



MINISTRY OF SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT
Te Manatū Whakahiato Ora

Information Centre

Te Puna Whakamāhioranga

The Cultural Facilitators of Family Violence

A Maori Perspective

by

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Introduction

"The theory that abuse is caused by a culturally supported belief that people have the right to control their partners explains almost all abuse described by women in refuges and in attitudinal research."

Ellen Pence, 1981

This theory, although a Western perception of family violence, cannot be lightly dismissed as mono-cultural and therefore of little cross-cultural significance.

Many ethnic groups subscribe to the theory that women are inferior and thereby render women vulnerable to abuse. Alternatively, where cultures who traditionally respected and valued their women have been exposed to Western influences, the status of women has gradually been eroded away.

The Maori position in relation to family violence is an outcome of the processes of colonisation and the concomitant erosion of the value of Maori women in contemporary Maori society.

"...Many small-scale societies simply vanish under the juggernaut of European expansion, their populations decimated by disease and slaughter, their lands appropriated, their communities gone and their customs destroyed. Where people were more isolated or sufficiently numerous to withstand the impact of colonial domination they became tied into the periphery of global economy and had to accommodate a new world in which they were inferior and subordinate."

Kessing 1976: 436

The colonisation of the Maori is well documented - see Sorrenson 1981, Awatere 1984, Sinclair 1969. The appendix to Pua-te-Ata-Tu (1986) is a concise overview of this process and the effects on Maori people.

There are four main causal factors of colonisation that have a direct impact on family violence:

1. The denigration of Mana-Maori.
2. The contravention of the Treaty of Waitangi.
3. The breakdown of the tribal structures and the subsequent fragmentation of the whanau.
4. The infiltration of an ideology of male supremacy on Maori consciousness.

The denigration of Mana-Maori

"The church of the colonies is the white people's church. She does not call the native to God's ways but to the ways of the whiteman, of the oppressor."

Franz Fanon

The catalyst for low self esteem amongst many Maori is the influence of the early missionaries. Paganism was synonymous with evil, as this early annual report from the Missionary Chapman illustrates:

"This place appears to be one of the last strongholds of the 'wicked one' in New Zealand. Much opposition is still made in this district by the old priests of Wiro to the admission of the gospel, yet their influence is gradually wasting away, and the truth is silently undermining the fabric of their superstition."

Chapman, March 1841

In other parts of Chapman's material, where he refers to the Maori as "wretched islanders" and describes the "truly grotesque character of our savage friends", it is apparent that Chapman's reports were not solely focused on theoretical concerns as he is not reticent in sharing his political views with British Colonial interests.

It is widely accepted that the effect of such emotional and verbal violence on an individual is to lower self esteem. Their religions have been dismissed as satanic, or superstitious and simplistic, and the people described as "wretched", "grotesque" and "savage".

These negative stereotypes have invaded Maori consciousness and it is only by systematic and constant resistance that the negative images will be repelled. Therefore, one of the factors in addressing family violence is the reinforcement of a positive Maori identity. A kaumatua view:

"whakahokia nga tamariki ki te Marae"

"We must bring our children back. They must again be taught the tikanga Maori - the traditions..."

(McNeill et al 1988:68)

It is therefore imperative in dealing with family violence that any programme support and affirm Mana-Maori.

The main factor in European eyes was the establishment of colonial power. In order that the colonising power should be successful in its push for supremacy, the prescribed order of events was to destroy the 'intended victims' belief in themselves. There was a systematic denigration of the Maori traditional lifestyle and customs, language, religious-spiritual beliefs, economy and, through sickness and disease, their population base (from an estimated 500,000 at the time of the first settlers to 50,000 at the turn of the century). This was an effective formula for the destruction of the people. The use of the State's institutions to reinforce Maori invisibility in their own country further strengthened the Pakeha stranglehold on the land and reinforced their absolute dominion.

To sum up the major denigration of Mana-Maori, the insidious nature of this violence has invaded Maori consciousness. The unavoidable consequence to this is low self esteem and poor self image.

That the victims of this violence subconsciously, or even consciously, accept the degradation is true. Maori people, along with many other indigenous and subjugated peoples, have been subjected to this form of violence. It must be reversed.

The Contravention of the Treaty of Waitangi

Whereas the denigration of Mana-Maori is the psychological colonisation of the mind, the Treaty of Waitangi 1840 denotes the separation of Maori people from political and economic sovereignty.

"Although there is much evidence from the colonial office statements and the news of Maori leaders that there was a need for some kind of mutual co-operation, events subsequent to the Treaty deny that need. The playing out of those events and the differing attitudes of the Maori and Pakeha toward the Treaty provide the most tangible touchstone of Maori grievance. Their perception that the Pakeha failed to fulfil their Treaty obligations was reinforced by the negative interpretations which the courts and the legislature placed on the agreement. The law's eventual dismissal of the Treaty confirmed the Maori sense of betrayal."

(Jackson 1988 B:48)

The link between the Treaty of Waitangi's betrayal and family violence is the ensuing political and economic deprivation. Generally, the Maori has been deprived of material resources, and therefore relegated to the lowest socio-economic stratum of New Zealand society. Whilst this is not the single causal factor in family violence, it is the context in which violence occurs. Poverty, cultural denigration and powerlessness are contributing factors to a profile on Maori criminal offending, including the crimes of wife and child battering.

The breakdown of tribal organisation

The weakening of the tribe as a functioning political/social unit was a direct consequence of land alienation (by 1989 less than 4% of the land remains in Maori land title). the tribal identity is based on kinship (whakapapa), and this is inextricably linked to the land in term of corporate ownership and rights to land use. The land court legislation of the 1860s effectively destroyed traditional land tenure and as a corollary this affected the functioning of the tribe. Traditionally, the smallest social unit in tribal society organisation is the extended family (whanau). In contemporary Maori society these components of traditional social organisation (the tribe/iwi and the whanau) have undergone radical changes, which have had an important bearing on family violence.

"The ideals of the group responsibilities of the male have been supplanted by an individualism founded in a disregard for the interests of others. The traditional sharing of responsibility in raising children within the whanau, which lessened the stress of parenting and so mitigated against the use of corporal punishment, has been replaced by the stresses of an isolated nuclear family and a resort to physical violence. The ancient respect for women, her tapu and the vitality of the female element, have been largely replaced by western chauvinism."

Jackson op cit:97

While the nuclear family is a lifestyle at variance with the traditional Maori family, it is imposed and reinforced by Pakeha institutions, laws and cultural practises. The successful promotion of the nuclear family is reflected in the monocultural residential architecture seen all around us today. The effect on Maori people was and remains catastrophic. This is nowhere illustrated more clearly than with the resulting disintegration of the extended family into fragmented, isolated units and, on countless occasions, alienation from family or tribal lands. Many Maori who, today, live within extended families experience problems associated with overcrowding, compounded by poverty.

The ideology of male supremacy

There are conflicting views regarding the status of women in pre-contact Maori society. The conflict arises when, without exception, the early descriptions of Maori lifeways were Eurocentric and written by men. Before European contact Maori history was recorded orally.

Elsdon Best, Shortland, White and George Grey, amongst other notable colonial historians, had access to Maori people of knowledge. They were, however, excluded from the society of Maori women. Therefore the written early history not only retains a European bias but has a male bias as well.

In spite of these problems, it is clear that the status of Maori women has diminished since European contact. There are any number of indices from Maori traditions and linguistics to support the theory that a Maori woman enjoyed privileges and status that would have been the envy of her European counterparts.

The complementary relationship between the sexes is denoted in linguistics by the neutral "a" category: Te wahine a Hone and Te tane a Mere. In Maori language, there are indicators of hierarchical relationships inherent in the possessive particles. Had the correct form been 'Te wahine o Hone', this would have indicated that Hone's woman was of lower status than himself.

In Maori social organisation the descent is cognatic. This means that inheritance is equally through both parents. In pre-contact society Maori women inherited status of their parents and also held land and other property in their own right. This was indeed an enviable position when contrasted with the circumstances of Victorian women in the same era who appear to have been deprived of the most basic human rights.

At a time when Maori kaumatua are calling for the return to Maori traditions it is imperative that "the ancient respect for women, her tapu and the vitality of the female element" is reclaimed as part of the rehabilitative process for Maori men. It follows that, if Maori women are revered and respected, the occasions when and where abuse might occur are much reduced.

There is, however, a contradiction between ideology and practise, as this sample illustrates:

Q: *"Do you think rape ever happened in traditional Maori life?"*

A: *"Yes of course. Rape is in every culture but I know there was a respect for women that is lacking now."*

McNeill op cit:65

A start must be made to restore traditional respect for Maori women.

Conclusion

It is apparent that the process of colonisation and the subsequent dispossession of the Maori has greatly affected the psychological, social, political and economic welfare of the whanau. A synopsis of the effects of this cultural annihilation need to be borne in mind when addressing the issue of family violence.

The contemporary Maori whanau has been shaped by these historical forces. It would therefore be ineffectual and inappropriate to address the problem of family violence from the dominant cultural perspective.

MALE ACCOUNTABILITY

Family violence intervention involves male responsibility for their violence whilst ensuring the absolute safety and protection of the women and children victims of this violence. Any rehabilitation process for Maori men must be inclusive of positive Maori self identity and must promote the family (whanau) as an institution which supports, as well as sanctions, behaviour.

"Crucial to these ideas is an acceptance of the Maori view of family and rights and obligations of the people within it.... This concept of family welfare has been much misunderstood and misinterpreted. It is often claimed for example that it is not 'culturally appropriate' for Maori men who abuse their children to be reported, or for that man to be removed and the children protected from further violence. This is simply untrue: the cultural perspective reflected in traditional Maori law is clearly that offenders should be subject to sanction and the children should be defended against continued abuse."

Jackson op cit: 187-188

The fostering and promotion of the whanau is the object of all the organisations operating in Maoridom. Part of this process of reaffirmation may require separate facilities to address and resolve problems. In the arena of family violence, the operation of women's groups to support the women and children and men's groups to facilitate this is unavoidable if intervention is to operate effectively. As one respondent in Jackson's research advocated:

"You young ones, you men, you need to talk together in your own space because you lot watch these xxx video things and you beat up our women and abuse our kids...you know before this pornography stuff come along our men didn't treat us like that."

While the causes of violence are many, the collective community message to all batterers must be clear: "When you beat your partners, you are not a victim, you are an aggressor. Either you stop or you lose increasing amounts of your personal freedom". However it must be agreed that in Maori programmes designed to address family violence, support and affirmation for Mana-Maori will be an intrinsic component.

Ma wai hei mahi? Mau maku ma tatou katoa.