

Exploring the nature of intimate relationships: A Māori perspective

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The 2002 World Report on Violence states that violence occurs in about 70 percent of intimate relationships (Krug, Dahlberg, Mercy, Zwi, & Lozano, 2002). New Zealand research indicates that more than a quarter of relationships have experienced intimate partner violence (IPV), with Māori (Indigenous people of New Zealand) women three times more likely to experience IPV in their lifetime. Utilising Kaupapa Māori (Māori-centred approach) and narrative methodologies, this paper explores the nature of intimate relationships from a Māori perspective, investigating how Māori initiate intimate relationships, attempt to maintain positive intimate relationships and when applicable, exit intimate relationships. The findings from two case studies reveal that intimate relationships involve identity negotiation and an incorporation of cultural values. Communication processes are highlighted as a facilitating factor of intimate relationships.

Intimate partner violence (IPV) is a significant social and economic issue in New Zealand, similarly highlighted by the international community as a major public health threat (McHugh & Frieze, 2006; Moffit et al., 1997). Internationally, the prevalence of IPV is estimated to be between 10 and 69 percent (Krug et al., 2002). In New Zealand, McHugh and Frieze (2006) reported that more than 25 percent of intimate relationships have contained physical assault. More recently, McMurray and Clendon (2010) found that Māori women were three times more likely to experience IPV in their lifetime in comparison with non-Māori women.

Krug and colleagues (2002) define violence as:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death,

psychological harm, mal-development or deprivation (p. 5).

The New Zealand Domestic Violence Act 1995 classifies IPV as a form of domestic violence which involves perpetrating violence against past or current partners or spouses (*Domestic Violence Act 1995, New Zealand, 1995*). Recent studies suggest that IPV includes verbal and psychological abuse that can take many forms, such as threats, intimidation and coercion (Robertson & Oulton, 2008).

To understand IPV within the context of New Zealand, we consider the impact of colonisation on Māori. In traditional Māori society, women were commonly referred to as “Te whare o te Tangata – the only source from which all new life flows” (Robertson & Oulton, 2008, p. 6). In accordance with these conceptualisations, the sexual assault of any female within the iwi (tribe) was regarded as an assault on whānau (family) and whakapapa (genealogy, ancestral connectedness), provoking punishment of banishment or death (Mikaere, 1994). The arrival of colonialism in

New Zealand brought patriarchal ideologies that conflicted with Māori values and beliefs (Mikaere, 1999). Imperial domination and its accompanying legislative systems sought to exploit the abundant natural resources contained within these shores. Colonisation stripped Māori of their land, culture, language, identity, access to natural resources, and their traditional way of life (Jackson, 1992). Furthermore, the patriarchal ideologies that underpinned British colonial systems countered and removed the importance of women in te ao Māori (Māori world-view). In contemporary New Zealand, the pervasive impact of colonisation has resulted in immense socio-economic disadvantage for Māori. These consequences are regarded as a major contributing factor to the high rates of IPV within the Māori population (Koziol-McLain, Rameka, Giddings, Fyfe, & Gardiner, 2007; Robertson & Oulton, 2008).

In considering the impact of colonisation upon IPV amongst Māori, this paper is situated within the context of preventing IPV. The aim of this research is to explore the nature of intimate relationships in relation to three core issues: initiating intimate relationships; maintaining positive intimate relationships; exiting intimate relationships. Research by Hamby (2009) that focused on relationship dynamics found that during the initiation phase of intimate relationships, the interaction process between couples is noted as a contributing factor to IPV and dating victimisation. In addition, communication styles used between intimate partners play a crucial role in the long term quality and maintenance of intimate relationships (Overall, Fletcher, Simpson, & Sibley, 2009). For example, indirect, passive or covert communication approaches may lead to a lower long term relationship satisfaction, whereas, direct or explicit communication approaches are likely to result in higher long term relationship satisfaction in couples (Overall et al., 2009).

Considerations are also made in regards to the sense of identity that people take into intimate relationships and how identity changes over time. Nikora (2007) proposes that social identity consists of an individual's self-perception which is drawn from knowledge associated with a social group he or she identifies as being a part of.

Traditionally, Māori identity is rooted in whakapapa, tikanga (custom) and kawa (protocol) (Nikora, 2007). Māori, as a social group, underwent social change during colonisation (Jackson, 1992), which has significant impacts on Māori identity construction (Nikora, 2007). Māori identity and how it had changed over time is important for understanding intimate relationships because it speaks to the issue of who Māori are. That is, the cultural and social groups from which Māori draw their identity help to shape the values Māori consider important and use those values to negotiate intimate relationships.

Method

A Kaupapa Māori methodology offered a means by which research could be conducted in a way that adheres to Māori tikanga and tradition. Kaupapa Māori approaches challenge the norms of mainstream research methodologies, stands to benefit Māori and allows Māori to interpret collected data in an appropriate way (Pihama, Cram, & Walker, 2002). This methodology had a strong emphasis on whanaungatanga (relationship through shared connectedness) which features that research is conducted *with* Māori, rather than *on* Māori. A narrative approach to this research was employed to capture Māori individuals' experiences. The narrative approach allowed research participants to recount their experiences in a story-like format that could appropriately consider the cultural context in which they are situated (Breakwell, Hammond, & Fife-Schaw, 2003). The findings of this research were part of an undergraduate directed study conducted by

the lead author.

Two participants were recruited through the researchers' social and university networks. To ensure anonymity, pseudonyms are used: Ruru, a Māori man in his early thirties; Tui, a Māori woman in her early forties. Once the participants consented to take part in the research, information sheets were then provided and the interviews were arranged at a time and venue that suited the participants.

The interviews were conducted utilising a semi-structured interview process with each participant being interviewed once. Interviews began with a shared meal, in line with traditional Māori customs surrounding hui (meeting) (Walker, 1990). Sharing a meal assisted to establish rapport between the researcher and participant and allowed the sharing of whakapapa and tribal ties. The interviews were recorded in an audio format once consent was given by the participants. The interview guide included five broad themes for discussion which were tikanga, te reo Māori (the Māori language) and te ao Māori; the initiation of intimate relationships; the maintenance of relationships; exiting relationships; and a general discussion. At the conclusion of the interview, participants were presented with a koha (gift) in appreciation of the time that they had given.

Following the transcribing of interviews, a summary of the interview was compiled and forwarded to the participants for review from which no amendments were necessary. A thematic analysis (Breakwell et al., 2003) was conducted from which three major themes emerged: intimate relationships within culture; intimate relationships and identity negotiation; and communication as facilitators of intimate relationships. These major themes identified are presented in the following section.

Findings

Intimate Relationships within Culture

The first case study was conducted

with Ruru. Ruru was adopted into a Pākehā (non-Māori) family whilst maintaining a positive relationship with his biological Māori family. Through his biological father, Ruru was active within te ao Māori, including partial fluency in te reo Māori and established a strong understanding of the tikanga of his iwi. His connection with te ao Māori carried through into his adult life. Weka was Ruru's long term intimate partner which he primarily spoke of during the interview. She also had a strong upbringing in te ao Māori. Tikanga Māori then became a cornerstone of their relationship together. For example, Ruru asserted: "We'd actually set up our relationship to honour our ethnicities... everything that we've done was about being successful Māori... in a successful relationship".

Ruru and Weka first met in a professional setting. They were set up on a date through a mutual friend. Once a committed, intimate relationship had begun, te reo Māori and tikanga became a process of intimate bonding – through establishing whakapapa (ancestral connectedness) – and an eventual way of life that they would share through marriage. During the early stages of their relationship, a concern was raised by Weka's family regarding Ruru's ethnicity. Ruru explained:

Funny enough, this is my partner we're talking about, she's part Māori, and her mother didn't like the idea of her partnering with another Māori, and that was communicated quite effectively. It was a perspective of her family that Māori men don't get out there and perform and provide for their families the same way that non-Māori men do.

This perception of Māori men reflects the hegemonic notions perpetuated by colonial ideologies in mainstream institutions to actively disadvantage Māori (Jackson, 1992) which could provide an explanation for

Weka's parents' perceptions of Ruru as a Māori man. However, in Ruru's account, Weka's parent's animosity was not aimed towards the Crown. Rather, it seemed to have turned Māori against Māori in that negative stereotypes that have resulted from colonisation are being held by people at the centre of disadvantage. Ruru took this as a challenge to prove that Māori men can be successful and worked hard to change this perception.

Ruru and Weka came from different iwi. As the relationship developed, they both saw the importance of learning the specific tikanga, karakia (prayer) and waiata (song) of both their iwi in order to participate appropriately when visiting each other's marae (tribal meeting place). Not only did this serve a practical purpose to the inner workings of the relationship, but also it served as a close and personal form of intimate bonding. Ruru explained:

We did a trade and exchange thing around waiata because we thought well, if we're going to make this in the long term, you're going to be spending time on my stomping ground, I'm going to be spending time on yours so let's do that in a way that we could participate.

Ruru's account indicates that much of their social life together consisted of attending Māori based events, such as Te Matatini (the bi-annual National Māori performing arts competition), Te koroneihana (the coronation of the Māori King or Queen) and Poukai (annual visits by the Māori King or Queen to marae in the Waikato area) from which they would enjoy Māori performing arts, socialise and acquire pieces of Māori art to decorate their home and reaffirm their Māori identity. Ruru and Weka also spent a lot of time caring for their loved ones in palliative care, which reaffirmed their commitment to each other. They actively encouraged each other to use te reo Māori in

a traditional way, free of transliterations. The primary reason that Ruru gave for this was that the meanings of traditional Māori words could be traced back through proverbs and chants for a deeper understanding of their language, where transliterations could not. These actions demonstrate that te reo Māori and tikanga were both an active expression of cultural identity, and also a set of tools used to develop, strengthen and maintain a positive relationship together.

In the second case study, Tui had very little influence of te ao Māori from her parents. Her father was brought up immersed in te ao Māori but in an era when children were punished at schools for speaking te reo Māori. Through this process as well as societal pressure to conform to Western ideologies, he disregarded Māori knowledge, as being the old way, and adopted te ao Pākehā (non-Māori world-view) as the new way forward. As a result of this, Tui did not learn te reo Māori from her father. Tui also described her father as having problems relating to alcohol that would result in him becoming verbally abusive towards her mother which she personally witnessed on a number of occasions as a child. As a child, the contact Tui did have with te ao Māori was through a close bond with her grandmother with whom she was able to participate in hui, tangihanga (traditional Māori funeral) and other such gatherings on her marae. Tui stated: "I still don't feel like a Māori... I don't have the language." Tui's statement suggests that there seemed to be an inability to connect with her cultural identity due to her perceived language deficiencies. She felt that she had missed out on her own culture. This is consistent with Durie's (2003) notion of te reo Māori being a key component of Māori cultural identity. For these reasons, she strongly encouraged her children to learn te reo Māori at kōhanga reo (Māori pre-school).

Tui's ex-husband Kererū has Māori heritage, but was raised in a family that held Western values. Although he was close to his own family, he had never experienced the

Māori concept of whanaungatanga the way that Tui had introduced it into their relationship together. Tui stated:

The three major relationships that I've had, they've started out not really with a basis of whānau, and whanaungatanga. So they've all been, and I don't mean to sound racist, but they've been white guys, white people and so they don't have the same philosophy. Basically I've had to train them to accept the fact that if people show up at my door, I'm going to feed them, and that you know, it's ok to do that and it's ok for people to come in and out of your house, and yea ok sometimes you get a little sick of it, but it's all about whānau and being accepting of everyone and I've managed to change their ideas about how they see whānau and family... My grandmother used to actually say that her house was her marae.

Tui incorporated the Māori concepts of whanaungatanga, tautoko (support) and awhi (aid) into her relationships and into their whānau. Both Tui and Kererū held their whānau in far higher importance to their individual selves. This demonstrates the concept of manaakitanga (hospitality, kindness), whereby the caring of others is central to being part of a social group, which is a cornerstone in te ao Māori (Nikora, 2007). Tui's excerpt shows that she was able to incorporate fundamental concepts from te ao Māori that she had learned from her grandmother. Whanaungatanga served as a bonding agent that allowed Tui and Kererū to integrate their lives together.

As we have illustrated, culture plays a major role in Ruru's and Tui's relationships through acts of tautoko, awhi and whanaungatanga. Culture is important in the way that they express themselves, bond with

each other and incorporate cultural practices into their daily lives. We have shown that cultural identity has been negotiated within our participants' intimate relationships. In the next section, we will show how our participants negotiate personal identity within their relationship.

Intimate Relationships and Identity Negotiation

Ruru discussed the multiple layers of identity that he negotiated with his partner Weka, such as: cultural identity, a Māori male who was adopted into a Pākehā family and a victim of child abuse. Ruru's cultural identity was easy to share with Weka because she too came from a Māori family. She understood and embraced this part of Ruru in their relationship.

As a Māori man who was given up for adoption and experienced years of sexual abuse as a child, Ruru found it hard to share "who he was" with Weka. These past experiences affected Ruru's perceptions of relationships, in that relationships can be unsafe and end in an instant. As a result, Ruru became protective and was generally defensive to physical touch. Although they attempted to work through these problems together, Ruru was never able to resolve the issues pertaining to his experience of sexual abuse as a child. As conflicts within the relationship escalated, Weka resorted to physically assaulting Ruru. Ruru was hospitalised and received stitches to his face. When seen by a doctor, he felt that he had to, and did, lie about how he had sustained his injuries due to his own, and Weka's, professional careers. Ruru reflected:

Without looking too deep bro, you can see that they don't believe your story and I don't believe the story and that's a huge cost, spiritually, on your wairua (spirit), that's a huge cost. It can split you in two depending on how often you have to tell that story. Privately, I've absolutely

ripped myself to shreds. It's hard to look people in the face.

Ruru's account suggests a stigmatisation associated with male directed IPV. Allen-Collinson (2009) argue that men generally do not report IPV to police or social services. The reasons for this include: embarrassment, shame and social norms associated with masculinity such as the feeling of not being a 'real' man (Allen-Collinson, 2009). Following the assault, Ruru felt a sense of loss and loneliness. Ruru questioned his abilities to take control of his own life and was filled with self-doubt and low self-esteem:

It's promoted to us as Māori people that there is no sense of yourself within a collective, there's no such thing as the individual. Well actually there is, and when all of those, iwi, hapū (sub-tribe), whānau structures break down, like in a relationship break up or something like that, then the Māori individual does find themselves by themselves for a little bit.

Ruru's reflection raises the issue of the loss of identity. Ruru felt that he had lost a degree of his professional identity through having to lie about the assault, and further, the collective nature of his cultural identity brought in to question who he was when he was alone. It was not until Ruru exited his relationship with Weka that he was able to begin rebuilding his own sense of identity through reaffirming connections with his family and close friends.

For Tui, the two relationships she was in reflect the different ways she negotiated her own sense of self. The first relationship was with her ex-husband Kererū. This relationship began in her late teenage years and they shared a close social life together. Tui and Kererū's relationship underwent changes when they had their first child. This change was marked by high levels of stress

which, at times, they did not deal with well. This stress was attributed to Kererū being unemployed and their newborn's erratic sleep patterns. Tui would become physically violent towards Kererū and her children. Kererū detested the violent touching of his children and would verbally lash out at Tui. In time, Tui changed the way that she dealt with stress by not resorting to violence with her children. However, Kererū did not change; he became increasingly verbally and psychologically abusive towards Tui. Tui stated:

As time went on, he just wore me down and wore me down and wore me down till basically there was nothing left of me. I was just a walking dead person, so I wasn't interested. I wasn't interested in helping myself. I wasn't interested in helping us. I wasn't interested. My focus was my kids and that was it. I lived for them.

Tui avoided interaction with Kererū and withdrew within herself. Allen-Collinson (2009) stipulates that avoidance, withdrawal and self-blame are common coping mechanisms for victims of IPV. Tui described a strange sense of attachment to Kererū, whereby she felt that she had no value without him. Her sense of self diminished; the only thing that kept her strong was her children. The relationship ended when Kererū left Tui for another woman. At this point, they were living in a different town from where they had met and Tui had made friends independent of Kererū. The support and whanaungatanga that her friends offered her was essential to the recovery of her sense of self. This indicates that for Tui, whanaungatanga was a dynamic concept that spans the domestic, whānau, hapū and iwi realms.

Tui's experience also suggests that intimate relationships are a process of self-development and growth. This is evident

when she reflected on her second relationship with Tītī:

This new relationship that's just broken up, it was my decision. I just needed to be in charge of my own life. I don't need someone telling me how to run my life. To finally get a sense of self and I think, when three papers I was doing on women and gender studies just smacked me upside the head and everything became really clear and I suddenly saw things for what they were and I suddenly woke up and I thought that I've been asleep for the last 40 years. What the hell have I been doing?

Tui's account suggests that she has experienced two pivotal shifts in self-concept. The first took place after her relationship with Kererū ended, leaving her disempowered and depressed. This second shift was a result of higher education which empowered her. Furthermore, this move to attend university was motivated by Tītī. One of the primary differences between these two relationships was the way that Tui and her partners communicated with each other. With Kererū, she employed an implicit and indirect form of communication, while with Tītī she used a more explicit and direct form of communication. Yet both relationships exhibited issues of power and dominance that affected Tui's sense of self. In the next section, I will focus on the role of communication in intimate relationships.

Communication as Facilitators of Intimate Relationships

At the beginning of his relationship, Ruru responded well to Weka's communication style. Before he had met Weka, Ruru had never directly initiated a relationship; most of his previous relationships were limited to one night stands or were initiated in very indirect ways. Ruru explained:

My soon to be ex-partner turned around and just said "Oh, look I'm interested in you, you're interested me." It was just a lot more, had a lot more strength behind it than anything I had expected or experienced in the past. It was exciting.

The reason Ruru responded well to Weka was that she was able to use a direct approach in a way that he had not experienced before. From his past history of sexual abuse, he did not respond well to direct approaches. However, as Ruru described, Weka was able to be direct in a safe and comfortable way. This communication style continued throughout their relationship and served as an effective maintenance tool. For example, Weka would neutralise arguments that could not be resolved in the immediate future and would deal with it at an appropriate time and place.

Through their employment, they acquired a vast range of communication skills which they applied in their relationship. For example, they used a three minute rule, which gives each of them an opportunity to express themselves uninterrupted for three minutes when they got home after work. The aim of this was to share positive experiences of each other's day, and to prevent the unloading of stress on each other. However, strategies like this were not enough to deal with the wide range of problems that they experienced. Ruru said: "If all you're doing is identifying problems and then trying to identify solutions, then that becomes your relationship." This suggests that their roles were now as professional facilitators rather than a couple, which resulted in less enjoyment in their relationship together. Ruru reflected:

If there's hope, then there's a chance for something better, but when the change doesn't walk, that dashes hope against the rocks. We were great organisers,

but we're not great, I don't know, love passed us by.

As a result, the relationship ended although they thought they had the resources and skills required to make the relationship work. This suggests that it is not enough to just have good communication skills; formulating effective ways to practice what is communicated within a relationship to invoke change is just as important. In comparison, the communication used in Tui's relationship with Kererū was different. Tui recalled:

It [communication strategies] wasn't even needed to be discussed. He would wake up one morning and say "where should we go?" and then we'd just go. I don't know, we just had a really nice rhythm for quite a long time and things just happened.

Later in the interview, Tui expressed how this style of communication transpired during times of conflict with Kererū, she said:

Just put a sticky plaster on it and kiss it better. Or I would give in and allow him to win. I would just agree with whatever it was that he wanted to fight about. To my own detriment, I would just swallow it back down again.

Tui's excerpts suggest that they did not discuss strategies to deal with conflict. As Tui asserted, at the start of the relationship this approach worked well and the relationship was good. This changed following the birth of their first child. Tui described:

After the first two kids were born, things started really going downhill and he became really, he just became more and more abusive, putting me down, belittling me, psychological abuse. Everything that you could of, but not physical. By the time he was actually wanting to try to

set something up to get it working again, something inside me had died. He [Kererū] yelled at me: "Why can't you argue with me? Why can't you just say one thing back?" At the time, I could not say anything, I totally froze... I think I have an instilled fear of arguing and I think that seeps back to my early childhood. My father was an angry Māori man with a drinking problem.

Tui's account suggests that the abuse she experienced from Kererū triggered emotions associated with the abuse she witnessed as a child. She withdrew herself from verbal conflict with Kererū as an adult, the same way she would with her father when she was a child. Riggs, Cusimano and Benson (2011) have suggested that victims of abuse develop "poor self-concept, low self-esteem and disorders of emotional regulation and impulse control" (p. 127) which may result in negative coping with IPV.

The participants' experiences suggest that, in intimate relationships, communication strategies and skills, and emotional engagement are mutually important in order to achieve the desired change within their relationships together. Despite the participants having experienced difficulties in the dissolution of their relationships, our analysis suggests that the participants not only cope with challenges and conflicts, but also consider that their everyday situations foster their growth and positive changes. The positive changes the participants experience include new possibilities of their lives and a greater sense of personal strength. In this sense, living with adversity can be harmful for the participants both emotionally and physically, but these situations can also encourage them to rethink their lives, re-evaluate what is important and develop strategies to achieving a future free from IPV.

Discussion and Conclusions

The presented research has explored the

factors that influence our participants to initiate, maintain and exit intimate relationships. The findings suggest that culture plays an important role in the way that our participants negotiate and maintain intimate relationships through acts of whanaungatanga, awhi and tautoko. They honour their ethnicities by using their culture to build what they consider to be better quality relationships. In this sense, cultural values provide a framework to bond, negotiate and interact with each other. This suggests that a focus on the strengths within te ao Māori can be used to incorporate Māori values into intimate relationships. For example, the collective nature of Māori emphasises the importance of iwi, hapū and whānau over the individual self (Walker, 1990).

The analysis demonstrates that self (re) construction is a crucial aspect during the dissolution phase of relationships. When the participants moved towards the end of their relationships they redefined themselves as autonomous beings. The analysis suggests that a holistic view of self and identity construction that considers the cultural context is needed in order to examine identity within intimate relationships.

For our participants, communication is important through different stages of their relationships. If there is open and honest communication along feeling, sharing and emotional engagement, the couple's ability to deal with conflict might be better resolved. When communication is manifested in an abusive way such as put downs and insults, our participants internalised their emotions and refused to engage in communication. As a result, the couples experienced breakdowns in communication that lead to an inability or an unwillingness to resolve relationship issues.

As the stories of Ruru and Tui indicate, intimate relationships do not exist in isolation. Rather, they are developed and constructed within the relational, cultural,

social, historical and political contexts. Individuals' cultural values, personal and cultural identities and communication styles collectively influence how they interact with intimate partners and the way they perceive themselves within the relationships. Developing this research out of a concern for IPV in Māori communities, we believe that understanding the nature of intimate relationship can provide us a window into preventative approaches to establishing more loving, compassionate and most of all, violence free intimate relationships.

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Glossary

<i>Māori</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>	<i>Māori</i>	<i>Meaning in English</i>
Awhi	Aid, help	Tautoko	To support
Hapū	Sub-tribe	Te ao Māori	The Māori world view
Hui	Gather, meeting	Te ao Pākehā	The Pākehā world view
Iwi	Tribe	Te koroneihana	The coronation of the Māori King or Queen
Karakia	Prayer	Te Matatini	The bi-annual National Māori performing arts competition
Kaupapa Māori	Māori-centred approach	Te mea te mea	And so on and so on
Kawa	Protocol	Te reo Māori	The Māori language
Kererū	Pigeon (used as a pseudo-name)	Tikanga	Custom
Koha	Gift	Tītī	Muttonbird (used as pseudo-name)
Kōhanga	Māori pre-school	Tui	Parson bird (used as pseudo-name)
Manaakitanga	Hospitality, kindness	Waiata	Song
Māori	Indigenous people of New Zealand	Wairua	Spirit, soul
Marae	Tribal meeting place	Weka	Wood-hen (used as pseudo-name)
Pākehā	Non-Māori	Whakapapa	Genealogy, ancestral connectedness
Poukai	Annual visits by the Māori King or Queen to marae in the Waikato area	Whānau	Family
Ruru	Morepork (used as pseudo-name)	Whanaungatanga	Relationship through shared connectedness
Tangihanga	Mourning, Māori death ritual		