

Testing practices for testing times: Exploring Indigenous-led governance

Dialogues in Human Geography
2023, Vol. 13(2) 301–305
© The Author(s) 2023



Article reuse guidelines:
sagepub.com/journals-permissions
DOI: 10.1177/20438206231177079
journals.sagepub.com/home/dhg



Rita Dionisio 

The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand

Kelly Dombroski

Massey University, New Zealand

Amanda Yates 

Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand

Abstract

In this author response, we further reflect on pluriversal and prefigurative approaches to research, centred on Indigenous Māori knowledge, while opening space for cross-cultural perspectives and co-creation methods. We address the responses authored by Meg Parsons, Wendy Steele and Wendy Harcourt, starting by summarising what we took from each contribution. We discuss key questions raised by each of the authors in the context of the evolving research programme and broader developments on wellbeing governance in Aotearoa. Pluriversal and prefigurative experimental approaches are key to testing and iteratively advancing the research agenda in disruptive times.

Keywords

governance, more-than-human, climate action, wellbeing, mauri ora, New Zealand

Since we wrote our article, ‘Dialogues for Wellbeing in an Ecological Emergency’, we have been forcefully reminded of the need for rapid transitions to wellbeing-led governance requiring planetary wellbeing approaches. In recent months, we have been buffeted by several storms of the one-in-a-hundred year type, and have all experienced disruptions: Kelly was trapped in a small coastal area with some of her young children and their cousins in a fast-rising flood on the east coast of New Zealand; Amanda experienced disruptions to power, freshwater, and children’s schooling for several weeks in the Auckland floods; and Rita

experienced a nomadic few months, travelling in her campervan while attempting to avoid such weather. We witnessed the devastation caused by post-cyclone Gabrielle in the east coast of the North Island, through various media. Meanwhile, Prime Minister Jacinda Ardern stepped down, and a new Prime Minister reshuffled cabinet and began

Corresponding author:

Rita Dionisio, School of Social Sciences, The University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand.

Email: mariarita.dionisio@waikato.ac.nz

what will be decades of recovery while deprioritising climate action. But we may not have decades before the next storm hits, especially if climate action is deprioritised.

Some encouraging events have happened too, at multiple scales. In March 2023, there was a workshop held by the Treasury of the New Zealand Government within a 'wellbeing report series'. In this event, Kate Raworth and Andrew Fanning, of the Doughnut Economics Action Lab, worked through the nuts and bolts of calculating planetary boundaries and associated social welfare 'floors' within which our societies must function. At the workshop, treasury staff predominated, but other professionals also engaged, such as those from the Productivity Commission, in discussing the relevance of GDP growth as an economic measure, and whether the SDGs go deep enough to support transformative imaginaries. Meaningful discussions took place at this level of national economic planning about how economic wellbeing-led transitions can support our living within planetary boundaries. We have had interactions with teams such as the long-term economic planning team in the Ministry of Business Innovation and Employment, on using diverse economies and *mauri ora* approaches to consider purpose-led (rather than profit-led) enterprises in New Zealand's long-term economic future. While our work described in the article was firmly place-based in Rotorua and Ōtautahi Christchurch, it has been important to see parallel shifts pushing ahead at the national scale. Of course, much of this is because wellbeing is under direct threat right now – with rising living costs, a housing crisis, massive damage to food production due to flooding, environmental pollution and plastic contamination, and social issues such as racism, mental health, domestic violence, and a proliferation of conspiracy theories. But perhaps many, in the place we call home, are coming to accept that wellbeing is not something just for the wealthy, or for humans alone.

In our article, we reviewed wellbeing-led governance frameworks considering Indigenous knowledge systems and more-than-human wellbeing. We presented an emerging research programme that takes a pluriversal and prefigurative approach, centred on Indigenous Māori knowledge, while

opening space for cross-cultural perspectives and the adoption of co-creation methods. By pluriversal we mean approaches to knowledge that are not universalising, or colonising, but acknowledge multiple ways of knowing and being in the world – one of which is *mātauranga Māori*. Our understanding of 'prefigurative' refers to the performative acts of knowledge-making and activations that prefigure the kind of place and wider world we want to live in. While critique is valuable, so too is engaging in Indigenous-led interventions for transformative metrics, tools, and practices in partnership with communities. We considered possibilities for culturally specific, place-based wellbeing indices and tools to orient transformative governance for human and more-than-human wellbeing, introducing the *mauri ora* compass and data tools as means to do so. We appreciate the responses by Meg Parsons (2023), Wendy Steele (2023), and Wendy Harcourt (2023), which illustrate various imaginaries and highlight critical points of inquiry for future thinking in wellbeing governance. In what follows, we engage with each response. We first summarise what we took from each contribution and then elaborate on critical points, while describing the progress of the research programme.

In her response, Meg Parsons puts our piece in conversation with Indigenous scholars such as Deborah McGregor, highlighting key alignments, particularly on what governing with care might look like in the future. She suggests a few potential lines of expanding inquiry. For instance, can wellbeing indicators be co-created and used to appraise the success of adaptation projects and/or policies? And, what does decolonising wellbeing approaches to climate change adaptation look like in practice? We appreciate this commentary because it highlights the importance of work within the context of 'cross-cultural partnerships built on actively engaging with and promoting IKS (Indigenous knowledge systems)' (Parsons, 2023). Overall, Parsons stresses how our work embraced a pluralistic approach in attempting to co-create *mauri ora* indicators in distinct contexts. Bringing empirical observations into the dialogue, the author presents the example of Ngāti Maniapoto, based in the Waikato-Waitomo region, and their ancestral, relational histories with Waipā River.

Parsons (2023) emphasises the importance of ‘small actions with cumulative effects in challenging and destabilising the current status quo in the context of governance’. Parsons’ closing comments highlight that this debate belongs to the pluralistic sphere of hopeful geographies, summoning us all (authors and readers) to elaborate on decolonising wellbeing governance in practice.

This question of a shared responsibility for decolonising wellbeing governance is crucial for us. We feel pulled to act *now*, even if we don’t know exactly how. In this response, titled ‘testing practices for testing times’, we reflect on how we can proceed with humility, into an experimental and iterative journey. This means giving things a go while considering prefigurative and pluriversal approaches. We proceed with caution, hoping that small acts can indeed be cumulative in rising collective responsibility in the wake of rapid environmental change. As such, in the article we described the initial stages of engaging with an Indigenous governance group, Te Tatau o Te Arawa, to support their mauri-centred 2050 Vision on their ancestral lands. In a series of co-creative workshops, Te Tatau o Te Arawa representatives ‘picked and mixed’ from a mauri-centred compass kitset to create their own specific compass that sets their vision and interconnected actions for holistic wellbeing in the urban environs of Rotorua. Our hope is that the Rotorua Lakes Council and other local governance bodies collaborate in such a vision for the city.

After this engagement, the intervening period has been extremely disruptive with a crisis in emergency and short-term housing in Rotorua, as well as several weather events that have caused major disruptions across the country. Yet, Te Tatau have spoken on their 2050 Vision and their compass in multiple places such as a newspaper article, and in radio interviews.¹ The potential now is to equip iwi developers with the compass and match them with regenerative design practitioners to facilitate infrastructural change on the ground. As the compass starts to guide change in the built environment, we hope to see an ongoing evolution. Firstly, there are already changes in the organisation and language used in the compass visualisation; and secondly, in the methods of using this tool to guide

change (Yates et al., 2022). We have observed it shift from governance or analysis tool to being used as change tool in multiple pluralistic ways. An example of this is the way in which our colleagues have traced its concordances with the Ngāi Tahu (South Island iwi) plan. The tool has also been adopted to frame the architecture programme at Auckland University of Technology (Yates et al., 2022), with the first cohort of students graduating with the mauri ora compass thinking shaping their programme and assessment.

As Wendy Steele notes in her response, transformative engagement is not just about iwi and Indigenous-led shifts. Steele discusses our article in conversation with Gandy’s *Natura Urbana* (2022), emphasising the imaginary of urban contexts where human and more-than-human geographies inter-relate.” She prompts us to consider how to meaningfully activate ethical wellbeing governance changes that include more-than-human inhabitants and ‘nature’ in different contexts. Reflecting on Gandy’s work, Steele highlighted the importance of countering dominant knowledge and relationships to ensure that future imaginaries are critically reflective on the socio-ecological dynamics of neoliberal urban development. Urban planning and transformation are never ethically neutral, but ethically negotiated and political. Steele poses critical questions for negotiating the future of resilient cities and urban territories, considering culture, ecosystems, and environmental change alongside meaningful measures of wellbeing governance. Steele emphasises kin-based approaches to urban wellbeing, which overlap with Māori relational ontologies.

It is encouraging to see moves towards relational ontologies in geographical thought and the emphasis on place as a central actor in transformative change. Indigenous concepts of wellbeing can serve to counter hegemonic and human-centric understandings of what a good life feels like, both for humans and more-than-humans. The mauri ora compass has been useful in testing out different ways of understanding and acting in the city for urban wellbeing considering the perspectives of different groups in a community. For instance, in a course titled Resilient Cities, groups of graduate researchers partnered with community

representatives to explore mauri-led ethics in holistic urban wellbeing projects focused on diverse urban systems. Examples included research in mobility and accessibility networks, food resilience, and ecological restoration of public spaces. In another project partnering with placemaking groups in Ōtautahi Christchurch, the compass was used to communicate the returns or impacts of their work in a public exhibition, an incubator site, and a book project. The compass also served to structure and hold together our wider research programme, guiding research projects we might develop with relevant community partners, amid various urban systems such as work on organic waste infrastructure (Diprose et al., 2023). In this sense, we have indeed undertaken the kinds of creative engagements that Gandy emphasises, particularly those that raise awareness of the connections between material and cultural dimensions.

For Wendy Harcourt, pluriversal imaginaries require us to consider to what extent Eurocentric and human-centric knowledge systems can be replaced, even perhaps within political power structures. Her response draws on international feminist approaches and her experience while campaigning for gender in the UN Millennium Development Goals. Harcourt gives the example of a global shift in policy and gender targets emerging from this effort to highlight the importance of engaging in place-based strategies for change, but *also* the importance of connecting to global solidarity networks for change. This kind of pluriversal yet global strategy for change is essential: in many ways, the campaign work of international and place-based feminist organisations is an inspirational model for change attempting to *connect* without *homogenising*. While there are also many important critiques from Black and Indigenous feminists, and feminists of the Global South, who often feel dismissed by white feminists (see hooks, 1981), the diverse range of feminist place-based strategies and the solidarity movement between them is a robust example of the kind of transformation required. We could add to the global Indigenous solidarity movements, from Standing Rock to the activism around the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, to the solidarity connections

between groups of minority scholars and Indigenous scholars, globally. The mauri ora compass and data tools – and indeed, the national Living Standards Framework and city-based data tools such as Doughnut Economics might have the potential to add to these collective struggles by inspiring plural place-based metrics. The important thing is that the metrics are negotiated in place and adopt decolonising approaches.

With the mauri ora tool and Indigenous partners, our work involved taking experimental and iterative approaches to language: testing out what is possible, what resonates and what works. The project has also been open to redirection: the above-mentioned work to develop an exhibition and public-facing book with community groups in Ōtautahi Christchurch led to ideas being adopted in Rotorua and Wellington. The mauri ora compass was presented in a booth at a local government conference, leading to further engagements around New Zealand, and an opportunity to connect with the Doughnut Economics Action Lab. Both comparative and place-based metrics for planetary and social wellbeing are something that must happen everywhere, in each context, as well as enhancing global cooperation in sharing place-based strategies and metrics for cities and governance geographies besides nation-states. As such, we hope that our testing practices can contribute to wellbeing-led change in these testing times.

Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was funded by the National Science Challenge 11: Building Better Homes, Towns and Cities, BRANZ and MBIE, NZ.

ORCID iDs

Rita Dionisio  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-7660-6186>

Amanda Yates  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1087-6984>

Note

1. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/rotorua-daily-post/news/kahu-ki-rotorua-compass-helps-define-road-to-holistic-papa-kainga-te-tatau-me-te-taonga-kapehu/B33SM76ECMCL4OOMV6A4X6GL74/>
https://www.buildingbetter.nz/news/2022/uw_BB_HTC_wellbeing_compass_aids_in_Bill_submission
<https://architecturenow.co.nz/articles/regenerating-tamaki-101/>

References

- Diprose G, Dombroski K, Sharp E, et al. (2023) Emerging transitions in organic waste infrastructure in aotearoa New Zealand. *New Zealand Geographer* 79(1): 15–26.
- Gandy M (2022) *Natura Urbana: Ecological Constellations in Urban Space*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
- Harcourt W (2023) The politics of knowledge: Feminist strategies for transformation. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 296–300.
- hooks b (1981) *Ain't I a Woman? Black Women and Feminism* (1st ed.). New York and London: South End Press.
- Parsons M (2023) Governing with care, reciprocity, and relationality: Recognising the connectivity of human and more-than-human wellbeing and the process of decolonisation. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 288–292.
- Steele W (2023) Imagining urban nature in the places we dwell. *Dialogues in Human Geography* 13(2): 293–295.
- Yates A, Pedersen Zari M, Bloomfield S, et al. (2022) A transformative architectural pedagogy and tool for a time of converging crises. *Urban Science* 7(1): 1.