
SHORT REPORT

Māori-focused course content in undergraduate psychology programmes in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Despite consistent critiques of the psychology discipline for over 40 years there has been insufficient inclusion of Māori worldviews in tertiary learning environments, and we still do not have a comprehensive curriculum that can prepare psychology graduates to work with Māori. Out of 141 courses offered in 2022 that we assessed, only two (1.4%) were specifically Māori-focused. An additional 26 (18.4%) included some degree of Māori-focused content. The number of specifically Māori-focused courses have dropped by half when compared to a similar study conducted in 2003, and remained the same as 2015. Our findings raise critical questions about the existence of genuine institutional and professional commitment to embed Te Tiriti o Waitangi and address Eurocentric curricula in psychology.

Keywords: *Psychology, decolonising psychology, course content, Māori*

INTRODUCTION

Within the discipline of psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereinafter referred to as Aotearoa), settler-colonialism has been identified as a key driver for systemic and institutional racism (Awatere-Huata, 1993; Lawson-Te Aho, 1994; Love, 2002). Settler-colonialism, by its very nature, exists to maintain a dominant position that requires the elimination, exclusion, replacement or control of Indigenous people's lands, resources, people, culture, language and knowledge (Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016; Moewaka Barnes & McCreanor, 2019; Wolfe, 2006). Wolfe's (2006) writing on genocide towards Indigenous peoples argued that settler-colonialism requires '... the elimination of the native' (p.387). Psychology in Aotearoa is inherited from a global colonising project (Love, 2002) that consistently shows its settler-colonial origins throughout its racialised structures of exclusion and control (Groot et al., 2018; Pomare et al., 2021). The structures that influence psychology experiences for Māori, the Indigenous people of Aotearoa include: University buildings situated on confiscated tribal lands (Pihama, 2023); epistemic racism via prioritising western knowledge (Groot et al., 2018; Pomare et al., 2021); culturally inappropriate research interests (Lawson-Te Aho, 1994); exclusionary academic appointments and promotion practices (Naepi et al., 2019); alienating learning environments for Māori students (Waiari et al., 2021), and performative diversity and inclusion policies and practices (Lawson-Te Aho, 1994).

This paper is in response to the ongoing evidence of the marginalisation and exclusion of Māori-focused content in psychology. A review of historical documents sets the scene for how calls for inclusion and Te Tiriti responsivity

have shifted towards calling out systemic racism. In a speech to the New Zealand Psychological Society Conference, Dame Tariana Turia asked the profession to consider 'Does your training and education address issues like the nature of the Māori kaitiaki, the spiritual guardian all Māori have? ... What is the nature of the rau kotahi; the multiple self?' (2000). In a keynote address, Dr Catherine Love (2002) outlined historical problems with the profession of psychology in relation to the notion of 'fit', "or fitness for consumption by Māori and other non-western peoples" (p.14). Dr Love argued three overarching points: 1) psychology lacks knowledge about how to work with Māori; 2) the impact of workforce issues (lack of Māori who enter, or stay) and 3) that psychology's value-base is predicated on an individualistic sense of self that contradicts Māori ways of being and knowing (p.15). Dame Turia and Dr Love (amongst others) have called for a Māori worldview in psychology that reflects the realities of Māori knowledge, culture, and language - in essence, to prepare the psychology profession to work with Māori.

Dr Love's notion of 'fit' is important to unpack. Reviews of psychology in the past few decades show clear concerns about curriculum content, and the preparedness of psychologists to meet the needs of Māori. Psychology, whether it is admitted or not, is intimately bound to a history of racism premised on white supremacist eugenics, heteropatriarchy and classism that has seen unfettered global expansion of the cultural imperialism of the West (Dudgeon et al., 2017; Fish et al., 2024; Lawson-Te Aho, 1994; Martín-Baró, 1994). The known impacts of colonisation and the limitations of a monocultural profession should ethically form part of the core education experience for psychologists. Blampied (2005) added that

psychology has a duty to decentre western science and expose students to multiple ways of knowing. Decentring western science, however comes with a requirement for making visible multiple forms of knowledge including, Māori, Pacific, and Asian (ngā hau e whā) from all corners of the world. The result for students is that their worldviews are included, valued, taught and prioritised. Multiple ways of knowing, or epistemic pluralism key to inclusivity in tertiary education as students are guided to respect the knowledge contributions of diverse communities, cultures and traditions.

The prioritisation of western knowledge systems in the teaching and learning of psychology (Groot et al., 2018; Lawson-Te Aho; 1994; Pomare et al., 2021; Waitoki et al., 2024) and structured efforts to eliminate non-western knowledge that does not fit within rigid notions of acceptable science replicates racist practice. Echoing Wolfe's strategy of elimination, an assimilationist education system requires Māori students to compete in Eurocentric curricula, accompanied by the pressure to forgo cultural integrity (Mayeda et al., 2014; Waiari et al., 2021). For example, Māori students who called for the establishment of bicultural psychology curriculum in Aotearoa, had expressed disappointment to see Māori epistemologies being framed through a deficit lens (e.g., atua and wairua being reduced to hallucinations and delusions) and given less weight than western knowledge systems within the training, teaching and practice of psychology (Johnson et al., 2021). This has a negative impact on Māori students enduring through Eurocentric systems, while also decreasing the likelihood that Māori students will complete a university qualification and achieve academic success (Mayeda et al., 2014).

In 2018, a Waitangi Tribunal claim (Wai 2725, #1.1.1) was made in relation to the Health Services and Outcomes Kaupapa Inquiry to address breaches of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in actively protecting Māori interest in psychology by the Crown and its agencies (Levy, 2018). The Waitangi Tribunal, established in 1975, is tasked with giving effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, as the founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand that promises Māori tino rangatiratanga or self-determination over things Māori (Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016). The Wai 2725 claim outlined the failure of the Crown to meet its obligation to promote Māori achievement in psychology, ensure programmes include adequate Māori and culturally competent-focused course contents, and actively support the development of kaupapa Māori Psychology pathways (Levy, 2018). The importance of having Māori-centric curricula is also emphasised by the Education and Training Act (Ministry of Education, 2021), which stipulates the role of educational institutions in giving effect to Te Tiriti by ensuring 'local curriculum reflect local tikanga Māori, mātauranga Māori and te ao Māori' (Ministry of Education, 2021). This Act aligns with Priority 5 of the Tertiary Education Strategy 2020 that aims to provide quality teaching by 'meaningfully incorporating te reo Māori and tikanga Māori into the everyday life of the place of learning' (Ministry of Education, 2022).

These Te Tiriti-centric regulations and guidelines compel universities to take immediate actions in increasing the cultural responsiveness of courses to reflect Māori worldviews, aspirations and needs (NSCBI et al.,

2018). The extent to which such requirements are being met by Psychology Departments/Schools across Aotearoa universities has been ascertained via a range of indicators (see Dr Levy's WAI claim, 2018). The responsibility to ensure that psychology programmes meet Te Tiriti obligations resides with Universities and the Regulatory Authority (NSCBI et al., 2018). As Dr Levy pointed out in the WAI claim (2018), those organisations have failed in their Tiriti obligations. To note, the profession has begun a process of responding to the WAI claim; however, psychology schools are yet to demonstrate critical Te Tiriti practices. Examination of psychology course content against the regulatory standards of competency reveals the difficulty in acquiring the complexity of cultural knowledge about te ao Māori, and the varied identities within. Following an earlier analysis of postgraduate training courses (Waitoki et al., 2023), this paper examines the levels of Māori- and culture-focused content within undergraduate psychology papers and whether this has changed over the past 20 years.

Evidence of the limited meaningful inclusion of mātauranga (knowledge) Māori in psychology programmes can be traced back to early studies by Abbott and Durie (1987), which found that less than half (44%) of postgraduate psychology courses had instruction on taha Māori (Māori content). Close to a decade later, Nathan (1999) found that only two clinical psychology courses (40%) had a substantial amount of content on tikanga Māori (protocols). In 2003, Levy (2007) recorded four (3.1%) undergraduate psychology papers that were specifically Māori-focused, while a follow-up study (Levy & Waitoki, 2015) showed a decline in the number of specifically Māori-focused undergraduate papers ($n = 2$; 1.4%).

The commissioned report on Indigenous Psychology in Aotearoa (NSCBI et al., 2018) noted that 'the development of cultural competence must begin in undergraduate papers' (p.17), given students are introduced to broad fundamental knowledge of major concepts, theoretical models, historical trends, analytical frameworks, and empirical findings to understand psychological phenomena. A strong foundation in Māori epistemology, including mātauranga Māori at undergraduate level can help prepare aspiring psychology practitioners to meet the high demand from Māori service users across sectors, such as mental health, primary health, child protection services and justice (NSCBI et al., 2018). As such, we evaluate the extent to which undergraduate courses include Māori content, attending to whether this is their sole focus, an integral part of the courses, otherwise included through considerations of culture, or excluded altogether.

METHOD

We undertook a desktop analysis of psychology department undergraduate papers from seven universities (University of Auckland, Auckland University of Technology, University of Waikato, Massey University, Victoria University of Wellington, University of Canterbury and University of Otago) in Aotearoa in December 2022. These universities were selected as they provide a pathway to professional registration as a mental health professional.

Our analysis builds on Levy (2007), who reported an analysis of psychology department undergraduate papers in 2003, and the follow-up in 2015 (Levy & Waitoki). Following the methods of Levy (2007), we sourced publicly available course outlines or descriptors from each university’s website. Required readings were not included as a part of the analysis, as the main focus is on what was being taught during contact time. The first author closely examined each course outline and grouped these into the following four categories:

- 1) *Specifically Māori-focused*: A course grounded in Kaupapa Māori philosophies and theories. The primary objective is imparting mātauranga Māori (knowledge).
- 2) *Inclusion of Māori-focused content*: Discussion of Māori theories alongside other cultures or consideration of Māori psychologies within broader cultural perspectives.
- 3) *Inclusion of reference to culture*: Discussion of cultural perspective and differences without specific mentioning of mātauranga Māori.
- 4) *No integration of mātauranga Māori and diverse sources of cultural knowledge*

RESULTS

Our findings show there were limited number of courses that fit the categories of ‘specifically Māori-focused’ ($n = 2$; 1.4%), ‘inclusion of Māori-focused content’ ($n = 26$; 18.4%), and ‘inclusion of culture-focused content’ ($n = 22$; 15.6%) in 2022. The breakdown of these findings according to level of studies are displayed in Figure 1 (overleaf). The percentage of courses without the integration of mātauranga Māori and diverse sources of cultural knowledge for each level is 56.3% (level 100); 66.7% (level 200); and 65.1% (level 300).

When examining courses that include ‘Māori-focused content’ and/or are ‘specifically Māori-focused’, chi-square analyses demonstrate that the number of these courses have increased markedly when compared to Levy (2003), $\chi^2(1) = 7.00, p = .0134$, Odds Ratio (OR) = 2.66, and Levy and Waitoki (2015), $\chi^2(1) = 13.52, p = .0002$, OR = 4.27. These changes range from twice the odds compared to 2003 (Levy) to four times the odds compared to 2015 (Levy & Waitoki). The increment is related to an increase in courses classified as ‘inclusion of Māori-focused content’, from seven in 2003 (Levy) and six in 2015 (Levy & Waitoki) to 26 in 2022 (Table 1).

Relative to courses that include ‘Māori-focused content’, the number classified as ‘specifically Māori-focused’ was low. In fact, chi-square analyses reveal that there was a reduction in the number of ‘specifically Māori-focused’ courses when compared to Levy (2003), $\chi^2(1) = 0.90, p = .34, OR = 0.45$, but no change since Levy and Waitoki (2015), $\chi^2(1) = 0, p = 1, OR = 1.04$ (Table 2). Compared to the number of ‘specifically Māori-focused’ courses in 2003 ($n = 4$), this number was halved in 2022; the two papers were PSYCH303 Indigenous Psychology (University of Waikato, 2022) and 175210

Bicultural Perspectives in Psychology (Massey University, 2022b).

DISCUSSION

This paper offers a timely analysis of the extent and forms of integration of mātauranga (knowledge) Māori into undergraduate psychology curricula in Aotearoa. This issue is of increasing importance, as universities are challenged to give effect to Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Ministry of Education, 2021; Levy, 2018), and as the field of psychology responds to the call of decentring western epistemologies, embedding epistemic pluralism that promote multiple ways of understanding psychological phenomena, and enhancing cultural safety for all who participate in psychology (Curtis et al., 2025; NSCBI et al., 2018). Universities play a crucial role in the production and legitimization of knowledge (Smith & Smith, 2019). The reduction in the numbers of ‘specifically Māori-focused’ courses over the past 20 years speaks to the ongoing effects of settler colonialism and the dominance of Eurocentric knowledge sources overriding mātauranga Māori in the discipline of psychology (Groot et al., 2018; Waiari et al., 2021). Consequently, Māori students continue to face the reality of assimilation, colonisation, and oppression, while searching for Indigenous resources to affirm their experiences within the limitations of a largely monocultural psychology space. It is important to note that, even in 2003, the number of ‘specifically Māori-focused’ courses was small. Compared to 2003 (Levy, 2007), both the University of Waikato and Victoria University of Wellington have each lost one ‘specifically Māori-focused’ course. This raises serious questions on the existence of genuine institutional and professional will to grow Māori capacity within schools of psychology, or to increase the responsiveness of psychology for Māori. Further, both of the ‘specifically Māori-focused’ papers were not classified as core papers, so students may complete an undergraduate degree in psychology without in-depth exposure to Māori knowledge and issues.

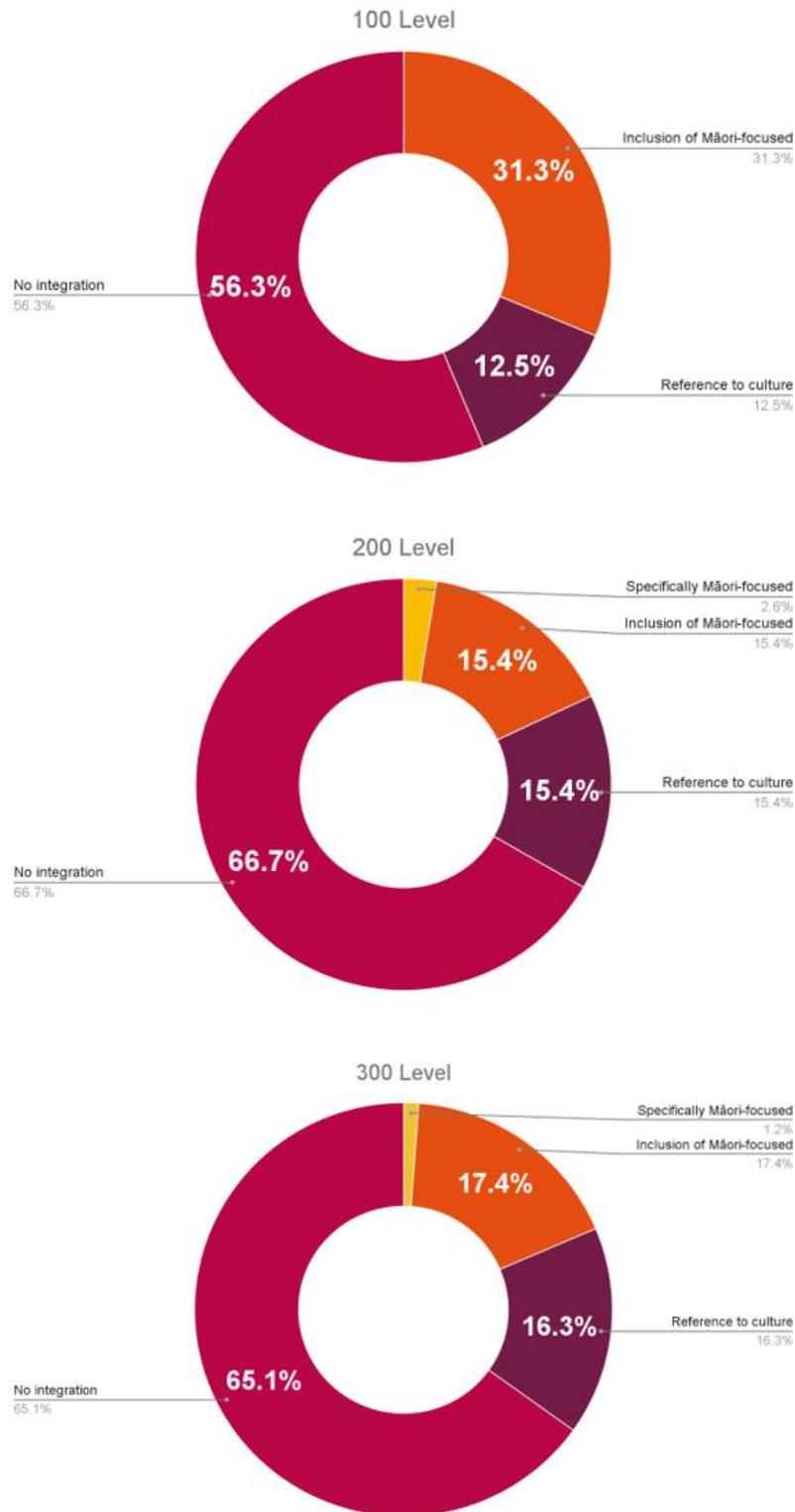
The increased number of courses under the label of ‘Inclusion of Māori-focused content’ is potentially a positive finding. Due to limited information available on the course outlines, we were not able to determine how Māori-focused content was included. Ideally, courses that were not specifically Māori-focused would draw on the He Awa Whiria (Braided Rivers) framework (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2018), which uses a braided river as an analogy. The framework highlights the importance of decentring western psychological knowledge and offers a possibility of including Māori-focused content through the blending of mātauranga Māori with western knowledge streams. However, there are some streams of Māori knowledge should remain independent and not be blended with western knowledge streams (Macfarlane & Macfarlane, 2018).

Furthermore, ‘quantity’ does not always equate to ‘quality’. We are conscious about the possibility of universities ‘grafting’ (Ahenakew, 2016) Indigenous knowledge into non-Indigenous ways of knowing as proof of cultural sensitivity, while western

Table 1. Proportion of Māori-focused undergraduate psychology courses

	Specifically Māori-focused (n)	Inclusion of Māori-focused (n)
2003 (129)	4	7
2015 (146)	2	6
2022 (141)	2	26

Figure 1. Percentage of Māori- and Culture-Focused courses across three undergraduate levels



knowledge continues to be naturalised. Our concerns are also shared by other Māori scholars, given the low numbers of Māori staff employed at universities (McAllister et al., 2019), exploitation of Indigenous knowledge to advance neoliberal goals (i.e., commodification of mātauranga Māori) (Lawson-Te Aho, 1994; Smith & Smith, 2019), and tokenistic inclusion of mātauranga Māori as an add-on element to western curricula (Lawson-Te Aho, 1994; Waiari et al., 2021). The

major incentive for Māori participation in psychology is the creation of environments surrounded by paradigms and epistemologies of relevance to the realities of Māori taught by Māori staff who have expertise in these areas, who can also manage the complexities of our diverse realities (Levy, 2007). The discipline of psychology in Aotearoa, therefore, needs to go beyond superficial adjustments to its teaching and learning to be committed to investing in Māori staffing so that Māori-focused

content can be taught in more meaningful and sustainable ways.

Our finding of limited representation of non-western course content speaks to the interest convergence notion that has emerged from Critical Race Theory (Salter & Adams, 2013). This notion highlights that Crown institutions are unlikely to endorse an indigenising movement in psychology unless there is an alignment with dominant Pākehā interests. Inertia persists despite the decades-long research by Māori psychologists (e.g., Abbott & Durie, 1985; Nathan, 1999; Levy, 2007; Levy & Waitoki, 2015) and the commissioned report on Indigenous Psychology in Aotearoa led by NSCBI (NSCBI et al., 2018). This lack of action is an example of how institutional racism manifests to defend whiteness (through protecting the status quo) as a central property of the discipline, and thereby entrenches ongoing material inequities (Salter & Adams, 2013). Therefore, solutions to addressing monoculturalism and systemic bias require critical analysis of systemic and interpersonal racism and active implementation of the articles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Abbott & Durie, 1987; Levy & Waitoki, 2016). The double-duty and cultural labour by Māori has produced a canon of decolonial pedagogy that calls for psychology training programmes to increase Māori-focused course content and kaupapa Māori content. Tied to an increase in course content, is the necessity to increase the number of Māori academic staff and Māori students; and to provide a culturally safe environment for Māori to participate, *as Māori* (Groot et al, 2018; Levy, 2007; Smith, 2021; Levy & Waitoki, 2016). Increasing Māori representation and success in psychology requires an anti-racist and indigenised learning environment across the entire programme of study to ensure its relevance to Māori worldviews and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Cooper et al., 2011; Love, 2002). Given the current situation where Māori are underrepresented in the student population of psychology, it is essential for staff members to be attentive to the impact of monocultural psychology on Māori students and actively challenge any fragility and paralysis towards Māori-focused content that may arise within classrooms (Crawford & Langridge, 2022).

A major obstacle is the limited number of Māori staff employed within Schools of Psychology to deliver these courses. Consequently, the teaching labour is often transferred to Māori staff in other faculties, or to staff on fixed-term and casual contracts, with little recognition of the epistemic contribution of Māori knowledge. The university is sometimes not seen as an appealing employment option for Māori, due to issues such as institutional racism (McAllister et al., 2019; Naepi et al., 2019), the precarious nature of academic jobs (Naepi et al., 2019); and the expectation of free cultural labour fulfilled by Māori staff for non-Māori colleagues, particularly when Māori are under-represented in departments (Waitoki et al., 2024). There have been some developments in the ongoing aspirations for a culturally responsive psychology curriculum in Aotearoa. Amongst these are the integration of mātauranga Māori and Māori values into course material across various areas of psychology. For example, two research methods courses at the University of Canterbury (UC; 2022a, 2022b) encourage students to work with iwi (extended kinship groups) and hapū (collective of families related through a

shared ancestor)' in designing research. This outcome reflects the formalised longstanding relationship between UC and mana whenua, Ngāi Tūāhuriri; although there is a need to acknowledge the additional labour often shouldered by Māori staff to facilitate this connection. The University of Auckland (2022) recently included a key topic "Tikanga and Tapu Practices in a Neuroimaging Space" in PSYCH109 (Mind, Brain and Behaviour).

In 2022, two universities started offering options for students to specialise in Kaupapa Māori psychology: Massey University (Diploma in Art specialising in Indigenous Psychologies), and University of Waikato (minor in Kaupapa Māori Psychology). These specialisations provide opportunities for students to have a firm grounding in Kaupapa Māori psychology, where Te Ao Māori is considered for its relevance to psychological theories and methods. The Kaupapa Māori minor also shares coursework with the Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Studies highlighting perhaps that the natural home of Indigenous psychology is in Māori studies. Massey University (2022a) is the only university to offer a specifically Indigenous Psychologies-focused paper at year one level [175103], with learning outcomes attending to Tiriti-centric practice and 'Māori Indigenous psychologies in an Aotearoa New Zealand context'. The emphasis on delivering Indigenous psychology content in the first year is essential for the exposure of students to various perspectives and cultural comprehension early in their studies. It could also attract and retain more Indigenous students into pursuing psychology, as their cultural worldviews are reflected and respected in what they are learning (Mayeda et al., 2014; Waiari et al., 2021).

Limitations

Our desktop analysis of paper outlines offers preliminary insights into the integration of Māori-focused content within the undergraduate psychology curriculum in Aotearoa. However, paper outlines only provide a general overview of what is intended to be taught and are often prepared months in advance of semester start dates. In a context of high workloads, staff turnover/shortages, and an over-reliance on casual staff, it is more challenging to keep paper outlines up-to-date or to sustain courses and programmes. Accordingly, more research is required to explore whether what is being advertised is actually what is being taught within courses. It is also recommended that future research delves into the specific roles and capacities of Māori staff in the delivery of Māori-focused content.

Conclusion

Donna Awatere, the first Māori psychologist (after leaving psychology) commented on the need to shift power away from the state: "To achieve this requires relinquishing colonial patterns of thinking and the certainty that Pākehā people and their ways are superior to Māori. For psychologists the issue is their role in maintaining Pākehā economic and political power." (Awatere-Huata, 1993, p.19). A challenge for some Indigenous peoples in western psychology spaces is the need to recognise that their discipline actively discourages their right to fully participate as Indigenous peoples. Dame Tariana Turia (2000) stated: "A consequence of colonial oppression has been the internalisation, by Maori, of the images the oppressor has of them". There is very

little in the psychology curriculum that allows for Māori to become conscientised to the role of the University, or the state, in their oppression, or to foster the understanding that solutions lie within Indigenous knowledge. While not all Māori in psychology experience racism (although they may, due to their intersectionality, experience other oppressions), a commonly voiced concern is that Māori must navigate their way through psychology training, and that it is their responsibility to protect their cultural and psychological integrity.

In recent years psychology associations across countries have made attempts to reconcile and apologise for their colonial past and neo-colonial present (American Psychological Association, 2021; Australian Psychological Society, 2017; British Psychological Society, 2020; Canadian Psychological Association, 2018). Nonetheless, the anti-Indigenous, anti-Tiriti agenda remains dominant (Ansloos et al., 2022, American Psychological Association; 2020; Canadian Psychological Association, 2018; Levy & Waitoki, 2016). Schools of psychology across Aotearoa are at their infancy in developing undergraduate curricula that embody Te Tiriti o Waitangi and the appropriate valuing of mātauranga Māori. However, a sturdy legislative foundation has been laid following WAI 2575 with the Education and Training Act (2020) and the Tertiary Education Strategy 2020, which supports the call for culturally responsive psychology curricula to reflect the worldview of Indigenous and diverse cultural groups. To meet Te Tiriti aspirations, it is imperative to build Māori staff capacity in psychology departments; to sensitise tuiwi staff in recognising the importance of allyship through specific training on Te Tiriti o Waitangi (including content such as Treaty breaches, partnership, and equity); to explicitly name the understanding of Te Tiriti as a requirement during the staff hiring process; and to collectively address institutional racism. With the appropriate legislative backing, a flourishing Māori cultural renaissance, focus on student experiences, and the creation of systems that support staff to implement real change, universities and schools can progress in working towards a culturally responsive curriculum.

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