything, all in bills, food, petrol, and anything the kids need. It's like, you know, I've got all the bills like everyone else and I'm thinking like ... how do you do it? ... You just feel sick every single week as you divide the money up.

Such ongoing stress among welfare recipients has been associated with a number of mental and physical health concerns (Sapolsky, 2005). The sentiments regarding stress expressed during the focus groups is also echoed by the welfare advisory group who state that the current social welfare system contributes to toxic levels of stress for their clients (Whakamana Tangata, 2019).

In response to Figure 8 (Chapter 8), which presents a cartoon depicting how beneficiaries would likely have felt after Metiria made her public admission, both focus groups reacted by stating that this image resonated strongly with their lived experiences. For example, Anahera (Focus Group 2, Te Rau Puawai) responded with “Yeah that kind of resonates with how I felt when I watched her admission. But it was like she was saying it from a lived experience. She understood the struggle was real” This response was echoed by Ngaio (Focus Group 2, Te Rau Puawai) who responded to Anahera by stating: “yeah that is exactly how I felt”. The overall consensus in response to this image was that it was brave of Metiria to speak out about such situations of hardship that are often silenced in mediated public deliberations regarding welfare. In doing so, these participants join Metiria in extending their discussion of the welfare system and beneficiaries beyond the conservative hegemonic narrative that dominates news coverage.

As is evident in Metiria’s admission (Chapter 3), part of her strategy for making do on an inadequate income was to lie to Work and Income and not disclose the fact that she had flatmates who were sharing the cost of housing. This strategy was heavily criticised by conservative news commentators and was reduced by them to character flaws within Metiria, rather than any deficits in the system. However, my participants did not accept this dominant conservative framing of Metiria or the issues that she had raised. They did not judge Metiria’s actions to be immoral or criminal. Rather, they understood the predicament Metiria faced and discussed how lying was necessary for Metiria to gain enough resources to not only survive, but also engage in education in order to lift her and

her daughter out of poverty. Below, an extract from Focus group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) exemplifies how my participants storied a shared understanding of Metiria's admission that was non-judgemental and that normalized such actions as what wāhine who face these predicaments have to do:

- Ana I don't think I would've even defined it is a lie. I would have rationalised you've got to do what you've got to do.
- Aroha Yeah, you're just surviving.
- Ana Yeah just surviving. I don't know. It seems perfectly normal. How I know others have functioned to get what they need to do to get by. Like, I need to manipulate the system.
- Aroha Because there's no wriggle room. There's nowhere to wriggle. You've got to find it yourself. You've got to go in there [Work and Income] and push your case and say...
- Ana Yeah, you've got to go in there and jump up and down and then they say oh maybe not and then you've got to go away and find another avenue or jump up and down again.
- Aroha Yeah, it's disempowering. They take the power away.
- Pania I find it's a survival mechanism. There is no other way really. Who can survive on a benefit? And like if you don't do things like have a flatmate and or maybe get some work under the table? It's just like if you relate it back to the animal world, what a lion would do for its cubs. It's the same thing as a mother or as a single parent. You will do anything to ensure that your child is fed clothed and has a roof over their head. You just do anything.

Evident within this exchange is how my participants did not accept that Metiria's 'lie' to Work and Income was an immoral act. It was framed as a necessary tactic for survival. For wāhine in such situations the priority is survival and if this requires some level of dishonesty then that is what will happen. Feeding and housing one's children is positioned as the higher priority. This reframing of the story is more nuanced than simply proposing

that Metiria and other wāhine are simply '*choosing to rip the system*', as was alleged by the conservative news commentators. Also evident in the reframing of such acts as lying to WINZ is the implicit assertion that wāhine often have few or no other options. The choice to lie to the system is presented as a forced choice that is made from within contexts of hardship and severe restraint that come with inadequacies in the system. Here, we see the common currency of a counter hegemonic narrative, which focuses on pragmatic responses to the inadequacies of the welfare system, which Metiria tried to articulate throughout the evolving controversy (see Chapter 3).

Within this section, I have explored aspects of the responses in the focus groups to Metiria's initial admission of lying to WINZ. The two threads discussed showcase how the wāhine understood Metiria's story and empathised with her due to their shared experiences of having been in similar predicaments. The counter-hegemonic narrative that informs their responses does not blame Metiria for her actions, but rather points to the inadequacies of the welfare system in meeting their cost of living and which causes financial, housing and food insecurities, which in turn cause them considerable stress and frustration. The wāhine then went on to invoke lying to WINZ as a common and necessary survival strategy that enabled them to provide for their children. In the following section, I move to consider my participants responses to items from the conservative news commentators.

### **Wāhine Māori respond to conservative commentators**

In Chapter 3, I foregrounded the ways in which Metiria Turei's disclosure created a rupture in the hegemonic perspective promoted in news coverage regarding welfare and the culpability of people who rely on it. I also explored how conservative commentators worked to close the rupture and reinstate their cultural hegemony. In the process, their depictions of single mothers drew on stereotypical constructions that worked to reinforce negative notions of the undeserving poor. Evident throughout the media analysis was the impact of these commentators in shaping the evolving media deliberations and in forcing the resignation of Metiria from parliament. I was interested in how other wāhine Māori reacted to such commentary and as such, included two of their items in the focus groups (see Chapter 2).

The first item depicted the heated interaction between Barry Soper and Metiria Turei titled “Metiria Turei v Barry Soper: Questioning turns into heated debate” (*NewstalkZB*, 25 July 2017). By way of recap, Barry focused on the simplistic narrative of Metiria’s ‘choice’ to defraud the system and Metiria strongly resists this framing. Barry Soper proposes that women (both Pākehā and Māori) choose to get pregnant then ‘rip off’ the system. He positions Metiria as a supporter of such immoral behaviour. All participants rejected and challenged this simplistic and ideologically loaded notion of ‘choice’ and how it was being promoted by a person who lacked any understanding of what life on welfare is actually like. The following extract is from Focus Group 1 (Women’s Centre) and demonstrates the use of irony and humour to establish how ridiculous and out of touch Barry Soper is on this subject:

- Ngaio I think they have this idea that people who are sole parents, [that] they were dole bludgers... They [Single parents] were already poor. Then they chose to have a child on their own. Then they didn’t have a relationship. Like nobody who is a sole parent must have been married and god forbid had a marriage break up or lost their husband...
- Marama And, the guy walks out to be with someone else, and leaves the kids and the wife. Yeah that’s not normal that doesn’t happen right?...
- Ngaio They [conservative commentators] just have this idea that they are young mothers who get knocked up, don’t want to work.
- Marama Yeah cause loose [promiscuous] right? We are out there putting it about. We are planning to have children.
- Hine To be on a benefit
- Marama To get the money. That’s the point.
- Ngaio Because there is so much money to be made in having children and being on the benefit... There’s this rhetoric that um sole parents are um.
- Marama Whores basically.
- Ngaio Poor people popping out kids to get money, um

Within this interaction, my participants sarcastically voice how conservative notions of choice are of limited relevance to understandings of life as a single mother. They foreground alternative explanations for how and why women come to be single parents and in doing so, challenge some of the sexist stereotypes that were voiced by Barry Soper. They take Barry Soper's argument as a personal attack on their own character. They take issue with the characterization of women just like them as 'whores' who start out poor and choose to have children in order to avoid work by accessing welfare. This is a common trope central to classist and unsubstantiated constructions of the welfare queen, solo mum and chav mum (Tyler, 2008) within news coverage in countries such as New Zealand. These participants are well aware of and equipped to re-narrate and undermine such hegemonic stereotypes. The high level of agreement on this response frame is signalled in participants' exchanges through which they jointly introduce and construct an alternative to the tale of terror being voiced by Barry Soper. Collectively, they open up space to raise and consider issues of welfare and coverage from beyond the restraints imposed by the hegemonic framing that dominates coverage, and which is reproduced by conservative commentators. Their collaborative action constitutes a shared resistive reading of the news item (Fiske, 1988/1994). That is, this socio-economically marginalised group of wāhine read a dominant group perspective in the news item against the ideological grain. These women can step outside the conservative characterizations of Metiria and read these items counter hegemonically as reflective of broader power imbalances in society. In doing so, they reject the hegemonic perspective on welfare and women who access it as single parents by pointing to the absurdity of the claims being made about the character of wāhine such as themselves.

Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) voiced a very similar reaction to the Barry Soper item. This focus group also raised different reasons for Barry Soper's position and assertions regarding people such as themselves. Through dialogue, participating wāhine also reject the notion of 'choice' and present the conservative perspective voiced by Barry Soper as being ill-informed, overly simplistic, and coming from a position of privilege:

Aroha            All I can think of is white male privilege. Arrogant. "Well it wasn't my intention". Think before you speak. Like look at all of the perspectives.  
                    Like how would you know what it's like to be a woman?

Maia            But that's the privilege. You don't have to think before you speak.

Aroha          Yeah

Pania          Yup

Maia            I think he's thinking of the 1950s. Where you have a wife and a child. You stay in the family unit regardless of anything. You know, shit happens you don't intend to be a solo parent.

Ana             Exactly

Maia            Yeah and you have to deal with that, you know. I think that's where she [Metiria] was going when she said, 'I'm not going to answer that' and she just walked away because, you know, he has no idea about the context of the situation. He's just making like a colonised assumption like she just planned this child, you know.

These wāhine appear to understand why such conservative commentators continue to impose their own worldviews on wāhine who are parenting alone with welfare support. They associate the rhetoric voiced by Barry Soper with his privilege as an affluent white male and with the broader colonial project within which he appears to be participating.

Participants in both focus groups went on to outline how Barry Soper was trying to provoke Metiria by voicing a highly gendered, elitist and racist perspective, which has become common sense within public deliberations regarding welfare (Wilcock, 2014). This perspective is presented as contributing to the stigma and shame that is often experienced by low income single women who are parenting children alone. Here is an example of how this was discussed during Focus group 1 (Women's Centre):

Ngaio           It just hurts when you hear that. Like with Barry Soper. It feels like he may not be talking to me, but I feel like those comments are on me. It's kind of like his voice, all of those things that they say when you walk out into the street. It just feels like when you hear Barry Soper and like Mike Hosking.

Marama          Oh, I can't stand that guy.

- Ngaio      Talk like that makes it that much harder to walk with your head held high when you are out in the community.
- Marama     Yeah, you've just been trashed.
- Hine        We know that he is saying it just for a reaction.
- Marama     He's racist, he is a complete racist.
- Ngaio      And then what it tells people is what to think about beneficiaries.
- Marama     Yeah, it denigrates you.
- Ngaio      Like when you go for a job interview. You feel like they know that you are a beneficiary. Like they know that you're a mess.
- Hine        Yeah, like it's written on your head.
- Ngaio      It changes how you think about yourself.

Wāhine participating in this exchange consider the implications of the stigmatizing and denigrating perspectives expressed by conservative commentators in provoking racism and discriminatory actions in situations, such as job interviews. As discussed in Chapter 3, it is common in news depictions of welfare recipients to present beneficiaries as threats to the moral order, which results in the voicing of moral outrage and 'panic' by representatives of the dominant group who benefit from the present societal order (cf. Cohen, 2011). These participants understand that such moral panics can impact their ability to secure employment when potential employers are encouraged to see them through the lens projected by conservative commentators. They also raise the dangers of what social psychologists refer to as 'stereotype threat' whereby such problematic stereotypes, such as the promiscuous welfare queen, are then internalized by single mothers who start to believe what others are saying about them (Hodgetts et al., 2020).

In Chapter 1, I drew on the work of Rappaport (2000) who proposed that hegemonic narratives offer shared symbolic resources that can disempower particular groups because these often go unchallenged. Silverstone (2007) also proposed that elitist media representations are often highly critical of unpopular groups, the marginalised, and the indigenous. However, Māori are no push overs, and my participants joined with

Metiria in contesting overly stigmatizing and victim-blaming characterizations of them that were voiced by conservative commentators such as Barry Soper throughout the evolving controversy. To do so, they draw on their own counter hegemonic tale of joy that repositions them as agentive people who are doing their best in response to an uncaring system.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how Barry Soper employed the rhetorical tactic of gaslighting as he questioned Metiria in this item. Even though the wāhine did not articulate this concept, their reactions to the Barry Soper item and the rantings of Mike Hosking reflect an understanding of gaslighting and how it is often used by those in power to silence wāhine Māori, including Metiria. Despite the considerable ideological pressure that is brought to bear on them through such items and the broader welfare news narrative, like Metiria, these wāhine remain defiant and refuse to internalize the conservative rhetoric.

The next media piece that was shared with the wāhine was from Mike Hosking. This item was titled “Metiria’s backing liars” (Hosking, 2017) and comes from the ‘Mikes Minute’ slot on NewstalkZB and the NZ Herald. This item contributed to the storyline about Metiria’s supporters who had also committed benefit fraud. In the item Mike Hosking focused on Metiria’s supposed immorality, criminal misconduct and denigrated Metiria’s supporters (see Chapter 3). Once the media snippet was played during the focus group, I asked the participants for their reactions. Overall, the responses raised the privileged positions of power that such commentators enjoy, and how detached they are from the lived realities of people who rely on welfare. The participants raised the issue of ‘hypocritical representations’ within news media where the same levels of negative scrutiny are not applied to elites who commit fraudulent acts. Participants also challenged the moralizing tone of the items and discussed how it promoted moral panic and undermined the position of wāhine within society. What follows is an extract from the discussion of this item in Focus Group 1 (Women’s Centre) :

Marama      He makes huge assumptions.

Ngaio      Fellow thieves? Did he say that about um, Bill English?

All laugh.

Marama No.

Hine They [elite Pākehā] do what they like, look at how much tax fraud...

Marama How does he live with himself?

Ngaio In his nice big rich mansion.

Hine You know it's all for the reaction, it's only said for the reaction

Marama No, he actually, genuinely believes that shit.

Hine It shocks you and all of those people like him will ring up and agree with him.

Marama It's extremist aye.

Ngaio Yeah, you know, I never really thought about it like that. I just thought oh that's just how they think.

This extract reflects a social distance that exists between wealthy conservative Pākehā commentators and wāhine participating in this research. The latter position Mike Hosking as a biased commentator who is more interested in policing the poor than affluent people, such as himself. To substantiate their claim of bias, my participants refer to the case of the former Prime Minister, Bill English. Mr English was found to have been in receipt of \$32,000 in parliamentary housing supplement payments for which he was not entitled. However, Mr English was not subject to the same accusations of immorality, criminality or stigma and denigration as was levelled at Metiria by conservative commentators. Mr English simply claimed that he had made a mistake and was left relatively unscathed by the news media. To recap, in referring to the Bill English case in the context of how Mike Hosking has responded so much more negatively to the Metiria Turei case enables the participants to exemplify their claims of bias on the part of Mike Hosking.

After engaging in a similar exchange regarding the Mike Hosking item, Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) then went on to talk in more general terms about discrepancies in the focus on benefit fraud as opposed to fraud committed by more affluent groups:

Aroha You can't tell me that National and all of those other politicians, and political parties, are honest? And don't lie, aye. Like whatever they twist the truth as much as they possibly can, you know.

Maia Yeah, and where do they learn that from?

Pania      It's that white collar privilege, especially with their investments and stuff. It's like, you know their offshore investments, like what they are doing in their world never comes to light, but a little benefit that would not have cost much at all is a massive deal.

In the extract above, the participants reinforce their reading of Mike Hosking's commentary as being biased and hypocritical. They invoke the idea that the dishonesty of members of less affluent groups is reacted to by conservative commentaries more harshly than the dishonest actions of more affluent groups.

In Chapter 3, I drew on the work of Marriott (2018) to discuss how 'white collar crime', such as tax evasion, is very costly to Aotearoa, yet there is no moral outrage and panic from conservative commentators. Rather, these commentators continue to stoke moral outrage and panic around benefit fraud, which is a much smaller and less harmful problem (cf. Marriott, 2018). Such a discrepancy serves to protect the cultural hegemony and standing of more affluent groups by shifting attention on to beneficiaries whose voices are often silenced within the mediapolis (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017). The wāhine clearly understand and see this discrepancy within conservative news representations.

Subsequently, the conversation in Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) moves on to challenging Mike Hosking's claims to represent an accepted, universal or uncontested morality and the moral majority of citizens:

Aroha      I felt like his point of view is very fixed about law and policy, well obviously that is created by people, so, you know, he is saying well...

Ana      But, he's saying that law abiding citizens are morally better and that's a totally different conversation again.

Maia      But, then again is it morally right to be giving people less than what they can survive on? And that's where you've got to challenge it. Like whose morals whose perspective are we going on.

Ana      And that's what I get from that, he is saying that they are morally superior because suddenly they are law-abiding tax paying citizens. But they have

the moral superior ground already and that they can make that judgement call for those that aren't.

Through such exchanges, we can see that these wāhine are not convinced by Mike Hosking's claims regarding the immorality of Metiria's actions. They also contest the construction he uses of the moral taxpaying citizen who he contrasts with the immoral actions of Metiria and her supporters. The participants challenge this contrast by questioning why some forms of fraud (beneficiary) by less affluent groups are reacted to so strongly and investigated so rigorously when other forms of fraud (tax evasion) committed by more affluent groups are not.

In Chapter 1, I outlined the ideological distinction between the 'undeserving' and the 'deserving poor', and how such concepts have been drawn upon in debates regarding welfare at least since the inception of the poor laws in Britain (Tihelková, 2015). This distinction works to divide the moral citizens within the moral envelope from the immoral citizens who are positioned as denizens outside of that envelope. This distinction is foundational to the items produced by conservative commentators, such as Mike Hosking. It constitutes a useful rhetorical device for commentators who present their own partial perspectives as common sense appeals to decency, and in doing so, tell the public what and who is right and what and who is wrong within our society today. As is reported by Hager (2014), such representational practices that produce tales of terror are self-serving and reflect how the perspectives of wealthy interests are often promoted as common sense in news coverage (cf. Silverstone, 2007). As we can see from the extracts from the focus groups, this tale of terror is also contested by groups who are unfairly constructed as undeserving denizens as they work to develop and maintain their own tales of joy (Rappaport, 2000).

My participants reflected overtly in Focus group 1 (Women's Centre) on the biased character of news coverage of socio-economic issues in general, and in relation to the items I presented to them from Mike Hosking and Barry Soper in particular. In the process, participating wāhine proposed that such commentaries offer little more than unbalanced opinions that appeal to the prejudices of affluent members of settler society:

- Marama It's so unbalanced, where are his facts?
- Hine It's an opinion.
- Marama Exactly.
- Ngaio The Herald is filled with 'opinion' pieces, no journalism.
- Hine Exactly, who listens to talk back?
- Marama Older white people.
- Ngaio Yeah, older white people listen to talk back and read the Herald.
- Hine No one else is interested. No one else listens to it... But those are the ones who vote as well.
- Ngaio Yes, but those are the ones who have the means, the resources and the time to...
- Marama To back that opinion and to enforce it.
- Hine And whose culture is that? It's an individualistic culture isn't it?
- Marama It's a colonial culture.
- Ngaio But the scary thing is that when you're poor or busy raising kids, you don't have the money, time or means.
- Hine To put your opinion out there.
- Ngaio To fight for change. You just can't. Unless you sacrifice things, you become poorer.

Within this exchange, the wāhine position the Barry Soper and Mike Hosking commentaries as reflective of a broader problem of bias in news outlets such as the New Zealand Herald and talk back radio. Participants propose that on these news platforms such opinion pieces have displaced actual journalism and function to perpetuate the cultural hegemony of the Pākehā elite. Participant responses to these items point to inequities in the power of different groups to engage in agenda setting in news spaces within the mediapolis. As I have shown in Chapter 3, when it comes to issues of welfare, elite commentators, with no real experience or knowledge of the complexities involved, dominate what is discussed whilst the voices of low income whānau are often silenced through omission or, as in Metiria's case, are silenced. Assertions of bias and inequity in news coverage were also evident within Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) where participants discussed how out of touch with reality media deliberations had become in

spaces such as talk back radio. Below is a quote from Maia who captures the essence of the conversation in Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai):

I am listening to talk back when I'm travelling between Whangarei and Auckland, like really? You're talking about that? Like, you don't even bother ringing up because the talk is so off the chart you are thinking where do you guys live?

Both focus groups would go on to talk further about Mike Hosking's commentary and how his focus on morality served to stir up divisions within society and increase the social distance between groups.

As discussed earlier, some of the wāhine from Focus Group 1 (Women's Centre) argued that Barry Soper's perspective was mirrored within society by members of the public and used against whānau in need of welfare assistance. In Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) a similar conversation ensued after the presentation of the Mike Hosking item. In discussing the item these participants also invoked the negative consequences for themselves of the stereotyping of beneficiaries that is evident in such items:

Maia            It's pushing us towards that stereotype. When you're out in the community or trying to get a job and we are frowned upon or looked upon as like, well we are not going to give you that job. We are going to give it to somebody else or probably we might give the job to an immigrant because they might work harder, you know. I'm not saying that would happen, but that kind of broadcasting pushes that perspective or stereotype it has a negative affect for us.

Anahera        It just creates that divide, you know, like that divides with Māori and Pākehā. You know, that happens on social media, that's exactly what's happening.

Pania           Yeah, it's just reiterating it.

Maia            But that's the other thing. It's not only Māori that are doing it [benefit fraud]. Yet, that's what's being pushed.

All Agree.

Pania I also think that society can be quite fickle around media. So, it's kind of like, what they hear they believe. Don't look into it into any depth or critically.

These participants associated the prejudice voiced in such conservative news commentaries with discrimination against Māori in society more generally. They propose that despite it not only being wāhine Māori who commit benefit fraud, from reading and listening to conservative commentaries, members of the public come to believe otherwise. Also important in this exchange is the passing reference by Anahera to divisions in social media between Pākehā and Māori, which the other wāhine acknowledge as part of their online experience as well. It would appear that for them, social media is a more contested space where debates regarding these issues are often split along ethnic lines.

Alongside the two conservative commentaries, I presented the wāhine with additional images from aligned conservative bloggers who, it has been argued, often work in concert with conservative corporate news media commentators. The first is presented as Figure 1 in Chapter 3, a doctored photograph of Metiria that functioned to reinforce the positioning of her as a member of a criminal underclass to be ridiculed in the way that a young man released from prison had been. This image was used by Cameron Slater in numerous blog posts during the controversy. The reactions to this image by the wāhine were characterized by shock and disgust. Many felt that the image mirrored a mugshot and proposed that it was culturally inappropriate. For example, Aroha stated that the image was inappropriate because the doctored tattoo was across the entire bottom half of Metiria's face: "Māori wāhine do not get that whole part tattooed". Maia then replied to Aroha stating that: "It is another cultural violation, and I know what it invokes in me, anger really but, you know, living with racism my entire life as a Māori. You know, in New Zealand this is typical". According to Te Awekotuku and Nunes (2011), wāhine were only traditionally tattooed on the lips, chin, forehead and neck, in some instances the breast, thigh and girdle around the waist, though, there were variations in these practices between iwi. The Moko Kauae (traditional chin tattoo) for wāhine Māori enhances their beauty, and represents femininity and strength (Awekotuku & Nunes, 2011). It is not a representation of criminality, as the doctored image implies.

## Wāhine Māori respond to balanced media representations of the Metiria Turei case

Following on from Metiria's admission of benefit fraud, I presented a balanced representation of the media controversy to the wāhine within the focus groups. This item was fronted by John Campbell on what was then his Checkpoint programme on *RadioNZ* and was titled "*Manurewa voters have their say on Metiria Turei's benefit fraud*", which was as outlined in Chapter 3. At the centre of this item were a series of interviews between journalist Mihingarangi Forbes and community members from Manurewa who were also facing hardship and engaged with the welfare system. After my participants watched this news item, they raised a number of key issues relating to structural problems with the welfare system. They also identified with the predicaments of the community members depicted and proposed that this item offered the public a fair and realistic representation of the struggles faced by whānau. The only point of criticism raised in Focus Group 1 (Women's Centre) was that the focus of the item should not have been restricted to Manurewa because the problems depicted are much more widespread. My participants then engaged in discussions regarding the problems presented by penal welfare and the focus on penalising people who are trying to 'better themselves' through education, employment and community involvement.

Participant's initial reactions to the balanced *RadioNZ* item overlapped in tone and content with their responses to Metiria's initial admission. They emphasized how the representation by *RadioNZ* showcased the reality of life on a benefit and the everyday struggles faced by beneficiaries:

- Ngaio            I think that was really positive, supportive of Metiria. Not so much all about Metiria, but just sort of explaining, giving a human face to the situation. Because there are lots of people who have no idea. They've never been... exposed to that situation.
- Marama          Yeah, they [Radio New Zealand] took it out and into reality. Most people, like we were saying earlier, would put their kid first.

Hine You see the human face of their suffering and how they just want to change and how they want it to change for everyone, not just themselves

Evident within this extract are wāhine reading the RadioNZ item as offering a realistic and more positive portrayal of people in similar situations to themselves. They see the item as important in exposing the reality of life on welfare that is often neglected in media coverage and the imaginations of broader society. They refer to people interviewed as the ‘human face’ of welfare. These wāhine appear to be well aware of how they are depicted in broader society and how their voices are predominantly excluded from news deliberations regarding welfare and its actual impacts for whānau.

Participant deliberations in Focus Group 1 (Women’s Centre) extended to omissions and biases in standard news coverage of issues of welfare and unemployment. In doing so, they bring into question public perceptions regarding issues of welfare and life in South Auckland:

Ngaio What was really striking though when they said oh 5% of the population are unemployed and 5% are on the solo parent support, that’s not the impression you get from the media about such things.

Marama No that’s just TV 1 right? That’s just National’s main propaganda channel.

Ngaio You know, when people think of South Auckland.

Marama They make it sound like every Māori is on the dole.

Ngaio Yeah, like all of South Auckland are bludgers and its complete bollocks.

Within this exchange, participants contrast the *RadioNZ* item with standard coverage from the key national news outlet *TVNZ*, whose coverage is associated with a conservative worldview that is used to reinforce inaccurate and negative stereotypes of Māori. The *RadioNZ* item served to provide participants with an anchor point for questioning broader representational trends in the depiction of low-income people in news coverage. Evident across the exchange included above is a recognition among my participants that alternative tales of joy regarding welfare that emphasize the human face of hardship and problems with the welfare system are rarely given airtime.

As the discussions evolved, the participants ventured out beyond the specific *RadioNZ* item to consider the broader issues surrounding the punitive nature of contemporary welfare provisions. Wāhine within both focus groups discussed the complexities they faced in trying to ‘better’ themselves and understood why those in Manurewa would have had to engage in seeking income from alternative (sometimes illegal) sources, just like Metiria had done. This included accounts of the withdrawal of benefits if recipients earned over and above their temporary additional support payments. Participants also considered additional hardships faced when trying to find employment that would accommodate their childcare needs. The wāhine also spoke about moving into higher education and the difficulties faced when transitioning from a sole parent benefit to a student allowance. Participant exchanges served to generalize and ground the points raised by Metiria and in the *RadioNZ* item regarding problems in the system and how these have impacted their own lives and those of the people around them when they try to do the right thing or meet societal expectations, such as those regarding employment:

Ngaio            When I first went on the benefit, the sole parents support, and got a part time job it was only working for Plunket and I got \$70 a week or fortnight. Something like that, anyway. I did all the right things. I told them [Work and Income] that I was working. I thought it was under the threshold.

However, I got temporary additional support. So, they took the amount that I earned before tax off that. I was actually losing, \$30 a fortnight to work. But I thought well I am enjoying this and I’m getting good experience. So, I did it. But it cost me \$30.

Marama           I did some work only for about five months for the Salvation Army sorting out the office for a bit and I got \$100 a week. They [Work and Income] took it. \$100 off the temporary additional support. I was literally working for free. And I’m like this is bollocks. No wonder people can’t pay their bills!... Yeah petrol money and kids care because you’re there and you’ve got a pre-schooler.

In this exchange, wāhine point to anomalies in the system that relate, in this instance, to how they are penalized by the system for meeting their obligations to enter into part-time

employment. As is evident in the exchange, dis-incentives are highly apparent in the welfare system for people trying to make realistic and sustainable transitions back into the workforce. The issues raised here by the wāhine were also foregrounded by the new Labour led Government's recent welfare advisory group who also identified the need to modify supplementary assistance provisions to make work transitions more sustainable and accessible to people (Whakamana Tangata, 2019).

Such exchanges also showcase the sorts of complexities and contradictions that are central to contemporary welfare provisions and that are rarely included in news coverage of welfare. They epitomize the sorts of discussions that have been sparked among many wāhine by Metiria Turei's admission and which were only covered by a few more balanced items such as the one from *RadioNZ*. Correspondingly, Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) also discussed the punitive nature of welfare. In doing so, they raised concerns regarding the withdrawal of supplementary assistance. Their conversation expanded further into the precarities that come with low pay and often temporary employment. Also discussed were the added expenses of returning to work for minimum wage (childcare and secondary tax), as well as issues around reductions in their benefit levels and the stigma and shame they felt as beneficiaries when re-entering such employment:

Pania           Jobs are really limited and they're not engaging jobs that help with like hours around your children. So, they are usually like really early morning or shift work or night work. And then you are expected to find a job that is like minimum wage anyway and then put your kids in day-care, after school care/before school care, get to the place and then come home and do it all again and it's just not worth it.

Maia           Yeah and then financially you have to pay secondary tax on that money. And then you lose some of your accommodation benefit. And then you have to pay tax again at the end of the year. Then they're going to deduct it off your main benefit. You're actually only earning like ten cents an hour pretty much and for what?

[Group all agree]

- Pania So, like no wonder people think well it's just not worth it because this is really hard.
- Ana Yes, I did that for like five or six years. Worked full time and basically was earning my benefit, which was fine. I was working and that was okay... because like I wasn't working too hard. But at the same time, I sat there thinking about the amount of time and what it takes away from you is not healthy. You know, like job satisfaction always varies... The other thing is that sometimes they put you in jobs where your employer is also being subsidised by Work and income.
- Maia For three months.
- Ana Yeah for three months and, you know, that you are well aware that they are only taking you on because they are subsidised by them [Work and Income]. I have heard of incidences where that has just fallen through after the three months and then you are suddenly unemployed again. So, the idea of you going into a job and you thinking like it's going to turn out to be something long-term there is no job security there either.
- Pania Also the stigma attached to that I don't feel like I would be very confident going into a job knowing Work and Income are subsidising it in order for me to be there. I would feel like personally quite embarrassed I reckon especially like if I got fired after three months.

This exchange evokes a problem also identified by the Child Poverty Action Group (St John, MacLennan, Anderson & Fountain, 2014) of low wage employers exploiting the system by simply employing beneficiaries for the three-month subsidized period and then firing a person when the period is up so that they can hire another subsidised worker. The wāhine propose that participation in employment under such conditions is not as straightforward as many conservative commentators would have us believe. It also involves considerable familial disruption and takes time away from their childcare responsibilities. Further, the employment offers few real rewards and can cost them supplementary welfare assistance that they rely on to make do.

Hardships faced when trying to gain higher education as a means of lifting themselves out of poverty, as Metiria had done, was also a significant point of discussion during the focus groups. Historically, single parents were able to access a training incentive allowance (TIA) that provided them with extra funds on top of their benefit to support their efforts to pursue further education. According to the Green Party election priority (2011), Paula Bennett (former National Party Minister of Social Development and a past recipient of the TIA whilst she was receiving the domestic purpose benefit) significantly reduced access to the TIA. The TIA was now only available for high school and certificate level (L4) study (Work and Income, 2019).

As the previous National led government began their welfare reforms and emphasized the primary goal of reducing welfare dependency (see Chapter 1) and getting beneficiaries into paid employment, they reduced the accessibility of the TIA and imposed more stringent conditions on single mothers who wished to study at the tertiary level. Both focus groups discussed the contradictions in a system that emphasizes the need for them to leave benefits and enter education or employment, but which poses considerable barriers and disincentives to them doing so. As part of this broader discussion of how the system actually works to prevent people from lifting themselves out of poverty through education and finding a good job, participants talk about small problems that create much larger problems. In the following exchange the focus is on the difficulties of trying to move between the single parent and student support benefits:

- Ngaio            I was going to get shifted from sole parent support onto study link and it literally put my whole world into a spin. The thing is when you go onto study link when the holidays come then you have to reapply to go back onto sole parent's support, the stress of doing that, like doing the whole thing is shit, well what if I don't
- Hine            You know, that one-week gap or anything like that.
- Marama        Yup throws it all out.
- Ngaio            And, it's so stressful.

Hine            And you're having to say to them 'hang on a second I was studying all before all of this came through I am entitled to do this and by the way I am passing my papers'. "Oh, what do you expect to get out of this?" They have a set list of questions, "well I am hoping to be a person that is going to help out in the community, as a social worker".

As is reflected in this conversation, there are many complexities when transitioning from a sole parent benefit to a student allowance, which requires wāhine to engage with an uncaring and stress invoking welfare system. These issues were also discussed by Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) who concluded that the system was dysfunctional and overly punitive. Also discussed was how stand down periods of even just a week can substantially increase the financial precarity of low-income whānau.

Thus far, I have analysed the responses of wāhine Māori to specific news items from conservative media commentary and balanced coverage of Metiria Turei's admission from John Campbell and colleagues at *RadioNZ*. I will now move on to present participant responses and reactions to the support seen via social media platforms and blogs. The images and blogs presented were prominent within the controversy, they are vital to look at as they reflect the narratives within the community.

### **Wāhine Māori respond to social media deliberations of the Metiria Turei case**

As discussed in Chapter 3, many well-known New Zealanders came forward across Facebook, Twitter and various online blogs to challenge what they saw as the inequitable crusade that had been waged against Metiria. Many expressed a sense of sadness, loss and anger in seeing a wāhine Māori leader being forced to resign in the way that Metiria had been. I include four figures from Chapter 3 that featured posts from supporters of Metiria in the focus groups. The first was Figure 6 (The Aunties). The second was Figure 11, which presents a blog from Leonie Pihama showcasing support for Metiria. The third was Figure 12, which comes from the progressive DailyBlog website and depicts photographs of the conservative commentators who led the attack on Metiria Turei. The fourth and final figure was Figure 7, which presents a photograph of Metiria smiling with the caption Mōrehu (survivor). I used these four figures depicting the hashtag #IamMetiria

in the focus groups because it was imperative that they were able to respond to a range of perspectives that came forth during the controversy.

In responding to the tweet from the Aunties (Figure 6), participants in both focus groups shared their own negative experiences of engaging with Work and Income and the importance of accessing advocates to help navigate the uncaring system:

Marama I actually have a women's refuge advocate. I don't actually go into WINZ anymore on my own, because I've been treated so badly in there. Literally defending myself to get through the week and get a food grant that she always comes with me, so I agree with that, it's utter humiliation and dehumanising for any Māori to go into WINZ. It's a terrible place to go.

Hine And historically it has been as well.

Ngaio It's always been cap in hand.

Marama It's not cap in hand, you're on your face.

These wāhine show solidarity with Metiria and her supporters and the validity of their criticisms of the welfare system by revealing their own experiences of engaging with WINZ. Speaking further out beyond the hegemonic tale of terror championed by conservative news commentators, these participants also spoke about the struggles they face when they interact with WINZ staff. The relationships between beneficiaries and WINZ staff have been identified in previous research as abusive and structurally violent relationships (Hodgetts et al., 2014). Such focus group responses to the 'The Aunties' tweet also invoke the structural violence that is associated with penal welfare and which results in women having to work with advocates to ensure that they can access their entitlements for support (Hodgetts, Chamberlain, Groot, & Tankel, 2014). Again, this is an issue that is all but absent from corporate news media coverage that is fixated more on the supposed deficits of beneficiaries rather than problems with the system.

The second image from Figure 11 was from a prominent Māori academic, Professor Leonie Pihama titled "Māori, woman, mother. #IamMetiria" ([LeoniePihama.wordpress.com](http://LeoniePihama.wordpress.com), 9 August 2017). Within the blog depicted, Pihama argues

that the media attack on Metiria Turei was led by privileged white men (Figure 12, Chapter 3) who lacked any real understanding of what it is actually like to live in poverty and have to engage with Work and Income. To stimulate further discussion, I also read the following short excerpt from Leonie's blog during the focus groups:

We have to ask why there has been such an obsession with Metiria and virtually no engagement by those same reporters, in the past weeks, on the underlying issues at hand: poverty, systemic failure to care, MSD and WINZ continuing to abuse those who are most vulnerable. The continued emphasis on fraud and virtually no focus on the fact that Metiria had commenced a process to pay back. The continued digging around the past of a 23 year old Māori woman single parent and the constant raising of questions that come from unknown, unnamed sources that comment on her whānau and life, where journalists imply that you can't possibly be in poverty if you have not turned to prostitution or drugs, would take its toll on any one (Pihama, 2017).

The wāhine from both focus groups reacted immediately by claiming that Leonie's argument was accurate. For example, during Focus Group 1 (Women's Centre), Hine proposed that: "It's so true, I think she is absolutely spot on". This statement was echoed by Marama: "It's the truth sister". Participants also noted that they could tell the blog was written from a Māori perspective: "Yeah, well you can tell that's from a Māori" (Pania, Focus Group 2, Te Rau Puawai). They then went on to use the blog as an anchor point to negotiate the issue of power wielded by conservative commentators and how it is used against wāhine Māori to silence, oppress and marginalise them:

Hine            It makes me wonder, 'is it your [conservative commentators] privilege and class that makes you disregard the other side of the argument? Or is it the sensationalism of promoting an agenda that's persecuting and shocking?' Is that what it is?

Marama        It's power.

Hine            I'd like to question that person [conservative commentators], like why do you feel that it is necessary? When, you know, that those words you've said them to be designed to cause sensation...

- Marama I think it comes down to power and that's the problem with the white middle class and upper-class. It's all been run on power since day dot. So, they're scared of losing that power. If actually we had enough impetus to actually find us enough time and energy to put behind us we could easily rise up and take back. However, we're not the French revolutionists. We're impoverished Māori, and we don't have the opportunities. We don't have the money. We don't have the backing.
- Hine We do have our brains.
- Marama So there's a huge power delta between us and them... It's the same as colonialism all over again... It's the same story. It's just another century.
- Ngaio The chains that are holding us down are poverty.

This interaction exemplifies how participating wāhine move out beyond the media items they are presented with to negotiate the meaning behind the actions of conservative news commentators and their Pākehā supporters more generally. In doing so, these participants present the actions of conservative commentators as a continuation of the colonial project and oppression of Māori. These wāhine are also aware of and question the power imbalance between such commentators and Māori living in poverty.

Focus Group 2 (Te Rau Puawai) also responded to the post by Leonie Pihamo by raising similar concerns as Focus Group 1 (Women's Centre) and also discussing issues of power:

- Ana They [conservative commentators] looked at other stories, other people, not actually what she [Metiria Turei] was trying to get at or what she was trying to say...
- Anahera Nah, they are still attacking her for like what she did ages ago and she is not that person anymore. So, they are not taking into account how much she has grown.
- Pania Exactly.

- Maia Exactly. She wasn't able to talk about the lack of income or protection for New Zealand citizens.
- Ana Yeah, but in doing that it also made a point. There is no protection because she had been away from the system for how many years and instead... they reduced her down to mum and Māori woman on a benefit. Not the fact that she had been to university, she had become a politician, none of that, it was all glazed over, it was like no, this is who you are.
- Aroha She was shaking the status quo and they don't like it when you do that.
- Maia Well yeah, it challenges the level of power and authority.
- Pania Yeah and the more Māori getting into those positions the more opportunity there is for change. So, they try very hard to do things like this to get them [Māori] out.

In challenging the power of conservative commentators, these participants support Leonie Pihama's stance and further position her post in the context of broader inequitable intergroup relations that are foundational to contemporary society in Aotearoa. In doing so, they bring into question the power of Pākehā men to name and define Māori women. Ana raises the important point that Metiria had become successful. She had graduated from university and become a politician. She lifted herself out of poverty. These are all markers of what the settler society would claim as an 'individual success story'. However, the wāhine clearly felt that as Metiria was Māori, these markers of success were not enough for conservative commentators. The other discussants responded to this point from Ana by proposing that this was due to Metiria challenging the status quo, which is another way of invoking the hegemony of the settler society.

The third item (Figure 12, Chapter 3) shared with the focus groups depicts the main conservative commentators who featured within the evolving controversy. In relation to this image, Hine initiated a broader discussion around structural inequities that was initially raised by Metiria Turei and subsequently silenced by the conservative commentators: "There is a very neoliberal hate of the poor. I absolutely believe it. I watch the news all the time. Neoliberalism is a problem. I get the Herald". Marama goes on to

claim that it is not only white men that perpetuate neoliberalism. She proposes that some Māori, such as Simon Bridges, the current leader of the National Party, is also a proponent of neoliberalism: “Not only white men. I think there are crossovers. Like that dude who leads the National party right now, I think he’s one of them. And you can shove him in that category as well”. This is an important point, as wāhine Māori can see how neoliberalism is not only imposed on them by white men, but also by Māori who are politically aligned with these commentators.

Finally, Figure 7 (depicting a positive image of Metiria and the word Mōrehu) was shared with the focus groups. This image was chosen because it provides a positive depiction of Metiria contrasting with the earlier negative image of her with a tattooed face. The wāhine felt that this positive depiction was more accurate and agreed that Metiria was a survivor whose story was crushed by conservative commentators because she threatened their perspective on welfare. The following quote, Ana (Focus Group 2, Te Rau Puawai) contrasts the positive and negative imaging of Metiria as a means of invoking her sense of omission in the evolving commentary that was held by my participants:

The [negative] images that we have got, that we have been told about her being a beneficiary committing benefit fraud. [Positive] Images of what she [Metiria] has done, the successes that she has had in her life, we know little of. So, we have heard about the mistakes, lots. But we didn’t actually get time to hear of her successes. None of us as Māori wāhine in particular. The women who are beneficiaries, we need that lift as single mothers. Because they are doing it pretty rough on their own. She [Metiria] is a woman who has succeeded. She pulled herself up and out of that place [poverty and reliance on welfare] and has gone places. I haven’t seen any of that [in news coverage]. It’s just here is another one of us that has done something dodgy.

This extract encapsulates the essence of how the wāhine felt about the characterization of Metiria Turei in news coverage of the controversy. They concluded that wāhine Māori who are successful in their own right, who work hard to raise themselves out of poverty, and who go on to try and make the system more responsive and caring are undermined by conservative commentators. My participants found this to be disheartening. In contrast to hegemonic news characterizations, participating wāhine characterized

Metiria as an advocate for those who have been silenced by people in power. On a positive note, the wāhine ended the focus group by concluding that they would like to see Metiria come back to parliament because of all the hard work she had done for people in similar situations who are also trying to survive within the welfare system.

### Chapter Conclusions

Throughout this chapter I have explored the reactions of wāhine Māori to the media controversy surrounding the admission by Metiria Turei. I began with an analysis of the wāhine’s reaction to Metiria’s disclosure to gain some insight into their thoughts and feelings towards Metiria and the controversy that engulfed her for a time. Two main threads emerged from the first section.

First, my participants reacted to Metiria’s admission with understanding and empathy as her sentiments also reflected their own lived experiences of income related insecurities and the welfare system. They too felt that welfare payments for sole parents both historically and in present times were inadequate for meeting the cost of living. This reaction then extended out beyond the media items provided to a discussion of financial, food and housing insecurities as well as issues around the efforts of wāhine to lift themselves out of poverty. As a result, the participants shared some of their ‘tactics’ for meeting their most pressing bills at any given time. Central here was the tactic of ‘shifting of money’ and obtaining food from charities to supplement one’s inadequate income from their welfare benefits.

The second thread involved participants contesting the idea that manipulating the welfare system to survive is a simple personal choice. They agreed with Metiria that the system is not functioning well and as a result, beneficiaries are forced into untenable situations and difficult choices. They also described misleading Work and Income as a survival mechanism to ensure their children were cared for when these wāhine had exhausted all avenues of trying to secure enough income to get by.

Section two of this chapter showcased two news items from conservative commentators, which my participants reacted to negatively and considered to be highly partial and racist. They discussed why conservative commentators portray single Māori

mothers in such a negative light and positioned such portrayals as the legacy of colonial ideology mixed with a fixation on individualizing poverty and hardship (cf. Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017). Participants recognized that conservative commentators wielded considerable power over the media framing of issues of poverty and welfare. They also questioned the lack of expertise on the part of leading commentators and proposed that they do not understand the everyday dilemmas low income wāhine Māori face. These participants proposed that such coverage feeds prejudicial views of wāhine and can contribute to discrimination when wāhine try to secure employment.

In responding to the conservative commentaries that promoted a hegemonic tale of terror, participants drew on counter hegemonic narratives or tales of joy (cf. Rappaport, 2000). Despite the hegemony of the conservative narrative, evident within both focus groups was wāhine resistance and refusal to be silenced, subjugated or to internalize the negative stereotypes of Māori being promoted in these commentaries. These participants used the media examples I presented in the focus groups as anchor points from which they then went on to discuss some of the broader issues at play. Participating wāhine appeared to be very aware of this discrepancy within media representation about the activities of low income and affluent people relating to issues such as benefit fraud and tax evasion.

In section three, the focus groups responded to a more balanced item from *RadioNZ* by discussing how punitive welfare provisions have negative consequences for families, and the ability of single parents to pursue further education and long-term employment. These issues were discussed in relation to the depiction of people who rely on welfare from Manurewa and whose stories reflected their own struggles. These wāhine appreciated how such items were needed to broaden coverage of issues of poverty and welfare.

Finally, section four presented an analysis of wāhine responses to images, blogs and social media posts, which offered support to Metiria. The discussion that ensued illustrates how wāhine moved further out beyond the posts being discussed to negotiate the meaning behind conservative news representations more generally. In doing so they engaged in what Hall (1980) has referred to as negotiated media readings that draw on material from the media to negotiate interpretations that come closer to their own

experiences and perspectives. Reflecting the counter hegemonic aspects of negotiated readings, my participants used the items provided as talking points to directly challenge the power of Pākehā men to name and define Māori women. Power differentials were a key feature of our discussions that also included the shared recognition of the actions of conservative news commentators as a continuation of the colonial project and oppression of Māori.

## Chapter Five: Discussion

In this thesis, I set out to explore the media controversy surrounding an admission of welfare fraud by a leading politician, Metiria Turei. I aimed to investigate how the media employ the use of symbolic power and cultural hegemony to silence wāhine Māori who receive welfare. To do this, the case of Metiria Turei and her benefit fraud admission was presented as an exemplar from which to discuss broader issues surrounding media coverage of welfare and depictions of people who access welfare support. My aim was to showcase the functioning of the mediapolis (Silverstone, 2007) and the exercising of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1979) by elites to reinforce colonial and neoliberal perspectives on the welfare system and Māori who access it. To explore how the media controversy was understood by wāhine Māori who access welfare support, I conducted two focus groups on this. The focus groups revealed solidarity between my participants and Metiria and her supporters.

I also opened this thesis in Chapter 1 with a brief history of colonisation in Aotearoa to provide context to the contemporary engagements of Māori with the New Zealand welfare system (McClure, 2004; Ware et al., 2017). As outlined, the process of colonisation significantly disadvantaged many Māori through the loss of land and material resources as well as the loss of culture and language (Belich, 1986/2015; Metge, 1967/2004; Papakura, 1938/1986; Ward, 1999). It is important to remind ourselves of this historical context, which includes the introduction of the welfare system in a manner that discriminated against Māori from the beginning, because it offers structural insights into the hardships faced by many single wāhine Māori mothers and their children today. As this thesis has shown, such understandings are all but ignored by conservative news commentators whose ideological perspectives dominate media coverage of issues of welfare.

In considering the context for this research, it was also important that I consider issues of symbolic power in the mediapolis today that are evident throughout our colonial history (cf. Mikaere, 1999; Walker, 2004) and which are particularly pertinent for understanding the media construction of the Metiria Turei case today. To understand the reporting of welfare controversies that the case of Metiria Turei exemplifies, I drew on the concept of cultural hegemony (Gramsci, 1971), the mediapolis and symbolic power

(Bourdieu, 1979; Silverstone, 2007). These concepts allowed me to deepen my appreciation of the actions of conservative commentators as well as how their perspectives that were anchored in legacy news platforms were extended through social media prosumption practices as part of the same media system or mediapolis.

In the following sections of this chapter I draw on these key concepts to offer further reflections on the controversy. My focus then shifts to a discussion of the key findings from the focus groups and the resistance to the colonial hegemony that dominated the news elements of the mediapolis, and which was only really contested on social media platforms. The chapter and thesis as a whole are concluded with a final discussion of the importance of transforming ‘tales of terror’ that dominate news coverage of poverty and welfare into ‘tales of joy’ (Rappaport, 2000) that more accurately reflect the everyday lives and aspirations of single wāhine Māori who receive welfare support.

### The functioning of the mediapolis in welfare debates

The concept of the mediapolis proved to be particularly useful in that it provided a way of integrating different forms of media into a large societal space within which issues, such as welfare and the character of wāhine Māori, are deliberated upon. As noted in Chapter 1, the mediapolis offers a contested mediated space of appearance that encapsulates all forms of media (news and social) that are woven into everyday life today (Silverstone, 2007). My research supports Silverstone’s (2007) assertion that the mediapolis is implicated in broader power relations between groups in society. For example, those with the symbolic power to engage in the mediapolis on their own terms have the ability to name, define and categorise others (Loto et al., 2006). The exercising of symbolic power by conservative media commentators to undermine Metiria Turei resembles much more long-standing practices within the colonial project. Such symbolic power has been exercised negatively by affluent members of the settler society since the early colonial period. It encompasses the practice of stereotyping, denigrating, infantilizing and undermining Māori as being lazy, dishonest and uncivilised in order to marginalise, control and silence us (cf. Haukamau, 2009; Hodgetts, Masters & Robertson, 2004; Mikaere, 1999). This colonial tradition has continued into the present and has been found to be

particularly prevalent in relation to the reporting of ideologically contentious issues such as crime, housing, education, poverty and welfare (Hodgetts et al., 2013; Nairn, McCreanor & Moewaka Barnes, 2017).

The media analysis presented in Chapter 3 reveals how conservative commentators consistently portrayed Metiria as a thief and a liar, who chose to defraud the system for no good reason. In negatively characterizing Metiria, these commentators also drew on long standing tropes regarding the promiscuity and immorality of 'solo mothers' in Aotearoa (Barnett et al., 2007), 'welfare queens' in the United States (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007) and 'chav mums' in the United Kingdom (Barton & Davis, 2016). These are essentially different labels for single women who raise children alone with welfare support. These women are characterized as 'work shy', 'scroungers', 'bludgers' and 'skivers' who defraud the welfare system in order to maintain supposed lavish lifestyles and so as to avoid paying their own way like decent citizens are expected to do. As such, single mothers receiving welfare are positioned as an undeserving moral hazard and a drain on society who must be held accountable for their bad decisions and criminal ways (Tyler, 2008).

My analysis of the media controversy surrounding Metiria Turei also demonstrates the use of symbolic power by conservative news commentators to foreground a perspective that promotes individual level explanations for poverty and welfare dependency and stigmatizes those affected. Central here is the invoking of distinctions between the deserving and undeserving poor and fixating on the latter. The focus on the undeserving poor was central to the repairing of the hegemonic rupture caused by Metiria Turei's admission and the emphasis she placed on an alternative or counter hegemonic narrative that focuses on structural explanations for poverty and associated solutions (cf. Hodgetts & Stolte, 2017). Conservative commentators appeared to be at pains to misdirect attention away from any structural and systemic failures within the welfare system (cf. Rua et al., 2019). Such strategies reflect the broader functioning of the corporatized news media outlets to marginalise and silence the perspectives of low-income citizens in general and Māori in particular for political and ideological reasons (Hager, 2014). What is particularly shocking about much of the corporatized news coverage and associated conservative attack blog content is that it constitutes a

continuation of the symbolic denigration of Māori as inferior and infantile, which has been identified as central to the colonial process. Such denigration leads to the positioning of Māori as undeserving of support and contributes to the denial of equitable access to welfare entitlements that has occurred since the introduction of the old age pension in the late 1800s (Mikaere, 1999; Nairn, McCreanor & Moewaka Barnes, 2017; Walker, 2004). Documenting power imbalances in news coverage of this controversy also supports the assertion that the multifaceted symbolic environment that makes up the mediapolis still tends to be elitist and exclusionary in many respects and functions to foreground the perspectives of elites over groups with direct experience and actual expertise in issues of poverty and welfare (Silverstone, 2007).

The role of public service broadcasters such as Māori Television news outlets as well as *RadioNZ* is pertinent here in terms of foregrounding the perspectives of more marginalised voices. The coverage of the controversy offered by these outlets was more balanced. However, these public service broadcasters do not appear to have the same prominence within the mediapolis as corporatized news outlets and their conservative commentators. What their coverage does show is how, even in news coverage itself and despite the overwhelming dominance of an elite, colonial and neoliberal perspective on welfare and Māori who access it, there is still some space for alternative perspectives.

As demonstrated in Chapter 3, focusing solely on news coverage through outlets such as the New Zealand Herald would have only offered an incomplete picture in terms of the contestation of perspectives that did occur through the mediapolis more generally. When I also explored social media prosumption practices, a more varied picture emerged in which the perspectives of elites that dominated the news were actually contested and openly brought into question by people with direct experience of the [dis]functioning of the welfare system. Social media offered a space for the contestation of perspectives and the mounting of forms of resistance to the hegemonic framing of Metiria's admission. More specifically, social media contestation involved people with similar experiences of hardship and trying to survive on welfare coming forward to support Metiria by sharing their own stories of hardship. These supporters also extended to prominent Māori academics and celebrities and members of the general public who connected with each other and the broader public through the #IamMetiria movement on Twitter and

Facebook. This hashtag served as a rallying point to continue the conversation Metiria Turei had opened up regarding the inadequacies of the welfare system and how these can lead beneficiaries to make desperate decisions in order to access further support to survive and hopefully lift themselves out of poverty. Although there was considerable evidence of such social media resistance, the conflict over meaning that surrounding the controversy would remain asymmetrical, whereby conservative commentators had considerably more symbolic power and influence within the mediapolis, which extended to the denigration of online supporters of Metiria. This power was also evident in that the commentators succeeded in forcing Metiria to resign from parliament.

What my research also suggests is that there is a need to do more to ensure balance in news coverage of key societal issues such as poverty and welfare. We need to do more to ensure that elite conservative commentators are afforded less visibility (space for appearance) and that more visibility is given to people with actual expertise regarding issues of welfare. This of course is a tall order given the corporatized or commercial imperative to increase the profiles off the likes of Mike Hosking. As Silverstone (2007) argues, the functioning of the mediapolis is reliant on status, as: "status leads to influence and influence leads to power" (Silverstone, 2007 p.30). It is interesting that most of the commentators who are afforded status in the news media and who pursued were Pākehā. Metiria Turei did have some status as a member of parliament which afforded her the symbolic presence to raise concerns regarding the functioning of the welfare system. However, once she challenged the hegemony of penal welfare, she became a target for marginalisation.

Silverstone (2007) argues that the functioning of the mediapolis should work for the human condition and not against it. Silverstone (2007) further contends that media commentary is simply a product of human thought and action driven by those with power and status. However, this is often a misuse of power by deception from those who are visible within the mediapolis. He strongly recommends that there must be understanding, care and responsibility within the mediapolis to ensure that there is a constant critical engagement with representations of 'the other' or marginalised groups. Silverstone's thoughts are reflected by Hager (2014) who contends that attacks within the media and other dirty politics all come down to human problems which can be improved through

regulation to ensure that the public receive quality news and balanced coverage of important issues that are free from attack and manipulation. As was demonstrated by Māori media and *RadioNZ* coverage, balanced and sensitive engagements with the lived realities of poverty and welfare that feature understanding and compassion, rather than denigration and stigma, are possible.

### Wāhine Māori respond to conservative commentators: The material consequences of elites exercising their symbolic power

In Chapter 4, I explored the reactions of wāhine Māori to the Metiria Turei case through two focus groups. I analysed the wāhines' reactions to three kinds of media items (hegemonic, balanced and counter hegemonic) coverage that I had investigated in Chapter 3. There was a level of consistency in participant responses to these items between both focus groups. The wāhine used the media examples as anchor points from which they then went on to discuss broader issues and to invoke additional issues, such as the colonial mentality, particularly in the hegemonic items and which was also raised as a concern in many of the social media counter hegemonic posts. The participants were also appearing to resist the hegemonic tale of terror that featured dysfunctional, immoral, criminal and undeserving welfare recipients. In doing so, participating wāhine provided a counter hegemonic narrative or tale of joy that worked to reposition themselves and other welfare recipients as the reluctant users of a failing welfare system who were doing everything they could to survive and to pursue a better life through education for themselves and their children. In resisting the hegemonic tale of terror, they were essentially refusing to be silenced and subjugated.

As outlined in Chapter 4, the items by conservative commentators presented to the wāhine were renegotiated through the focus group discussions to produce resistive readings of these texts (Fiske, 1988). As outlined by Hodgetts (2000): "Resistive reading works with the beliefs and values presented in a programme, exploiting ambiguity idiosyncratically in negotiating a counter-hegemonic position" (p. 77). Fiske (1994) believes that consumers of mediated deliberations are not simply audience members who absorb and believe the messages being produced by those in power, rather the audience can and does resist the depictions being presented to them. Audience members are able

to step away from media representations being presented to them and construct their own interpretations and counter hegemonic narratives from their own experiences and life circumstances (Hodgetts, 2000). As can be seen in Chapter 4, the wāhine within my research demonstrated a clear resistance to the notions of individual level blame and ‘un-deservingness’ perpetuated by conservative commentators. The wāhine exemplified how they worked tirelessly to meet the welfare regulations imposed upon them. However, the regulations created significant barriers when trying to secure more income.

More specifically, my participants emphasized how out of touch these commentators were, for example, by providing counterarguments based on their own lived experiences. Prominent in the focus group discussions was the questioning of the lack of knowledge held by these commentators in relation to the hardship they faced as recipients of welfare and the [dis]functioning of the system. This was evident in their discussions of food, housing and financial insecurities that they and other people like them face every day (Rua et al., 2019). These wāhine resisted the simplistic notion that they could easily gain employment if they were motivated or budgeted more proficiently to free themselves from poverty. Their counter-narrative exposed the hardships and barriers that they face when trying to budget on very little income, enter employment and gain a tertiary level education. The focus group participants also broadened their scope of discussion through the cultivation of their shared understanding of the attacks by these very commentators (Barry Soper and Mike Hosking) on Māori as evidence for the continuation of the Pākehā colonial project to subjugate Māori (cf. Mikaere, 1999). These wāhine openly discussed how the conservative commentators used their position of power to manipulate and control the wider public audience, and thus reinforce the hegemonic narrative about Māori welfare recipients that Metiria had ruptured.

Examining both the mediapolis and the exercising of symbolic power, and then speaking to wāhine Māori themselves provided me a means of exploring how those are often denigrated in news media coverage react and resist how wāhine Māori are portrayed negatively and discriminated against in society. As seen within the stories presented in Chapter 4, wāhine participating in this research provided insights into their experiences of the welfare system that are often omitted from, and denied within, corporatized news media coverage. The wāhine raised concerns around the barriers

within the welfare system to their entering education or employment, and how such barriers perpetuate economic, social and educational disadvantage for Māori. As a result, and after extended efforts to provide for their whānau via the welfare system, they shared stories of having to employ particular strategies to secure enough resources to meet their immediate needs. These strategies were positioned as only temporary resolutions that did not address the underlying problems with the inadequacies of welfare support for meeting the actual cost of living (cf. Child Poverty Action Group, 2014). They also recognized the potential longer-term consequences they would face in terms of getting themselves into debt and having to service loans that would lead to further hardship. However, providing for their children now was the priority, and like many other people who rely on welfare, they did not have the means or luxury to escape their financial situations moving forward. In contradicting and challenging the perspectives of conservative commentators, the wāhine also exposed how systemic failings in the welfare system to provide adequate support increased the likelihood that they too would be forced to lie to WINZ. This is a serious concern, as any act that transgresses the rules regarding access to welfare support can have devastating consequences for them and their whānau if their benefits are stopped or they are prosecuted.

The accounts of my participants are in keeping with research in other countries that shows that austerity and penal welfare sets a scene in which people experiencing severe economic desperation come to engage in illegal activities to simply make ends meet (Jensen, 2014). For example, it is well documented that welfare has been inadequate in meeting the increasing cost of living in the US for a very long time, and that this often forces women into criminal conduct just to survive (Kohler-Hausmann, 2007). Welfare authorities then respond to such activities by intensifying the scrutiny and surveillance to which beneficiaries are subject and by engaging in further sanctions against those who transgress the rules. Like here, in the United States responses to hardship induced transgressions of the rules of penal welfare are driven by cultural, economic and racial ideological assumptions and are divorced from the lived realities of welfare recipients. Rather than increase welfare support, many OECD countries, such as ours, devote considerable resources to detecting such transgressions, including benefit fraud and overpayments, and punishing transgressors. I discuss this issue in Chapter 3 in

relation to the work by Marriott (2018) who examined government debt and how it is collected. Marriott's work revealed how beneficiaries who are overpaid or commit benefit fraud face intensive investigation and are chased by all means necessary to ensure the repayment of any debt. This insistent aim to investigate and prosecute beneficiaries has been reflected in research by Child Poverty Action Group (2019, p.1) who found that:

In the 2017/18 year there were 12,578 phone line allegations, which resulted in 5,490 completed investigations of which 3094 were related to a marriage-type relationship. Of the total investigations 1664 overpayments were established and 277 successful prosecutions resulted.

It is unknown how many wāhine Māori have been prosecuted or penalised for earning income and not declaring it. However, in a recent report on welfare fraud investigations of sole parents it was found that 46% of women investigated were of Māori descent (Healey & Curtin, 2019).

The incessant focus on welfare overpayment and fraud and associated sanctions fails to acknowledge the harm that is caused to the children wāhine are trying to keep fed, clothed and housed. The lives of these children are also further impoverished when their mother's income is diminished further, particularly when their incomes are already insufficient in meeting the cost of living (Child Poverty Action Group, 2014). Children then face deprivation of vital material support such as healthy housing, nutritious food and healthcare (Child Poverty Action Group, 2014).

Again, news coverage of poverty and welfare that focuses on blaming and punishing individuals and ignoring structural explanations for their actions obscures the harm caused by penal welfare for mothers and their children. Wāhine participating in the two focus groups often referred to the consequences of racism towards them by conservative news commentators in coverage of welfare. Such racism is compounded by misogyny (evidence in tropes such as if you cannot afford to have children then you should not have children) and functions to place wāhine Māori and their children at the bottom of the societal pecking order (Webb, 2011). To address these issues, Māori scholars and their Pākehā allies (Rua et al., 2019; Ware, Breheny, & Forster, 2017) have proposed that there needs to be a shift away from punitive welfare to policy that considers the social

and cultural challenges of childrearing in poverty within a racist and discriminatory colonial society.

### Turning tales of terror into tales of joy within the mediapolis

Throughout this thesis, I have considered both the hegemonic narrative of welfare that stigmatizes wāhine Māori and their self-narratives that offer more realistic and substantive insights into poverty and welfare. To frame up this distinction, I drew on Rappaport's (2000) distinction between 'tales of terror' and the 'tales of joy'. As discussed, hegemonic cultural narratives are essentially meaning systems that are constructed by dominant groups (wealthy Pākehā) that are used to frame stereotypical depictions of marginalised groups (low income Māori) (Rappaport, 2000). These stories then become overlearned within society and are regularly communicated by key institutions such as the news media and the Ministry of Social Development. This is problematic as the dominant narratives are based on prejudices rather than lived realities, and function to dehumanize and terrorize the people being depicted. Rappaport's (2000) conceptualization of how dominant narratives are constructed and disseminated within the media and how they impact those they represent was mirrored within my investigation of the functioning of the mediapolis and through the voices of wāhine Māori who participated in the focus groups. The media analysis presented in Chapter 3 exposed how the hegemonic welfare narrative was perpetuated primarily by conservative commentators who drew on long-standing negative stereotypes of single mothers who receive welfare, which proved fundamental to the dehumanizing of Metiria Turei and the women who supported her.

In response, many prosumers on social media and the participants in the two focus groups articulated tales of joy. These tales of joy were voiced via various forms such as pictures, captions, posts and blogs, which constitute artefacts of ongoing resistance to oppression through which members of marginalised communities work to foreground issues and events that are of importance to them. These acts of resistance also manifest a sense of solidarity and community that comes with the sharing of similar experiences. However, the impacts of these tales of joy in shaping public deliberations regarding welfare are curtailed by power differentials, which are associated with ethnicity, race, gender and social class (Rappaport, 2000). Put simply, the affluent Pākehā commentators

had more say in the mediapolis and in shaping the evolving controversy that surrounded Metiria Turei.

Early in Chapter 1, I discussed why it was important as social scientists to critically analyse how the dominant narrative reinforces a Pākehā and neoliberal cultural hegemony. As McIntosh (2011, p.278) notes: “Māori research is well placed to critically engage and respond to the issues that pertain to both the reproduction of privilege and the reproduction of disadvantage particularly as they relate to indigenous Māori in Aotearoa”. By deconstructing the hegemonic narrative produced within the mediapolis, I was able to explore the negative consequences of this dominant perspective not only for wāhine such as Metiria in the past, but also for wāhine today. Such analytic work is important for charting the lived realities of penal welfare, for affording spaces for tales of joy to be heard, and for further substantiating the need to reform penal welfare and ensure that welfare benefits are set at levels sufficient to cover the cost of living (Rua et al., 2019). Rappaport (2000) also claims that community narratives are a key element when working towards humane social change. Tales of joy can celebrate the resilience, agency and creativity of wāhine in the face of hardship and an uncaring system as well as expose the preventable hardships and insecurities that are caused by the failings of the system. Wāhine Māori have been displaced from their own stories for far too long. Looking forward, we must work towards implementing regulations to ensure fair and just representations of the ‘other’ within the corporatized news media and aligned conservative blog sites (Hager, 2014; Silverstone, 2007). Wāhine Māori must be afforded more space within news outlets to name and define who they are and what their experiences mean. They need to be able to share their stories surrounding the delivery of services like those of social welfare, without being silenced and shut down by those with cultural hegemony. Discrimination is not solely the problem of those with cultural hegemony, rather it is owned by entire societies and thus requires citizens to come together to contest discriminatory practices and to support transformative change (Loto et al., 2006).

Unfortunately, the plight of wāhine Māori who rely on welfare has all but been ignored in practical terms by the current government as well. Although the present Labour led government has openly questioned the penal approach to welfare and talked a big

game regarding the need to challenge neoliberalism and the need for transformational change, they have done the very minimum in reforming the welfare system. They have removed some sanctions on beneficiaries who do not comply with the conditions of their benefit support and left many of the other punitive features of the system in place. This government has also failed to raise benefit levels to meet the actual cost of living.

In terms of my contribution to discussions for change, the key findings of this research will be disseminated in various ways to a range of different audiences. First and foremost, it is imperative that I share my findings with Metiria Turei herself as the essence of this research is based on the hegemonic rupture she created with her public disclosure in 2017 as Green Party co-leader. The key findings will also be published in a chapter titled "*Welfare and Single Māori Mothers in the Media: Documenting the Symbolic Assassination of Metiria Turei*" for the Routledge Companion to Media and Poverty book in 2020. I will also present the key findings in July 2020 in Melbourne, Australia at the 8<sup>th</sup> International Conference of Community Psychology at Victoria University before embarking on a PhD project looking at wellbeing among single Māori led parent households.

Briefly, an overarching aim of my thesis was to contribute to the knowledge production of how discriminatory practices within the mediapolis are particularly unhelpful for wāhine Māori and are in fact unjust and harmful. To bring some closure to this thesis and to recognize the efforts to bring the hardships that come to Māori households with penal welfare, I will end with comments made by Metiria Turei when recently reflecting on the controversy that surrounded her:

*I'm proud of the speech, I'm really proud of the speech and always will be. I think it was absolutely the right thing to do, and I always will. And I'm proud of the activism that it created. Taking all of that passion and turning it into something really concrete and that's what needed to happen because those people hadn't been heard at all for such a long time" (Metiria Turei, The Spinoff, 2019).*

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## Appendices

### Appendix A

#### Information Sheet



# Massey University

*Māori Women and Welfare: The Case of Metira Turei.*

#### INFORMATION SHEET

Kia ora, my name is Ahnya, I whakapapa back to Maurea Marae in the Waikato (Tainui). I am a postgraduate student at Massey University undertaking a Master of Science. I am inviting you to participate in my thesis project, entitled: Māori Women and Welfare: The Case of Metira Turei. This project is about a recent media controversy surrounding single Māori mothers receiving welfare support. I invite you to participate in a focus group discussion regarding your opinions of Metiria Turei's attempt to broaden public discussions regarding life on a benefit. During the focus group, I would like to discuss a selection of media articles regarding the Metiria Turei story with you. The focus groups will run for approximately two hours. In recognition of your valuable time, you will receive a \$20 gift card as a (koha) for participating in the focus group. Your participation will also be kept confidential and no one apart from myself and other women involved in our discussion will know your name.

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to decline to answer any particular question. You can also withdraw from the study up to a week after the focus group. You can also ask any questions about the study and will be provided with a summary of my research findings at the completion of the project.

**Project contacts**

Ahnya Martin, [a.martin@massey.ac.nz](mailto:a.martin@massey.ac.nz), [REDACTED]

Pita King, [p.r.w.king@massey.ac.nz](mailto:p.r.w.king@massey.ac.nz)

Darrin Hodgetts, [d.j.hodgetts@massey.ac.nz](mailto:d.j.hodgetts@massey.ac.nz).

This project has been evaluated by peer review and judged to be low risk. Consequently, it has not been reviewed by one of the University's Human Ethics Committees. The researcher(s) named above are responsible for the ethical conduct of this research.

If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research that you wish to raise with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact Prof Craig Johnson, Director, Research

Ethics, telephone 06 356 9099 x 85271, email [humanethics@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethics@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix B

### Participant Consent Form



# Massey University

*Māori Women and Welfare: The Case of Metiria Turei*

#### **Consent Form for Focus Group Participants**

I have read the **Participant Information Sheet** for this study and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions about the study have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I also understand that I am free to withdraw from the study at any time from the focus group free of consequence, or to decline to answer any particular questions in the study. I agree to provide information to the researchers under the conditions of confidentiality set out in the Participant Information Sheet.

I also understand that all information shared within this focus group is to remain confidential to the participants and should not be discussed with anyone outside the focus group.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Participant Information Sheet..

Participant's Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Participant's Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

If you have any queries or wish to know more, please write to me at:

Ahnya Martin [a.martin@massey.ac.nz](mailto:a.martin@massey.ac.nz)

The research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee. Any queries regarding the ethical conduct of this project can be directed to: [humanethicsnorth@comasseyn.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsnorth@comasseyn.ac.nz) or, my supervisor:

Professor Darrin  
Hodgetts

Email: [D.J.Hodgetts@massey.ac.nz](mailto:D.J.Hodgetts@massey.ac.nz)