

# Exploring the Role of a Māori Kin Insider Researcher's Positionality: A Perspective

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## Abstract

This paper aims to shed light on my positionality in my doctoral research by exploring some of the advantages and challenges faced as a Māori kin insider researcher conducting research in my own kin community of Te Araroa. It highlights my chosen positionality and the role that whakapapa research methodology and kinship can play in a Māori kin community study. This is my journey as a Māori kin insider researcher, and I acknowledge that my experiences may differ from those of other Māori kin insider researchers. The complexities surrounding my positionality are explained by drawing on critical themes such as kin included researcher, kin accountability, social boundary theory and reflexivity. For other Māori kin insider researchers and indigenous researchers working within their own kin community, I hope this paper will offer helpful information to understand some of these complexities.

**Keywords:** Whakapapa research methodology, Māori kin insider researcher, Māori kin included researcher, positionality, reflexivity, social boundary theory, kin accountability.

## Introduction

An essential element in qualitative studies is indicating one's positionality (Bourke, 2014; Holmes, 2020; Soedirgo & Glas, 2020; Jamieson et al., 2023). The positionality of a researcher can affect every step of the study process, including constructing research questions, participant selection, appropriate methodology and methods, and ethical considerations (Davies, 2008; Bourke, 2014; Fleming, 2018; Wilson & Williams, 2022). Positionality is a position that researchers select and embrace within their research (Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Additionally, positionality allows the audience to understand who the researcher is (e.g. background, identity, worldview, experience) and how they influence the research study (Wilkinson, 1988; Davies, 2008; Holmes, 2020). When researchers have an awareness of their positionality and biases, this can help to ensure the validity and reliability of the research (Smith, 1999; Wilson et al., 2022).

Another essential part of positionality is reflexivity (Huberman & Miles, 2002; Savin-Baden & Major, 2013). Reflexivity acknowledges the role of the researcher in that they are an integral part of the research process because their experiences, assumptions, biases and beliefs influence the study (Holmes, 2020; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023; Jamieson et al., 2023). In this paper, I explore my positionality and reflexivity to illuminate some of the advantages and challenges of occupying the position of a Māori kin insider researcher. This position is not fixed but fluid, shifting throughout the research investigation (Holmes, 2020). For example, there were times when I felt like an outsider because I occupied a non hau kāinga position in relation to my kin community. This will be explored further in this paper. While I use the word 'Māori' kin insider researcher, I acknowledge that 'Māori' is a generalised title as Māori belong to hapū groupings.

## **My Doctoral Research**

In 2021, I began my doctoral research, which explored the impacts, challenges and opportunities of climate change in relation to Te Rimu Trust. Te Rimu Trust is located in Te Araroa on the East Coast of the North Island. Te Araroa is a small rural coastal Māori settlement (Soutar, 2011) located approximately 169 kilometres north of Gisborne. Te Rimu Trust is an ahu whenua trust, a legal body that multiple Māori landowners can utilise to administrate their land (Māori Land Court, 2023). In the 1970s, a small group of

whānau representatives of sections of Tokata and Whetumatarau land blocks (located in Te Araroa) met to discuss how they could best develop and utilise their land. After deliberations at several hui, whānau representatives decided to amalgamate their land holdings under Te Rimu Trust as a single administration. Consequently, Te Rimu was formed in the early 1980s via the Māori Land Court. Te Rimu Trust consists of sections of the Tokata and Whetumatarau land blocks situated Northwest of Te Araroa (Māori Land Court, 2024). The total area of Te Rimu is approximately 240 hectares. As of June 2023, Te Rimu Trust has approximately 400 shareholders (Māori Land Court, 2024). The majority, if not all, shareholders whakapapa to hapū in and around the Te Araroa region.

### **Whakapapa Research Methodology**

Britto (2023) asserts that a researcher's positionality influences the methodology. The researcher chooses theoretical and methodological approaches they think are most suited for their research investigation. In my doctoral research, whakapapa research methodology was chosen, which offered a theoretical and method approach appropriate for Māori participants, which reflected their whakapapa connection to the landscape as well as resembled the context of the study. Another reason for selecting this methodology is that it offered a framework for comprehending, organising, and interpreting Māori knowledge (Graham, 2009; Te Whata, 2021; Kawharu et al., 2024). Whakapapa is intrinsically linked to both traditional and modern Māori society, thus woven throughout the fabric of Māori society (Graham, 2009). Additionally, as Kawharu et al. (2024) explained, whakapapa research methodology provides an ethical research approach that embodies Kaupapa Māori research. A critical component of these methodologies is who will benefit from the research and the care and respect for the research participants throughout the study.

As part of the whakapapa research methodology in my research, I explored Māori cosmological narratives in relation to the creation of the world that provided a perspective of a Māori worldview. This signified the customary rituals, beliefs, values, and knowledge that are still relevant today. The Māori creation story also represents the evolving journey from darkness to light in the search for knowledge that continues in the

world of Te Ao Marama. I utilised a generalised Māori creation story while recognising that different tribes have their own stories. This story was important considering the context and topic of this study (e.g. Te Rimu Trust, which is a Māori ahu whenua land trust located in a kin community) and all the research participants identified as Māori. Additionally, through whakapapa and land court records, as the researcher, I could identify my genealogical connection to the Te Rimu Trust and the research participants (trustees) as well as to some of the members of the Te Araroa community. I traced my whakapapa lines from atua to my iwi then to my hapū and whānau, that helped identify my whakapapa connection to Te Rimu Trust. Furthermore, whakapapa research methodology included tikanga, which guided the way the data was gathered and how I engaged with the research participants and the broader community in a culturally appropriate and respectful manner.

### **Positionality: My Connection to the Research**

Wilson et al. (2022) claim that the researcher's identity, positionality and reflexivity can influence all aspects of the research. With this in mind, it was necessary as a researcher to acknowledge my identity and connection with my research investigation. I am an indigenous Māori woman from Aotearoa, New Zealand. My whakapapa distinguishes my ethnicity and position in society today (Graham, 2009). Whakapapa means that I am a member of a whānau, hapū, iwi and also belong to the collective group of Māori. Hence, I belong to multiple groups, including family groupings, subtribes, tribe/s and Māori. Furthermore, there are other groups I belong to beyond ethnicity, including women, mothers, students, teachers and so on. Identity, therefore, includes the intersection of other groupings that can add to the complexities of one's positionality.

Through my whakapapa on my mother's side, I connect to the land of Te Rimu Trust. I acknowledge the ancestry I share with the hapū of Te Whānau a Kahu, which binds me to the land of Te Rimu Trust. My mother is a current shareholder in this trust, and I am a beneficiary. Her land shares have been passed down through multiple generations. One of her tupuna claimed and received land shares in the late nineteenth century through the Native Land Court. Before this, the land in this area belonged collectively to the hapū.

I have never lived in Te Araroa, but my mother and her mother were raised there. My siblings and I were raised in Turanganui a Kiwa (Gisborne, Kaiti) in the 1980s. Nevertheless, Te Araroa is not a foreign place for me. It is where many of my ancestors are buried, where my marae are located, where my mother and grandmother were raised, where my Māori land trust is situated and where I spent some of my school holidays.

Before this doctoral research, I had few pre-established community relationships in Te Araroa, which impacted my position. I found this challenging, having never lived in Te Araroa and undertaking research there. Residing away from my kin community as a Māori kin insider researcher has made it somewhat difficult to build community relationships, along with other pressures like work, family and financial commitments. However, this has not deterred me from researching or contributing to my kin community while residing away.

### **Māori Kin Insider Researcher Positionality**

A Māori kin insider researcher can be defined as a researcher with genealogical ties to a kin community (also known as a marae community). This is not the only criteria but an important one. There have been a number of kin insider research investigations that have been conducted, including Hohepa (1964), I.H. Kawharu (1975), Kawharu (2016), Muru-Lanning (2010), Aikman-Dodd (2015), Tane (2018), Te Whata (2021) to name a few. In relation to my doctoral research, my whakapapa places me in a kin insider position in relation to the research participants, Te Rimu Trust, and the wider Te Araroa community in which Te Rimu is located. Being a kin insider researcher in one's own kin community and residing away can have advantages and challenges. This may not be the same for every Māori kin insider researcher as this may depend on factors such as upbringing, experiences and the relationship the researcher has with their kin community.

### ***Advantages of a Māori Kin Insider Researcher***

A Māori kin insider researcher may be considered an 'insider' in their kin community because of their shared kinship ties. This may have considerable advantages. Depending on the researcher's experience and relationship with the kin community, an advantage of

occupying a kin insider position may include the researcher's contextual understanding of the research participants' home community. As mentioned earlier, Te Araroa was not a foreign place to me. I have a genealogical connection to this place through whakapapa. Additionally, I had some awareness and understanding of this community in terms of the landscape and people. For example, as a child, I would spend holidays exploring the landscape and meeting people in the community. Also, some of my whānau members lived there, some of whom still reside there today. These experiences aided some familiarity with my kin community.

My whakapapa links to Te Araroa, which other researchers might not have, helped me connect with the land trust and the research participants, the Te Rimu trustees. Through my whakapapa ties, I am connected to the research participants, some of whom I am closely related to, while others I am distantly related to through a common ancestor. Whakapapa and whānaungatanga allowed me to undertake this research, receiving the blessing from Te Rimu, allowing easy access to the research participants. Attending Te Rimu Trust's meetings before this research investigation allowed me to gain some knowledge about this Trust. Furthermore, I shared the same cultural identity as the research participants, which helped me to understand their cultural worldview expressed in their kōrero.

Beyond the boundaries of Te Rimu Trust, my whakapapa gave me a genealogical connection to my kin community of Te Araroa. Some community members I contacted during my research knew my whānau and were welcoming. Whakapapa, therefore, served as a gateway for this research. Another advantage was that I had extended whānau living in Te Araroa, which helped to facilitate relationships with other community members. For example, my uncle (my mother's brother), who lives in Te Araroa, introduced me to community members willing to share their kōrero (knowledge, insights and experiences) with me, for which I am grateful. Although a kin insider research position was helpful, there were still some challenges.

### ***Challenges of a Māori Kin Insider Researcher***

The challenges of a Māori kin insider researcher include the different dynamics that can impact the researcher's position, such as age, race, gender, class, and whānau identity

construction (Smith, 2015). As mentioned earlier, as a kin insider researcher, I belong to various groups that include Māori, Pākehā, Ngāti Porou, Ngāpuhi, women, mothers, teachers, university students, and many more. The participants' perceptions and my affiliations with these various groups may affect whether the research participants and community accept me as an insider or how they interact and behave toward me. For instance, the participants might perceive the doctoral qualification as a position of privilege and, therefore, interact with me differently. Regardless of the various groups I belong to, Smith (2015) sees this as a benefit as she states, "the multiple positions we hold and the different relationships which each of those positions binds us to make our research encounters problematic, dynamic, and rich (p.51)." As such, the diversity of groups we are part of can broaden our perspectives.

Another challenge I experienced was that while some community members were willing to kōrero with me about the research topic, there were instances when some community members were not. What I realised was that whakapapa alone does not guarantee whanaungatanga (Te Whata, 2021). I discovered that other aspects were required for some community members to kōrero with me, such as trust, time, familiarity, credibility, proven ability and kin accountability.

Some scholars perceive the closeness of a kin insider to the research participants as a limitation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Chavez, 2008; Innes, 2009; Toy-Cronin, 2018). It has been said to cloud the researcher's views, promote insider biases, and impact the validity of the research findings (Chavez, 2008; Innes, 2009). In my case, the closeness to the research participants in this study aided me in various ways. For example, access to research participants was straightforward via family relationships, through which I gained their trust and support. The close relationship I shared with the participants helped build a good rapport, allowing them to feel comfortable and 'open up' during the kōrero.

### **Social Boundary Theory Associated with Kin Insider Researcher**

Through social boundary theory, I could understand some of the challenges presented by a Māori kin insider researcher undertaking research in their own kin community. In

general terms, social boundaries can be understood as rules accepted by majority of people in society that assist in dictating a group's behaviour (Albritton, 2023; Mcleod, 2023). Social boundaries in the form of social and mental boundaries have the potential to allow people to categorise others, such as similarities and differences, which in turn can be used for exclusion (Lamont & Molnár, 2002; Albritton, 2023). The excluded person or group may be seen as different from the other or even 'the villain' (Barth, 1969; Tane, 2018). The social and mental boundaries were implicitly present in my research regarding me as the researcher and the following groups: Te Rimu Trust members, hapū members and hau kāinga members, which are explored next.

### ***Te Rimu Trust's Members***

At times, parameters needed to be negotiated as a kin insider researcher with members of Te Rimu Trust. Internal to the Trust, I have distinct descent lines that group me as belonging to a particular family, which comes with its own history, experiences, labels, dynamics, biases and knowledge. I would, therefore, occupy a somewhat 'other' position in relation to the other families in the Trust because of the whānau I belong to. Deliberately or unintentionally, this may have affected the information individuals share with me (Tane, 2018). Additionally, certain whānau members carried 'mamae' about historical land shares within the Trust pertaining to specific individuals, which has had an additional effect on following generations and their interactions with each other and me as a researcher. This added relational tension within the Trust and impacted how I viewed specific members and how others influenced them.

### ***Hapū***

At a hapu level, being a kin insider researcher and belonging to Te Rimu Trust, I found social and mental boundaries to be present in my research. Te Rimu Trust is a distinct legal organisation with assets, resources, trustees, shareholders, and beneficiaries associated with specific whānau groups. The whānau groups that belong to Te Rimu Trust share some commonalities, such as narratives, lived experiences, and knowledge systems



that make them distinct from other whānau groups of a hapū. During a hui in Te Araroa, a local member made the following remark, which symbolises the social divide between Te Rimu Trust members and hapū members, stating, “Te Rimu Trust has created jobs and is producing an income for their shareholders and whānau, but what if we are not a shareholder of that Trust, what does the rest of the hapū get or what is in it for us?” As a beneficiary of Te Rimu Trust, I would be perceived as the ‘other’ regarding other hapū members because of my association with the Trust, which I believed acted as a barrier to obtaining information from some hapū and community members.

### ***Hau Kāinga***

My kin insider position occupied the ‘other’ stance at a community level. There was an undercurrent of ‘other’, which was evident when I attended a marae hui in Te Araroa (2021) regarding the Te Araroa barge, when a local community member stated, “What about the ahi kā people? What impact will that have on us, for the hau kāinga people living here?” Another example is when Tina Ngata (2021) was interviewed by Ngāti Porou radio station concerning the Te Araroa barge and Te Rimu Trust, and she stated, “It is important to remember there are many people involved in the process that do not live here (Te Araroa). They live elsewhere, so the implication of that falls upon people living here, the hau kāinga people.” These remarks suggest that non hau kāinga members are positioned as the “other” based on the perceived social norms of hau kāinga members. Here, it is critical to acknowledge that the hau kāinga plays a significant role in community decision-making because the decisions directly impact their daily lives, unlike non hau kāinga members who live abroad. The hau kāinga members of marae communities play a critical role because they maintain the home fires burning, and without them, much will be lost. Furthermore, the hau kāinga members have intimate knowledge of the environment and the community in which they live, and they are the experts within our communities; therefore, they should be honoured and respected. That said, sometimes descendants who live away can also play an equally active role in community affairs or even more significant roles (depending on what they do). As a kin insider researcher living away, I am still accountable to my hapū regardless of where I reside. While the kin insider

researcher broadly locates my position concerning my kin community, the kin included researcher precisely locates my positionality in my study.

### **Māori Kin Included Researcher Positionality**

The kin included researcher concept emerged in Professor Merata Kawharu's 2016 research about Ngāti Whātua's entrepreneurship. This could be considered an element of a Māori kin insider researcher. Kawharu describes her positionality as a kin-included researcher who encompasses the socio-cultural context of her research and draws on whakapapa-based philosophies and methods. She provides a brief description of a kin included researcher that is underpinned by whakapapa,

“Whakapapa in principle refers to a researcher's cultural and social identity, and whakapapa in practice begins with having privileged access to information because of insider connections, and it then frames how the material is interpreted and located within a historical narrative of community identity (Kawharu, 2016, p.367)”.

Another critical aspect of kin included researcher that Kawharu (2016) makes is that although she was 'connected to the researcher participants through hapū membership, the kin included researcher position allowed her to be one step removed' (p.367). This means Kawharu was an active member of her hapū. Yet, the kin-included researcher position allowed her to detach from the research because she resided away from her kin community. The kin-included researcher position accurately reflects my position in my doctoral studies. It recognises my cultural and social identity in my study and honours my kin obligations while executing this research away from my kin community.

### **Māori Kin Accountability**

For Māori, kin accountability is an ancestral value and practice still relevant today. In traditional times, rangatira would lead their kin community by example, and in some cases, rangatira would sacrifice their own life in the hope that future generations may prosper (Tapsell, 2017). Kin accountability is formed on a profoundly multifaceted set of kin relationships with obligations and duties (Tapsell, 2017). Kawharu and Tapsell (2019)

describe kin accountability as ‘essentially fulfilling a reciprocal relationship between leaders and communities where leaders are motivated to serve and be responsible to their communities while the communities, in turn, shape the parameters of the leadership’ (p.8). Furthermore, kin accountability acknowledges past ancestors, present generations, and those generations to come (Kawharu & Tapsell, 2019).

Kin accountability embraces the idea that one should demonstrate their ability and accountability to their kin relatives (Tapsell, 2017; Tapsell, 2021). These two concepts, ‘ability’ and ‘accountability’ are intertwined. While I am accountable to several hapū because of my whakapapa, however, to be accepted entirely as a member of a hapū, I must prove to them my ability and accountability. Ability in this context is to use one’s credentials/expertise and personal effort to support my whānau and hapū in achieving their goals and aspirations. While kin accountability is the personal obligation and sacrifices one makes toward one’s hapū. This may be referred to as “giving back”, demonstrating one’s service to their hapū, or “proving oneself” to their community (Cram, 1993; Mahuika, 2015; Selby & Moore, 2007; Jones et al., 2010; Tapsell, 2017; Ann Roche, et al., 2018).

As a Māori kin insider researcher undertaking my doctoral research in my kin community, I am accountable to different kin groups, including my Māori land trust, kin community, hapū, and whānau. For instance, my kin accountability lies with my Māori land trust that includes the trustees, shareholders and the beneficiaries. The trustees and some shareholders were research participants in my research study. To make myself accountable to Te Rimu Trust, I would attend the Trust’s yearly Annual General Meeting (AGM), which requires me to travel from Wellington to Gisborne. At the AGM, I would update the shareholders and beneficiaries on my research progress. When possible, I would attend trust meetings (whether in person or via Zoom) if Te Rimu needed my support. Another example was when Te Rimu Trust planned a working bee to plant lime trees in January 2022, so I made myself available. I was also accountable to my hapū and the wider Te Araroa community in which our land trust is situated. I was available to offer my service if it was required. My presence at community hui was one way to help build relationships, which is significant in long-term outcomes in serving my hapū and people. My whānau was another kin group I was accountable to, including my children, partner,

parents, siblings, uncles, aunties and cousins. The long periods of being fully engrossed in this doctoral study meant I missed important family events and time away from my family. I was accountable to them to ensure this study was completed and to utilise my qualifications and skills to support them beyond the boundaries of this research.

## **Reflexivity**

My doctoral research employed an ethnographic methodological approach. Reflexivity is crucial to ethnographic study, and it also informs positionality (Holmes, 2020). Reflexivity has been described in general terms by Charlotte Aull Davis (2008) as “turning back on oneself (p.4)”, and it involves the researcher examining their own beliefs, judgements, practices and influence during their research process (Delve & Limpaecher, 2022; Olmos-Vega et al., 2023). In addition, Berger (2015) states, “researchers need to focus on self-knowledge and sensitivity increasingly; better understand their role of the self in creation to knowledge; carefully self-monitor the impact of their biases, beliefs and personal experiences on their research; maintain the balance between the person and the universal” (p.220).

A concern raised by Davis (2008) and Berger (2015) regarding reflexivity is when the researcher has a close relationship to the culture and society of the researcher participants. For instance, the level of personal familiarity that the researcher might share with the participants may impact all aspects of the research process, such as recruitment, observations, analysis and drawing conclusions. As a kin-included researcher, I acknowledge the close relationship with the research participants (trustees), which aided the research process. I understood the participants’ cultural worldview, and recruitment was straightforward via the land trust. Additionally, the participants felt comfortable interacting with me and ‘opened up’ during the kōrero because of my pre-existing relationships with them.

Ingrained in reflexivity is collaboration (Seravali et al., 2022). This may include the researcher and researcher participant working together throughout the research investigation, enabling mutual learning. Collaboration is also a way to address the dynamic power relationship between the research participants and the researcher.

Collaboration was evident throughout my research study. For instance, collaboration began before the research proposal was formulated. It was essential that I received the blessing from the trustees and shareholders to undertake this research. Through ongoing engagement and co-construction, the researcher and research participants could collaborate throughout the research investigation. For example, I co-constructed the research questions with some participants. Additionally, research participants reviewed transcripts before the data was used in the study, and the research participants viewed the final draft to ensure that I understood what they had said. Therefore, the benefit of collaboration between the researcher and research participants throughout this study is that it prevented me from controlling the entire process or misinterpreting the participants' statements.

A reflexive journal was utilised to minimise my bias throughout my research investigation. This journal recorded my experiences, emotions, thoughts, unspoken conflicts, decision-making, and reflections. Written entries were done regularly when the ideas were fresh in my mind. Components of my reflexive journal were shared with my supervisors and a PhD cohort group. This aided in providing unbiased, independent feedback and discussions from an outsider's perspective.

## **Conclusion**

As this paper has explored, the positionality of a Māori kin insider researcher can be surrounded by various complexities, some of which present advantages and challenges. Additionally, this paper has highlighted how one's positionality is dynamic and varies according to the participants, context and subject matter. As a researcher, whakapapa research methodology influenced my position. For instance, this methodology identified the research participants and the researcher's cultural identity. Whakapapa research methodology also provided a lens through which Māori knowledge was understood, organised and interpreted. There were some difficulties at the outset of my research project because I had never lived in my kin community and had limited community relationships. Nevertheless, whakapapa provided a gateway to the research project and

helped me connect with other kin members in my kin community who knew my whānau. While whakapapa had its advantages, it also had associated challenges. There were instances when whakapapa alone was not enough to persuade certain community members to share their kōrero with me, and other elements were required, such as time, familiarity, trust, credibility and proven ability. Collaboration with research participants throughout the entire process ensured that the research investigation was a team effort, each playing a critical role. Kin accountability is an inherited value that was an important part of my research, and I made myself accountable to various kin groups. My kin obligations to these kin groups will continue beyond this study. Finally, to conclude this paper, I would like to acknowledge the research participants and members of the Te Araroa community who have contributed to this research investigation.

## Glossary

Ahi kā – continuous occupation of land by a group

Hapū - subtribe

Hau kāinga – local people of the marae, home people

Hui - meeting

Iwi – tribe, extended kinship group

Kāinga – kin community, marae community, tribal marae

Kōrero – talk, discussion

Mamae – hurt, pain

Māori – indigenous New Zealander

Rangatira – chief, a person of high rank

Te Ao Marama – the world of the living

Tikanga – correct procedures or custom

Tipuna - ancestor

Whakapapa - genealogy

Whānau – family group, extended family

Whanaungatanga - relationship, kinship, sense of family connection

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