

Understanding Drug Harm Through Māori Lived Experience & Knowledge

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Acknowledgement & Disclosure

Aotearoa tangata whenua (people of land) acknowledge the people of this land, sky, & waters.

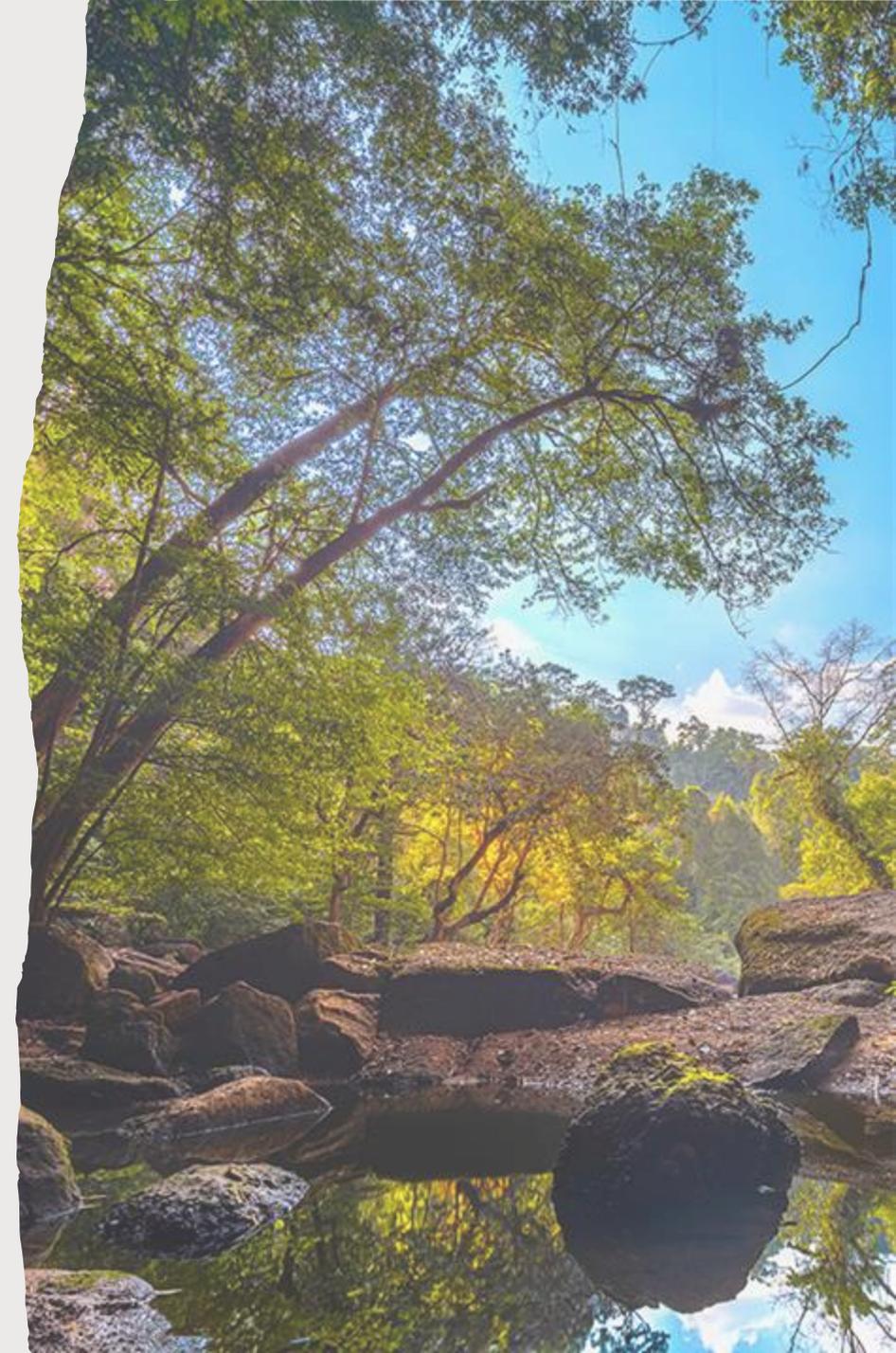
We acknowledge the Gadigal people as the Traditional Custodians of the lands upon which we meet.

We pay our respects to their Elders past and present and extend that respect to all Indigenous peoples attending the conference.

No conflicts of interest to declare

My Positionality

- Māori reclaiming whakapapa
- Lived experience of substance use & abuse
- Previously smoker, vaper, & other drug user
- Education in Psychology & PhD behavioural genetics and neuroscience



Background

Māori communities hold deep knowledge about wellbeing, balance, and healing.

Current drug policies & systems disregard Māori experiences & strengths,
Instead impose frameworks that blame individuals and pathologise Māori experiences.

This study responds to that gap.

Aimed to understand drug harm through an Indigenous lens by exploring Māori perspectives of drug harms.



Approach

Guided by Indigenous Research Approaches to privilege relational knowledge making.

We worked alongside Māori with lived experience of drug harm to understand their perspectives, as holders of knowledge and leadership.

We used wānanga (discussion, sharing of knowledge, learning) which created safe spaces for Māori with lived experience to share, reflect, and collectively make sense of what drug harm means in their lives and those connected to them.





Findings

Rongoā is a concept of healing, and not just medicine in a clinical sense. It's healing the spiritual, emotional, social, relational, and physical wounds.

"Drugs are rongoā. Until you are given the environment or the awahi to replace that rongoā with another rongoā."

Drugs were *'a way of soothing'*

'preventing suicide'

'self-medicating'



Findings

“I don’t think drugs are the problem. When I think of the whānau, and even myself, taking substances was just a way to get some relief from life. Some people get to go on a holiday to Rarotonga, and for whānau like mine, that's not an option. So, you look for a little bit of relief from the day-to-day crap that you deal with.”

“Drug use involved. seeking joy, seeking hope, seeking peace, seeking refuge, but when does the drug seeking become the harm?”

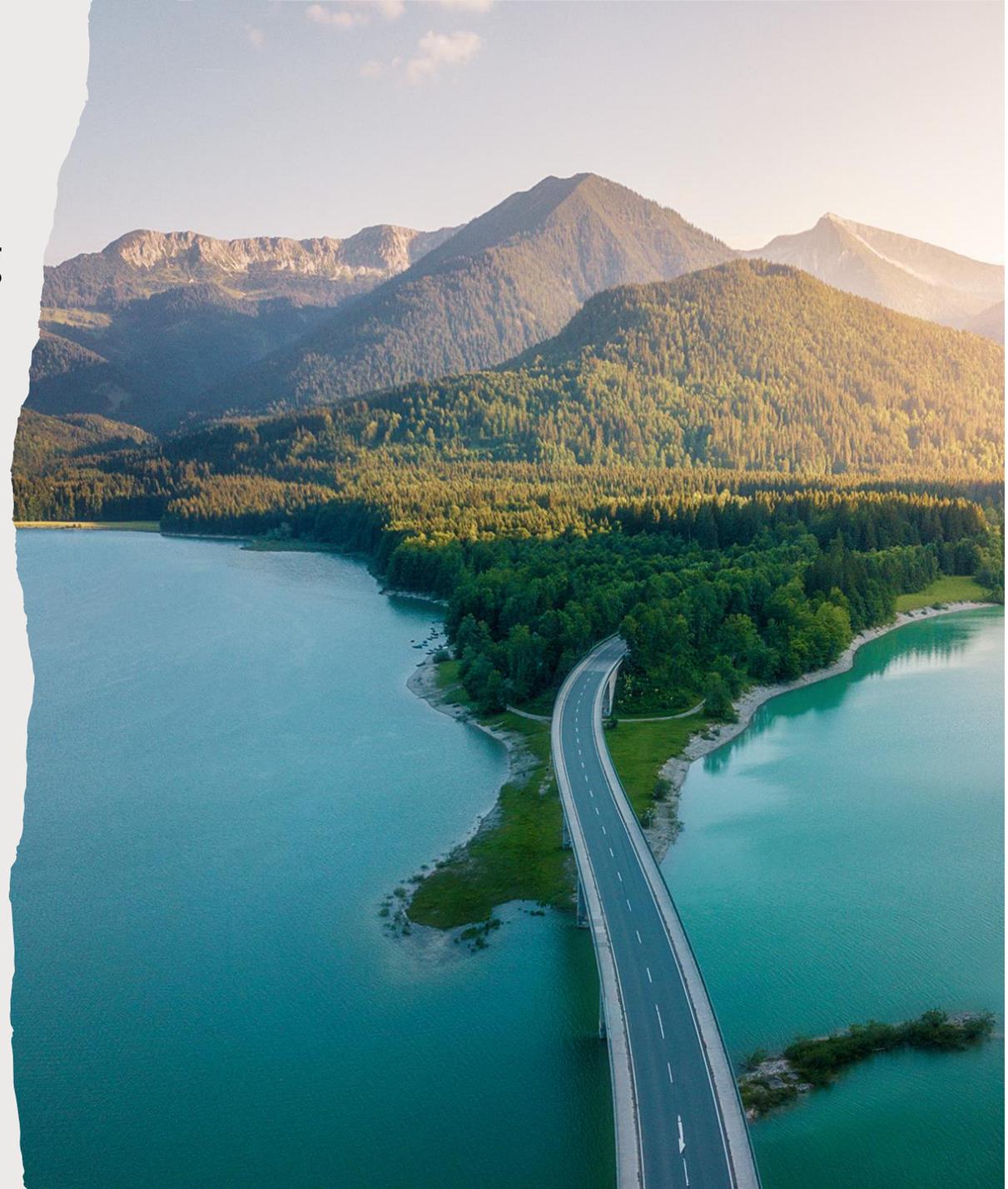


Implications

Current approaches perpetuate ongoing harms by treating symptoms while ignoring structural causes.

Stop pathologizing rational responses to structural violence. Drug use isn't individual failure, it's often a pragmatic strategy for survival and connection in contexts of dispossession and trauma.

Māori experiential knowledge isn't anecdotal, it's essential expertise.



Closing

Drug harm is not just about substances, its about systems.

The drug harm comes when care becomes control, and when colonisation breaks connection.

Healing requires restoring tino rangatiratanga and rebuilding the relationships that sustain life.



Want to know more?

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Come Talk To Me

OR

One of the Research Team that are here today:

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