Dignity, diversity, and resistance:  
A bicultural, community-led approach to transforming social responses to domestic violence in Aotearoa New Zealand  

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Social problems of domestic violence have been a focus of community and Government attention in Aotearoa New Zealand for over four decades. This article presents early research findings in a community-based social change project that focuses on acts of resistance to interpersonal violence. The praxis of the Tu Mai Awa project is informed by interweaving Māori protocols, principles, and values, with principles of Response-Based Practice, in which domestic violence is recognised as a gendered social problem that is supported by psychologising attributions and other discursive operations. In the first half of this article we present Tu Mai Awa’s framework for a biculturally sensitive and consistent approach to interventions with victims and perpetrators of violence, and to systems advocacy with organisations and institutions across the sector. In the second half of the article, we present findings of research conducted with project participants that aimed to better understand the scope of personal experiences that inform Tu Mai Awa practice. The findings are presented as a thematic analysis of diverse experiences leading to a common commitment to work for non-violent futures, and an analysis of the storylines for telling how we have come to our commitments for change.

In the decade from 2000-2010, New Zealand women experienced the highest rate of IPV [intimate partner violence], and specifically sexual violence from intimate partners, of any women in all Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries reporting (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2014, p.19).

Communities and Government in Aotearoa New Zealand have been attempting to address domestic violence as a social problem for over four decades. Statistical evidence of the significance of family violence as a social problem that urgently needs to be addressed is complex and controversial. Terms are not always defined consistently and analysed data is not always comparable. Population level studies are rare, and data is often collected from operational databases that change as operational policies and procedures change and are not designed for research (for further discussion, see Gulliver & Fanslow, 2012). Nevertheless, such sources remain the best available indicators of the scope of the problem. Data released by New Zealand Police show that there were 101,981 family violence investigations in 2014 and 62,923 family violence investigations where at least one child under the age of 16 years was linked to the investigation (New Zealand Family Violence Clearinghouse, 2015). This data provides evidence of high levels of domestic violence in a population of around 4 million people, however Police estimate that only 18-25% of family violence incidents are reported to them (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2014). These estimates suggest that the actual incidence of violence in New Zealand homes is much higher than Police data reveals.

For the purposes of the social change project discussed in this paper, we reflect on intimate violence using language commonly used in much of the literature and in the sector that deals with relationship violence.
The term ‘family violence’ broadly encompasses all forms of violence that occur in family relationships, including intimate partner violence, child abuse and neglect, elder abuse, and sibling abuse. ‘Domestic violence’ is often used synonymously with intimate partner violence and child abuse, which are closely connected because in the majority of situations where children are victims of family violence, women are also being victimised by their partners. It is currently the term used in legislation in Aotearoa New Zealand to encompass diverse forms of familial and close non-familial relationships (Domestic Violence Act, 2013). However, we are mindful that the use of common terminologies occludes social and cultural contexts in which movement against relational violence occurs (Stewart, 2004), and that the problematic use of broad terminologies is compounded at intersections of race, culture, gender, and language (Morgan & Coombes, 2013). We are also mindful that the term ‘violence’ is itself commonly associated with physical assault. This is an association that neglects other dynamics of relationship violence, for example in the use of coercive control operating through abusive strategies, tailored by intimate partners to the psychology of their victims (Family Violence Death Review Committee, 2014). Nevertheless, limitations arising from use of generic terms do not preclude recognition of the social problem of domestic violence. Although legislation and Government policy uses gender-neutral language, the wider community sector frequently recognises that domestic violence is more often a particular form of violence against women, which significantly affects New Zealand women and their children.

Communities became involved in addressing domestic violence well before any Government recognition of the problem. In the late 1970s, women’s refuges were established and the reform of legislation and policy that began in the mid-1980s was largely influenced by the advocacy and lobbying of community organisations, like refuge and rape crisis (Morgan & Coombes, 2013). Community responses to family violence have developed into co-ordinated networks that now include police, and sometimes specialist Family Violence Courts. Services offered to victims include safety assessments and planning, referrals to other social agencies including budgeting or housing services, alcohol and other drug services, children’s programmes and parenting support. Refuges still provide emergency accommodation, and often run safety programmes for women and children who have been victimised at home. Mobilising communities to sanction local responses to domestic violence is now recognised as a particularly effective strategy for addressing the harms done through domestic violence (Hann & Trewartha, 2015).

**Biculturalism: Three Houses**

Biculturalism emerged in Aotearoa New Zealand in the late 20th Century, in the context of political struggle by Māori to redress the social injustices of racism and the power of colonising dominance that dictates the terms by which Māori and Pākehā/tauiwi/non-Māori come together in partnerships (Coombes & Morgan, 2015; Smith, 1999). Complex and controversial, biculturalism serves as a symbolic system advocating for genuine partnership - a coalition - between Maori and Pākehā that enables space for indigenous self-determination (Bennett & Liu, 2017; Thomas & Nikora, 1996; Simon-Kumar, 2018). The understanding of biculturalism mobilised in this project is informed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) and Māori explanations of how the spirit and intent of Māori agreement to Te Tiriti can guide bicultural practice. In this study, we deploy the work of prominent Māori academic, Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (1998), who uses a metaphor of three houses to explain how a partnership of two cultures works from a perspective that is respectful of each culture. The three houses are the ‘Tikanga Māori House,’ the ‘Tikanga Pākehā House’ and the ‘Treaty House’. In te ao Māori, the Māori world, the human body takes on the form of a wharenui, or meeting house: face, arms, and thighs form the walls, the ribs and spine...
form the beams of the roof. *Wairua*, or spirit, embraces the whole, and the wellbeing of the whole is present in and through the *wairua* of the self and of the visitors. Royal’s three-houses model of biculturalism recognises that each party to Te Tiriti has their own *wharenui* in which to develop autonomously, and that both parties are committed to operating in concord, represented by the Tiriti/Treaty house, within which they come together to engage in dialogue and act in partnership.

**Tikanga Māori House**

Māori protocols, principles, and values are brought from the ‘Tikanga Māori House’ to guide partnerships between Māori and non-Māori. Relational practices of *whanaungatanga* enable participants to connect with one another through stories that build a sense of shared experiences and values. In what follows, we briefly reflect on five principles that provide specific guidance to the Tu Mai Awa social change project, using English interpretations of Māori protocols, and observing as we do so that language is powerfully interrelated with identity and belonging, so translation is always problematic. Words and phrases from one language do not neatly correspond with concepts that they may appear to resemble in other languages; thus our interpretative efforts are necessarily inadequate and contestable.

The principle of *whakamanawa* focuses attention on responsiveness to those journeying from states of oppression (all forms of abuse) to emancipation. The principle reminds us to encourage, inspire, and instil confidence to achieve, and to be free of subjugation. The principle of *whakapapa* challenges us to be mindful how people connect to one another and to places, events, activities, significant values, ideologies and beliefs. It reminds us to consider relational connectivity and how people are woven together. The principle of *manaakitanga* emphasises cooperative and interdependent acts of support, care, hospitality and protection of others that connect us through reciprocity and collaboration for mutual benefit. The principle of *rangitiratanga* concerns leadership, and recognises that leadership styles and approaches vary. *Rangitiratanga* values qualities such as integrity, negotiation skills, expertise, and wisdom, and includes styles of leadership that involve working collaboratively with others. Diversity is important and leaders of all kinds are recognised for the contributions of their different styles and qualities. Finally, the principle of *wairuatanga* brings spirit to the foreground. It is not only concerned with spiritual matters, but extends more broadly to a collective consciousness of the spirit of life, including all aspects of being Māori, and might be further extended in a more general sense to embrace all aspects of holistically located humanity.

**Tikanga Pākehā House**

From the ‘Tikanga Pākehā House’ we bring principles of Response-Based Practice (RBP), an approach to domestic violence interventions and advocacy in which domestic violence is recognised as a gendered social problem that is supported by the ways in which language shapes responses to violence, victims and perpetrators. Coates and Wade (2004, 2007) observed judicial predispositions in sexual assault trial judgments to account for sexual assaults by drawing on psychologising attributions such as alcohol and drug abuse, dysfunctional family upbringing, stress and trauma, and loss of control. Psychologising attributions engage with other linguistic devices to systematically reformulate deliberate acts of violence as non-deliberate and non-violent acts, through four specific discursive operations that limit the quality of social responses: by concealing violence, mitigating perpetrator responsibility, concealing victims' resistance, and blaming or pathologising the victim. This suggests that there is an indissoluble link between problems of violence and discursive practices of representing violence (Coates & Wade, 2004, 2007).

Response-Based Practice is guided by core principles concerning responses to violence (for further discussion, see Coates & Wade, 2004, 2007; Todd, Wade, &
Renoux, 2004; Wade, 1997; Weaver-Dunlop, Todd, Ogden & Craik, 2007). These principles cover the ubiquity of resistance to violence and abuse; the subtlety and ambiguity of some forms of resistance; and the purposefulness of violence and abuse.

Recognising that resistance to victimisation is present wherever there is violence and abuse, RBP acknowledges there are many situations in which victims act to avoid escalating violence against them. Acts of resistance may be virtually unrecognisable to anyone other than the victim herself. For example, a woman might borrow milk from a neighbour rather than risk asking for money to shop. The request to borrow milk is not easily recognised as an act of resistance to violence yet it is a purposeful act that serves to uphold her dignity and improve her safety.

Subtle acts of resistance are not easily discerned by those outside the relationship. Domestic violence is still often regarded as a ‘private matter’, and acts of resistance as well as acts of violence and abuse may be hidden from those who are not involved. Along with resisting violence, victims are often acting to resist negative social responses to their victimisation. Concealing or minimising violence may avoid responses like victim-blaming, or excusing the perpetrator. Subtle forms of resistance avert others’ negative judgements, including degrading responses. As a consequence resistance to abuse may be invisible to anyone other than the victim (Weaver-Dunlop et. al., 2007; Coates & Wade, 2004).

Often perpetrators also conceal their violence and present themselves to others as amiable and pleasant. They are aware of victims’ resistance to abuse even when victims are compliant to resist escalating violence. Perpetrators act to prevent victims from resisting. For example, a perpetrator might belittle his partner in front of someone from whom she could seek support to embarrass her and undermine any potential alliance for her safety.

RBP acknowledges that acts of violence and concealment are deliberate. Although some perpetrators claim that they are only abusive or violent when they lose control of their emotions, RBP emphasises their ability to be non-abusive and respectful. Treating perpetrators as agents with choices upholds their dignity and RBP aims to inspire perseverance in becoming free from violence.

The Treaty House

When brought together in the Treaty House, principles of tikanga Māori and Response Based Practice have enabled us to evolve a framework for a biculturally sensitive, consistent approach to interventions with victims and perpetrators of violence, and to systems advocacy with organisations and institutions across the sector. Through discussion and collaboration, learning from each other, and sharing our experiences we agreed four action initiatives: working reflexively, upholding dignity, intervening safely, and engaging social analysis.

Through reflexivity, Response-Based Practice mobilises language that reveals violence, clarifies perpetrator responsibility, honours victims' resistance and responses, and contests blaming and pathologising victims. Reflexivity involves acknowledging to ourselves and to others that language weaves us together and connects us as we work for social responses that inspire movement towards freedom from violence.

Dignity is crucial to healthy social relationships, and preserving dignity is central to our social organisation as an affirmation of social worth. We benefit through engaging in practices that uphold the dignity of others, and prioritise support, care, respect and collaboration. Concealing violence, blaming victims, and excusing perpetrators for their actions are social responses that do not accord victims, perpetrators, or our interconnectedness the dignity that we need for social and community wellbeing.

Whether we are working with victims, perpetrators, organisations, institutions, or each other, safety is our priority. Our understanding of safety includes not only eliminating abuse and preserving dignity, but also caring for and respecting diversity, maintaining our own and respecting others’
integrity, and collaborating and negotiating when we encounter challenges.

As we recognise that violence, abuse, dignity, and safety are social phenomena, we are obliged to acknowledge and understand our interconnectedness rather than treating people as autonomous individuals. By mobilising social analysis techniques in our work, we aim to open pathways and move towards a collective consciousness of communities free from violence.

**Tu Mai Awa**

At its heart, Tu Mai Awa is a community-based social change project that focuses on acts of resistance to interpersonal violence. The project is named for a Māori image of two rivers feeding into the same moana, a single body of water. This metaphor reflects ways in which the project operates additively alongside other initiatives responding to interpersonal violence, as well as parallel processes of working with individuals at the personal level and with agencies to achieve systemic change in wider society. The project involves a diverse range of practitioners, therapists, youth workers, educators, victim advocates, refuge workers, facilitators, lawyers, artists – anyone who is experienced in, or open to, incorporating Māori principles into their practice and wants to be involved in developing and advocating more positive social responses to domestic violence. There is no formal organisation involved with the community network of practitioners who are involved with Tu Mai Awa, and membership of the network is fluid. At the time we undertook this study, members who formed the project were employed in various service organisations that constitute the Family Violence sector, while others worked independently or were employees of organisations that were not specifically focused on Family Violence interventions, although they worked with clients affected by violence in their homes. The day to day work of the Tu Mai Awa community was and is diverse. Client work might involve individual women, men or children; group programmes for victims, perpetrators or children; and whānau based interventions or family work with Pākehā clients. Advocacy work could involve formal roles for representing and speaking for clients within the legal or welfare systems, being actively involved in community mobilisation to bring change in more community-based settings, or challenging practices within formal organisations where members of the group have opportunities to advocate for systems change. The research team have also been regarded as members of the network, although our roles are very different, and we maintain our relationships in the community through consultation on research rather than participating in RPB training, case reviews, or community action plans that other members of the network meet together to work on. While we are regarded as members of the community, we do not participate in research that we are conducting to ensure that no conflicts of interest arise. The diversity of practitioners and practices engaged by members of the Tu Mai Awa network respected our mutual commitment to various processes of social responsiveness to violence in our homes as well as the specificity and differences amongst ourselves, our communities and our clients.

**The Current Study**

As Tu Mai Awa has developed, many stories have been told among the practitioners in the context of reflexively questioning their responses to those who experience intimate violence. Each of these stories are different, each specific to practitioners whose courage and determination to resist intimate partner violence bring them to embark on journeys committed to ending its devastating impact on families, whānau, communities, and the turanga or foundations of our future, our children. Sometimes these stories are intertwined together as reflections on resistance, survival, struggle, and commitment to change. They converge and diverge among those who have spoken with us, rarely mapping neatly to reveal archetypes of domestic violence: those who are, or are not victims, those who do, or do not survive, those who have, or have not perpetrated abuse, and those who are, or are not respectful of the dignity of others. Yet in
their retelling, we locate shared understandings within our differences.

Consistent with how the practitioners of Tu Mai Awa value reflexivity, each other, and the diverse knowledge they bring to Tu Mai Awa’s praxis, they chose to focus the first research project on the stories of their own experiences. By gathering and analysing the practitioners’ stories, we aim to share understandings of the complex social issues we are addressing, and facilitate better understanding of our commitments, collaborations and the meanings of RBP work in our bicultural context.

Practitioners’ stories are also like a braided river – a network of discrete awa or waterways that interweave their paths. Each story has a standpoint that is unique, specific, and located within the social, cultural, and historical trajectories of the raconteur’s life. Yet along these discrete life-courses common themes emerge. These are the touch-points where stories overlap, where channels unite.

Method
Consistent with our aims to share and enrich our understandings, we sought research strategies that accommodated diversity, and that enabled us to analytically interpret the meanings of stories told by participants. Our research depended upon participant practitioners from the Tu Mai Awa project storying their everyday experiences and understandings of intimate family violence, and we aimed to honour the integrity of participant understandings by foregrounding their voices.

The design of our study is qualitative, employing semi structured interviews with the members of the project to gather their experiential stories. Experiential narrative studies are among many approaches to narrative research which are not prescriptive in their methods and are primarily concerned with understanding the meaning of participants’ experiences from their perspectives (Squire, Andrews & Tamboukou, 2013). In designing interviews, we were guided by Hydén’s (2014) teller-focused semi-structured interview principles, developed specifically for narrative interviews in sensitive areas to ensure that the researcher does not become the dominant party in the interview process. The interview schedule was structured around an open starter question asking about the participant’s experiences working in the area of family violence, leading up to their decision to join the Tu Mai Awa project. Prompts relating to experiences of social responses to victims and perpetrators as well as institutional responses and the participant’s interest and experience of RBP were available to facilitate story-telling should they be needed.

All of the Tu Mai Awa practitioners were invited to participate in the study and nine volunteered to be interviewed. Interviews were conducted by a member of the research team who did not have an ongoing relationship with the Tu Mai Awa project. Participants were assured that privacy would be protected, although it was acknowledged that some participants may wish to share their contribution to the research with others in the team. Interviews were transcribed by the interviewer and all identifying material removed. Participants were able to review and make changes to their transcripts before analysis took place. The ethical protocol for the study was reviewed by senior researchers, assessed as low risk and registered with the Massey University Human Ethics Committee.

In the first phase of our research, our goal has been to identify commonalities, and specifically focus our analysis to address how practitioners’ experiences of social responses to family violence inform their current knowledge and understanding of the work of responding to family violence. We addressed this goal by using a situated approach to thematic analysis of narrative data that acknowledges how each of us makes meaning of our experiences within a broader social context that impinges upon our personal constructions of meaning. At the same time, this approach maintains a focus on the material conditions and the limitations of our realities (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

We conducted a second phase of analysis to identify storylines through which the participants’ personal narratives were
organised. Following Mishler’s conceptualisation of narratives as “socially situated actions” and identity performances (2004, p.19), storylines contextualise the particularities of our personal accounts, and enabled insights to the situations and experiences of others based on plausibility of the storyline, rather than through some quantitative measure of the lived-world of the individual. By following the perspective of the participant, stories are understood holistically, and are able to connect seemingly diverse meanings and experiences (Murray & Sools, 2014). In this way, our narratives become political acts through which it is possible to move from the specific/singular to the more general/shared (Denzin, 2003).

**Thematic Analysis**

Six themes emerged from our thematic analysis: an intimacy with violence; an awakening of a social/political conscience; a sense of outrage at the injustice of victim-blaming and frustrations with “the system”; a recognition of a need for transformational interventions that orchestrate social change; a desire to foreground the diversity in the stories of those closest to violent relationships; and an urge to re-language those stories in order to counter toxic effects of psychologising attributions and other damaging linguistic devices. These are the themes that speak most clearly to our braided river, the similarities and differences in our commitments to the journey of transformation that draws us together. We discuss these themes in the following sections.

**Intimacy with Violence**

Our early experiences are quite different, yet there are intersections among our stories where we share intimate appreciations of the issues of domestic violence and loss of agency. Among us are survivors of domestic violence and child abuse, as well as sexual violence: 

*I grew up with a father who was at times violent . . . violence has always been part of my context* 
(Peter).

*I’ve had an interest in family violence and mental health because of my own kind of upbringing really* (Mātai).

So there was a lot of sexualised violence in my life when I was a child. Then when I was 22 a guy broke into my house. I went through the court process. He was up on charges of burglary and attempted rape... I went to go because he pleaded not guilty. He wasn’t guilty, wasn’t guilty. I had to go to court. They were going to make me testify. Then the morning of the court thing he changed his plea. So then they weren’t going to let me in (Gwen).

Gwen’s experiences as a client herself and her experiences of working with others speak to the marginalisation of victims within the justice system, and to the problematic outcomes of marginalisation:

*When I got to the door [of the courtroom] this security guard went, “Well who are you?” I said, “I want to go in there.” He said, “But you can only go in there if you are friends or family of the defendant.” . . . I was just mortified. I thought there’s no way one has to go through this.* (Gwen).

*A young woman that I’m working with . . . her father was incredibly violent towards her for years and years and years - she’s 19 now - but the courts kept making her go back to her father; she had to have shared custody. . . It ended up everyone was getting upset all the time so she would cover up her bruises; she would just cover it up and say, “No I’m okay . . . I’ve got this guy who absolutely abuses the crap out of me, a mother who wasn’t able to protect me and a system that didn’t protect me, I’m freaking out, I’m cutting (self-harming)”* (Gwen).
While coming from different backgrounds, where for the most part some of us felt “surrounded by love”, we seem to still share a similarly uneasy intimacy in our early life experiences with violence and powerlessness in various manifest forms. Tara tells of:

*A lot of different stories through many generations and on both sides of my family . . . [ranging from] extreme physical violence . . . [to] having to function in a very patriarchal sort of social environment (Tara).*

Some of us reprise our exposure to violence through becoming involved in women’s crisis initiatives. Marion describes her early volunteer work with Women’s Refuge as “a bit of an accident”, and something that she had no real attachment to initially. However, over time her engagement changed:

*Pretty much everything I was doing with my study somehow tracked back to family violence and that just carried on right through (Marion).*

Peter’s early involvement in setting up and running a provincial youth centre parallels these experiences:

*Most of the kids that came down to the youth centre . . . were from families where there was violence (Peter).*

Mātai’s experience in a mental health setting also speaks to the extent that we recognised the pervasiveness of domestic violence in our particular work contexts:

*I was working in the [mental health unit at . . .] with people from the moderate to severe end of mental health. I did see quite a bit of [domestic] violence and I don’t think that was because of the mental health stuff (Mātai).*

**Awakening Social/Political Conscience**

Awakening our social and political consciousness thematically braids together the various moral trajectories that support our commitment to transforming domestic violence. For Tara, her development has been shaped by her parents: role models of social awareness and the moral responsibility to take action in pursuit of liberation from oppressive social structures:

*It just transformed my way of thinking about how people relate to one another and I just thought that was such a cool thing (Tara).*

As Tara’s awareness of global issues of social injustice around her has grown, so too has her awareness of the finer nuances of social disharmony in her immediate surroundings:

*When you see around you what you believe to be social injustice, whether it’s people having more than others, like, you know, the disparity between rich and poor or people being discriminated against . . . you become aware of it happening in the world . . . and then you start to notice it in your own community as well (Tara).*

For Peter, growing up in a wider context of pervasive violence and social revolution had a similar impact on his pathway to work in family violence.

*There was lots of violence . . . [but also] really amazing scenes of freedom and justice . . . during high school became I guess interested in issues of social justice . . . issues of oppression, and, sort of, the antidotes for that (Peter).*

Hana’s pathway has been influenced by her work in conflicting jurisdictions of the law – working in the criminal court to defend perpetrators of family violence, while working in the family court to protect victims of domestic violence. Hana understands her movement between these two worlds by recognising that the offenders are themselves often victims of systemic intergenerational inequalities:

*Just that child with that mother in the family court, that has been failed by the system at some level, or who has seen that violence and then becomes that perpetrator (Hana).*

Underlying these different pathways is a common interest in issues of social justice.
Participants talk of a “sense of fairness” and of the injustices of oppression, poverty, and powerlessness. They recount stories involving negative social responses to victims of violence, and in these discourses they give voice to stories that honour victim resistance. All talk of wanting to make a difference at a systemic level, to transform, rather than ameliorate, social conditions that lend themselves to violent outcomes. They voice frustration and feelings of powerlessness to effect these changes:

*Everything’s all ambulance at the bottom of the cliff stuff... there’s nothing proactive about what we’re doing. We’re trying to keep women and children safe and, you know, we talk about being political and try to create social change but not effectively (Marion).*

The underlining principle for me... is acknowledging that these people have mana and dignity and being able to uphold that and nurture that, sometimes draw that out of themselves, and to help maybe restore, enhance, rebuild, reframe their own dignity [so] that they have power (Reiko).

### Victim-blaming and Tensions with the “System”

Some of us give voice to tensions in relationships with police, corrections, and the courts. Prevailing discourses of discrimination and marginalisation of the poor and the mentally unwell, and how dominant cultural and social representations of domestic violence all too often privilege the masculine viewpoints and the ‘old-boy networks’, stifle the voices of victims:

*Our police don’t understand the DVA [Domestic Violence Act]. They don’t understand how domestic violence works and they don’t train effectively (Marion).*

Quite a lot of people, I think, are really suspicious of the police, you know, have had really bad experiences with them, if not in their own lifetimes, then intergenerationally... one of the advocates was telling me her own family stories about pretty awful police discrimination... you can sort of understand why people wouldn’t necessarily want to go to the police (Tara).

There is also talk of strategies that fail to respond respectfully to the victims’ experiences of and resistance to intimate violence. For instance, when women complain of feelings of intimidation and harassment, police may mitigate the perpetrator’s responsibilities by misinterpreting breaches of protection orders:

*A cop didn’t believe that the protection order had been breached because the address wasn’t the address on the protection order so totally missed the fact that actually it’s a protected person not a protected address (Marion).*

When we acquiesce to our partner’s intimidation and demands because resistance is more emotionally and physically damaging, institutionalised systems responses too often mutualise domestic violence, misunderstanding subtle resistances by assuming that both parties are somehow ‘at fault’ for their part in a ‘dysfunctional’ relationship:

*A cop said it’s not a breach of a protection order because she had invited him to the house (Marion).*

Some participants identified that the majority of judges are white, middle-class men, with little personal experience of the issues that they encounter in court. We also perceive a difficulty in speaking of psychological abuse, with an accompanying sense of intangible issues, which are difficult to evidence in compelling ways within the context of the current judicial environment:

*How do you evidence someone who has been controlling and manipulating and terrifying and intimidating (Marion).*

*If the violence had been physical then my ex-partner would have been arrested years before (Shelley).*
Rather than seeing these intangible abuses clearly represented during court hearings, several of us experience the frustrations of victim-blaming processes at play, while perpetrators deflect attention away from their actions:

Or men can’t control their violence or the violator can’t control it and she somehow, or the victim somehow asked for it; so that if she dares disclose it to anybody then somehow she’s done something wrong by pressing charges (Mātai).

I’ve talked about mana, that kind of mana and that strength that sits around women who’ve experience violence because they’ve had to be strong to survive. But it’s not acknowledged socially, that strength; we’re seen as victims. Or if we’re seen as survivors there’s still a stigma and a stereotype that sits around how victims sometimes get blamed for being victims – because obviously there’s some sort of deficit that’s enabled you to be a victim (Shelley).

Tara reprises the theme of failure to respond respectfully to victims’ experiences of intimate violence and the casual institutionalisation of victim-blaming in her description of the police response to a woman reporting her rape:

She was a pain in the arse . . . picked her up heaps of times . . . she’s mentally ill . . . she’s, you know, a prostitute . . . she was definitely considered a second class citizen and not worthy of decent respectful treatment and decent inquiry (Tara).

Need for Transformational Interventions

While ameliorative interventions aim to promote well-being, transformative interventions also address imbalances in power relationships and seek to eliminate systemic causes of oppression and marginalisation. Members of Tu Mai Awa share recognition of a need for transformational interventions that orchestrate social change:

Systems currently kind of make it just difficult you know. They actually make it make it more difficult than easier (Peter).

When we have stories in New Zealand about people’s resistance being honoured . . . men’s dignity being upheld because we believe that they are capable of being respectful and loving and caring and all those things and that language or those stories are starting to permeate through affidavits, and media reports . . . that would mean that we’re on the right track (Peter).

Unless attitudes change and actually change across a really really broad social framework it’s [domestic violence] not going to change (Marion).

I see Tu Mai Awa as an opportunity to decolonise a whole lot of Pākehā . . . I see Tu Mai Awa as being a way to āwhi [help] our Māori colleagues in so they don’t have to be judged for their tohu [mark or qualification] (Gwen).

Foregrounding Diversity

Resistance to violence is often unspoken, marginalised, or homogenised so that representations of violence re-produce static images of those who are subjected to intimate violence. One of the goals of including research within Tu Mai Awa is to gather and disseminate multiple stories, in many voices, to thicken resistances to violence. As with our desire to affect transformational interventions, members of Tu Mai Awa also share commitment to valuing diversity in the stories of those who are closest to violent relationships, for in diversity is strength. Our different pathways, standpoints, life-stages, understandings, and experiences come together to contest totalising stereotypes of domestic violence, to help highlight the pervasiveness of
domestic violence, and to honour acts of resistance in all their many forms and contexts:

Each client and family is going to be different and they’re going to be moving at different speeds around. Some are going to be entering into violence or they’re still in violent relationships. You can have others who are trying to get out of violent relationships. You can have others that are wanting to stay in those violent relationships but make things better. And then you’ve got others that are wanting to maybe just break off altogether. So you’ve got different families working in different spaces, different paths of the awa (Reiko).

[We have] an incredibly diverse bunch of women all with very strong perspectives of what they wanted to do themselves, all with their own understandings of what their experience of violence had been to them (Shelley).

Re-Languaging

Dominant discourses that are used to describe domestic violence often conceal violence, mitigate perpetrator responsibility, conceal the resistance and responses of the victim, and sediment insidious practices of victim-blaming. Tu Mai Awa seeks to re-language those descriptions to reveal violence, to clarify and illuminate perpetrator responsibility, and to give voice to, and honour, the resistance and responses of victims.

As might be expected of discussions on Tu Mai Awa, many of us raise concerns regarding dominant representations of domestic violence in discourse. Tara describes working at a rape crisis centre, which the women involved renamed so as to reclaim and repurpose their place as a healing space (Tara, 96-98). Reiko and Shelley reflect on the power of language to mitigate the act of the perpetrator by relocating the problem of violence within individuals, moving responsibility from perpetrator to victim, and objectifying victims:

We get caught up in the language of victim, we get caught up in the language of all of the words around family violence and label them (Reiko).

It frustrates me so much watching news reports with the way language is used to describe victims of violence and to implicate them. Even well-meaning people. I’ve come across a few when I’ve approached people to want to do things for group and they’re like, “Oh, those poor women.” I feel like saying, “Well, actually you’re talking to one of them and I don’t feel like a poor woman, so hold fire on the pity” (Shelley).

Marion reflects on how responsibility for abuse is dispersed through the relationship, and the re-languaging approach that Tu Mai Awa takes in terms of change agency:

You cannot talk about an abusive relationship. A relationship cannot be abusive, you know, it’s impossible, it’s ridiculous (...).

If we change language then we start to make shifts. Some things become ridiculous to say, and their very ridiculousness . . . creates change (Marion).

We have told and heard many stories of domestic violence, each different, each specific to its storyteller. In these stories are multiple accounts of resistance, survival, struggle, and commitment to change. Through narrative analysis we have identified six themes that braid together to provide us with understandings of the experiences that have brought us together. When organised temporally, we have located storylines within our narratives that speak to our diverse experiences of involvement with, and exposure to, domestic violence and that come together in an emerging and shared awareness of political change. In the following section, we present three distinct
storylines of transformation.

**Storylines Analysis**

As socially active identity performances (Mishler, 2004), storylines were identified in the second phase of our analysis so that we could share both the themes and the plots that enable diversity to be represented among Tu Mai Awa practitioners. From our analysis, we acknowledge two distinct types of storylines: those which tell of first-hand experience of domestic violence, and those which tell of learning about domestic violence from political environments, whether through socio-political initiatives, family, or formal education. Within storylines of first-hand experience, there are two trajectories in stories of experience of domestic violence from an early age and stories of growing up in ‘safe’ environments only to experience domestic violence as an adult. There is a convergence in all three storylines around an emerging commitment to developing a community of change. We have observed this convergence after a process of politicisation that gives the protagonist a sense of social justice in relation to domestic violence. The three exemplars we have chosen illustrate these distinctive ways in which domestic violence is braided through the lived experiences of participants in Tu Mai Awa.

**Gwen: Keep Reaching Out**

Gwen talked of a sense of pervasiveness in the violence that she recalls from her childhood: violence towards farm animals, violence between Gwen and her brothers and their mother, violence that followed her with every relocation to a new community:

*Physical and emotional and psychological abuse are huge with my entire childhood. There was just loads of it. Loads and loads and loads of it. We moved around a lot so I would see it all the time.*

Testimony in her accounts of patterns of sexualised violence in her childhood is re-enacted later in her life. As reported in relation to the theme ‘intimacy with violence’, Gwen was 22 years old, when a man broke into her house to burgle the property, and attempted to rape her at knifepoint. When the case came to court, and the offender pleaded guilty, Gwen was denied access to the courtroom:

*I was just mortified. I thought there’s no way one has to go through this . . . I just remember being so dumbfounded by that I was treated again as an outsider.*

Tensions in being ‘othered’ through systemic failures reverberated through Gwen’s accounts of her treatment as a child and are exemplified in her treatment at the hands of the courts during her attacker’s trial.

Gwen’s narrative is saturated with a long-standing determination to effect change in her own situation and in her communities. As a child she pushed back, stood up for abused others, located herself in peer support leader roles, and became the one that other kids would seek out for support. Her sense of outrage at abuse around her was strong:

*I did speeches and that stuff. I was always into debating, always challenging authority.... Always standing up to teachers if I felt something was unfair. I remember I got strapped when I was 11 or 12 [for speaking out].... Well, the only way I kind of knew how to stand up some of the time was to hit back. But yeah I was always doing that kind of stuff.*

A sense of outrage at the plight of people who have had a ‘rough deal’ continued into Gwen’s adult life:

*[Victims are] on the back foot with the justice system right from the go. This innocent until proven guilty is really one sided; there is no innocence given to the victim . . . there’s no āwhi, there’s no support around them.*

Her interests in helping victims of domestic violence are interwoven throughout her narrative. Gwen’s contact with social services supporting victims of violence and sexual violence has motivated her to
undertake study and work with counselling services to enhance wellbeing and outcomes for women and young people.

**Shelley: Making Things Beautiful**

In contrast to Gwen’s childhood experiences of intimate violence, Shelley’s narrative located her own experiences of domestic violence in her 13 year relationship with an abusive partner, living in a remote rural area. She recalled a relationship spiralling through the complexities of abusive behaviours from an intimate partner. The acts of violence and abuse against her took many insidious forms:

- "A lot of the violence that I experienced wasn’t physical, that was emotional, psychological, spiritual, financial, everything except, and it was only at the very end it became physical. If the violence had been physical then my ex-partner would have been arrested years before.

Non-physical forms of abuse were devastating for Shelley, and she constantly questioned her sanity:

- "For me the violence was hard to understand. You do feel like you’re mad. No one else thinks there’s anything wrong and so for 13 years you’re kind of questioning yourself the whole time.

Resistance wasn’t something that she understood or acknowledged until she left the relationship. In retrospect, it seemed impossible to recognise resistance when it felt so futile, and its outcomes ineffective:

- "When I suddenly realised that I’d resisted consistently throughout that relationship. I guess personal resistance isn’t acknowledged often especially if it’s not seen to be changing the violence.

Nevertheless, she found an inner resolve. In Shelley’s recognition of her resistance, she discovered beauty, inspiration and creative freedom:

- "My way of resisting was to make things beautiful; so I stencilled roses on the walls, I planted them in the garden, I bought plates for them. I just had this thing and I couldn’t understand at the time why I needed to have them around me but I think it came to represent something that couldn’t be touched - the power of the mind and the spirit to kind of still remain untouched when your body and yourself is constantly being berated and put down and made to feel less.

Unable to verbalise her experiences, Shelley exposed the complexity of her stories of abuse through art. She described a sense of ‘responsibility’ to explain her art in ways that challenged and confronted the essentialised deficits of ‘vulnerable victim/survivor’ stereotypes. Through these activities she was empowered to privilege her own standpoint and her self-constructed knowledge, rather than the standpoint of her abuser, an essential dimension in her healing process.

Finding inspiration and an emerging sense of commitment to social justice in the therapeutic effects of her own artistic endeavours, Shelley established a women’s collective where other women who had experienced violence could engage in artistic activities to acknowledge their own dignity and resistances to violence:

- "What I got was an incredibly diverse bunch of women all with very strong perspectives of what they wanted to do themselves, all with their own understandings of what their experience of violence had been to them. . . We’re able to see outside of ourselves to understand other people’s pity, other people’s pain. Not with pity but with the desire to actually empower them and make them feel strong.

**Tara: Transforming my Thinking**

Unlike the first-hand experiences of Gwen and Shelley, Tara’s story is an exemplar of the stories of those of us who have learned about domestic violence from political environments. Tara described a
childhood ‘surrounded by love’, in a large family, with four generations under the same roof. Her parents were active supporters of social justice, and one of Tara’s earliest memories was of marching with her parents in 1981 in protest at the Springbok tour of Aotearoa New Zealand. Those were deeply divisive times: while rugby fans packed the football grounds, anti-tour protestors clashed with police in the surrounding streets. Tara’s experience of that protest with her parents in a small South Island township left a lasting impression on her. She described tour supporters:

> Seething rage, and yelling abuse, and throwing eggs and one landed on dad’s foot, it was really scary for me, on his boot and he looked down at me and he just said ‘don’t worry, they’re just really afraid’ and I looked up at him and it just really transformed my way of thinking about how people relate to one other.

Even so, Tara was not completely cocooned from domestic violence. She told us stories of other family members who had experienced violence and forms of abuse that she did not directly experience:

> Varying levels of violence from . . . extreme physical violence to just perhaps more of a situation. Not so much physical violence but just ongoing, sort of having to function in a very sort of patriarchal sort of social environment.

Her work in domestic violence services was also facilitated through relatives:

> Quite a lot of my aunties were involved in this little organisation . . . I really learnt so much more about the area of violence against women and how it kind of operates on so many different social levels from you know really interpersonal right out to societal level.

Tara took over coordination of the collective, and extended her skills in support and advocacy, and in liaison work with police and rural health services in communities throughout the province she lived in. Her commitment to social justice developed further during her tertiary studies, and her postgraduate studies explored experiences of intimate partner violence. She has continued her education while working. There is a thread of consistency in Tara’s orientation to working with her clients that can be traced back to her childhood:

> Upholding dignity is just so crucial . . . that for me would be the number one central guiding principle in not just the way that you work with clients but the way that you try and interact with everybody that you come into contact with and the way you think about your interactions with people and just questioning all the time is this upholding that person’s dignity.

**Convergence on Commitment**

Our storyline analysis identifies three kinds of narrative plots that participants engaged to organise their identity stories in the context of their diverse situations. Each of these storylines follows a trajectory from different encounters with domestic violence towards shared commitment to developing a community of change. Amongst those with first-hand experience of domestic violence, some have grown up in ‘at risk’ environments, whilst others have grown up in ‘safe’ environments only to experience domestic violence as an adult. Others have had no intimate experience of domestic violence in their closest relationships, even though violence in some forms has touched our lives. Despite these differences, all three storylines converge as the protagonists politicise a sense of social justice in relation to addressing domestic violence:

> Gwen: I work with family violence every day because the sexualised violence is happening within it. And again rangatahi or teenagers are actually more hurt by the responses of the whānau even than they are by the sexualised violence a lot of the
time.

Shelley: I kind of tried to set up a bit of a programme of things, experiences that I wanted them to have which would allow them to make work which would give them a voice. . . . It also acknowledged the positives, things like we are beautiful people, we are strong people, we’re here, we’re doing this.

Tara: It’s like a shared understanding of [bicultural Response Based Practice] really makes sense, this way of working with people and for people, families and whanau, individuals and communities and we really need it urgently. It’s a way of working with families and people who have experienced violence and oppression and abuse and control.

Critically important to the endpoint of each storyline within the community of Tu Mai Awa participants is their sense of the harm perpetrated by socially unjust responses to domestic violence and their dedication to responses that respect the strengths, resistances and dignity of those whose lives are affected by violence in their homes.

Conclusion

Whilst social problems of domestic violence have long been a focus of community and Government attention in Aotearoa New Zealand, our women continue to experience the highest rate of intimate partner violence of any women in all OECD countries. The Tu Mai Awa project team is committed to addressing this issue, by honouring the diversity of resistances to violence that are already in practice within our communities. We share an understanding that psychologising attributions and other linguistic devices are commonly used in institutional discourses to realise and maintain social power relations that sustain intimate violence in our homes. Such dominant re-presentations of violence re-produce static pathologising images of those who are subjected to intimate violence, and act to conceal violence, mitigate perpetrator responsibility, and conceal diverse strategies used to resist violence.

An interweaving of protocols, principles, and values, from Māori and Pākehā worlds, provides a framework for a sensitive and consistent approach to praxis with victims and perpetrators of violence, and to systems advocacy across the sector. This bicultural approach has helped us to maintain and honour the dignity of the diverse experiences and multiple representations of participants and provides us with a mechanism that thickens resistances to violence by promoting understandings of collaborations and experiences.

In the next phase of our research collaboration, we will extend our analysis of Tu Mai Awa members’ stories to study the specific ways in which discourse can be taken up to challenge the operations of language that support harmful social responses to intimate violence. Discourse analysis will also help identify any of the resources we are using that could be inhibiting shared commitment to re-languaging intimate violence, so as to produce more positive social responses that support safety and dignity in our homes and communities.

Much remains to be done to address social problems of domestic violence in Aotearoa New Zealand. The issue is fraught with complexities along multiple intersections of race, gender, and many other cultural and historical dimensions within our society. Addressing linkages between problems of violence and discursive practices of representation is one of many initiatives, but it is an important strategy in our efforts to construct a safer future for the most vulnerable members of our society.
References


Notes

1 Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi) was signed in 1840 as an agreement between the British Crown and various Māori hapū and iwi (sub-tribal and tribal) leaders on the governance of Aotearoa. The text of Te Tiriti originally signed at Waitangi was written in te reo (Māori language). There are different English translations of the text and differences between English and Māori versions of the text. Most significantly, Māori sovereignty and authority is retained in the Māori text but ceded to the British Crown in the English versions (Network Waitangi, 2015).

2 Whānau is the core social unit for te Ao Māori (the Māori world) (Smith, 1999) and although often translated as ‘extended family’ it is more complex and dynamic than any western equivalent. In the context of Tu Mai Awa, whānau is used in a kaupapa (shared principles, purpose, agenda) sense and whanaungatanga means constituting a group “as if they are a whānau… to identify a series of rights and responsibilities, commitments and obligations, and supports that are fundamental to the collectivity. These are the tikanga (customs) of the whānau; warm interpersonal interactions, group solidarity, shared responsibility for one another, cheerful cooperation for group ends, corporate responsibility for group property, material or nonmaterial (e.g. knowledge), items and issues. These attributes can be summed up in the words aroha (love in the broadest sense, including mutuality), awhi (helpfulness), manaaki (hospitality), and tiaki (guidance) (Bishop, Ladwig & Berryman, 2014, p.189).

3 We acknowledge work done by Leland Ruwhiu and Moana Eruera to develop these principles for practice. For further discussion, see Ruwhiu (2009).

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Tony Mattson is a doctoral researcher and recipient of the Vice Chancellor’s Doctoral Scholarship at Massey University. He is using feminist and postmodernist theory and Deleuzean ontological theory to critically read experiences and intervention outcomes for migrant men who have perpetrated intimate partner violence. His research interests focus on interfaces in intimate partner violence; historical, social, and cultural conditions of masculinities; and the use of ethical activism in social research to challenge assumptions and discourses that nourish unjust social, political, and economic structures.