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Exploring Māori Identity Behind Closed Doors

An investigation of Māori cultural identity and offender change within Waikeria Prison's Māori Focus Unit, Te Aō Marama

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for

the Degree of Doctor of Clinical Psychology at

Massey University, Albany,

New Zealand

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2014

"...I've been in prison most of my adult life. I really didn't give a shit about being Māori when inside, but [was more] worried about being a staunch gang member. In Te Aō Marama it's not about being a staunch prisoner, but [about] learning to be a staunch Māori. I'm not going to come back in when I get out. Te Aō Marama changed my life".

Participant Four. (2012, April 30). Personal interview. Te Aō Marama, Waikeria Prison.

Abstract

The Ministry of Justice (2013) continually reports an over-representation of Māori within the incarcerated population. An attempt to address these concerns led to the development of the Māori Focus Unit (MFU). The MFU aims to strengthen an offender's Māori cultural identity through therapeutic programmes rich in tikanga Māori (customs), potentially resulting in offenders, once released from prison, leading pro-social, non-offending lifestyles (Department of Corrections, 2009b; Ministerial Review Report, 2005). However, limited studies inform the relationship between MFU participation, Māori cultural identity and offender change.

The current research, based at Waikeria Prison's MFU, Te Aō Marama, attempted to explore offender change through cultural identity theory of indigenous offending (Chalmers, Williams, & Gavala, 2012; Snowball and Weatherburn, 2008). This theory proposed that, through the destructive effects of colonisation, indigenous peoples lost aspects of their values, beliefs and traditions, while becoming acculturated into the colonising population. This was suggested to have resulted in a decrease in Māori cultural identity, wellbeing and pro-social behaviour, and an increase in anti-social attitudes, cognitions and behaviour (Gale, Bailey-Harris, & Wundersitz, 1990; Pearson, 2001).

The current study employed a repeated measures research design in the naturalistic setting of Te Aō Marama. Quantitative measures explored the relationship between Māori cultural identity, wellbeing, anti-social cognitions and attitudes, and pro-social and anti-social behaviour over time spent in Te Aō Marama. Further, participant feedback generated through interviews explored what offenders believed contibuted to any changes experienced.

Results suggested that offenders experienced a significant increase in Māori cultural identity, wellbeing and pro-social behaviour, and a significant decrease in anti-social attitudes, cognitions and behaviour over time spent in Te Aō Marama. Furthermore,

offenders predominantly reported that their experience in Te Aō Marama had strengthened their Māori cultural identity, and that as a result, they had experienced the changes across the aforementioned constructs. In conclusion, the study may potentially provide information in the establishment of other therapeutic environments aimed at increasing Māori cultural identity.

Acknowledgements

I would first like to acknowledge and thank my whānau. To Wade, you have continually given of yourself and compromised throughout the journey. I am so thankful for all that you have done. To my father Steve, and siblings Jade and Nick, you have provided me with unconditional love and grounding. I am grateful to have you as my family. To my grandparents Brian and Maureen, your genuine interest and pride in my studies has continually motivated me to do better. I am so lucky to have you in my life and cannot wait to have you at my graduation. And finally to my mum Orna, thank you for your support and belief in me, and your continued willingness to listen. You provided me with respite when I felt like giving up and inspired me to carry on. I love you all.

I would like to acknowledge my supervisors. Dr Mei Wah Williams, thank you for your valuable mentorship over this journey. You have always challenged and supported me to do better. Your belief in me provided the confidence necessary in achieving my goals. This thesis would not be what it is without your hard work. To my secondary supervisor, Jhanitra Gavala, thank you for the time you invested, particularly early on in the thesis development.

I would also like to thank Statistician Derek Christie. Your assistance in the statistical analysis of this research has been immensely helpful. Further, I would like to acknowledge the Department of Corrections for approving this research and for your willingness to partner with Massey University. Particularly, I would like to thank the Waiariki Area Psychologists' Office, Tauranga. Your understanding, willingness to listen, give advice, and provide a helping hand has been immeasurable. I look forward to working with you in the future.

To Te Aō Marama staff, thank you for your kindness and willingness to help. You made the time I spent at Te Aō Marama enjoyable. To the participants, thank you for your

willingness to take part in the study and your openness in sharing you personal experiences with me. Without your participation, this study would not have been possible.

I would like to thank my friends for their willingness to stay in touch. I have relied on you for some much needed laughter and for the grounding provided by old friends. Thank you for allowing me to escape and be part of a more balanced life. I look forward to spending more time together.

I would also like to thank Ngāti Whakaue Education Endownment Trust, Te Arawa Fisheries, Otama Marere Trust, Māori Trustee, Te Rau Matatini, Waikato-Tainui, Massey University, and The New Zealand Psychological Society, for the scholarships, grants and mentoring I have received throughout this journey. I am humbly grateful for your support.

This thesis is a product of all those who supported the study and those who supported me personally. I would like to acknowledge and thank you all for your contribution.

Tena koutou mo tenei

Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi, engari he toa takitini

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