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Insights from a Hawaiian Systemic Psychotherapist on Feminist Solidarity: A Cultural Framework for Collective Care

Ezra N. S. Lockhart

Department of Marriage and Family Sciences, JFK School of Psychology & Social Sciences, National University, San Diego, CA 92123, USA.

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Corresponding author: Ezra N. S. Lockhart, Department of Marriage and Family Sciences, JFK School of Psychology & Social Sciences, National University, San Diego, CA 92123, USA.

ORCID: https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4435-9053

Abstract

This theoretical study explores the intersection of Hawaiian cultural values and feminist solidarity, focusing on the principles of *kōkua* (mutual assistance) and *ho'oponopono* (restorative justice) as frameworks for collective care and social cohesion. Drawing on over two decades of experience as a systemic psychotherapist, the study reflects on how these Indigenous concepts can enrich feminist discourse and inform social policy. Through a reflexive practitioner–narrative approach, it examines how *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono* map onto feminist ideals of mutual aid, caregiving, and restorative justice. *Kōkua*, which emphasizes non-transactional, communal support, aligns with feminist ethics of solidarity and challenges dominant Western notions of caregiving rooted in reciprocity and individualism. Similarly, *ho'oponopono* offers a culturally grounded model of justice that resists punitive responses to harm, instead promoting reconciliation, forgiveness, and the restoration of relational balance. These Indigenous values provide not only ethical guidance for therapeutic practice but also structural insights for reimagining how justice and care are enacted within institutions. The study discusses implications for inclusive policy design and culturally attuned clinical interventions, particularly within mental health care and social justice movements. By integrating *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono*, the analysis highlights the potential for creating more inclusive, relationally grounded approaches to collective care, community healing, and systemic transformation. These concepts contribute to an expanded feminist framework that values cultural diversity, centers relational ethics, and supports the development of holistic responses to social inequality and community trauma.

Keywords

Hawaiian culture; feminist solidarity; social policy; kōkua; ho'oponopono; restorative justice; collective care; social justice; mental health; indigenous knowledge; cultural diversity; social inequality; community healing; therapeutic practice

1. Introduction

Reflecting on the reflexive practices honed over a two-decade career, as a *Kanaka 'Ōiwi* scholar-practitioner, I have gained profound insights into how the concept of *kōkua* pervades both my personal and professional life. Given the structural nature of oppression and the systems that perpetuate inequality, it is essential to explore the ways in which

power dynamics operate within therapeutic practices and social justice frameworks, particularly through recursive systems such as the Imperialist White Supremacist Capitalist (Heteronormative Ableist Theistic) Patriarchy (*IWSC(HAT)P*; Lockhart, 2025). As a male-bodied, AANHPI[1] and BIPOC[2] systemic psychotherapist, I approach mental health care with a deep respect for cultural values that emphasize community, interconnectedness, and collective well-being. One such value is *kōkua*, a Hawaiian term that encapsulates solidarity, mutual assistance, and unconditional support. This concept, while specific to Hawaiian culture, shares striking parallels with feminist values of care, solidarity, and social justice. Another such value is *ho'oponopono*, a Hawaiian model of restorative justice (Ito, 1985), which offers a dissent to contemporary manifestations of feminism by emphasizing reconciliation, forgiveness, and the restoration of harmony.

The relevance of this essay lies in its contribution to feminist discourse by incorporating underrepresented Hawaiian cultural insights. It aims to bridge the gap between Hawaiian values and feminist ideals, enriching contemporary conversations with perspectives often overlooked in mainstream discussions. My unique position—operating as a male-bodied individual within feminist and Indigenous frameworks—challenges traditional narratives and underscores the inclusivity of contemporary feminist thought. This essay explores how Hawaiian values intersect with feminist principles, addressing the growing need for inclusivity and respect for diverse cultural traditions within feminist movements.

In the following pages, I will explore the nature of *kōkua*, its pivotal role in Hawaiian society, and its alignment with feminist ideals of community support and collective action. Additionally, I will probe the principles of *ho'oponopono*; recognizing its emphasis 'to make right, correct' social relations through reconciliation and restoration of harmony, which dissents from contemporary manifestations of feminism. Drawing on both my professional and cultural experiences, I will explore how these values can enrich therapeutic practices, enhance family relationships, and promote community cohesion and collective action.

2. Contextual Background

The field of psychotherapy in the US is predominantly White, with non-White psychotherapists and clinical supervisors comprising a small fraction of the profession (Zippa, 2024). This lack of diversity highlights the need for more inclusive and culturally sensitive approaches to therapy, as well as for greater representation in leadership roles within the mental health field. As a psychotherapist who works with a diverse population, including those from marginalized communities, I have come to realize that values like *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono* are essential in creating therapeutic spaces that honor individual, family, and community healing (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2021).

3. Reflexive Practitioner Approach

Drawing on over two decades of clinical experience as a male-bodied AANHPI and BIPOC systemic psychotherapist, I adopt a reflexive practitioner–narrative methodology to examine how Hawaiian cultural values intersect with feminist solidarity. This approach incorporates autoethnographic methods, drawing from clinical reflections, cultural narratives, and lived experience to illuminate the relational and systemic dimensions of care and justice (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2010; Holman Jones, 2005). Thematic analysis is employed to identify patterns within these narratives, particularly as they relate to the values of *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono* (Braun & Clarke, 2006). In alignment with Hawaiian epistemological frameworks, I approach analysis through an *'Āina Aloha* grounded in *kuleana*, spiritual relationality, and embodied knowledge (Maunakea, 2016; Meyer, 2013, 2014). By situating my positionality within this inquiry, I center Indigenous ways of knowing and challenge dominant Western paradigms that often marginalize culturally grounded practices. This methodology enables a layered, situated inquiry that bridges practice-based knowledge with critical theory, offering a culturally rooted lens on caregiving, reconciliation, and collective healing.

4. Defining *Kōkua*: A Hawaiian Concept of Unconditional Help

The Hawaiian term *kōkua* is both a verb and a noun, embodying both the act of helping or assisting and the state of

[1] AANHPI: Asian American, Native Hawaiian, and Pacific Islander.
[2] BIPOC: Black, Indigenous, and Person of Color.

being a helper or caregiver. At its core, *kōkua* refers to the act of helping or assisting others without expectation of reciprocity. This concept of non-reciprocal assistance is at the heart of *kōkua*, distinguishing it from transactional or obligation-driven forms of help that often characterize Western understandings of caregiving (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972).

4.1 *Kōkua* as Communal Ethics

This concept can be understood through a communitarian or relational ethics lens, emphasizing interdependence and collective care rather than individualistic moral approaches. Unlike utilitarianism, which focuses on maximizing individual happiness through reciprocal exchanges, or deontological ethics, which centers on moral duties and rigid rules, *kōkua* prioritizes collective well-being and social harmony over individual gain or strict adherence to rules (Mokuau, 2011). It operates on the understanding that support and care are integral to maintaining a healthy, interdependent community, not contingent on personal benefit (Kamakau, 1992; Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972).

4.2 Historical Example: The 19th-Century Leprosy Epidemic

As a verb, *kōkua* signifies the act of helping, supporting, or assisting others, particularly within a communal context. This form of assistance is motivated by an inherent sense of responsibility to the group, not personal gain. For instance, during the 19th-century leprosy epidemic in Hawaii, many Hawaiians offered care to sick relatives or community members despite the personal risk (MMHC Hawaiiana Archives, 1886). This selfless act of *kōkua* reflects a profound obligation to family and community (Kamakau, 1992; Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972).

4.3 Alignment with Feminist Mutual Aid

The Hawaiian concept of *kōkua* challenges transactional caregiving models, emphasizing non-reciprocal assistance and collective responsibility for community well-being, a value that resonates with feminist calls for solidarity and mutual aid, which emphasize collective care over individual gain (Lockhart, 2025). The principle of *kōkua* in this context mirrors feminist ideals of caregiving, which often go unrecognized or unrewarded, especially when performed by women and marginalized groups (Daws, 1973). In this way, *kōkua* challenges the narrative that care work is a burden by reframing it as a collective responsibility that strengthens community bonds.

The notion of *kōkua* as a verb mirrors feminist ideals of care work, which often goes unseen and unreciprocated. Feminists have long critiqued the devaluation of care work, especially when it is expected of women and marginalized groups without acknowledgment or recompense (Bahn, Cohen, & van der Muelen Rodgers, 2020). The Hawaiian value of *kōkua* complicates this narrative by framing care not as a burden but as an act of collective responsibility that strengthens community bonds.

5. *Kōkua* as a Noun: The Respected Caregiver

As a noun, *kōkua* refers to the individual who gives aid—whether physical, emotional, or practical—and is a respected member of the community entrusted with the responsibility of caregiving. In Hawaiian culture, to be a *kōkua* is an honor, not a duty to be resented. What sets *kōkua* apart is its non-transactional nature. Unlike Western notions of volunteering or helping, where individuals may expect compensation or recognition, *kōkua* is rooted in unconditional service. The act of helping is viewed as essential to social harmony, where giving and receiving support are interdependent and happen in cyclical, rather than transactional, ways (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972). There is no obligation to reciprocate; it is understood that everyone in the community is both a giver and a receiver at different times (Pukui, Haertig, & Lee, 1972).

This non-transactional ethos aligns with feminist principles of solidarity, which emphasize collective action for social change, particularly for marginalized and oppressed communities. Just as feminist movements acknowledge the value of unpaid labor—whether caregiving, activism, or emotional support—Hawaiian culture values *kōkua* without the expectation of material compensation or formal recognition. By doing so, it strengthens the community as a whole and reinforces the bonds between those who give and receive help (Korn, 1976).

6. *Kōkua* in the Context of Feminist Solidarity

The concept of *kōkua* offers important lessons for feminist solidarity. Feminism, in its various iterations, calls for a collective, intersectional approach to justice (Putman, 1995)—aiming for one that transcends individual rights and acknowledges the interconnectedness of all people's struggles. Solidarity in feminism is not about transactional support but about standing together in the face of oppression, inequality, and injustice (Sweetman, 2013). In this regard, *kōkua* aligns closely with feminist calls for mutual aid, particularly in marginalized communities.

6.1 Mutual Aid in Feminist Movements

For example, in feminist movements around the world, there is often an emphasis on the importance of mutual support networks, where individuals offer help and support to one another, often without expectation of return. This mirrors the Hawaiian understanding of solidarity, where *kōkua* is not driven by the desire for recognition or reward but rather by the belief in community well-being. It reflects the feminist commitment to dismantling systems of power and oppression, by empowering those in need through collective care.

6.2 *Kōkua* in Clinical Practice

In my clinical practice, I have found that incorporating the principle of *kōkua*—as a verb and as a noun—creates a more holistic and inclusive approach to healing. By fostering an environment where clients feel supported, respected, and understood, regardless of their ability to 'pay back' the support, I encourage them to take part in mutual care. This therapeutic approach reflects the feminist vision of a society where care work is valued and normalized and where solidarity within communities is a core value.

6.3 Hawaiian Proverb: A Vision of Community and Interconnectedness

The Hawaiian proverb *"Ike aku, ike mai, kōkua aku, kōkua mai; pela iho la ka nohona 'ohana"*—translated as "recognize and be recognized, help and be helped; such is family life"—highlights the reciprocal and interconnected nature of community. In this view, every member of a community plays an integral role, and the welfare of one person affects the entire group. This aligns with feminist critiques of individualism in Western frameworks and the feminist call for solidarity among marginalized communities. In Hawaiian culture, this interconnectedness is not simply a theoretical ideal; it is a lived reality where family and community care are essential to survival and well-being. Similarly, feminist solidarity prioritizes collective action and mutual aid, especially in the fight against oppression and inequality, which often requires marginalized individuals to care for one another in ways that transcend traditional, transactional relationships.

7. The Concept of *Ho'oponopono*

Ho'oponopono is a Hawaiian term that translates to "to make right" or "to correct," referring to a practice of conflict resolution and reconciliation within the community. Rooted in Hawaiian cultural traditions, *ho'oponopono* emphasizes the restoration of harmony and balance in relationships, addressing wrongs through dialogue, forgiveness, and collective responsibility. Unlike Western approaches to conflict resolution, which often focus on punitive measures or individual accountability, *ho'oponopono* is driven by the belief that healing and reconciliation are necessary for maintaining social harmony within the community. *Ho'oponopono*, as a practice of reconciliation and social harmony, offers an alternative to punitive justice systems that dominate contemporary feminist and social justice discussions, aligning with restorative justice models that seek healing and relational restoration rather than retribution (Lockhart, 2025).

7.1 The Ethics of *Ho'oponopono*

In the context of ethics, *ho'oponopono* aligns with restorative justice principles, focusing on healing relationships rather than punishment. This process involves the active participation of those involved in the conflict, as well as their families or community members, in creating a space for reconciliation. It is a communal approach to justice, which prioritizes collective well-being, healing, and social reintegration over retribution. The practice stresses the importance of taking responsibility for one's actions, but it also recognizes the need for forgiveness and the

rebuilding of trust, making it a key example of Hawaiian relational ethics.

This principle is particularly relevant in the context of family therapy and psychotherapy, where *ho'oponopono* can be used as a tool for healing not only individual relationships but also the broader community dynamics that influence those relationships. The focus on mutual understanding and forgiveness can help create therapeutic spaces that honor cultural values of interconnectedness and collective responsibility. In this sense, *ho'oponopono* is more aligned with restorative justice than punitive justice, and it invites a more nuanced and healing-oriented approach to conflict within social systems.

7.2 *Ho'oponopono* in the Context of Feminist Solidarity

Ho'oponopono offers a compelling contrast and complement to contemporary feminist notions of justice, particularly those rooted in restorative justice. While feminist movements often challenge systems of oppression through activism and social critique, *ho'oponopono* emphasizes healing and reconciliation, offering a more integrative approach to social justice. In this sense, it can be seen as a critique of certain approaches within contemporary feminism that may focus primarily on punitive measures to address harm. Rather than simply calling for retribution, *ho'oponopono* invites us to rethink justice in terms of healing, transformation, and the restoration of relational balance.

This Hawaiian practice resonates with feminist models of restorative justice, which seek to address the root causes of harm, prioritize healing over punishment, and focus on rebuilding relationships.

7.3 Feminist Restorative Justice: Reconciliation over Retribution

Feminist scholars and activists have long advocated for alternatives to the criminal justice system that center on community-based healing and restorative practices, recognizing that justice cannot be achieved through retribution alone. *Ho'oponopono* contributes to this broader feminist discourse by offering a culturally specific practice that envisions justice as a process of reconciliation and mutual respect, rather than division or punishment.

In therapeutic contexts, *ho'oponopono* encourages a concordant approach to healing, where forgiveness and collective accountability are central to restoring harmony within families and communities. By drawing on *ho'oponopono*, therapists working with marginalized groups can integrate these culturally rooted values of reconciliation and forgiveness into their practices, fostering spaces where clients are empowered to heal and restore their connections to others. This not only enriches feminist frameworks of care but also aligns with broader calls for justice that incorporate cultural and restorative practices.

8. Conclusion: Implications for Research, Practice, and Policy

In this essay, I have examined how the Hawaiian concepts of *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono* offer valuable contributions to feminist solidarity and collective care. *Kōkua*, with its emphasis on non-reciprocal assistance, aligns with feminist ideals by highlighting the importance of community well-being over individual gain. This concept challenges transactional caregiving and instead fosters a sense of shared responsibility, which is essential for strengthening both individual and collective resilience. Similarly, *ho'oponopono*, a Hawaiian practice of restorative justice, complements feminist calls for social justice by focusing on reconciliation, forgiveness, and healing rather than punitive measures. It offers an alternative model of justice that prioritizes relational harmony and community restoration.

Together, these Hawaiian values provide a unique framework for feminist discourse, emphasizing the significance of interdependence, mutual support, and collective action. By incorporating *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono*, this essay highlights how Indigenous cultural practices can enrich feminist movements, offering deeper insights into healing, community care, and restorative justice. These concepts challenge traditional models of justice and caregiving, suggesting more inclusive, compassionate approaches to social change and mental health care. Future research should empirically assess the outcomes of integrating *kōkua* and *ho'oponopono* into feminist-informed therapy to evaluate their effectiveness in promoting healing and relational balance. Practically, training curricula for clinicians could incorporate modules on these Indigenous frameworks, equipping therapists with tools to offer culturally responsive and restorative care that aligns with community-based values of interconnectedness and mutual support.

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