Investigating the call to kindness: A study with community participants in Aotearoa New Zealand

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ABSTRACT. Here in Aotearoa New Zealand there is a 'call' for kindness often associated with Jacinda Ardern and the Covid-19 response. But how do 'ordinary' people experience and understand kindness? What do their understandings and the tensions within these reveal about the call to kindness? In 2019, we ran a Rōpū Whai Whakaaro/Values-based Practice course in Auckland with 21 community participants. As part of the five-week course, six women aged from 31 to 65 years did a group project on the value of kindness. Analysis of their discussions, presentation and individual interviews suggested a kindness 'trajectory' that was

simultaneously held in community *and* undercut by social forces. Kindness was described as something people 'do' beginning with children who are 'innately' kind, and if practised regularly could flow in all directions. It was portrayed as having radical potential to include and transform, but participants spoke of themselves as imperfect practitioners. We conclude by returning to the call for kindness and, inspired by our participants, suggest that kindness, while in some sense risky and extraordinary, is a practice worth cultivating.

Keywords. kindness; prosociality; mātauranga Māori; neoliberalism

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Introduction

Here, in Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ), we have been told to 'be kind' throughout the COVID-19 pandemic (*'Be kind'*, 2020; Martin-Anatias, 2020; Niall, 2020). Jacinda Ardern declared, before she was sworn in as Prime Minister, that she wanted her government to be one that 'brings kindness back' (RNZ, 2017); and businesses like Air New Zealand (2016) and AMI Insurance (2019) have been using kindness to promote their products and services. At the time of writing, then (mid-2021), kindness is part of the cultural conversation. But how do 'ordinary' people experience and understand kindness? What tensions are there in those understandings? What do these understandings and tensions reveal about the call to kindness?

To explore these questions, we will discuss data from discussions, presentations and interviews with six people who participated in a Rōpū Whai Whakaaro/Values-based Practice course that was held in Auckland in 2019 and undertook a group investigation of kindness. Sarah Nutbrown did an initial analysis of the data as an 'outsider,' the other authors were participant researchers in the course. Brooke Murphy was also a participant in the kindness group. Five of the six of us are based in a School of Psychology; Daniel Hikuroa is based in a Department of Māori Studies. Although our perspective is primarily psychological, mātauranga (Māori knowledge, culture, values and worldview) and tikanga (Māori practices) were a key part of the course, as will be discussed. First, we ground our work in conceptualisations of kindness in academic psychology and closely allied disciplines; next, we pose our key research questions and then outline the method and results of our study. We finish with reflections on

the call to kindness, with particular reference to its potential and limitations within the broader political context of neoliberalism.

Within the psychological and allied literatures, kindness has been investigated primarily as a state of being concerned for others (McLaughlin, 1987), a temperament (Knafo & Israel, 2012), a value (Habibis, Hookway, & Vregdenhil, 2016; Lamborn, Fischer & Pipp, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987), a behaviour (Curry et al., 2018; Gilbert, Basran, MacArthur & Kirby, 2019; Habibis, Hookway, & Vregdenhil, 2016; Sanderson & Mcquilkin, 2017), and a virtue (Clegg & Rowland, 2010); or some combination of these. Kindness is often linked to, or used interchangeably with, other prosocial concepts such as altruism, compassion, empathy, benevolence, care and helping (for further discussion, see Gilbert et al., 2019). This is consistent with standard dictionary definitions of kindness as 'the quality of being friendly, generous and considerate' or a 'kind act' (Lexico, n.d.) or 'the state, quality, or habit of being kind' or 'a kind act or kindly treatment' (Your dictionary, n.d.).

As well as motivating prosocial acts that benefit others; studies have found that performing, remembering, and witnessing kind acts can increase positive emotions and well-being, and inspire gratitude and feelings of love (Canter, Youngs & Yaneva, 2016; Curry et al., 2018; Ko, Margolis, Revord, & Lyubomirsky, 2019; Rowland & Curry, 2019). Kindness, at least in theory, can have a domino effect (Baskerville et al., 2000) as it is enacted, experienced and witnessed as 'good'; and may be a key foundation to democratic political discourse, especially in relation to care for the vulnerable (see Habibis et al., 2016; Ryan, 2012).

Despite the way in which kindness appears to facilitate well-being and social relationships, some, notably Adam Phillips and Barbara Taylor (2009) in their book *On Kindness*, have suggested that kindness is on the wane. Phillips and Taylor claim that it has shifted from being 'mankind's "greatest delight"' (p. 4) in Ancient Roman times to being a central tenet of Christianity, to becoming displaced during the industrial revolution by a focus on individualism. Now, they propose, we have been left with a vestige of normative kindness, but this is considered a feminine, rather than human, quality. Phillips and Taylor suggest that kindness is, therefore, an extraordinary and even risky quality or act, rather than a natural and desirable one in today's society. These claims have echoes in the psychological literature on gender that suggests women are socialised to be kind, or 'nice,' such that they suppress their own needs, ambitions and identities in order to serve others (Brown, Mikel & Gilligan, 1992).

On similar lines, in a discussion about the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK, Campling (2015) argued that while a foundation of 'intelligent kindness' (p. 3) is essential to

health*care*, this foundation is currently missing due to the NHS being run like a corporation. Hamrick (2002, p. 23) too, argued that a business-focused framework of 'managed care' in the health sector leads to an 'unkind niceness,' which he calls 'plastic friendliness': the appropriation of kindness as a means of suppressing human needs or objections that might otherwise disrupt the 'smooth functioning of the bureaucratic machine' (Hamrick, 2002, p. 23). Meanwhile, studies from a business perspective have advocated for kindness on what appears to be utilitarian grounds, promoting it as a strategy for enhanced business performance. Demonstrating kindness, such studies have shown, will attract customers as they will choose to support, or buy from, organisations that they perceive as kind (Gürtler, Walkowitz, & Wiesen, 2019). It has also been suggested that kindness can positively influence organisational performance through employee loyalty, culture, creativity, and collaboration (Haskins et al., 2018) and that it can help build relationships (Gibb, Gibb, & Bennett, 2018).

In summary, kindness has been investigated within psychology and allied disciplines as a personal quality and action that benefits both the giver and receiver and may enhance civic discourse, institutional care, and organisational outcomes. Its limitations have been given less attention, although some research shows that people are more likely to be kind to those they see as deserving (Habibis et al., 2016) or part of their in-group (Hein et al., 2010). Kindness may, in some circumstances then, serve to further exclude those who are perceived as 'others' or 'outsiders.' Whether kindness can be required (rather than volunteered) is also dubious (see Gilbert et al., 2019). In amongst this literature are several underlying tensions. These include whether kindness is socially endorsed and seen as 'productive' or whether it is marginalised (or both); if it can be the basis of institutional practice; and whether (or not) people are repelled by 'unkind niceness' (Hamrick, 2002, p. 23) or kindness as a means to an end. We will come back to these tensions in the discussion.

In the study to follow, participants had a broad remit to discuss, research and present on kindness, as they understood it and saw it practised. We had two core research questions: How do our participants understand kindness; that is what does kindness mean to them, and how is it experienced by them? What are the tensions in those understandings?

Method

The data used for this study was collected during a Rōpū Whai Whakaaro/Values-based Practice action research project carried out in early 2019 (the Rōpū), led by Niki Harré & Daniel Hikuroa. Its key purpose was to explore core human values and if and how these play

out in people's lives and institutional practice. The project also investigated if it was possible to enhance participants' own values-based practice by being in a collective setting with this intention. Participants were primarily recruited via snowballing that started with email invitations to the principal researchers' networks. These networks included community activists and people who had participated in previous research projects run by the researchers (see especially Harré, Madden, Brooks, & Goodman, 2017).

The Rōpū was a five-week course held on Monday evenings in Auckland with 21 community participants, aged 28 to 73 years old. Each wānanga (session) was 2.5 hours long and began with a karakia (blessing) and shared kai (food). Participants heard short talks on values from Niki and Dan, and engaged in a variety of exercises designed to explore what values-based practice might entail. Participants were offered monetary compensation to cover transport to the wānanga or parking. The attention given to manaakitanga (hospitable care) and whakawhanaungatanga (relationship building) was intended to help participants feel welcomed and safe before entering a 'critical collective space' (see Wallin-Ruschman & Patka, 2016, p. 327).

During the first two wānanga, participants jointly compiled a list of values that they thought matter most, based on a process devised by Harré et al. (2017). They then formed small groups to investigate a value that resonated with them. The values investigated were love, creativity, manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga (guardianship of the natural world) and kindness. Each group researched their chosen value, shared observations of the value in practice, and talked about what facilitated or created barriers to practising the value concerned. In the final wānanga, they did a group presentation on their value. For further information on the structure of the Rōpū, see Muñoz Duran (2020). The project was approved by The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

Participants

The participants for the current study were those in the kindness group. All six were women and ranged in age from 31 to 65 years. Five of the group identified as Pākehā (New Zealand European), and one identified as Māori. Names used in this article are pseudonyms, with the exception of quotations ascribed to Brooke, who was the participant researcher.

Data collection

The data used for this study was the email correspondence, a shared Google document, and the final presentation given by the kindness group members. The latter included PowerPoint slides as well as a transcript of the verbal presentation. We also analysed the semi-structured individual interviews with each group member conducted after the conclusion of the Rōpū (note that Brooke, as a researcher, was not interviewed). The interviews were conducted and transcribed by Brooke, Fernanda or Yasir within six weeks of the end of the project. In the results, we attribute quotes to the source (presentation transcript, presentation slide, email, Google document, interview) and, if it is clear who said or wrote a particular comment, the participant's pseudonym.

Analysis

We took a contextual approach to the data (Henwood & Pidgeon, 1994). That is, we did not assume the participants' words simply reflected what they thought and felt, but also reflected their social locations, including the particular location of the Rōpū. Thus, the participants' understandings were seen as providing *hints* as to what kindness may mean and how it may be experienced by *some* people in Aotearoa NZ, as well as to reveal tensions in those understandings. They are not assumed to 'represent' a larger category (e.g. NZ women).

In phase one of the analysis, Sarah used inductive thematic analysis to create a set of themes to capture commonalities in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2012). As the interviews also covered other aspects of the Rōpū, she selected only material relevant to kindness for analysis. In doing so, she made judgements concerning material that did not use the term 'kindness' but seemed relevant, erring on the side of inclusion. All the data was then entered into NVivo, and Sarah created 67 codes that she felt captured the content related to participants' understandings of kindness. She then organised these into themes. In phase two of the analysis, the themes were discussed, revised and grouped by Niki, Brooke and Sarah until we were all in agreement on the most accurate and useful structure. All three of us were highly familiar with the data. As noted, Brooke was a member of the kindness group and so present for all group discussions and a contributor to the written documents and presentation. Brooke's insights, therefore, carried particular weight in this process.

Finally, Yasir is a practising Muslim and worked closely with the Muslim community following the attacks on mosques in Christchurch on March 15, 2019. Given that all the participants referred to the events of March 15 in their interviews, Yasir's insights were of particular value in considering the attacks in relation to the call to kindness.

Results

While we acknowledge that there are many ways this data could be read and organised, we present here themes that we consider best reflect participants' understanding of kindness both in its positive form and in relation to its limitations. First is the talk that clustered around what we are calling a 'kindness trajectory.' The subthemes are that kindness is innate, that kind acts lead to further kind acts, that kindness flourishes in community, and that kindness can be extended to the environment and future generations. Second is talk about what limits kindness and the limits to kindness. The subthemes are that the larger social system limits kindness, we lack time to be kind and our capacity to be kind is finite. We discuss each set of themes in turn. Before we begin, here is our definition of kindness:

> To be kind is to act on the human tendency to consider the needs and welfare of others, and to respond to those needs as if they were our own, without judgement or expectation.

The kindness trajectory

***Kindness is innate*.** Participants returned a few times to the idea of kindness as 'inherent' (presentation slide) and discussed if it was a natural state, and therefore more recognisable in children before they have learnt *not* to be kind. Wendy, for example, said, 'we're born kind, and it's not 'til we're influenced by our environment, our, our nurture-state, or our nature-state that we become other than that' (presentation). Liz also talked about her observations of young people, commenting that 'yes they're clever…and all the rest of it, you know, but actually, I find a lot of them are very kind, actually' (interview). Wendy pondered, 'is kindness about acting in the likeness of a child?' (email), to which Victoria responded 'tautoko [yes] to the idea of authentic childlike interactions' (email).

Kind acts lead to further kind acts. Kindness was largely described as an *action* that could be intentional (e.g., moving in with an elderly relative, Liz, interview; or acting sustainably, i.e. in regard to the environment, presentation slide) or opportunistic (e.g., smiling at the bus driver, Liz, interview). The acts of kindness discussed ranged from small, random acts of kindness to strangers to acts that require significant life changes; and from interpersonal acts through to environmental behaviour that would have intergenerational benefits. This meant kindness was

assumed to be *demonstrated*, rather than located within people as a temperament (Knafo & Israel, 2012), value (Habibis, Hookway, & Vregdenhil, 2016; Lamborn, Fischer & Pipp, 1994; McLaughlin, 1987), or virtue (Clegg & Rowland, 2010). Consistent with its visibility, kindness was seen to beget kindness 'that through showing kindness we can encourage others to be kind as well' (presentation slide). One detailed example was contributed by Sam (email).

> Another example I saw was on community [sic] Facebook page: someone had posted how they had bought flowers at the roadside, which bought [sic] huge joy to a friend that had just died. The woman posting was wanting to buy some more of the same sunflowers for the funeral. The immediate and beautiful response from the seller was that she was welcome to come and pick as many as she wanted, for free, and whenever was convenient. Lots of people then added in nice wishes and also support to the local business. My reflection on that was how a little bit of kindness, which was really quite easy to give, reverberated so quickly and widely. It made me think of the 'random acts of kindness' concept. And how while each small action is not in itself a big ask – but, if it becomes part of 'the culture' and the background way of working, it can become quite transformative.

The Rōpū itself was also described as having a ripple effect. Victoria gave an example in her interview about how the set-up of the wānanga had reinforced for her some of the different ways in which you can do kindness:

> the checking in with everybody and saying our names and the prayer or blessing for food, all of those practices solidified for me that you can just in many ways you can break into spaces and make them more kind.

She then went on to explain how she had incorporated these practices into a two-day meeting for work, which 'worked really, really well' and gave 'nice tone-setting for the future,' especially for some new members of the group.

***Kindness flourishes in a community*.** In all data sources, participants mentioned several times the need for a community in order to feel able to enact values. This was discussed in terms of being in the company of supportive people, feeling safe, and having a shared ideology. Liz

talked about being a member of a Buddhist group, where people share a similar worldview and so have the opportunity to talk about things that they might not be able to in other situations.

> I think a facilitator is having people who think like you to talk to, but not too much like you, so that you can also be challenged and extended. Someone who is interested in having that conversation. Yeah. Say, for example, in my Buddhist women's study group, you know, we'll come up with real thorny, ethical issues in our everyday life. Because the Buddhist worldview is so completely different, we can talk to each other and say, and say things, that other people would go 'you're completely mad,' right? Like extreme kindness to people who really, by most accounts, wouldn't even merit it – but we, because we've got shared values, we can talk about it, which means that we can take it back out into everyday life where those world views are not shared (interview).

Again, the Rōpū was offered as an example of a community that facilitated values-based practice through supportive people, a safe space and a shared worldview. For example, Sam expressed how being in a safe space with people who have similar interests was 'an amazing experience of, you know, if you are open and trusting, uhm and trusting of intention, how much is, ah, possible so quickly' (interview). Here Sam also supports Liz's implication that these conditions do not exist in people's everyday lives.

Having a shared worldview that is explicit and perhaps formalised was also discussed. Victoria shared her experience of setting up a working group within her workplace that is oriented towards promoting kindness. The members of her working group shared the same intention to be kind, including

> how we expected people to behave at meetings and conferences and stuff and what kinds of conferences we would sponsor and support and around people not being on all-male panels or all-white panels like if you're asked as an expert who are the other people being asked and who are the other members of the community are being spoken to (interview).

However, Victoria said that working towards a shared goal that is not in line with dominant practices can be difficult. She explained that despite their best intentions, people found

themselves acting in ways that were not aligned with the shared goal. In response, Victoria wrote a values-driven policy for the organisation that supported people to make 'kind' decisions.

> [H]aving a policy they can refer to is easy because it's not like them saying no, 'oh, it's just the policy,' you know, and then there's a few people who might actively think it's a bit stupid, but … generally, once you make the policy and you say these are what our principles are, most people end up; it becomes normative and so within our [workplace] that stuff is really normative (interview).

In a playful example of how written documents could be tweaked to help create a kind community, Wendy shared an example of a leaflet that described volunteers who work with the police in their communities. On reading the leaflet, Wendy decided 'to change a few of the words to see if it made a difference in how their role might be construed' (email). Her description of the original content (which we do not claim to be accurate in all respects; hence. we have removed the name of the organisation) and suggested amendments appear in Table 1.

Table 1

Wendy's suggested amendments to the leaflet (emphasis and highlights in the original)

Original copy – as described by Wendy	Amendments Wendy offered
[Name of volunteers] are volunteers working closely with police as extra '*eyes and ears'* to assist police and other agencies to build safer communities.	Community growers are volunteers working closely with police as extra *'hearts and souls'* to assist police and other agencies to build kinder communities.
Our Vision: Safe, resilient communities	Our Vision: Kind contented communities
Our purpose: To empower communities to prevent crime and create safer environments through the utilisation of trained and equipment [sic] volunteer patrols.	Our purpose: To embody and promote kindness in communities to create safer environments through the utilisation of trained and equipped volunteers.

Wendy talked about this further during the group's presentation. She suggested that this, in turn, could encourage desired behaviour by '[making] people, yeah ... [sounds of agreement] wanna be part of that … wave.'

The most frequently cited example of community kindness was in relation to the Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern, and the NZ public's response to the Christchurch mosque attacks on 15 March 2019. As Liz explained: 'I would say that Jacinda Ardern has demonstrated values-based practice at a national level and her response to the Christchurch shootings, and it has put her on the international stage.' (interview). Wendy shared an example of an American Muslim family who said that they wanted to move to New Zealand after the mosque attacks because 'your Prime Minister is really awesome, and the people of New Zealand, and the way that they've mourned and … shun these deeds and actions' (interview). Sandra identified Ardern's response to the attack as consistent with her behaviour more generally. 'Yeah, so I see our leader Jacinda practising them beautifully. On a daily basis, she talks about kindness.… I think she is amazing. The influence that her love and kindness has had around the world has just been phenomenal' (interview).

The participants also commented that 'kindness seems to increase cooperation' (presentation slide), and Liz suggested that the opposite is also possible, in that a lack of kindness 'reduces community cohesion' (interview). Liz described the characteristics of neoliberalism as reducing community cohesion as 'it becomes much more individualistic and dog-eat-dog. Or, if it's not dog-eat-dog, "I'll just ignore everyone because I'm focusing on my own trajectory"' (interview). However, she saw kindness as a potentially radical way in which to address this:

> And I think that acts of kindness.... [O]ne of the consequences to me is that they do start to break down that barrier between self and other. Which, you know, when you see the results of alienated individuals, like these young men who get into these chat rooms and then buy guns, you know, they're so alienated. And I think, you know, just acts of kindness do break down that barrier (interview).

***Kindness can be extended to the environment and future generations*.** Kindness to the environment represents perhaps the furthest outreach of kindness discussed by the group. At the same time, it suggests that participants understood kindness to flow back towards people and children (the latter being posited as the original source of kindness; see earlier) when

extended in this way. For example, the group proposed in their presentation that being kind to the environment is a form of 'intergenerational kindness' (presentation slide) and that, while 'things that have happened in the past affect us now…, that doesn't mean we shouldn't contribute to change in the future' (Brooke, presentation). Liz also hypothesised that 'if we're looking at genuine, intrinsic values … I think if you were practising those things, we would actually be a kinder society. Because we'd be kinder to the environment, kinder to each other' (interview).

What limits kindness and the limits to kindness

The larger social system limits kindness. There was considerable discussion of the way in which social norms and power structures discourage or limit the practice of kindness (and intrinsic values more generally) in the Google Document, presentation and participants' interviews. For example, in presentation slides, the group noted the existence of 'societal norms which devalue kindness as naïve, feminine/not masculine,' 'the common perception that other values are more important, or that it should be less of a priority than other values,' and that kindness requires 'challenging conventional beliefs and power structures.' The presentation transcript included Brooke saying that 'we've just got a strong sense that we've often got to prioritise our self-interest' and Liz that 'kindness is sometimes perceived as being weakness.'

In their interviews, several participants made reference to the way in which the larger social system made the practice of intrinsic values challenging (we read this as including kindness). Sam, for example, mentioned 'the capitalist construct and competition, and excessive individualism.' Acting consistently with intrinsic values was considered to be a matter of 'courage and the willingness… to take risks and push/break the system' (Sam, interview) and that 'it's often women or minorities who are leading that' (Victoria, interview). These statements are consistent with Phillips and Taylor's (2009) historical analysis of kindness becoming considered a feminine trait that may be portrayed as risky.

Notably, in what may at first glance look like a contradiction to the claim of kindness and other intrinsic values being undervalued, Victoria also discussed the potential for co-option of the language of these values (she talks in particular about 'well-being') by neo-liberalism and corporate culture.

> I think another barrier is the co-option of the language of well-being, etc., by corporates.… I think there is a sense that people can become really cynical about some

> of these ideas. I mean, well-being obviously is a beautiful word, it is a beautiful idea, but when it becomes a corporate-speak, people start getting cynical about the idea as if – people get cynical about the word and not the corporate using it as they often do associate the two…. (interview)

Victoria gave an example of a workplace that sent well-being emails encouraging staff to take advantage of 'benefits,' such as free access to the gym. However, they did not include things like not spending too much time at work or what the organisation might do to enable this.

Despite the weight given to broader social structures as discouraging 'genuine' kindness and, there were indications that participants' saw the ever-present possibility of a return to the innate kindness of childhood, especially in relationships with others. For example, one of the presentation slides said, 'our ability to be kind is dependent on our perception and our lived experience, which means that we can change it and we can be kind.' We will discuss this further later.

We lack time to be kind. All the participants talked in their interviews about the need for 'time' to practise values, which was something some considered they didn't necessarily have. They often discussed this in apologetic language, suggesting they took personal responsibility for being kind. Sam gave an example of a connection she made on Facebook following the Christchurch mosque attacks and wanting to follow this up. However, she said that 'unfortunately … I got really, really busy with work, and I haven't done it.' Liz also talked about a lack of time, when asked in her interview about whether taking part in the Rōpū had led to a change in her life.

> In terms of changing my practice, I think I would like it to have done so but, I don't think it had the opportunity, simply because I'm too busy. I've got too many things in my life. And that is something that I'm really trying to fix in my life (interview).

We are imperfect practitioners of kindness. Finally, the group suggested that our capacity to be kind is finite. While kindness was described as compelling and natural, it was also seen as co-existing with other priorities. This is illustrated in the preceding sub-theme, but also reflects that we, as people, cannot fully embody kindness in its most radical sense. As Brooke said during the presentation, our kindness sometimes 'comes down to our perception of who gets to

be in the group that we are kind to.' This echoes previous research findings, which suggest that people are more likely to be kind to those close to them, or those whom they evaluate positively (see Curry et al., 2018; Habibis et al., 2016; Hein et al., 2010). However, the group also discussed at some length the importance and potential for kindness to 'break down that barrier' (Liz, interview) in relation to alienated people (see the sub-theme 'kindness flourishes in community').

Discussion

The literature on kindness from psychology and allied social sciences has tended to focus on specific facets of kindness rather than capturing the breadth of what people understand by kindness (see, e.g., Gilbert et al., 2019). Here we used data gathered from a discussion process, a presentation and individual interviews with a group of six women from Aotearoa NZ who had focused on kindness for a month as part of a values-based practice course (the Rōpū).

The participants' understanding of kindness emphasised its role as a compelling force between people. This interpersonal emphasis has also been the focus of most previous research, at least in psychology (e.g. Baskerville et al., 2000; Canter et al., 2016; Curry et al., 2018; Gürtler et al., 2019; Ko et al., 2019; Sanderson & Mcquilkin, 2017). It was, however, also seen as relevant to organisational policy (see also Campling, 2015) and the environment. When we looked at the participants' discussions as a whole, they appeared to evoke a kindness 'trajectory' that was simultaneously held in community *and* undercut by social forces. Kindness was described as something people 'do,' beginning with children who are 'innately' kind (see also Curry et al., 2018). Acts of kindness were considered to promote further acts of kindness, and if practised regularly by a community, kindness could flow in all directions.

Kindness was also portrayed as having radical potential, perhaps best reflected in the participants' discussions of Jacinda Ardern's and the community response to the mosque shootings on March 15, 2019. In her speech to parliament on 19 March 2019 (New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2019), Ardern did not explicitly talk about kindness, but she did talk about the need for New Zealanders to come together as a community to support one another in the aftermath of the attack. She concluded with the now-famous phrase, 'We are one. They are us.' This speech, and Ardern's personal actions, such as wearing a hijab and embracing relatives of victims of the attack (see, for example, MacManus, 2019), were widely acknowledged, including by the Muslim community. For example, in a letter to her from the Federation of Islamic Associations of New Zealand (2019), the president, Dr Mustafa Farouk,

thanked her for her 'bold, resolute and compassionate leadership in response to the tragedy,' and 'the exemplary way you led the nation in walking with us and sharing our unfathomable grief.'

The attacks happened just after the conclusion of the Rōpū; they were therefore highly salient for participants, all of whom mentioned them in their interview. In keeping with Ardern's public persona (see, e.g., RNZ, 2017), many of our participants identified Ardern as leading with *genuine* kindness. Liz, for example, said in her interview, 'She was just genuinely, I believe, totally responding in the moment.… She just responded from the heart.' In her interview, Wendy referred to Ardern's response as 'just her being who she is.' Notably, Ardern's initial response was followed up with national legislation banning military-style semi-automatics and assault rifles (New Zealand Government, 2019; a request was also made in Farouk's 2019 letter).

While the legislation was introduced and passed after our data collection, this initiative may illustrate the radical potential for kindness our participants mentioned, and indeed its extraordinary quality, claimed by Phillips and Taylor (2019), leading to the tempting possibility that a call to kindness *can* transform society. On the other hand, this is perhaps, an unusual example of the reach of kindness, and we consider it significant that Ardern's public persona is strongly associated with her being a woman. As argued earlier, it may be that, in contemporary societies, kindness is seen as women's work (see Brown & Gilligan, 1992; Phillips & Taylor, 2009). Of most relevance here, a man could not have worn a hijab or embraced Muslim women, images that were likely crucial to Ardern's perceived sincerity and that potentially smoothed the way for the banning of semi-automatics and assault rifles (although Ardern could not easily physically embrace Muslim men, we suspect a man embracing men may not have carried quite the same weight).

In other words, that Aotearoa NZ, led by Jacinda Ardern, managed to take kindness seriously in the aftermath of 15 March (at least to a degree) may have been due to features of her as a person and the cultural context she drew on. In regard to the latter, we note the extraordinary graciousness of New Zealand Muslims, who opened mosques to the public (see RNZ, 2019a; The Spinoff, 2019); and, in some cases, publicly forgave the shooter (see, e.g., RNZ, 2019b and the speech of Farid Ahmed who lost his wife in the attack). This moment then, extraordinary as it was, does not necessarily suggest that the call to kindness is *generally* compelling in a contemporary neoliberal society. Indeed, our results revealed several tensions

between the neoliberal backdrop of Aotearoa NZ and the call to kindness which we discuss now.

Neoliberalism is ‘a set of social, cultural, and political-economic forces that puts competition at the centre of social life’ (Wilson, 2018, p. 2) and, according to some theorists, is the dominant paradigm in Aotearoa NZ (Kelsey, 2015; McMaster, 2013). Competition is linked with an individualistic, self-reliant viewpoint (Triandis, Bontempo, & Villareal, 1988), and so is in opposition to the cooperation and community that the participants identified as necessary to facilitate kindness.

Our participants’ ability to recognise, but not reconcile, the tension between their understanding of kindness as ‘obviously good’ *and* inconsistent with how the world works (that kindness is costly, is and should be done by women, and must be justified) may have reflected their reality as inhibitors of a neoliberal world. For example, in their definition of kindness given at the beginning of the results section, participants’ proposed that it should be done without ‘expectation.’ However, they also discussed at some length the *fruits* of kindness, such as how kindness might generate kindness in return, and the importance of kindness in helping to include people who are alienated and create community cohesion. While these comments are a long way from the instrumental emphasis in organisational psychology of kindness as facilitating organisational performance (Gibb, Gibb, & Bennett, 2018; Gürtler, Walkowitz, & Wiesen, 2019; Haskins et al., 2018), they do reflect a delicate balance in the participants’ understanding between kindness as a spontaneous, innate act which simply ‘gives,’ and something that is ‘useful.’

Even the notion of kindness as potentially ‘transformative,’ while offered in a critical spirit, can hover dangerously near to *requiring* kindness of people (see Gilbert et al., 2019 for why this is problematic), encouraging women to serve others in ways that may undermine their own well-being (Brown, Mikel & Gilligan, 1992), and the potential for ‘plastic friendliness’ mentioned in the introduction (Hamrick, 2002, p. 23). This is especially the case in a society adept at co-opting the language of values, as pointed out by one of our participants. Indeed, while Ardern’s kindness was presented by our participants in a positive light, Paula Bennett (as deputy leader of the opposition party) called the use of the ‘Be Kind’ slogan during the COVID-19 pandemic ‘patronising’ (Burrows, 2020). There was also considerable criticism of the announcement in 2020 that the Government did not intend to raise state benefits (ActionStation, 2020; Garner, 2020), similarly calling into doubt the sincerity and relevance of Ardern’s call to kindness.

Another tension in our results was that participants talked about the need for the community to do kindness, but were apologetic for not creating enough time to practise it fully themselves. They considered kindness effortful and time-consuming, needing to be balanced with other priorities. The neoliberal imperative to fill our time in 'productive' ways (Bellezza, Paharia & Keinan, 2016) is highly likely to crowd out time for kindness, especially if done without expectation, as advocated by our participants. Alongside this, neoliberal actors are expected to take personal responsibility for their actions (Wilson, 2018). Hence participants highlighted a struggle with contradictory expectations that kindness should be a high priority *and* secondary to more productive concerns.

Limitations and future research

While this study provides insight into 'ordinary' people's understandings of kindness, it is important to stress that the data came from a group of women in Aotearoa New Zealand who had been part of a values-based practice course. Although participants acknowledged that there were differences between them, Liz brought up in her interview that they were 'biased in the nicest way.' We, the researchers, share many similarities with the participants, especially a broadly 'left-wing' worldview, which will also have influenced our reading of the results. Future studies could work with different demographics to identify possible similarities and differences in kindness understanding. It would also be interesting to discover more about how kindness can be enacted in communities and, if it is found to be beneficial, how it can be supported and promoted without becoming 'plastic.'

Finally, we acknowledge that we have taken a positive view of kindness, in keeping with the view of our participants. As they saw it, kindness per se was never the problem; the problem was limitations to its expression and the potential for the *idea* of kindness to be co-opted and misdirected by social institutions. Having said that, we acknowledge that kindness alone does not transform a society, as material inequalities must also be addressed. Simply 'being nice' to the people you encounter is clearly not enough and may distract people from such inequalities. Nevertheless, a truly kind society would be disturbed by, and attempt to correct, those inequalities. This is our participants' vision.

Conclusion: Our verdict on the call for kindness

The instruction to 'be kind' seemed to resonate with New Zealanders, particularly during the first COVID-19 lockdown in which began on March 25, 2020 (Martin-Anatias, 2020).

Furthermore, fostering a sense of community with the ‘Unite against COVID-19’ campaign slogan (Ministry of Health, 2020) and the talk of a ‘team of five million’ (see, for example, Ardern, 2020) may have been instrumental in facilitating an effective response against COVID-19 (Baker, Wilson, & Anglemyer, 2020). Given, however, the ever-present possibility that a call for kindness can be seen as cynical and purely instrumental, we need to be careful about advocating for kindness without careful attention to the depth with which it is offered. After the events of March 15, 2019, Jacinda Ardern made a risky and extraordinary gesture that appeared to work. This does not mean it can be repeated easily.

Inspired by our participants, we do suggest that attempting to ‘be’ kind and facilitating the kindness of others is a practice worth cultivating. Occasionally, public acts of kindness such as Ardern’s sweep the public imagination, but more commonly, attending to the needs of the other as best we can may help to rebalance the self-focus encouraged by neoliberal doctrines. And that, we feel, is at least some endorsement of the call to kindness.

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