



Wairua, identity, and belonging: Centring Māori narratives to seek restoration and wellbeing

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Abstract

Centring wairua alongside Māori understandings and ways of being offers a pathway for the discipline of psychology to boldly take up the challenge of transformational change. In the context of the long-awaited response to the 2018 Waitangi Tribunal claim highlighting failures of the discipline and the Crown to ensure an equitable and culturally competent workforce, there is a timely opportunity for psychology in Aotearoa to embody the aspirations of Te Tiriti o Waitangi through engaging with an ethic of restoration (Jackson, 2021). Drawing on narratives of wairua and experiences of psychological distress, healing, and recovery, we explore how Māori have made meaning of their identity and belonging. We look to Māori experiences and understandings to chart a way forward for psychology that prioritises restoration.

Keywords: Māori psychology, wairua, Indigenous spirituality, identity, belonging, narrative

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Introduction

Nō hea, nā wai, ko wai. Our revered phrases to inquire, to express, 'Who are you, who am I.' With reverence we ask, we are asked, 'Who do you come from, who do you belong to, who are you?'

In response, poised upon pride and grace, we speak, 'Nō hea, nā wai, ko wai tēnei.' This is our privilege, 'I am of this mountain, I am of these waters, I am of this land, I belong to this people. I belong.'

Sometimes we yearn. We yearn to know belonging more, deeply. We yearn to be māori. Yes, māori (adj.), naturally, freely, of this land. We yearn to know intimately the pull in our chests, in our stomachs, in our feet. The pull that speaks, 'You belong.'

May you hear us speak, 'Nō hea, nā wai, ko wai. I am, I belong.' May you know us. Most of all, may we know ourselves.

When we as Māori talk about wairua, we are invoking identity, belonging, and what it means to be Māori. Likewise, when we talk about what it means to be Māori, inherent in this is whakapapa (genealogy) and our connection to whenua (land), our relationship with the natural environment, identification with collectives of whānau, hapū, and iwi, as well as our experiences of energies, seen and unseen. Indeed, wairua and spiritual ways permeate a Māori world so profoundly that it is inconceivable to consider one divorced of the other (Te Awekotuku, 1990).

Wairua is fundamental and innate to being Māori (Marsden 1992; Valentine, 2016). For Pere (1997), wairua reflects two complementary energies, and likewise Kohu-Morgan (2018) describes wairua as representative of a dual nature. Māori cosmology and narratives comprise many dualities; te kore, both the void and limitless potential, te pō, te ao mārama, darkness and light, unknowing and knowing, and Papatūānuku and Ranginui as eminent symbols of the balance of feminine and masculine (Mikaere, 2011). Dual qualities are also embodied in our being as Māori, te ira atua and te ira tangata, the divine and human, feminine and masculine, and we are both tapu and noa, sacred and ordinary. These symmetries and balance of energies are encompassed in wairua and give meaning to our sense of belonging and identity.

Drawing on narratives of wairua and experiences of psychological distress, healing, and recovery, in this article we explore how Māori have made meaning of their identity and belonging. We propose that by centring wairua and foregrounding Māori

understandings and ways of being, the discipline and practice of psychology can be transformed.

Closely entwined with wairua is identity belonging, and whakapapa. Who we are, 'ko wai', is a central ethos to Māori life. Whakapapa represents connections between past, present, and future generations, providing a genealogical narrative, tracing ancestors and layers of descent to Māori cosmology. An understanding of whakapapa therefore emphasises connection with the earth, while grounding and locating us in place and time, and affirming belonging and identity (Te Rito, 2007). Attachment to whenua is embedded in a Māori worldview, traditions, and narratives, such that landmarks become tied to identity (Mikaere, 2011; Walker, 2004). Furthermore, our expressions in te reo Māori of connection to place and collectives convey our belonging and integration with whenua and the natural world in a bodily way (Bishop, 1998).

Fundamental to an Indigenous Māori psychology is wairua (Valentine, 2016). The significance of wairua to wellbeing is reiterated in foundational models of health, namely Te Whare Tapa Whā (Durie, 1985, 2001) and the Meihana Model (Pitama et al., 2007, 2017). Consistent across Māori models of wellbeing are the themes of integration and balance. Individual health is considered in the context of the environment and wider systems; there are no clear-cut distinctions between spiritual, psychological, physical, and collective (Durie, 2001). These most sacred matters of te ao Māori (the Māori world), wairua and mātauranga (Māori knowledges), are valid and legitimate, and so too are the ways we as Māori engage with our identities and experience belonging in contemporary settings. That is to say, we are not defined by colonisation, nor are our worldviews or knowledges. Essential to processes of decentring oppressive structures is the insistence by those who have been oppressed to be self-determining (hooks, 1990). Following we detail the intent and impacts of colonisation, with the primary aims being to emphasise the need and potential for transformational change in psychology in Aotearoa.

Te Tiriti re-affirmed Māori tino rangatiratanga (independence) and envisaged the strengthening of relationships and interdependence between Māori and the Crown (Jackson, 2021). Importantly, Te Tiriti also acknowledged Māori spiritual customs and assured freedom of religion and spirituality (Waitangi Tribunal, 2014). Yet, the impacts of colonisation are wide-reaching and do not spare even revered aspects of culture or spiritual beliefs:



The soul of the people, the essence of their being, exists within the warmth of their culture; it is nurtured and sheltered by the wisdom of their history and philosophy. To oppress a people, to set in place the bloody success of colonisation, it is necessary to destroy the soul. For the Māori, the attack on their soul was to be so terrible it would lead to a weakening of faith in all the things that had nourished it. The demeaning of the values, which cherished it, the language, which gave meaning to its soul, the law, which gave it order, and the religion, which was its strength, was to ultimately affect the belief of the Māori in themselves. (Jackson, 2018, p. 95).

Wolfe (2006) is unequivocal in the assertion that settler colonialism seeks the elimination of Indigenous peoples and ways of being, on the premise of obtaining and maintaining territories and lands. Elimination of Indigenous peoples can take many forms, from violence and fatalities through to assimilation. Indeed, a tenet of colonisation is about recreating peoples in the image of the coloniser, and this extends to spiritual beliefs and practices (Mikaere, 2011). The brutality of settler colonialism in the history of Aotearoa is well-documented; land confiscations, warfare, dispossession and exclusion of culture and language, assimilatory strategies, and other injustices (e.g., Walker, 2004). This is mirrored in contemporary settings in the ongoing structural racism and inequities throughout our nation's systems and institutions. To this end, White supremacy is a feature of our history, and it continues to be enacted structurally and practically. It is a jarring term, White supremacy, and it is often mistakenly thought to be exclusively the realm of extremist groups and ideologies. But, as DiAngelo (2019) summarises, White supremacy refers to the long-established systems and structures of dominance that centre and privilege people and groups defined and perceived as White, based on the assumed superiority of Whiteness. Use of the term White supremacy is thus a potent means to name and acknowledge structural power in Aotearoa. Psychology is not exempt from this, and indeed being White is elevated in psychology (Buchanan et al., 2021), and in systems where psychology operates in Aotearoa, namely health, education, and justice (Reid et al., 2019).

Presently there is long-awaited response from psychology in Aotearoa to the 2018 claim to Te Rōpū Whakamana i Te Tiriti o Waitangi (the Waitangi Tribunal) regarding the failures of the discipline and the Crown to ensure an equitable and culturally competent workforce. The discipline thus has a timely opportunity to pursue the aspirations of Te Tiriti through engaging with what Jackson (2021)

describes as an ethic of restoration. Such an ethic can be likened to decolonisation, but it extends beyond efforts to deconstruct established structural power, with a restorative motive to seek balance in relationships and to assert the rights of Māori to self-determination. Underpinned by values that prioritise relational ways of being, an ethic of restoration emphasises the importance of people and life in the world around us.

With the hopes envisaged in Te Tiriti and an ethic of restoration in mind, we return to the principal proposition of this paper, that by centring wairua and Māori worldviews, the discipline of psychology can be transformed. A distinguishing feature of Māori understandings lies in the holistic conceptualisation of wellbeing. The term *tangata whaiora*, and abbreviation *whaiora*, denoting a person seeking wellness (Opai, 2020), have become common and are used in place of client, patient, or service user throughout psychology and mental health practice. This aligns with descriptions of recovery in Aotearoa, as living well in the community, whereby each person defines for themselves what living well means (Mental Health Commission, 2012). Moreover, *tangata whaiora* fundamentally signals a self-directed process, rather than a process of treatment that is enacted upon a person. Processes of seeking wellness are often conceptualised by Māori in terms of healing, which is subjective, self-determined, and focused on restoring psychological and spiritual wellbeing (Durie, 2001). Certainly, for Māori and Indigenous peoples alike, seeking wellness entails holistic healing alongside restoring a relational and interdependent way of being in the world (Blume, 2021, NiaNia et al., 2017).

Recurring themes emerge in the literature about Māori lived experience of psychological distress regarding the culturally significant and unique characteristics of wellness, healing and recovery, and mental health care access for Māori (Barnett & Lapsley, 2006; Lapsley et al., 2002). Practices that centre *tikanga* (customs) were valued, namely use of *karakia* (prayer or blessing), *whanaungatanga* as a process to develop relationships, connections with *kaumātua* (elders) and *tohunga* (healing experts), and access to *rongoā* (traditional healing practices). There were benefits for wellbeing through access to *te ao Māori* including affirming Māori identity, developing knowledge of *whakapapa*, as well as learning and practicing *te reo Māori* (Māori language), *tikanga*, and *waiata* (song). Furthermore, connections with *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi*, and affiliation with *tūrangawaewae* (place of belonging) were experienced as positive and beneficial (Barnett



& Lapsley, 2006; Lapsley et al., 2002; L. Pere, 2006; Waitoki et al., 2015; Wharewera-Mika, 2012). Notably, the significance of Māori identity has been consistently emphasised and to affirm, reclaim, and rediscover who one is as Māori is an important part of the pathway toward recovery and wellness (Fenton & Te Koutua, 2000; L. Pere, 2006).

The aims of this paper are to explore pertinent narratives and meaning making of wairua, belonging, and identity for Māori. In doing so, we look to Māori experiences and understandings to chart a way forward for psychology that prioritises restoration. The findings presented draw from a larger project which was an inquiry about Māori narratives of wairua and how wairua is experienced and understood in relation to psychological distress, healing, and recovery (Brittain, 2022).

Methods

The research involved developing a Kaupapa Māori narrative approach. Kaupapa Māori theory was the interpretive framework, determining the foundations and shaping the research project throughout. Essential to Kaupapa Māori theory is tino rangatiratanga and self-determination (G. H. Smith, 2017), which influenced the aims, processes, and presentation of the research. This entailed a reclamation of space to validly engage in research about mātauranga (Bishop, 1998). Kaupapa Māori theory is also the avenue by which the research engages in critique of prevailing systems of power are, and simultaneously embodies the struggle for emancipation (L. T. Smith, 2012).

Narrative methodologies were integrated, with an emphasis on Māori and Indigenous approaches. Lee (2009) frames pūrākau (traditional narratives) as a methodological tool to bring together narrative inquiry and Māori knowledges. Embedded in pūrākau are the philosophies, constructs, and lifeways essential to Māori identity. Pūrākau thus offer a paradigm for interpreting the world and human experiences in ways that are specific to Māori. To employ Kaupapa Māori theory and practice by way of pūrākau methodology is an act of reclamation; Māori narratives offer legitimate ways of telling, representing, and researching Māori stories. Engaging in the retelling of pūrākau serves to both reclaim knowledge systems and to foreground Indigenous research practice. Certainly, for Mikaere (2011) pūrākau and the mātauranga they preserve an invaluable cultural resource; Māori narratives cannot be relegated to the past as mere myth, rather they are brought to life in successive retellings.

Participants

Participation involved taking part in a one-on-one interview. The criteria for participation were to identify as Māori, be over the age of 18 years old, and at some time have experienced mental distress or accessed mental health services. Mental distress was self-identified by participants, though broadly understood as a diverse range of experiences of psychological suffering, that may also be referred to as mental illness or disorder (Cromby et al., 2013). Twelve people participated, with hapū and iwi affiliations throughout Aotearoa. Eight participants identified as wāhine (women) and four identified as tāne (men). The overall mean age of participants was 39 years; wāhine ranged in age from 27 years to 55 years old, and tāne ranged from 31 years to 48 years old.

Interviews

Inviting participation in the project occurred through the distribution of the research information sheet to our networks and through a snowball approach. Interviews were carried out at a time and place identified by participants (all interviews were facilitated by EB), with whānau and support people present if desired. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim and returned to participants to review and edit. The project met the requirements of the Central Health and Disabilities Ethics Committee and was conducted with the approval of that committee.

Informed by previous narrative studies and Māori research a bilingual interview schedule was developed to guide dialogue, (Barnett & Lapsley 2006; Fenton & Te Koutua, 2000; Ngata, 2014; Valentine, 2009). Participants primarily spoke in English, but many freely used te reo Māori words and phrases. Whakataukī (traditional sayings) were integrated and participants were invited to share a whakataukī meaningful to them and their story. Likewise, participants were invited to speak to a pūrākau or another narrative that was significant to them and their journey through distress, healing, and recovery. Whakataukī and pūrākau naturally feature in Māori settings and when speaking in te reo Māori, as these are both common means of imparting knowledge (Bishop, 1996). Drawing on these aspects of te ao Māori in the interviews evoked vivid and enriched narratives.

Narrative interpretation

Interpretations were initiated from the commencement of interviews, through listening and



engaging with participants, and then through subsequent transcription. Narrative interpretation utilises general qualitative research elements; identifying common concepts, linking concepts categorically, recognising patterns within categories, and articulating themes or threads that represent patterns (Kim, 2016). This was a cyclical process. Imagery, metaphor, and symbols are linked to core ideas and are a means to develop a coherent interpretation of narratives (Crossley, 2000). We were attentive to emerging and recurring concepts, categories, patterns, imagery, metaphor, and narrative threads within the distinct stories. At the same time consideration was given to where these elements met across participants' narratives, and where there were connections with te ao Māori and the literature.

Narrative inquiries are not linear, stepped-out processes, rather interpretive processes are layered in complexity. As it is with pūrākau methodology, the approach to interpretation was moulded for purpose (Lee-Morgan, 2019). Indeed, a unique process was necessary to undertake an inquiry focused on experiences of wairua. Māori and Indigenous narrative methodologies do not aspire toward uniformity, rather they encourage broad and dynamic approaches, to encompass diversity in representation and voice (Benham, 2007).

To achieve narrative coherence in interpretation entails the telling and re-telling of narratives, not aspiring to order them in a linear fashion, but rather being with narratives and composing stories in relational ways (Caine et al., 2013). (For an extended outline of methodology and inquiry processes, see Brittain (2022, pp. 42-62)).

Narrative interpretation

There were multiple levels to interpretation; each participants' narrative was interpreted individually and there was an overarching narrative interpretation. The overarching interpretation focused on shared threads, recurring characteristics, and comparable meaning-making across participants' stories. Imagery of water and a sensed relationship to bodies of water were recurrent narrative features in participants' stories, and a common understanding within the narratives was the depiction of wairua as two waters, two complementary energies. This component of the overarching narrative interpretation was termed 'Ko wai, nā wai', to reflect self, identity, and relationships with others (Brittain, 2022). Narrative identity and constructions of self were core to the retelling of stories and meaning making. Like water, the shaping

of self and identity was contextual and fluid; there were multiple experiences to choose from and to compose into a cohesive narrative.

In the present interpretation we have focused on narratives and meaning-making of wairua, belonging, and identity. The interpretation has been shaped in a sequential manner around participants' experiences of belonging and identity through times of distress, in the shift towards wellbeing, through processes of healing and recovery, and in embracing identity and belonging. We have included extended passages to prioritise participants' stories and to honour their voices. While we offer our interpretations of meaning-making, we recognise these are partial and subjective, and that neither the stories nor the interpretive work is static.

Identity and belonging in times of distress

During intense distress and situated within narratives of trauma, loss, and extremely difficult circumstances, identity was constructed as disempowered. Participants' stories comprised experiences and feelings of helplessness, which overlapped with losing or being hindered in connectedness to wairua.

Ihaia describes his experiences of distress in terms of a dislocated identity, with substantial impacts for wairua:

I've struggled with my own mental health issues in terms of knowing my own identity, and how that linked with being of Cook Island descent, of Māori descent, and of Pākehā descent, and sort of understanding where I belong or fit in one of those three. [...] I guess with identity and how it's inextricably linked with wairua, in my own battles with mental health issues, I think there's been a disconnection of where I felt I belonged and stood in any one of those three ethnicities, and also how that made me feel, inside I guess spiritually, not really understanding a lot of my culture and where I felt that I fit, I guess left me at the point where I stood in no-man's land, and I kind of stood alone and didn't feel wholeheartedly connected anywhere. I guess and that's sort of one of the reasons why I haven't, I wasn't able to develop the resilience that I needed to, I guess, yea cope basically.

Ihaia is clear about the relationship between his mental wellbeing, feeling a lack of belonging, and at a distance from his cultural identities, and that these were linked to wairua. He renders a compelling image of loss and disconnection, that he 'stood in no-man's land', which was a lonely and isolated place. This calls to mind a painful absence of connectedness



in relation to *tūrangawaewae*, as a standing place and belonging granted through *whakapapa*. His retelling emphasises a compromised sense of identity, which he shapes as inhibiting resilience.

Mere retells of the absence of connectedness to *wairua* during times of distress:

I don't think my *wairua* ever dropped off, I just think I had a lack of understanding of it, and how important it was until I didn't have it, and then when I didn't have it, when I was a bit lost, I, well my *wairua* was lost, 'cause I was.

In recalling experiences of feeling lost in herself and in her sense of *wairua*, Mere invokes meanings of loss and being lost, which is to be missing and adrift. She creates an impression of intense distress and suffering.

Characteristic of participants' narratives of distress was to lose or be hindered in connection to *wairua*, and this was accompanied by feelings of disorientation, deep loneliness, and perceived emptiness. Experiences of distance from *wairua* also occurred alongside dislocated identities and isolation from *whakapapa*. Moreover, cultural identity and belonging emerged as bound to and influencing the degree of connectedness to *wairua*.

Identity and belonging in the turn towards wellbeing

In the narrative turn towards healing and recovery, there was a reformation of identity. Fundamentally, participants' stories at this point encompassed a realisation that change was needed; this was the construction of the narrative hero, who took control of how the story would unfold. Connectedness to *wairua* was overlaid by an integral shift to take up a self-determining stance.

Mere narrates fostering *wairua* as essential to her path toward wellbeing:

So it, it was my own understanding, like no one, like I wasn't given it by a health professional you know, "You need to work on your *wairua*", it was nothing like that. It was more of an inside knowing myself and going, "Right what's actually lacking here? Or what, during the time in which you were getting better, what did you lose? Or what was not as strong?" And it was my *wairua*. [...] So I think part of my recovery was getting my *wairua* strong, while getting my pills for my mental illness reduced, or not there at all. [...] I thought, "What are you gonna do to keep yourself safe? 'Cause you're well." The professionals believed that I was well enough that I didn't need that anymore, which to me was

quite scary, because I saw it that that's what was keeping me well, and it wasn't, I was keeping myself well, that was just like a, an extra, [...] something to help me manage. And so it was like, "Shit, if I have to manage this on my own, how am I actually going to do that? What does it look like?"

Mere relates an intuitive knowing and recognition that her experiences and connectedness to *wairua* was integral to maintaining her wellbeing. While she acknowledges having attained a level of wellness within the mental health system, there was growing awareness that she was leading and responsible for her recovery. She recalls fearfulness about this shift in positioning, nonetheless she tells of advancing with self-determination.

Tūi draws attention to the significance of self-determination as imperative to her healing and wellbeing and she expands on personal agency through sharing a *whakatauki*:

"He kai kei aku ringa" means I had, when I was born I had all the tools I needed to heal, and no one acknowledged that. [...] So I think, "He kai kei aku ringa", yea it talks about my past, my present, and my future, and that we're not down, we're not shit.

Do you know what I mean like? You know sometimes the system can make us feel like, "Oh I lost all my things, I lost my self-worth, I lost my *wairua*", but those things are never lost. So, it's about returning back to actually I'm a full person, and you know as long as I know who I am and where I come from, which has been true in my journey, then nothing is ever taken from me. All I can do is contribute, you know, and that everyone is a vessel for that. So this is about *whakamana* [to uplift mana, empower] and empowerment and yea upholding other people's mana through these processes and through life yea.

Constructing a narrative in which she re-discovers and fulfils inherent mana (spiritual power), Tūi takes up a position to define and shape her own spiritual and psychological wellbeing. Her reflections that self-worth and *wairua* are 'never lost', these cannot be taken, and she is whole, are illustrative of claiming control of her story. Furthermore, security and assuredness in *wairua* and her identity as Māori emerges as fundamental to her healing and recovery journey.

Participant's narratives in the turn towards wellbeing represented their appreciation and insight that they were autonomous in their healing and recovery. Recognition of their capacity in these ways emboldened the pursuit of healing and recovery and



encouraged proactive practices to achieve and sustain wellness. By coming through distress, the depth of experience of wairua was understood and a resilient identity was formed.

Identity and belonging in healing and recovery

Throughout participants' narratives Māori identity and the realisation of Māori identity was linked to wairua. In healing and recovery, narrative identity was framed as enriched and restored through wairua, which was constructed as a process of discovery. Experiences immersed in te ao Māori were retold by participants as powerful to cultivating a secure and positive Māori identity. Fundamental to this was cognisance of whakapapa and relationships with whānau, hapū, and iwi.

Kahu constructs reclaiming Māori identity and learning te reo Māori as foundational to her healing and recovery. In addition, she retells connecting with supportive whānau members as well as addiction recovery groups as essential:

The number one things I feel that have helped me, is definitely reconnecting with my culture, so learning te reo Māori, it's been such a huge journey for me like and such a positive impact on my wellbeing, and it's out of that, it's out of that is where my base of support comes from now. [...] And when I think about it, keeps me grounded and connected to the life that my tīpuna [ancestors] wanted for us, as their mokopuna [grandchildren, descendants] when they considered themselves as the caretakers of you know our future, that I guess I felt I had more of a, a purpose in life, more of a reason to keep, to want to keep connected to living a good life and being the best I can. [...] When I thought about Māori it was all the really negative sort of, I had a really negative picture from the portrayal of Māori in the news and the way Māori were treated, and so when I talk about like learning te reo and being connected to tikanga Māori today, I think that goes some way to healing that aspect of my life, that I can be proud of that side of my life, my Māori side, that tikanga Māori side, and that I done a lot of things that I'm not proud of, but I can be proud of who I am today. And part of that pride comes from having that knowledge of who I am, that identity, to be able to identify as Māori and to reclaim the reo.

Through her journey of learning te reo Māori Kahu has come to realise both the continuity and obligation granted by whakapapa, and she expresses a responsibility to her tīpuna, to uphold their aspirations. Her whakapapa imparts a strong sense of

being 'grounded and connected', spurring her on in a commitment to live 'a good life', to honour her whānau. She shapes a contrast in her understandings of what it means to be Māori; whereas previously the image of a Māori identity was undesirable, through embracing core aspects of Māori culture she has gained great pride and attained an experience of 'healing'. Her act of reclaiming te reo Māori has enriched her sense of self and nourished her Māori identity.

Throughout participants' narratives, identity as a member of whānau was reiterated, and this added to the meaningfulness of being Māori, reinforcing individual purpose as encompassed within the greater whole. As an empowered position was taken up in healing and recovery, there was an enhanced sense of responsibility to whānau and to tīpuna. Notions of belonging to collectives and also to whenua were at the heart of Māori identity. Furthermore, to truly and intrinsically experience belonging encouraged resilience, and Māori identity was a source of pride and strength.

Notably, access to te ao Māori was variable for participants and it differed throughout their lives. Māori identity was at times narrated as shrouded in shame and secrecy. This was constructed as a product of the social context, in which Māori identity was represented as disadvantageous and as endorsing a Māori identity meant being faced with cultural isolation, discrimination, and racism.

Embracing identity and belonging

Developing understandings and expressing Māori identity fostered belonging and connectedness to wairua. For participants this occurred through wide-ranging efforts, such as learning and developing knowledge of te ao Māori through te reo Māori, waiata, karakia, and whakataukī. Participants also identified practicing tikanga and recovering mātauranga through gaining knowledge of tīpuna, whakapapa, and pūrākau, as integral to enriching Māori identity. Embracing Māori identity enhanced the experience of wairua and likewise connection to wairua sustained identity.

Mel identified two whakataukī meaningful to her experiences and her story:

'E kore au e ngaro te kākano, te kākano i ruia mai i Rangiatea'. [...] So, for me, I didn't grow up Māori, because I look like a Pākehā, and I grew up in a Pākehā whānau, family, who never ever ever talked about being Māori, it was quite a shameful secret actually, it's been hidden, it was hidden in my



whānau. So for me that tells me that it doesn't matter about that, that I come from Rangiātea, and that's it, I have whakapapa, and you know, it's unquestionable, but also that because of that, that anchors me firmly, firmly to this place, and I'm not lost, because I have a place. [...] 'Ka whānau mai ki te tatau pounamu, e waihakatia e ō tupuna hei tūraka mōhou i te ao tū nei', 'Born on the greenstone door, shaped by your ancestors as a standing place for you in the new world', that's a Kāi Tahu whakataukī yea, and I just, that connects me to this place.

Mel narrates that reclaiming her descent from Rangiātea, Māori spiritual and ancestral lands, was a vital remedy for the shame experienced earlier in her life about Māori identity. Indeed, as the whakataukī states, she will never be lost, as she is a seed sown from Rangiātea. With both whakataukī she reiterates her right to assert whakapapa, although with the latter she affirms her connectedness to Te Waipounamu. By drawing on concepts from te ao Māori that are relevant to identity, Mel creates an impression of fulfilling her standing place, her tūrangawaewae.

Alice retells a phase of the creation pūrākau that influenced her understandings and enhanced her experience of wairua, and in turn her identity:

I'd never actually thought of pūrākau as a learning tool until quite recently. I thought they were just stories that your nanny would tell you when you were a kid. [...] I'm sure she embellished all of them [laughs]. I think some, one that has definitely kind of interested me, or the understanding of it, is the creation of Hine-ahu-one, and how, because I just thought Tāne went and got some clay, and then he made a woman out of the clay, and I was like, that's a, that's a nice story. And then when I realised that each of the different atua [gods, deities] actually gave, not a piece of themselves, but they contributed to her, and then I think I was reading some article and it mentioned how because all the atua contributed to her, they, we are descended from her, we inherently inherit those traits I guess of each of the different atua. I just thought that was pretty interesting, and I don't know if it was like a spiritual awakening or if it was just a realisation that within each of us we have different parts of atua and have the ability to I guess achieve greatness, or achieve what we want to.

Alice portrays a lasting tie to her tipuna, her nanny, through storytelling and she recognises that while retellings may have been exaggerated, pūrākau contain important lessons. Recounting the story of

Hine-ahu-one, she reflects on the deepening of her insight, a 'spiritual awakening' to the messages therein; she narrates being enlightened to a Māori worldview of divine heritage and imbued potential. In essence, Alice infers a reclaiming and a recovering of her own greatness through mātauranga, by virtue of whakapapa Māori, which was integral to her experience of wairua.

Discussion

The interpretation canvassed rich narratives of wairua, identity, and belonging for Māori who have experienced psychological distress, healing, and recovery. Our aim in this paper has been to both explore and emphasise narrative features and shared stories about the significance of Māori understandings and experiences to wellbeing. Our hope is that it incites a shift toward an ethic of restoration for psychology in Aotearoa.

Unique to Māori identity and belonging is connectedness to wairua. To restate the ideas expressed at the outset, to talk about and explore wairua, is to invoke identity, belonging, and what it means to be Māori. The narratives portray a scope of experiences from an absence of connectedness and lacking in identity in distress, through to self-determination, pride, and enriched identity and belonging in healing and recovery. While the research was small in scale, with 12 participants, whose experiences do not fully represent the diversity of Māori realities, the scale allowed for interpretations that portrayed a depth of meaning and honoured participants' stories and contributions.

Developing Māori identity and cultivating a sense of belonging were retold as central to healing and recovery. While a wavering sense of Māori identity is characteristic of experiences of distress, sustaining identity is recognised as promoting healing and recovery processes (Lapsley et al., 2002; L. Pere, 2006). Wellbeing for Māori and a secure sense of identity necessitate access to cultural, social, and physical resources, however difficulty accessing the breadth of te ao Māori is an issue experienced by many (Durie, 2001). Even when ready access to te ao Māori was variable for participants, there were assured commitments to strengthen identity. The significance of whakapapa, mātauranga, te reo Māori, and cultural practices are integral to wairua (Valentine, 2009). These aspects of culture were narrated as key to enhancing connectedness to wairua, identity and belonging, and to facilitating healing and recovery. Indeed, a defining feature of the narratives encompassed efforts to re-discover Māori identity. Healing and recovery alike were



ongoing processes, in order to restore wairua and psychological wellbeing the development of a grounded identity and sense of belonging was necessary.

A focus on Māori identity naturally comprises relationships and processes of healing and recovery were retold as entwined with relationships. Whānau relationships are established as influential in mental health recovery (Lapsley et al., 2002; L. Pere, 2006) and Māori models of wellbeing position whānau as central, while appreciating specific historical and social determinants of health for Māori (e.g., Pitama et al., 2017). The narratives exemplified a relational model of recovery in which people are inextricable from their social environments and interdependence underpins recovery (Price-Robertson et al., 2017). Blume (2021) highlights that from an Indigenous perspective restoring relationships is imperative in recovery and wellness, as is embracing spirituality and sacredness. Indeed, the significance of relationships with whānau, hapū, iwi, and whenua was foregrounded in the narratives. Healing and recovery were retold as established in relational processes; identity and meaning in life were sustained by collective connection, hope was inspired by whānau, and empowerment emerged from belonging. Essentially, identity and belonging were made more meaningful in relation to others and wairua was inseparable from relationships.

The narratives portrayed taking an emboldened stance to determine a pathway to healing and recovery, of which the significance cannot be overlooked. Naturally expressions of self-determination bring to mind notions of tino rangatiratanga and the history of struggle that Māori have endured. The principal aspirations of tino rangatiratanga are to exercise independence and autonomy, and at both individual and whānau levels this was the essence of self-determination within the narratives. Centring Māori understandings and prioritising tino rangatiratanga in practice is a means by which psychology in Aotearoa can be transformed. Mātauranga and the rich array of Māori understandings, traditional and contemporary, have much to offer in charting a way forward.

There are a growing number of practice models and evidence-informed approaches within psychology that draw on mātauranga and appreciate the significance of wairua to wellbeing for Māori. In assessment and formulation, Pitama et al. (2017) detail a clinical guide based on the Hui Process and Meihana Model that attends to connectedness to

wairua, including consideration of relationships with whānau and communities, whakapapa, tipuna, atua, and whenua. In approaches to therapy and healing *Te Manu Kai i te Mātauranga: Indigenous Psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand* (Waitoki & Levy, 2016) provides a number of innovative exemplars grounded in te ao Māori that centre wairua. These include a wairua perspective to therapy (Valentine, 2016); connecting to atua and pūrākau to facilitate whānau healing (Cherrington, 2016); and re-telling stories and reconstructing narratives to heal soul wounds and support trauma recovery (Taitimu, 2016).

Pūrākau and Māori narratives naturally engage wairua and are an invaluable resource to guide and shape therapy processes (NiaNia et al., 2017; Rangihuna et al., 2018), and Clifford (2022) offers Toka Āhuru as a framework to ensure purposeful and meaningful use of pūrākau in practice. Similarly, whakataukī are founded in Māori worldviews and innately linked to wairua, and McLachlan et al. (2019) present therapeutic practices that integrate whakataukī, including practicable ways to explore understandings and experiences of wairua with tangata whaiora and whānau. Furthermore, mindfulness practices, which draw on Eastern traditions and have intrinsic spiritual values, have been aligned with Māori worldviews and understandings of wairua to support wellbeing for Māori (Ketu-Mackenzie, 2022; McDonald et al., 2021).

Māori approaches in psychology actively employ knowledges and practices that originate in te ao Māori. However, supporting psychological wellbeing for Māori is not the sole domain of psychologists or mental health practitioners. Rongoā, as a holistic system of healing based in tikanga, nurtures connectedness to wairua and promotes wellbeing, including psychological wellbeing (Ahuriri-Driscoll et al., 2008; Mark et al., 2022). Similarly, practice and use of taonga pūoro (singing treasures) can enhance healing and wellbeing for Māori, while offering enriched experiences of wairua (Cashell, 2021).

In sum, there is an expanding body of research and practice models with foundations in te ao Māori and mātauranga that can be implemented within psychological practice. From assessment through therapy and healing processes, Māori approaches provide pathways to understand and support connectedness to wairua and psychological wellbeing for tangata whaiora and whānau. Consistent with previous research and established



understandings of Māori wellbeing, the narratives in the present study make clear that wairua is integral to Māori psychological experiences. Furthermore, as a model for the strength of Indigenous spirituality and resilience, wairua can be drawn on to seed hope and encourage flourishing (Tassell-Matamua et al., 2022).

Broadening our focus to the discipline of psychology and wider systems, Māori aspirations and efforts to assert tino rangatiratanga have equal relevance. There is evident power in our existence as Māori. Embracing Māori ways of being, identifying as Māori, and exercising belonging to this land as Māori is to exemplify tino rangatiratanga. That is, to be Māori, unapologetically (Waititi, 2020). Our resolve as Māori to be self-determining as leaders, practitioners, researchers, teachers, and peers within the discipline is essential to decentring the oppression of settler colonialism, White supremacy, and racism. In doing so, we call on our colleagues, in particular our Pākehā and White colleagues, to see the pervasiveness of these issues in the discipline and to ally with us in re-imagining possibilities and pursuing transformative change (Waitoki et al., 2024). For Māori psychologists, a transformation of psychology has been a longstanding goal (Love, 2003). To prioritise and seek balance in relationships and to affirm our rights as Māori to self-determination, would be to galvanise an ethic of restoration within the discipline.

Colonisation is characterised by the denial of Indigenous peoples' rights to freedom in their own lands (Jackson, 2021). Rightfully, we as Māori seek to be fully free in our own lands. The discipline of psychology in Aotearoa has a timely opportunity to be transformative through engaging in an ethic of restoration. Such an ethic is a lofty aspiration; however ascending heights and pursuing an enlightened way of being is a treasured pastime for Māori. So, follow us, our tīpuna have shown us the way.

Tēnei au, tēnei au

Ko te hōkai nei o taku tapuwae...

Glossary

atua: god(s), deity(ies), supernatural being(s), ancestor(s)
hapū: collective, kinship group, subtribe
iwi: collective, extended kinship group, tribe, nation
karakia: prayer, incantation, chant, blessing
kaumātua: elders

kaupapa: principles, guiding rules, purpose
mana: spiritual power (intrinsic trait)
marae: abbreviation of marae ātea, can refer to entire community complex
marae ātea: space or earth in front of meeting houses
mātauranga: Māori knowledges and worldviews
maunga: mountain
mauri: life essence, spark of life
mokopuna: grandchildren, descendant
ngākau: heart, seat of emotions
noa: ordinary state
Papatūānuku: Earth, Earth mother
pūrākau: traditional narratives
Rangiātea: Māori spiritual and ancestral lands
Ranginui: Sky, Sky father
rongoā: traditional and holistic healing practices
taonga puoro: singing treasures
taiao: natural environment
tāne: man, men
tāngata whenua: people of the land
tapu: sacred state, sacredness, sanctity
te ao Māori: Māori world, Māori worldviews
te ao mārama: the world of light and life, physical world
te ao wairua: the spiritual realm
te ira atua: the divine or godly essence
te ira tangata: the human essence
te kore: the nothingness, the void
te pō: the night, the darkness
tikanga: custom, correct process or practice
tino rangatiratanga: independence, self-determination
tīpuna/tipuna: ancestors/ancestor
tūrangawaewae: place of belonging
wahine/wāhine: woman/women
waiata: song
wairua: spirit, soul, spirituality
whakamana: to uplift mana, empower
whakapapa: genealogy, descent
whakatauki: traditional saying
whānau: family, extended family, collective
whenua: land, earth

Translations and notes for te reo Māori phrases

E kore au e ngaro te kākano, te kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea

A whakatauki that translates as, 'I will never be lost, I am a seed sown from Rangiātea'

Tēnei au, tēnei au, ko te hōkai nei o taku tapuwae
The first line of a karakia that recites the journey of Tāne who ascended the heavens, one translation is, 'Here I am, this is the journey of sacred footsteps'

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