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How Māori precariat whānau navigate social services.

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Abstract

Rates of poverty and hardship are a persistent social concern in Aotearoa with far too many people, particularly Māori, vulnerable to insecurities in work, income, housing, food, and other essentials. In order to ‘make ends meet’, many people seek support from the welfare system, which has become less responsive to their needs. This has resulted in the need for advocates to support whānau to navigate services and access their entitlements for support. To understand such issues, it is useful to consider the concept of the ‘precariat’ or emerging social class of people who often find themselves rotating between insecure employment, unemployment and reliance on charity to survive. The purpose of this study was to investigate experiences of two precariat whānau in navigating welfare and social services in the context of the global rise of the precariat. I also explore the experiences of two service advocates who help precariat whānau in navigating the welfare system. The design and conduct of this study was guided by Kaupapa Māori Theory (KMT) and Kaupapa Māori Research (KMR) and utilized qualitative methods, including repeat semi-structured interviews. My approach enabled participants to share their experiences of how the present welfare system operates, their strategies for accessing resources, and the broader implications for precarity within everyday lives. Findings confirm the punitive nature of contemporary welfare provisions for whānau who find the system degrading and unresponsive. Despite the obstacles my participants face, they demonstrate considerable agency in navigating services themselves and in assisting others to access resources. In doing so, they demonstrate the enactment of core cultural values such as whanaungatanga and manaakitanga. The advocates in particular undertake their work in culturally-oriented ways as they support, teach, speak for, and protect whānau in navigating the welfare system. Such Kaupapa Māori-oriented support raises the possibilities of anti-oppressive welfare.

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