

What Does It Mean to Be a Man?

Effects of Outsider Witnessing Practices

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Abstract

Telling stories about one's life and experiencing those stories being witnessed by others can have life-giving effects. At the same time, since identity is shaped on the terms of available stories, having access only to thin descriptions of the possibilities for one's life and constrained spaces in which to perform one's identity is life-limiting. Narrative therapy employs practices involving the rich telling and witnessing of stories for therapeutic and life-enhancing effects. One such practice is known as outsider witnessing. This paper reports a study that explored the experiences of a small group of men in Aotearoa New Zealand, who participated in outsider witness practices, telling and witnessing stories about negotiating their lives as men. Narrating the men's perspectives on these practices, the paper demonstrates and argues for the potential of outsider witnessing to contribute to identity-shaping in the lives of men, and so to social action.

Situating this study

Ever since I can remember,¹ I have held close to me a value of accepting difference and being appreciative of what differences can bring to our lives. I think back to one significant event that contributed to my valuing the speaking of difference—and hence to this project researching a particular conversational process with a group of other men about what it means to them to be a man.

When I was ten years old, my mother and I were sitting outside my music class on a Saturday morning, waiting for it to start. As we sat there, I noticed one of the mothers walking around with a petition, approaching other parents to sign it. The parents of my class were known to each other and they would chat about a range of things while

waiting for us to finish class. There was a comfort about the group, and people appeared only too happy to oblige by signing the petition. The mother with the petition then approached my mother, asking if she would like to sign. At that point we learned that the petition opposed equal rights for those in same-sex relationships. As a shy 10-year-old, I preferred to engage with others for the shortest amount of time possible and, however long the engaging took, it was to be positive. This situation was no different. I smiled at the woman, taking no notice of what she was talking about, and looked at my mother for her response. My mother smiled back at the woman, and declined to sign the petition. The woman's body language changed a little while she stood there, then acknowledged my mother's response, before carrying on to other parents. I remember looking at my mother with some confusion. I asked why she hadn't signed the petition. I was concerned that by declining to sign, she may have created some sort of rift between her (us) and the other parents. I can't remember exactly what she said in reply to my question, but it was something to the effect that, "Everyone is entitled to live their lives the way they choose and we need to respect that." What this situation showed me was that you can still get on with others even though you may have differing opinions. As well, I learned that there are areas within our lives that warrant taking stances, which provide opportunities or prompt us to voice our thoughts and not get lost within a collective voice. My mother took a position for respect and fairness in a situation where to do so was to stand out from the crowd.

The project at the centre of this paper also comes from a position of standing for respect and fairness, and a willingness to stand out from the crowd. I invited a group of men, all members of the rugby league club to which I belong, to meet together to explore in conversation how they negotiate being a man. My hope for the project was to extend the ways available to us all to negotiate our lives as men and so to contribute to the lives of the men and our whānau.

From this brief autoethnography, the paper now goes on to contextualise the project further, in my own professional life, and in a selection of literature on masculinity. I then outline the conversational, storytelling practices—narrative therapy's outsider witnessing practices (White, 2007)—that were used to structure the conversations when we met as a research group. A brief glimpse of one research meeting then follows. The article then presents the men's perspectives on the effects for them of engaging in these processes of telling and retelling stories of what it means to be a man.

Thinking in terms of negotiating gender: Hopes for a kind of “gender reform”?

Inviting men to end men’s privileges, and to remake masculinities to sustain gender equality, strikes many people as a strange or utopian project. Yet this project is already under way. Many men around the world are engaged in gender reforms.
(Connell, 2005, p. 1817)

My hope for this project was that it might make a difference in everyday lives through exploring how men from my social network negotiate being a man in their day-to-day lives. This hope is linked with the social constructionist idea that, through our participation in the world, people both shape and are shaped by discourse (Burr, 2003), that is, by the stories and signs that tell us how things are and are to be in the world. By speaking together about what it means to be a man, this group of men and I might expand the repertoire available to us, and this expanding would contribute to shaping the possibilities of the masculinities we get to perform as men in Aotearoa New Zealand.

One of the research participants commented that engaging in a project to meet with a group of men to tell and listen to stories of what it means to be a man was not what he had believed “real men” do. In this very particular way, this project disturbs or “troubles” (see Davies, 2000, p. 14) the idea of “real men” formed by dominant expressions of masculinity—particularly in Aotearoa New Zealand, where the legacy of a colonial history emphasises physicality for both Māori and Pākehā men. The performance of masculine identity as “hard,” “tough and silent,” involving consumption of “copious” quantities of beer, and refusal to “yield to physical pain” (Hokowhitu, 2003, pp. 180–181) continues to shape contemporary masculine identities, including those alternatives which productively contest this dominant expression. Such alternative performances of masculinity are characterised in everyday and academic terms: for example, the metro-(sexual) man, consumer of body/beauty products; the “new man,” middle-class, educated, expressive; the “humble and quiet” Māori man (Hokowhitu, 2007, p. 66); the pro-feminist man, and so on. Such terms of categorisation, however, can obscure the significance of how each man puts together his identity as a man, how he negotiates or performs being a man in the ordinary events of his daily life. This gap was identified by Coles (2009): “Little consideration [is] given to the strategies men use to negotiate masculinities in their everyday lives” (p. 30). Sitting behind the everyday words of the question I presented to the men in my research group—“What does it mean to be a man?”—is a complex understanding of the negotiating of experience that goes on as people continuously shape their identities in their interactions with the world around them:

... from a Foucaultian perspective, identity can be understood as constructed via experiences that are linked to the workings of discourse, power relations, disciplinary techniques and processes of active self-negotiation. (Markula & Pringle, 2006, p. 99)

While this project's focus is conversation within a particular group of men about "processes of active self-negotiation" of the experiences of being a man, these experiences are continuously shaped by the wider discursive context. Each man's experience of being a man is shaped by discourses of masculinity, as well as other discourses. As Connell (2005) noted: "Class, race, national, regional, and generational differences cross-cut the category 'men,'" and "the gains and costs of gender relations [are spread] very unevenly among men" (p. 1809). This is also Hokowhitu's (2007) point in reference to Māori men, as I shall explain shortly.

I have witnessed the gains and costs of gender relations particularly in my professional life. I have worked with groups of men (young and older—*taitamariki*, *taiohi*, *rangatahi*, *pakeke*, *koroua*) in a range of settings including schools, prisons, *marae*, clubs, and community houses. These experiences have been challenging and rewarding. I have valued opportunities to connect with others and form relationships and have been very privileged to hear young men speak their values and beliefs. Working with young men in groups is complex (see Allen, 2005; Edley & Wetherell, 1997; Gaddis, 2006). As a group leader, I proactively work for a group culture that fosters possibilities for genuineness and for openness to sharing thoughts and ideas. While, with young Māori males, another Māori male face suggests the possibility of familiar experiences, at times I have sensed a strong scrutiny being focused on me. I think the *āhua* (holistic appearance) a leader brings to the group is scrutinised by young males, thereby influencing the effectiveness of the group's relational processes and task focus.

There have been some challenges in my group work with young Māori men. The not-so-good experiences I have been exposed to include young Māori men whose lives have been caught up in drug abuse, crime, vandalism, violence, gangs, and unsafe sexual practices, and who struggle to find any support or direction for the future. Their lives have been, in Hokowhitu's (2007) words, "confined by a highly dysfunctional [discursive] space where many Māori men locate themselves, are located to, and struggle to break free" (p. 66). The evidence is that this limited discursive space does not work for Māori men. For example, Māori male life expectancy is shorter than non-Māori, and Māori are represented more highly in the criminal justice statistics, as victims and as offenders, than their proportion of the population (Statistics New Zealand, 2008, 2009).

Arguing that it is important for Māori men to find ways to move beyond the limited space defined for them by others, and particularly those spaces defined on the terms of colonial discourses, Hokowhitu (2007) cited examples of Māori artists and intellectuals who have produced “inspirational spaces” (p. 75) for other Māori men to engage with. I take with me into group work with men a hope for the possibility of supporting men’s migrations from the limited discursive spaces of a “silent physicality” toward possible inspirational spaces and a “communicative oral masculine culture” (Hokowhitu, 2007, p. 75). While Hokowhitu suggested that Māori men look within their own culture for the traditions to engage in this migration, in the project I describe here I have drawn from narrative therapy practices (White, 2007) to explore the possibilities of life-enhancing speaking spaces. For, echoing Hokowhitu’s hopes for alternative speaking spaces for Māori men are White’s (2007) descriptions of narrative conversations that aim to provide a scaffolded conversational movement from what is “known and familiar” in a person’s everyday discursive world to what might be “possible for them to know” (pp. 278–279) through the widening of discursive horizons. The outsider witnessing conversations that were central to this project, and that I shall describe shortly, provide such life-enhancing possibilities. They provide alternative approaches to working with men in groups.

From the perspective of a researcher, Allen (2005) valued the ways in which meeting with young men in the context of a focus group allowed her access to observe the means by which young men manage their masculinity. As a group worker I hope to go further than that. In group work and in the research group, I hoped to find ways to negotiate beyond the managing and policing that men offer each other and themselves that limit the spaces in which masculinity can be performed. I am familiar with the ways in which these limits are policed. For example, in groups in prison, the strong presence of a “prison code” shapes whose voice gets heard and what topics are acceptable to talk about. I have noticed that in instances where discussions take a new route, perhaps talking of changing a baby’s nappy, this is likely to be frowned upon, given a confused look, ridiculed, or blatantly shut down with either a joke or a change of subject. Discussions continue only if the group accepts the topic. As a further example, Allen (2005) showed how young men managed and policed their own performances, in speaking about sexuality, in ways that maintained traditional masculine identities. Writing about adolescent boys and groups, Gaddis (2006) suggested that “most boys, even those with strongly held personally different views, know how to say what is necessary in public or to keep silent to prevent immediate

and/or delayed reprisal” (p. 48). Further, Gaddis argued that it is patriarchal knowledge that adolescent boys use to police the limits of their own and others’ speaking.

My experiences of the effects of these limitations on what it is possible for men and boys to speak about has led to my interest in exploring conversational practices with men in groups. My hope is to explore practices that might allow for individual voices and alternative expressions of masculinity to be heard and accepted in ways that diminish the presence of patriarchal self- and other-judgement, retaliation, or isolation, and open the possibilities of alternative cultural expressions for men.

Introducing outsider witnessing practices

My own experiences of outsider witnessing practices led me to explore their possibilities further, and most particularly in this research. Outsider witness practices were developed by White (2000, 2007) in the context of narrative therapy. These practices come out of the idea, introduced above, that identity is generated in the context of relationships with others, and on the terms of the available discourses. This way of understanding identity has resonance with the Māori concepts of *pepeha*² and *whakapapa*, through which relationship produces identity—relationship with the environment and extended family members, community, and those who have gone before.

Narrative therapy is based on the idea that stories shape lives: for example, as Hokowhitu (2007) argued, the story that Māori men are violent or silent actively shapes the available ways for Māori men to live their lives. With the idea of the shaping effects of stories in mind, the speaking of stories is significant in how people understand themselves and live. The speaking of the stories of people’s lives allows opportunity for stories of who they are to be “authenticated” (White, 2000, p. 65)—or not—by themselves and others. The outsider witness process is structured in order to support someone in telling stories of his or her life, and for those stories to be witnessed and authenticated by others. Careful structure and facilitation provide conversational spaces that offer possibilities for more expansive speaking that might contribute to richer descriptions of what people do and care about in their lives. These carefully structured steps aim to offer a layering of story upon story, and the building of connections between people.

A facilitator’s role is crucial here. A facilitator is not only a conversational partner with the person and the witnesses, but also a political activist (Monk & Gehart, 2003), alert to the shaping effects of limiting discourses and also to opportunities to take

conversations, in this situation, beyond the limits that the dominant patriarchal discourse would impose, into carefully crafted alternative conversational spaces.

An outline of the steps of outsider witnessing follows, based on the process described by White (2007). In the first phase, there is an interview between a facilitator and one person. The outsider witness team is an audience to this interview. Before the interview begins, the facilitator prepares the outsider witness team to listen with a particular focus in order to respond in ways that will be meaningful to the person at the centre of the interview. The second phase involves the team's responding to what they heard in the first facilitated conversation. These responses, too, are facilitated. There are four main categories of inquiry to the outsider-witnessing team interview. In brief, team members are asked:

1. What particular words or expressions did the person use that stood out for you as you listened to the conversation?
2. What images did this noticing invoke? What do you think the person was caring about here?
3. How did this particular expression resonate with you and your life?
4. Where has being witness to this conversation taken you in your own life? What of the conversation will you take away with you? How might it change you?

After the team members have responded to these inquiries, the third outsider witnessing phase returns to the original pair from the first phase. The facilitator interviews the person about his responses to the outsider witnessing in phase two.

White (2000) wrote that engaging in outsider witnessing processes provides the possibility for people to be transported elsewhere into places of "life and identity" where they might never have thought they would find themselves. This aspect, in particular, appears to offer strategies that respond to Hokowhitu's (2007) hope for Māori men:

To work with Māori men effectively is to allow them to broaden the limits imposed on them, to have them recognise that the limits are imaginary and that they can be transcended. (p. 75)

Another experience in the genesis of this project occurred when I was part of an outsider witnessing team in a group that met to speak about negotiating masculinity in our lives (Kotze, Gaddis, & Crocket, 2005). In this particular situation, phases one and three involved group interviews rather than individual interviews, as in the usual process described above. As a member of the witnessing team, I had opportunities to speak of my beliefs about fatherhood and the values I hold regarding supporting my

partner as the mother of our children. There was also opportunity for me to step outside of what I experience as dominant traditional thinking about fathers, and talk about my goals for being a father and my hopes for my children, in terms of how I act and what I value as a father, a husband, and a man.

In this outsider witnessing group, I heard other men's stories about being a man and I connected with some of these stories in terms of my own life. In connecting with these stories, and speaking of the connections, I gave voice to some ideas that were important to me. The process offered me further understanding of how my past experiences had contributed to the ways in which I live my life as a man. Through making connections between other men's stories about being a man and events in my own life that I had not previously thought about in this way, I experienced a greater richness in my thinking about how I go about being a man myself.

Wanting to open this opportunity to other men I knew, I joined with Stephen Gaddis in inviting some of my male friends to meet together with us in a similar outsider witnessing group, about being a man. This invitation to my friends was into a way of speaking together that might be out of our usual context, a little different, and a little challenging. While the friends I invited know me as someone who aims to stand firmly on a set of morals and values, I had previously engaged with them in conversation only in the realms of sport, Māori culture, and academic matters. I had yet to share other ideas with these friends around maleness and fatherhood. I hoped this expanded sharing would be enabled through outsider witness processes. This small group met informally a number of times, and my hopes for our taking conversations into new territories of speaking began to be realised.

From this informal group, my research study was a later and further step. Influenced by action research, the study's method drew on a growing tradition of practitioner research in counselling (Crocket, 2004; Lees, 2001; McLeod, 2001a, 2001b, 2003). The project's method was particularly informed by Speedy's (2008) arguments for and illustrations of carrying the practices of narrative therapy into research. Thus, outsider witnessing practices were both a subject of inquiry and served as an inquiry strategy. At the same time, I suggest that the study's design accords with Smith's (1999) statement about kaupapa Māori research: "The research approach also has to address seriously the cultural ground rules of respect, of working with communities, of sharing processes and knowledge" (p. 191).

With a research proposal and ethics approval in place, I invited some friends from rugby league to join me in a group that would make outsider witnessing conversations

between men available for research. Given that a number of authors have observed that male contact sport is a site for the expression of a physical, competitive, less articulate expression of masculinity (Hokowhitu, 2007; Markula & Pringle, 2006), it is of some significance that the participants in this study of a process for conversations about being a man were all members of the same rugby league club.

My research questions

Two main questions shaped my research project. These were:

1. What makes it possible for men to have conversations about what it means to be a man?
2. How do outsider witnessing practices contribute to men's conversations about what it means to be a man?

The research also highlighted how outsider witnessing works as a research practice, exploring its potential to provide a site to both engage in shaping masculinity and to study masculinity in-the-shaping. The focus of this article is on the men's evaluations of their experiences of speaking together in outsider witnessing about negotiating masculinity in their lives. While their words quoted below will point to some of the intersecting discourses that shape their lives, here the focus is on outsider witnessing as a strategy for men to speak together about being a man. Forthcoming articles focus on the stories of being a man that the men told, including a discursive investigation of the masculinities they perform through their stories; on their ideas about how the process might be extended to include other men, and on a more richly theorised description of the research strategies. The significance of the focus of this first article is my work as a practitioner: the value of this process for these men suggests it is a practice to be made more widely available. This focus leaves dimensions of the research story, such as my positioning as both researcher and clubmate/friend, and descriptions of the analytic strategies, absent from this particular article.

An example of an outsider witnessing conversation

The following extracts track moments of a particular thread within one outsider witnessing conversation. I use this illustration to give context and credibility to the men's reflections on the process, which follow the illustration. Pseudonyms are used for all participants.

Parata spoke in the phase-one interview of some of the ways of being a man that shaped his growing up:

I look at my uncles and I see: work hard and play hard, go to work, booze it up, play football, booze it up, that was what it was ... all heaps of fun ... the girls had to stay home ... that's what my uncles said, so that's what happened you know ... it was massive to be a male in my whānau ...

He told of these shaping effects playing themselves out in his own life, along with a sense of responsibilities and love for his wife and children:

... and I question myself ... do I really love my wife? And if I did then why am I hurting her by being out on the piss with the boys ... like when I'm playing football and I don't come back ... leave in the morning to catch our bus to travel and not get back till seven at night ... and come back pissed ... and the missus being with the kids all day ... and seeing her tired when I come home and not really noticing it ... and the only way you get to know is when she is pissed off ... and you are too busy getting over your hangover and the person you love is trying to tell you something ...

I asked Parata about how he had negotiated his ways through to suggesting that he was now putting his wife first:

I remember saying it to myself when my third son was born. It was when my third son was born that it all fell into place. I thought about it now, bro. I always wanted to know what it felt like to have a father, you know. I've never had that ... my father figures were my uncles ... never my father and so... (Pause. An emotion-filled moment.) Far [out], [that's] pretty out of it ... (Pause.) I just realised this, bro ... when my sons came along, bro ... and it's what you probably picked up on last week [when we all met] ... [and Anaru was talking about] what was it like to be a son. And so when my sons were there [born] I asked the same question ... so I can't answer that, eh... It's quite personal, man, but now that I've got my sons, bro ... I can be the best father for them.... It's pretty cool to notice that, bro ...

In response, I asked Parata, “And what do you hope for your sons, bro?” He replied:

I hope that they will have one [a father present in their lives]—and they do—and it's mean, mean to know that they are going to grow up with a father. Whether I do it right or wrong, I don't know ... but at least they have one ...

The words on paper may not convey the significance of this moment for Parata's story of himself as a man and a father. Anaru later acknowledged this emotion-filled moment when he spoke during the phase-two witnessing:

... it was mean. When he got touched thinking about his kids, man, it was empowering. It's good; it makes you feel good ...

In phase-two witnessing, Mikaere also connected with Parata's experiences of finding his way as a father:

I've sort of been in the same situation as Parata: when having his first baby [he] still didn't get it ... [he] had his second child still didn't get it ... cruising around the country ... and then when he had his third boy ... I don't know if this will sound wrong but ... when he had his third boy he sort of woke up and wanted to change his ways ... he made a stand to be different. I don't know, but I sort of had the same experience. I was the same when I had my first girl at fifteen ... [I] didn't get it at all. [Then I] had my young fulla; he's seven, sort of didn't get it then either ... but then when I had my little girl, I birthed her myself you know ... From that I feel that I am a father more now, [it] just changed my whole priority list ...

I asked Mikaere about the special significance of participating in the birth of his daughter:

I don't know what it is ... I hate to say it's different from one child to the next ... but it may have been a spiritual thing, maybe, my girl was born a day after my birthday ... and just that I birthed her you know ... I didn't do that for my other kids ... I think that came from a different sort of relationship with my wife as opposed to the first two ... I was in a different mindset: just get in there and get it done ... Kind of like the dishes thing: if they're there, just do it. Man, I didn't see my old man touch the dishes once or not even take his plate from the table ... just straight eat and then [pick up the TV] remote ... I have a deeper sort of love for my wife ...

Anaru, too, responded to Parata's kōrero about being a father and about relationships with children:

... when Parata said he didn't have a father, right, and I was thinking about myself and my father and how blessed I am to have had a father, and what I think is being a good father ... and what I have learned from him ... but in saying that he has done things I didn't like as well, he has been a good dad ...

From speaking of his own experience, Anaru went on to acknowledge the hopes Parata had spoken about for being a father himself:

... it kind of blew me away you know ... cause I know Parata and I respect him totally, as a friend and as a man, and to know what he's done has kind of blown me

away ... to see he's done it without a father ... to break the cycle that his uncles showed him as well ... it's mean.

In order to develop the witnessing account further, I asked Anaru what values he thought Parata held that were possibly connected with his wanting to “break the cycle.” He responded:

... his realisation that his kids were gonna have a father where he didn't, you know ... because there is probably a lot of people who have grown up without a father and abandon their kids too ... because that's what they know ... so to see that he's breaking that cycle too ... it's mean ... it was quite powerful to be honest ... and in all honesty, bro ... like Parata said, they're going to have a father whether he does it right or wrong ... but, see, to me I tell him that I've had a good dad ... and not necessarily agreed on everything but he's been there anyway and I've learned from that ... so right or wrong, however he raises his kids they are going to learn stuff ... no one's perfect ... but the fact that he didn't have a father, yet he is saying that he's going to be around for his kids ... that's good straight away ...

The theory that the witnessing of a person's preferred identity stories further shapes identity played out during the phase-three conversation when I interviewed Parata about the phase-two team conversation to which he had just listened:

... that realisation with my sons, bro ... that was powerful ... I'll just go back, bro, and embrace my kids tonight ... I told my wife last week what we were doing. She sort of said, “What's that all about?” I said, “We're doing a mean thing and I'm on the seat next week, babe,” and she said, “What does that mean?” [I said,] “I gotta talk about what it means to be a man.” And then she started asking me about my thoughts of being a man, and it was pretty cool. She started getting really interested.

Reviewing our conversations about what it means to be a man

The purpose of the final group meeting was to review the men's experiences of the outsider witnessing conversations. It was Parata who spoke first:

... I found it really powerful at the time, and really helpful to think about what it means to be a man ... and I got some awesome feedback, so that was powerful. I went back home, felt good about myself, felt good about what happened, I felt good about the process ... It was useful. I went home and said, “Babe, I feel like a better man ... I've got a mean understanding of fatherhood ...”

We heard how Parata's partner had served as a further witness to his story of himself as a man and a father:

... she nodded in an understanding way ... it was all good ... [I] told her about the realisation I had when I had my son and a few tears came to her eyes and that was mean ... cause I'm open and can't lie to her these days ... she can read me like a book ... so that has been helpful to open up more at home ... I guess using the power of the discussions that has been available here ... but where to from here after the review? ... What's going to happen next and the weeks after that?

Parata here referred to the question, raised during earlier meetings, of how the group process might continue, and might include other men, after the research ended. I asked him if he had any ideas about next steps:

Not yet ... maybe ongoing kōrero, that's up to the brothers ... it's new and how do you sustain that ... something that's good? ... cause it might feel hoha, "Got to get to this meeting" ... but you know it's good ... it's beneficial ... just the needing to get the house right first before coming, get the kids sussed first ...

Even as he considered how these meetings might continue, Parata demonstrated something of how he prefers to be a man and a father, in speaking of "the house" and the kids having first claim on his responsibility. This had been an idea that had been discussed during our earlier meetings: here we see Parata taking this idea on into his everyday life, as he does again later in the review conversation:

I'd love to learn the skills to do this [outsider witnessing]. I was talking to Mikaere on the way up and thinking of when my kids get to being teenagers, and what better way to understand—skills of listening and empathy—to then use them when I talk with my kids. It will just make me a better father again. I'd love to learn those skills.

Mikaere, too, spoke in terms of the group supporting his preferences for how he is as a man:

I was keen [to meet] ... cause I saw it as helping me to stay on track with how I want to live my life, you know ... so just to hear stories and see people's points of view ... cause without that you can be sort of closed off, with what you see on TV, what you talk about with your mates ... normally you are all having a laugh about something and never really get down to the nitty-gritty like this you know ... I think it's great to meet without the booze, or the rough-and-tumble around the footy field you know ... proving your manhood in other areas but no one sort of talks about it you

know ... no one can talk about it ... that's what it's done for me ... I think it's great ... let's get past those sort of hurdles and get it out there ...

Mikaere valued the safety that created a climate for getting down to the nitty-gritty. Anaru commented on how the collaboration and structure of outsider witnessing contributed to creating a safe space for speaking:

Everyone here is willing to give something. The fact that you know everyone here is going to say their bit.

He went on to comment on the value of speaking about the everyday aspects of negotiating gender, and hearing the stories of the other participants:

... I think you can learn something from everyone and it doesn't have to be something completely drastic. It might only be short but it can be beneficial. I mean I was connecting with Clint's story in many different ways. I think the reinforcing is something I can take away with me.

Brad and Parata both commented on the structure and style of facilitation:

... part of it is the way you [Eugene] have gone about it ... you've explained what it's about, and haven't put any pressure on us to be involved.... There's no sort of attitude or anything to bring anyone down; we just want to be open. As soon as you get that feeling it's huge. The wicked thing is we are all listening and not judging. We are here to listen and give feedback. (Brad)

Whatever that fulla [in the phase-one interview] has to say he is saying it. And because of the skill you [Eugene] have or non-biasness or not right or wrong, that comes out and the brothers feel safe about that you know, you're not judging them. You just are going on what they are saying, and so that creates a safe environment. (Parata)

A sense of safety and belonging resonates with Waldegrave's (2000) suggestion that belonging is a central therapeutic value, since the health of Māori is directly linked to a sense of belonging—to land, people and culture.

Perhaps another aspect of belonging was the reciprocity of generating knowledge together of which Anaru spoke:

There isn't that avenue elsewhere to do this ... the whole what does it take to be a man ... where else do you go to sort that out other than talking about it ... so sweet, here is something that I haven't been able to do elsewhere, so cool ... part of it was my wanting to learn something and another thing was I wanted to give

something to someone else ... I always think about how I can help others, cause that's mean and empowering too, and with this situation, being in the hot seat was mean. You get the feedback from others, and knowing that they have taken something from what you said and that is empowering. At the same time listening to others and giving your feedback and learning from others, it's that whole give and take thing ... it's mean ... it's just a good system ... not like you are going somewhere and you have just one lecturer and learn from them ... we are learning, giving and taking, from each other; I think to me that's what keeps me here ... it's not you [researcher] taking a group and we are all sitting and taking notes from you ... everyone is giving and taking from each other ...

The oral context Anaru describes here produces a space for expressing masculinity beyond those narrow spaces to which Hokowhitu suggested Māori masculinities are restricted. The process Anaru describes is one of knowledge being made collaboratively, resonant of Gergen's (1985) social constructionist suggestion that "knowledge is not something people possess, somewhere in their heads, but rather something that people do together" (p. 270).

The group focus and the process of outsider witnessing took these men into new conversational landscapes:

... we don't normally get to say this stuff. (Brad)

Someone like myself, I'm a pretty quiet person, a bit introverted, and don't find it easy striking up conversations like that. So that's why I really value something like this; it's given you a forum to speak and you know that everyone is going to listen and feedback ... I like knowing that I can be a part of a conversation that builds and grows off itself and stuff like that. (Brad)

... as much as we are here encouraging each other to contribute, at the same time the brothers can sit back take it all in and just come in when they feel comfortable. Even when someone is in the hot seat, as much as it might be difficult to talk about some of this stuff, there is a total comfortable feeling and we can take our time. If we go off on a tangent no one is going to say you can't. Everybody just welcomes each other to talk; as we have all said this is really rare and it's just a blast to be part of it ... (Brad)

... I think that there is an idea out there that you need to have a beer or be watching a football game to have a conversation and that's why I think it is rare. I think about all the family gatherings my family had and no one had conversations like

this.... They would be talking about football, or cracking a joke at somebody or trying to know more than somebody else, but never the deep and meaningful. We don't get there because it's not a male thing; it's more of a feminine thing. I think that's the scary part of what I assume males are frightened of, which is going to something like this and thinking of it being uncontrolled. (Parata)

I think I am heaps more enlightened about new things, about what I think it is to be a man. I think it's all those traditional things we have always known about, providing service and that. For me now, being a man is about the unspoken things and being in touch with your emotions, stuff we don't talk about as men, stuff we have been able to do here. Over the past few meetings, being the best son I can be, best husband and best dad, things I have been awakened to by being here; it's changed heaps my ideas about what it means to be a man. (Mikaere)

... I think what it means to be a man, I'm still learning.... Being open to learning from others instead of thinking that I'm the man, I know what's right and what's wrong.... The main thing about being here is while there are certain things we have in common, we still have different ideas of what it means or takes to be a man. That's been part of the process for me, learning new stuff and it's been good ... (Anaru)

Significantly, the process was likened to Māori processes of dialogue:

I mean they did it in the old days, maybe around a fire speaking Māori. On the paepae, one fulla gets up and everyone listens, that's it, the Māori culture has it, there's a lot more value than we actually realise, eh? (Parata)

... each one of us here has an appreciation for deep kōrero eh, and you need that first, I think. I like to go to wānanga and wānanga hard you know. The discussion can go from here and go right around and back again and that's what I like about it. We came here for this kaupapa but we went all around it ... (Mikaere)

These comments perhaps resonate with Anaru's earlier comment about "learning, giving and taking from each other." It appears that the men have found the conversational processes of outsider witnessing culturally appropriate in a number of ways, including in the resonance with aspects of Māori cultural practice; in collaborative participation; in offering structure and skill to enable entry into meaningful conversation; and in affirming and authenticating their preferred identities; in the tangible benefits for their day-to-day lives.

Making a difference for everyday lives

My hopes were that this research project would explore some possible contributions of outsider witness practices for conversations with men about gender, about what it means to them to be men. In its focus on conversations about how a group of men think about and enact being a man in their everyday lives, the study shows men as gendered “subject[s]-in-process” (Davies et al., 2006, p. 101). That is, the outsider witness conversations recorded here show the men taking steps that begin to render visible the stories by which their lives are made up, and so the wider cultural stories by which their lives are shaped. The inscriptive powers of discourse thus become, in the words of Davies et al., “both visible and revisable” (p. 101). When the stories that shape our lives are visible to us, there is the possibility for us to revise them; when we do that in the context of a community, that authenticates the revised stories. In this way, outsider witness practices contribute to alternative sites for the performance of alternative stories of Māori masculinity, an expanded space such as Hokowhitu (2007) was suggesting.

Carrying forward my mother’s teaching, my hope was that this project might contribute to supporting men to find further ways to negotiate beyond what they might identify as limited spaces of dominant masculinities, and to find acceptance for doing things differently. The men’s evaluations of the process and review of their experiences in the group, and beyond, weave together with my mother’s teaching, and other experiences in my life, in support of my ongoing professional work and in my friendships with these men. Most particularly, the research conversations illustrated here show how the outsider witness processes supported men to speak about, story more richly, and live out what they care about in their lives.

Notes

- 1 This research account is told in Eugene’s voice. It draws on his MCouns research, which Kathie supervised. This article is authored by us both.
- 2 Pepeha is the name of the process of introducing oneself by naming the mountain, sea, river, waka, iwi, and so on with which one affiliates.

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