

Whakapapa Narratives and Whānau Therapy

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Abstract

This article proposes, discusses and illustrates the concept of whakapapa narratives, showing how counselling practices are produced out of such narratives. It creates links between practices of whānau therapy and narrative therapy, located within te ao Māori. Its contribution is in articulating a whakapapa-informed counselling practice for Māori with Māori.

Keywords: whānau therapy, whakapapa narratives, Māori counselling, narrative therapy

A young Māori man is referred to me for counselling.

As we meet I experience an embodied, spiritual and cultural imperative to acknowledge his whakapapa and make some form of relational connection.

Māori never enter into a space of engagement as an individual: who they are and who they are connected to comes into the room with them whether they acknowledge or even understand it or not.

It turns out this boy has connections to my iwi.

I experience an added cultural obligation to help him because his maunga is my maunga, his tīpuna are my tīpuna.

The tuakana-tēina relationship and the responsibilities that surround the principles of whānau, manaaki and reciprocity come into play.

He begins to tell me his story.

I experience a sense of solidarity: I see that we hold shared knowledge about and lived experience of the oppressions of racism and colonisation.

As a whānau narrative therapist, out of a sense of solidarity with him, I ask questions, curious about the particular experiences he has had and the meanings he makes of those experiences. (B. Swann, 2012, p. 46)

Counselling practices are shaped, we suggest, by whakapapa narratives. “While whakapapa may be understood to mean genealogy, the word whakapapa carries a nuanced reference to the means by which connectedness to people, place, creation, atua and tīpuna is made” (Taonui, 2013, p. 1). Whakapapa refers to a process of folding layers one upon another:

A way of visualizing whakapapa is the building, layer by layer, upon the past towards the present, and on into the future. Within these layers of whakapapa are the narratives that take in the many spiritual, mythological and human stories that shape, create meaning and bring to life the genealogical layers. Whakapapa and its narratives create links and provide the basis for relational interactions with each other, to place, the land and the many ancestors we descend from. These whakapapa narratives also provide the individual and cultural context from which meaning-making, connection, and shaping of identity emerge. (B. Swann, 2012, pp. 8–9)

This article considers and raises questions about the ways in which whakapapa narratives shape and might further shape contemporary counselling practices. While the focus of this article is the particular whānau therapy practices which Huia and Brent have shaped through multiple forms of connectedness, these practices are held within a rich and extended whakapapa, within counselling and beyond.¹

The whānau therapy practice that becomes possible for us, in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, depends upon that which has come before. Donna Awatere (1981) clearly set a political agenda in her assertion that the work of the psy-professions, including counselling, contributed to oppression of Māori. The Just Therapy Team (Waldegrave, 1985, 1990, 1995, 2000, 2003) has long made the case that the accounts told in counselling rooms are not neutral and a neutral hearing of them is not possible: counselling is a political practice. Others have joined the projects of commenting on and illustrating the limitations of Western psychological theory, and/or of offering alternative understandings of life and personhood for counselling alongside Māori (Davies, Elkington, & Winslade, 1993; Drury, 2007; Durie, 1989, 1999, 2001, 2007; Hokowhitu, 2007; O’Connor & Macfarlane, 2002; Pere, 1997; Piripi & Body, 2010, 2013).

In drawing attention to the embeddedness of wellbeing and identity in whānau, wairua, hinengaro, and tinana, Mason Durie (1989, 1999, 2001, 2007) troubled the reductionist Cartesian separation of mind and body out of which traditional counselling theory and practice arose, thus calling for a richer, more layered, expression of

counselling in Aotearoa New Zealand. That so significant a contribution as Durie's has often been misread—for example as a reductionist practice of attending to these dimensions of life, one at a time—shows the ongoing grasp that reductionism, as a product of Western rationalism, has on thinking and practice in health and social services, and the struggle to think beyond what is already thought. Therefore, at the same time as we argue here for connection with what has come before, for engagement with the layers of history in which human beings are enfolded, we also argue for a preparedness to think beyond what is already thought, and particularly beyond the humanistic individual at the centre of Western psy-professions (Rose, 1998; Sampson, 1989). For it is the very familiarity of the individual of Enlightenment humanism that leads to the colonisation, appropriation, or misunderstanding of alternative systems of knowledge—such as those of te ao Māori.

In these ways, this article enters a contested space of knowledge-making, where for each of us there are ambiguities in taking up authorship and knowledge claims: Brent, his whakapapa layered within Ngāti Porou, and Huia, her whakapapa layered within Ngāi Tahu and Ngāti Wai, might be restrained by the tikanga of speaking rights being earned and bestowed; and Kathie, her life layered within particular Pākehā cultural, professional, academic, and family values, might be restrained by ideas about cultural safety (A. Crocket, 2012; Ramsden, 1997, 2005), decolonisation (Smith, 1999), or Māori sovereignty (Awatere, 1984). What would other Ngāti Porou, other Ngāi Tahu, other Māori, other Pākehā, say about the right (or not) to write, the risk of writing—or perhaps the obligation and responsibility to write? Further, for Brent and Huia, there is the risk that what we have to say is read by Pākehā as speaking for all Māori. We suggest that such action would be a mis-reading, perhaps produced by the imperative, of the dominant scientific worldview, to generalisable truth claims.

Our purpose is to show how Brent and Huia have shaped particular whakapapa narratives in producing a whānau therapy practice. We do this as a contribution to kaupapa Māori counselling knowledge. We hope that our accounts might open up the opportunity for others to similarly value the many and diverse layers, the whakapapa, out of which non-colonising counselling practices are produced. When our day-to-day counselling encounters bring us into painful contact with the harmful effects of colonisation, it is an ethical call to us to contribute to knowledge-making towards the present and future of whānau therapy. It is our experience that whakapapa narratives provide rich conceptual and practical possibilities for this task.

Poetic representation

As the article continues, at times we employ rescued speech poetry (see Behan, 2003; Speedy, 2005) as a form of poetic representation. Narrative therapists write rescued speech poetry, or poetic documents, using only words that have been uttered by the client: “[r]escued speech poems emerge from talk that has been de-composed, from its ‘first’ speaking, into evocative words and phrases which a counsellor re-composes into poetic form” (K. Crocket, 2010, p.77). In using rescued speech as poetic representation in this article, we use only utterances made by Huia and Brent in a recorded kōrero between Huia, Brent, and Kathie, about Huia and Brent’s whānau narrative practice. Poetic representation and poetic inquiry are two developments in qualitative research influenced by arts-based methods (Etherington, 2004; Furman, 2006; Furman, Shears, & Badinelli, 2007; Piercy & Benson, 2005; Richardson & St Pierre, 2005; Speedy, 2008).

Writing about social work research, Gold (2013) suggested that “we can look at poetry as a form of evocative qualitative research in which we write about our own reflections or co-create accounts of practice with others (Prendergast et al., 2009)” (p. 7). Further, such arts-based methods may achieve political ends: “[T]he emphasis is on undoing dominant stories of place (decolonisation) and the collective and relational making of new place stories (re-inhabitation). These stories are local and responsive” (Somerville, 2010, p.340). Local and responsive stories are appropriate, Somerville claimed, for practice in what she called a post-colonial contact zone. The rescued speech poetry that we employ here is intended to show Huia and Brent actively constructing a practice out of various whakapapa narratives, illustrating how they shape and (re)inhabit counselling practices that are local and responsive.

Whakapapa narratives within counselling

We acknowledge our connectedness to the contributions of Māori and other authors cited above, and to their mahi, and the enfolded layers of whakapapa that they offer for our contemporary counselling. Our purpose in this article aligns perhaps most closely with Tēina Piripi and Vivienne Body’s (2010, 2013) contributions, in our focus on articulating a kaupapa Māori counselling practice, whānau narrative therapy, with a sense of engaging in dialogue with other Māori practitioners. The work that Piripi and Body have done in developing and sharing kaupapa Māori counselling practices for a Māori audience is a significant contribution to whakapapa narratives in Māori counselling, and it is our hope to join that endeavour.

We hold particular interest in the ways in which practitioners' own whakapapa narratives guide our practices as we find ways to move forward in our meetings with clients. For example, Eugene Davis (Davis, 2009; Davis & Crocket, 2010) layered his account of research conversations about masculinity, with a group of men with whom he played sport, with a memory of an event in his childhood when he witnessed his mother taking a stand for social justice, the reasons for which she then explained to him. Davis thus locates his research and counselling practice among values layered in a whakapapa narrative. Similarly, Joy Te Wiata (2006) tells of having been led by the kuia from whom she was learning to weave kono to an understanding of the importance of gifting her first (imperfectly woven) kono, "the fruits of our labours" (p. 3). This learning from her kuia was layered into the whakapapa of Te Wiata's life and, as she explains, later provided connectedness when she was to hand over her completed master's thesis for examination and publication:

So it is from the position of inquirer that I present this work. Like the kono, it is a taonga, imperfect with all its gaps and partial knowledges and beginning understandings. But like the kono process, these testify to the value of the struggle and the intention to understand and honour Māori knowledges and to bring them to the attention of others. (p. 4)

We, too, draw on whakapapa narratives in our work as whānau therapists. Brent tells the following story about an event during some years spent living with two kaumātua in a small East Coast rural community: Papa Paul, a kaumātua, storyteller, retired farmer, and Minita a Iwi, and Nanny Lena, a kuia, a whaea, a master weaver, and a nanny to her many mokopuna. They were two of many significant elders and kaumātua whose lives and stories had an impact on Brent's life while on the Coast.

Reading in public was not one of my strengths, but every Sunday without fail Papa Paul, as the local priest, would open his Bible and point to the scripture he wanted me to read that morning. I was a shocking reader and, what made it worse, whakamā/shyness used to grip me so tight that my left leg used to shake uncontrollably. I would have much preferred to sit at the back of the church, ring the bell, and give out the prayer books than to read and be up front wearing a cassock and surplice. It was difficult to say no to a kaumātua minita like Papa Paul. One Sunday, before the karakia, Papa Paul proceeded to tell the congregation that Ngarangi's mokopuna was going to lead the Karakia in te reo Māori. I recall sitting

there stunned and feeling the onset of panic take over: there was nowhere to hide, nowhere to run. The old fellow had got me good, and I had to handle it. I wasn't even a Kaikarakia (a licensed lay reader) and I knew that in order to celebrate communion you had to be a Priest. From my perspective Papa Paul was breaking all the rules in asking me to lead the karakia. The congregation of mainly elders, and a few rangatahi and mokopuna sprinkled around them, showed no concern whatsoever. Papa Paul told the people that he was about to have a cataract operation and was unable to read the liturgy, but I knew he didn't need the book for he knew the liturgy off by heart. I remember thinking: I've just got to get on with it.

Well, I was up there, with Papa Paul standing close by. I was leading the karakia in te reo Māori, and I proceeded to totally butcher those beautiful kupu/words one after another and in so doing broke the usual flow of the karakia. I recall pausing for a while. I looked up, and I saw all my nannies' and papas' eyes focused on me. They were eyes of encouragement, almost willing me to carry on. I took a breath and started again and I immediately felt the mana of their voices: they were reading the priest's parts with me, at the pace I was going.

Why?

When they saw my face they saw the faces of my tīpuna. For them I wasn't only Brent the individual, I was Ngarangi and Dave's (my grandparents) mokopuna (grandchild), I belonged to the church whānau, I was Ngāti Porou, I was one of them. Māori relational response is dependent on identifying whakapapa ties and pursuing connections of commonality. They chose to respond from a whakaiti/humility (perhaps narrative therapy's de-centred but influential position [White, 2007]) that provided a place for me to be and stand. I learned in that community that Whakaiti is one of the important Māori cultural tīkanga/values which can guide relational process and inform appropriate community and individual behaviour and response. Those present made connections from a position of whakaiti, respect and a responsibility to serve and care for others. Knowing that they were standing with me, and not judging me because of incompetence or breaking the flow of the karakia, invited me into a place of agency, which in turn allowed me to carry on.

Despite having countless times led karakia and liturgy in te reo in the years since, this experience of stumbling and being held in the warm embrace of my whānau stays with me. (B. Swann, 2012, pp. 27–29)

Whakaiti

Brent continues: The tīkanga values and mana-enhancing actions that I experienced from my pākeke at karakia all those years ago have shaped the way I prefer to engage and interact with the whānau, couples, and individuals in my practice now as a whānau therapist. Their actions are layered into my life and practice in ways that call me to live out the whakapapa narratives that they gifted to me.

We continue together: Narrative therapist Michael White (1997) argued for therapists valuing the experiences of their lives that shape the values they hold and the actions they take in their therapy work. Just as the congregation that day saw Brent as whānau, as Ngarangi's mokopuna, as Ngāti Porou, as one of them, so Huia and Brent encounter those who meet with them in whānau therapy as one of them. James and Melissa Griffith (1992) put it this way, in their discussion of the relational and dialogic tasks of therapy:

These family members and I share more similarities than differences as human beings.

...

Family members are ordinary people leading everyday lives who unfortunately have encountered unusual and difficult life circumstances.

...

I cannot know for sure what actions family members need to take for the problem to be resolved. (p. 9)

The position of whakaiti—the position of humility taken by people of immense mana who chose to pray *alongside* Brent, not over him, or in correction of him—infuses the ways that Huia and Brent engage with whānau. Whakaiti is layered throughout the knowledges we express in our whānau therapy practices:

The people we are working with
It's full on
Multiple and complex issues
Drugs, alcohol, extreme violence, abuse
Armed offenders squad and helicopters
And babies
Little babies there in the middle of it all.
You could get so immune to it.
It's important to listen to the pain and the maemae that's there.
It's real.

We struggle with that sometimes
The things we are privileged to hear
These people are telling us their stories of real, real pain
We're sitting there
Feeling their maemae, too.
A wairua thing
We're not just empty vessels
We are part of this too
We feel and we take on.
We feel the wairua and maemae of what's going on for them
As people and as parents who love their kids.

The emotions that people feel when there's been injustice
are the same that I'd feel,
the love I feel for my children, my family,
is the same that others feel for theirs.
I've seen that
I've lived alongside people.

Of course, there are conditions that make the practice of whakaiti possible. Just as Papa Paul's mana and the wairua of the whare karakia provided the context and process for the story Brent has told above, so in counselling there are significant practices involved in setting up a context in which mana-enhancing practice becomes possible.

Calm
Being quite ordered
Saying
"This is what our expectations are of this space here."
"This is where these things happen."
We ask
what their hopes for their future are,
for their children
what their priorities are.
We ask about others who they come with,
the tīpuna,
who they belong with.
It's a space to bring those questions in.

While we have the responsibility to host the counselling meetings, to set the kawa for how things are done, and to ask people about their hopes for themselves, their tamariki, and their whānau, we don't take for granted that we have the right to ask questions or to invite ourselves into people's lives just because they are positioned as clients and we as counsellors.

Waewae tapu

We enter counselling relationships with a sense of being careful, considered and respectful. Many of the whānau we meet in counselling have prior or current statutory agencies or non-governmental organisations involved in their lives, and they have not always been accorded respect. It is not unusual for us to meet with whānau who are familiar with being identified as problem persons, as in deficit, as failing to meet some norm or other. Positioned in this way, they then experience themselves as being acted upon, in an absence of respect for their tino rangatiratanga, sovereignty or autonomy. It is of course not new to pay attention to the building of relationship for counselling: autonomy is a core value in the NZAC Code of Ethics (2012). However, we have experienced that the whakapapa narrative of waewae tapu offers a mana-enhancing concept and practice that enacts respect for tino rangatiratanga.

We approach their stories
As waewae tapu
privileged to hear their stories.
We wait at the gate, we wait.
When they allow us to
It's they who indicate
Yes, I'm going to allow Brent and Huia to hear this particular story.
Constantly in this place of waewae tapu,
we consciously enter into that space
because it's their space,
not ours.

We don't believe that because we're the counsellors
we have every right to ask every question and expect the answers.
And even if we do ask the questions they might still shut down that space.
That's okay too.
We then turn back,

go somewhere else,
and it might be then that they decide to open the gate.
Stories that were not normally told, talked about,
some of these things aren't spoken.
And maybe they have to find the words to speak them too.
Careful, considered, respectful.

With Aileen Cheshire (see White, 1997), we acknowledge that we are guests in the lives of those with whom we meet as clients. We are particularly guided by our experiences of and knowledge about waewae tapu in treading gently when we enter others' lives.

Narrative therapy practices

In building a practice, layer by layer, our counselling is richly textured by narrative therapy practices. Narrative therapy, like whakapapa narratives, offers us both concepts and practices that guide our work with clients. We have found the rigour of narrative therapy gives us practical strategies that offer both hope for change and movement towards change:

We're not talking miracles,
we're talking really hard work
step by step
by step by step.

Whānau who have had multiple encounters with social service agencies have often been referred to psycho-social groups to address difficulties with, for example, anger, violence, parenting, alcohol, and other drugs. The stories whānau tell of their experiences within these groups tend to echo the description that Glen Silvester (1997) offered of traditional approaches to psycho-social group practice:

A traditional approach to groups assumes that the group leader has both good facilitative and good didactic skills. This positions her as the expert with knowledge, skills and resources, and participants in deficit.... [T]he group leader is likely to support dominant cultural stories, thereby replicating the oppressive story the group participants bring in with them. (p. 234)

Like Silvester, we prefer to take relational positions and to use counselling skills that support whānau to engage in different kinds of conversations and activities. We prefer conversations that support whānau in generating meaning and knowledge relevant to

their lives, and that build from what they already know. A further example that is useful to us comes from the practice descriptions told by Jenny Snowdon and Rachel McKenna, about their group work with women who have experienced intimate partner violence:

From our first meeting with individual women we are interested in the knowledges about violence already available to them. Thus, when we meet each woman we hold in mind both safety concerns and possibilities that might arise for noticing moves women have already made towards safety. In respect of the latter, we ask a woman what we think is a significant question about “turning points” in how she positions herself in relation to violence. We ask with the assumption that, even if there by mandate, women have already taken actions—either in thinking or physical action—in relation to violence. In asking about turning points we are looking for the possibility of even the smallest movement towards safety—perhaps on behalf of children. This turning-point question invites a woman to identify and revisit a moment when she brought about movement towards safety. (K. Crocket, Kotzé, Snowdon, & McKenna, 2009, pp. 33–34)

Holding in mind that whānau may have had experiences of being expected to conform to others’ expectations and ideas for how they should live, we offer a practice that works to build accounts of the hopes that whānau hold for their lives (see White, 2007). As we noted above, this is a slow, step-by-step, scaffolded process that takes care, time, and skill. The skill of such practices can be learned, we suggest, particularly when we pay attention to our own whakapapa narratives.

Central to the skills involved in working with the knowledges that whānau bring with them to therapy is the practice of paying careful attention to the language people use in speaking about their lives. When we listen to the words and phrases that people speak, we create opportunities to explore meaning with them and to evaluate the meanings that are available.

From anthropology, narrative therapy has borrowed the idea of thin and thick descriptions (White, 1997, 2007). Thin descriptions offer an account of people’s lives that does not use the language of those people and their community. The language of professionals who write reports on clients that are not in a language that clients understand is, we suggest, an example of thin description, a form of colonisation. We work to listen carefully to the language that whānau use:

Speaking back their own words
Instead of interpreting them back to them.
We're seeing the effect of speaking back their own words.
We see them think:
"Yes, these are my words; I did say that."
It makes a difference.

When we pay attention to language and to meanings, we invite whānau into making knowledge about their own lives. Mandy Pentecost (2006, 2008) researched the effects of writing practices in therapy that pay attention to client utterances. She wrote this rescued speech poem about what she learned from her client, during a research interview, about the effect of reading Pentecost's record of the client's words:

*"That's what I said," I thought—
"The same but different."
Seeing it written down
Indicated
I was right. (Pentecost, 2006, p. 113)*

What we want to draw attention to here is the effect for the client of the experience of being invited to create knowledge about her own life, and then that knowledge being given value through being recorded in writing.

Responding to clients in the language of their own communities is a form of witnessing (Weingarten, 2000, 2003; White, 2007): we engage as a compassionate audience to whānau members' speaking about the difficulties they face in their lives, their hopes for change, and knowledge about or steps already taken towards such possibilities. Again we draw on both whakapapa narratives and narrative therapy in our interest in witnessing to what people say about their lives, and thus who it is possible for them to be. When Brent looked up and saw the congregation members' eyes on him, willing him on to perform the karakia in te reo, he saw them witnessing him as a person who belonged among them, as a whānau member, as Ngāti Porou, as a man whose mana they nurtured. When client whānau hear us repeat back to them the words they have used during the small steps of knowledge-making in counselling, they too experience themselves being witnessed, and their mana also nurtured.

Using their words
being curious about their lives

and their stories.
Sometimes we have to hunt for them,
we have to really listen and hunt
because they don't come forward with those stories.
But we are listening away and we might hear something
Something will stand out
And we go to that story.

We bring forward this other whakapapa narrative that hasn't been storied for a long time.

"Gee, I had forgotten about that."

"Gee, I haven't thought about that for a long time."

"Gee, I feel good to think about this."

Creating a different kind of space

Speaking the relational ethics of our counselling practice

We move now to close our article with a series of stanzas, using the poetic form, in returning to the point we made in our earlier discussion of the effects of taking authorship. There is a great deal more to be said about Māori counselling for Māori: this article is intended as a small contribution to a wideranging discussion into which many voices speak, in rich discussion and debate, in resonance and difference. Each practitioner, we suggest, brings a multilayered series of whakapapa narratives to their counselling practice: how much richer then are the layers upon layers available when many contribute to the kōrero. What we offer here is a particular contribution to knowledge-making towards the present and future of whānau therapy that arises from our lives and practices. We end this article not with a conclusion but through the indeterminacy of poetry, with an invitation to others to kōrero and to tell whakapapa narratives about Māori therapy practice for Māori whānau:

And, if after we have written, the text enters into others' dialogic encounters, then how can we claim to be the final arbiters of meaning for something whose meaning is so open-ended. (Sampson, 1985, p. 1208)

Karakia

Mihi

Waiata

It doesn't necessarily say that everything's going to be smooth sailing

because it certainly isn't.
But it does alert us to the diversity and to negotiation
and attending to people.
It's the same as the front of the marae
The same thing.
There's this opportunity for difference and debate and hard talk.

Karakia
Mihi
Waiata
Holding it gently
You wouldn't want to be just bowling on in.

I don't fully understand it
This wairua connection with others.
You can't grab hold of it and say this is what it is
It's constantly shifting and moving.
You feel that ihi feeling
And you get all those goose bumpy things.
You know that is wairua.
Other times when you just sit, and that's wairua too.

Narrative practice encourages us to be Māori
The space is being offered
Spaces available that we can take up.
Opportunity for creativity
and exploring in places that we never thought possible.

On the Coast
Māori
They were inclusive
Whatever it was they'd put it in their kete
It was a huge kete.
Just thank you
Thank you, this is helpful
This might work.
Oooh
this tastes good

Mmm
this smells nice.
This is helpful for our people
This is life-giving.

Glossary

atua – God, gods
hinengaro – mind
ihi – psychic force
iwi – tribe, people
kaikarakia – a licensed lay reader in the Church
karakia – prayer, liturgy
kawa – protocol
kete – basket
kono – woven basket
kōrero – talk
kuia – female elder
kupu – word
maemae – fears, pain, or hurt
mahi – work
mana – prestige or authority
manaaki – hospitality
maunga – mountain
mihi – speech of greeting
minita – minister
Minita a Iwi – minister of the people
mokopuna – grandchild
pakeke – adult
rangatahi – young people
tamariki – children
taonga – treasure
te ao Māori – the Māori world
te reo – the (Māori) language
tinana – body

tino rangatiratanga – Māori self-government, self-determination, independence
tīpuna – ancestors
tuakana–tēina – elder–younger
waewae tapu – newcomer
waiata – song
wairua – spirit
whaea – term of respect for an older woman
whakaiti – to be humble
whakamā – shame
whakapapa – ancestral genealogy
whānau – extended family
whare karakia – church

Endnotes

1. Brent, Huia and Kathie have written this paper together. It arises out of Brent's MCouns dissertation, and draws on kōrero between the three of us. The corresponding author is Kathie: kcrocket@waikato.ac.nz

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