Whangai: remembering, understanding and experiencing

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Abstract: The Māori customary practice of whangai is often equated with adoption or foster care. There are, however, significant differences between the institutions. Adoption or foster care, tends to be mainly focused on the interests of the child. The institution of whangai, while being cognizant of the interests of the child, is weighted more towards establishing, nurturing and cementing relationships between individuals, families and broader relational networks. In this paper we draw on the lived experiences of six people who have been raised as whangai and/or have raised whangai. We were interested in their understanding of the cultural concept of whangai, how the customary practice of whangai has changed over time, and their projected thoughts on future generations' experience of whangai. Findings suggest that the institution of whangai remains as a strong vehicle for both the care of children and for the nurturing of whangai kinship relationships. While participants recognised that contemporary Māori social environments have contributed toward multiple manifestations of whangai, most felt it to be an institution that will be valued and carried into the future.

Keywords: adoption, Māori culture, whanau, whangai

Introduction

Within Māori society the customary practice in which a child is raised by kin members other than their birth parents is termed whangai, atawhai or tamaiti whangai (for the remainder of this report the term whangai will be used). The term whangai literally means 'to feed or nourish' (Mead, 1994). The meaning of whangai implies that the child is being nurtured in the fullest sense including instruction, cultural and affection as well as food (Bradley, 1997). Carroll (1970) provides a working definition of adoption as, "any customary and optional procedure for taking as one's own, a child of other parents" (p. 3). The expression '*taking as one's own*' under the whangai institution does not require the child to relinquish all claims to her/his birth identity. That whangai occurs within the child's own kin group means that, whakapapa (genealogy) is acknowledged and maintained to affirm birth lines, and placements were arranged to secure and strengthen whanau and kin links (Bradley, 1997).

The whangai system before European arrival to Aotearoa was commonly practiced and well developed (Graham, 1948; Firth, 1959). Through processes of colonisation, the introduction of a foreign law system had a destructive affect. Work by Suzanne Pitama (1997) reviews the insidious eroding of the whangai system through the institution of European derived laws and regulation. We draw heavily on her work to present a review of these effects below.

New Zealand's first Adoption Act 1881 did not impinge on the whangai institution. This was not the case when the subsequent Native Land Claims and Adjustment and Amendment Act 1901 was introduced. Through this Act, it became essential to register whangai placements in the Native Land Court to qualify the child to succeed to lands of their whangai parents. The Act also established the legally recognised adoption of children; a new form of child placement that was not kinship based. The Native Land Act 1909 brought further change by prohibiting the practice of whangai in its customary form. Māori were forced to legally adopt through the Native Land Court. Although Māori continued to whangai children, this was done at the risk of whangai not being able to legally succeed to land.

Subsequent Adoption Acts followed and in 1915 'secrecy' became the focus of adoption laws, mainly to protect the identity of childless European couples (Bradley, 1997). Even so, allowances for Māori perspectives were made. For example, "Māori Land Court adoption hearings remained open and Māori adoptions were published in the Kahiti (Māori Gazette) and the New Zealand Gazette" (Else, 1991, p. 179). The 1955 Adoption Act further supported secrecy through the implementation of closed adoption, a law that inferred that the more open Māori whangai practices were some how detrimental to the child and their whangai parents. From a Māori perspective, closed adoption in which the adoptee is alienated from birth parents and the kin group threatens the child's self identity. Severing a child's birth identity and heritage is seen as an act of cultural violence (Bradley, 1997; Griffith, 1997).

Transcultural adoptions increased through the 1960's and 1970's. State welfare officers were in the invidious position of placing Māori children of parents deemed to be 'unfit', with Pākehā families. Māori children with fair skin were under demand and easily placed. Boys and in particular children with dark skin were harder to place with families, many in turn ending up 'unwanted' and in institutions (Mikaere, 1994). Transcultural adoptions served the purpose of assimilative policies that promoted socially constructed families such as the nuclear family, over kin based whanau systems (Bradley, 1997). They also served the demand by Pākehā for children, but only those that were agreeable.

Māori initiatives played a significant role in the legislative changes that occurred in the late 1980s (Report to the Minister of Social Welfare, 1990). Māori focussed on adapting their cultural practice to ensure it worked in conjunction with, instead of being subsumed by, legal adoption. Puao-te-ata-tu (1988) (the report on the Department of Social Welfare from a Māori perspective) in its recommendations to changes in the Children and Young Persons Act 1974 emphasised the importance of a significant ideology change in order that the Act met Māori needs. Work by McDonald (1994) discusses the influence Māori have had in the shaping of legal adoption and decision making processes. This is evident in the Children, Young Persons, and their Families Act 1989 which moved away from the paramount interests of the child as was prescribed by the Children and Young Persons Act 1974 towards family and whanau decision making (Report to the Minister of Social Welfare, 1990). For example, family or whanau group conferences are used as a main component in discussing the future of a child. The Act directs that all decision making shall involve the extended family group and that family relationships shall be strengthened and maintained (New Zealand Statutes, 1989). In addition, the Act does not assign special status to parents, and the role of the state is, "less interventionist and more that of a facilitator" (Report to the Minister of Social Welfare 1990, p. 44).

Further Māori initiatives that utilise the wider whanau group as a valuable resource base are noted in current programmes. For example Matua Whangai was originally developed as a strategy to strengthen whanau, hapu and iwi links and is based on nurturing Māori children within the whanau group as the principal means of child placement (Puao-te-ata-tu, 1988). While this review does not give a comprehensive list of the strategies Māori have developed in their resistance to change, it is clear that Māori both value and desire to pursue their own cultural practices.

The environmental ideology underlying adoption held that the environment was more important than genealogy lines (Griffith, 1997). The child's birth identity was suppressed and the focus was on creating a new relationship with adoptive parents. A 'clean break' from birth parents was seen as optimal to all involved (Griffith, 1997). In comparison, "in customary terms taking on a whangai is a public affair and care is taken to keep the whanaungatanga (kinship relations) links alive" (Bradley, 1997, p. 38). In this regard, whangai children are often raised in the same home or community as their birth parent.

Literature surrounding the whangai institution often and inappropriately parallels this customary practice to adoption and foster care. The fundamental ideas that underlie the institutions greatly differ. While kinship forms the foundation of the whangai institution, kinship is not the basis of adoption and foster care. Although adoption is mainly veiled in secrecy, the practice of whangai embraces a principle of openness. The idea that children are parental possessions informs that of adoption (Griffith, 1997).

Māori view children not as a possession but a valuable resource and raising children was a shared responsibility within the whanau or kin group. Birth mothers that choose adoption were often labelled irresponsible and uncaring, while birth parents of whangai were praised for their generosity (Metge, 1995). Whangai children are seen as a gift of love. In contrast, protecting the child's interest rather than that of the whanau or community is central to adoption and foster care. The whangai institution recognises the interests of the child but is also concerned with establishing, nurturing and strengthening relationships between whanau members and the broader kin group.

Work by Joan Metge (1982; 1995) describes how the values of aroha, whanaungatanga, mana and whakapapa shape and inform the customary practice of whangai based on her own experience with the people from Tai Tokerau (she uses the term atawhai). Her work greatly informs the remainder of this review.

The traditional practice of whangai as understood by Māori was a whanau system whereby the child is provided an open and supportive environment to grow and whanau structures are strengthened. Paramount to the Māori world and fundamental to the whangai institution is the kinship principle which acts to protect both the interests of the child and the whanau group. For the whangai child this ensures one's social place in society and of utmost importance preserves the child's whakapapa. The whangai child has knowledge of her/his birth parents and is provided the opportunity to establish intimate relationships with them. The kinship principle guarantees the child is not denied contact with the birth whanau or kin group but has recourse to call upon many relatives in times of need. The open characteristic of whangai ensures the child's cultural interests are protected, for example the transference of kinship ties, descent line and connections with land. That the whangai child knows their own position within the whanau and kin group serves to promote self identity, self esteem and mana. If the whangai child's interests are met, the entire whanau group benefits.

Whangai placement secures lasting bonds and commitment within the whanau group. Bonds are secured as the entire whanau are committed and involved at different stages in the growth and development of the whangai child. Benefits of the whangai system are experienced by; 1) whanau members who are childless, 2) young mothers who do not have the resources to raise a child, or 3) whanau members whose children have matured and left the home. The practice of whangai is seen to enhance the well-being of the whanau group by allowing children to be raised by whanau who have the resources to meet their needs. That whangai children will one day become participating adults is in the interests of the whanau to protect and nurture them (Mead, 1994).

Relationships between grandparents and mokopuna within Māori society are regarded as special in that love is shown freely and openly in actions, words and affection. Children that are whangai of their grandparents or older whanau members are sometimes chosen as repositories of whanau and hapu knowledge, ancestral lineage, tikanga and tribal history. Grandparents often whangai their grandchildren too keep the extended family together. For whatever reason a whangai relationships is established, positive value and connotations are attached to this customary practice. The whangai system involves both transient and permanent child placement. In most cases whangai takes place at birth however the term whangai is also legitimately applied when placement occurs at a later age or lasts for a shorter period of time.

Within Māori culture raising children is about duties, responsibilities and obligations. Responsibility is attached to the whangai whanau. To whangai a child is taking on a promise to provide an environment that will enrich the whangai child's life. Whangai that are chosen to be repositories of whanau, hapu or tribal knowledge, equally inherit a responsibility to pass this knowledge on in later life. Whanau members will often seek out whanau information from whangai that were treated as repositories of whanau history. That whangai takes place within the kin group assures the continuation of knowledge.

Literature that discusses the whangai institution mainly portrays a positive child placement practice, however as Metge (1995) points out, it was not always successful.

> It could not prevent some children from feeling rejected by their birth parents
> or deprived of the special love of a mother; it could not prevent siblings being
> split up or atawhai being overworked or abused in particular cases. But
> philosophically and in practice it had many strengths and advantages (p. 256).

Since the late 1990's there is the noted absence of literature that explores how Māori feel about this traditional practice. In particular, little attention has been given to the documentation of Māori understanding of the practice of whangai, including Māori thoughts on how the practice has changed overtime, and Māori views on the future practice of whangai.

The objective of this research is to:

1.   Explore Māori understanding of the practice of whangai through the experience of being and/or raising whangai.

2.   Let Māori discuss how the customary practice has changed over time and what has contributed to this change.

3.   Draw on Māori thoughts concerning the continuation of the whangai institution into the future.

Method

This section outlines the methodology used in the research process. It describes the people involved in the research, the interview schedule and the research procedure.

Participants

The sample size consisted of six people, four female and two male. All persons identified as Māori, and the criteria for inclusion in the study specified people who had experienced being a whangai and/or raised a whangai. Five people were in the age range of 50-60 years and one person was in the age category of 45-50 years. Five people affiliated to Tainui and one person affiliated to Ngati Awa. All resided in the North Island, three live in Huntly, two in Auckland and one in Hamilton.

Interview Schedule

A semi-structured interview schedule was developed for this research (Appendix A). The interview schedule consisted of three topic areas that were explored. These were: 1) understanding the cultural concept of whangai and the experience of being and/or raising whangai; 2) how the whangai institution has changed overtime and what has contributed to this change; and 3) will there be the need for the whangai institution in the future, and what will support and/or diminish the future practice of whangai. The first topic area involved two general questions and some gathering of background information about key people, and pivotal events that contributed to each persons understanding. These were: 1) what has contributed to your

understanding of the practice of whangai; and 2) how has your understanding developed through their experience of being and/or raising whangai. The second topic area included two general questions. They were: 1) how has the whangai institution changed over time; and 2) how does the whangai institution differ from foster care and adoption institutions. The third topic area consisted of six questions. These were: 1) will the whangai institution continue into the future; 2) will there still be a need for the institution; 3) what things will support the need for this institution; 4) what things will diminish the need for the institution; 5) what changes need to occur within the institution to better support the whangai and birth whanau; and 6) what are the important things to remember when moving into the future. These questions were not expected to be an exhaustive list of areas to be covered in the interview. It was anticipated that exploration in other areas would stem from the discussion that the questions created, and from each persons own experience and perspective.

Procedures

Recruitment Process
The first stage of the recruitment process began by contacting and inviting two hapu members that the researcher knew were whangai to participate in this project. This was done by way of telephone and an informal meeting where the information sheet (Appendix B) was left with them. Each person was asked if they knew of other who had either experienced being whangai and/or raised whangai that may be interested in participating in this project. They were asked to contact these people and leave information packs and the researcher's telephone number with them. The initial contact between the researcher and the remaining four people was done by telephone. This involved the researcher explaining briefly what the research was about, the process involved, the time it would take, where it would take place, and answering any questions. All four people agreed to participate in the research over the phone. I explained to all six people during the initial contact that they could withdraw from the research at any time without penalty. An interview date, time and location that suited each person were organised. All six people were advised at initial contact that if they wished to, they could have support people present during the interview.

Ethical Considerations in the Recruitment Process
Three of the people involved in this project are older relatives of the researcher, and two are affiliated to the researcher through hapu and iwi affiliation. At no time was the researcher in a position of authority or power. During initial contact by telephone and at the beginning and end of the interviews it was emphasized that each person was free to withdraw from the research. Anonymity was clearly explained to each person. The researcher is the only person that has access to audio-tapes and information regarding all six peoples contact details. Ethical approval was gained from the Psychology Research and Ethics Committee.

Interview Procedure
All six people chose a time and place for the interview. Before each interview the researcher indicated on the information sheet that it may be necessary to have a support person present during or after the interview to discuss issues that may cause discomfort through the interview. One interview was held in Auckland, one in Hamilton, and two people chose to be interviewed together in Huntly and also had whanau members attend as support. Two people were interviewed separately in Huntly and both had whanau members present.

Prior to each interview proceeding, the researcher asked if there were any questions, and explained the process that would take place concerning the interview and research procedure. Also discussed were the methods for reporting the research outcomes. Using the information sheet the interviewer explained that it was the right of the person to withdraw from the research at any time, and to have any information provided to the researcher returned immediately to them. The researcher also indicated on the information sheet that they could refuse to answer any question at any time. An interview schedule consisting of a list of questions and themes to be discussed was given to each person before the interview started.

Each person signed the consent form (Appendix C) and permission form (Appendix D). All six people chose not to use pseudonyms and to have their own names in the final report and presentations. All agreed to be audio taped. Five people agreed to have their photo taken and gave consent to have the photographs included in presentations and the final report.

The estimated length of the interview was one and a half hours although some interviews were close to two hours. A fifteen minute break was taken an hour after the interview began. The interview questioning began by following the questions in the interview schedule. At the end of a theme the researcher indicated that a new theme would be covered. All the themes were covered however during each interview the person occasionally diverged from the topic area. This was not discouraged but it did result in some questions not being asked. The researcher made notes during the interview so that areas could be revisited if necessary. The interview ended when the researcher signalled it had finished. Immediately after the interview ended the interviewer asked if there was any information the interviewee wanted to add. They were also asked if they had any questions, and were thanked for their valuable time. The interviewer revised each person concerning what would happen to the information they provided. A list of counselling services (Appendix E) was left for the interviewee to refer to if they felt it necessary. The interviewer asked if she could phone within 48 hours after the interview to see if the interviewee had any concerns regarding the interview. This was done and no concerns were raised.

Verification of Interview Transcripts

Six interviews were transcribed by the researcher and a narrative report was written for each person. These contained the essential points that were made during the interview supplemented with direct quotes taken from the audio-recordings. Each person received a narrative report for comment, correction and to add further information. Three people made slight changes to the narrative reports. The narrative reports were verified by each person and they were asked to sign their reports once they were happy with them. Each person was told that they would receive a copy of the narrative report, a copy of the final report, and the audio-tape of their interview at the conclusion of the research.

Qualitative data analysis

The analysis of qualitative data is a process that requires the researcher to make a considered opinion about what is both significant and meaningful in the data (Patton, 1990). An inductive analysis approach was used in this project. We believed this to be an important methodology to use, as it facilitates the search for patterns, themes and categories from the data instead of imposing them prior to data collection and analysis (Patton, 1980).

To begin the analysis process we transcribed the six interviews. As I read through each transcript, we began a coding process whereby a keyword was recorded alongside each statement. The coding process was repeated six times. The key words were then used to help establish the five sub themes. The responses made by each participant in relation to the sub themes were then grouped accordingly. We re-read the responses to ensure they were grouped under the relevant themes. An analysis of the five sub themes was repeated four times in which three major themes emerged. The aim of this categorisation process was to develop an overall framework for describing, presenting and understanding the topic of interest.

The process of coding and categorising data described above was a time consuming process that required making carefully considered judgements about what was significant and meaningful. As we worked through the data we endeavoured to identify responses that related to the research aims. The findings are presented in the following section.

Results

This section presents the major findings of this study and are organised around three major themes. These include:

- Influences
- Environments and Institutions
- The future practice of Whangai

Influences
The theme 'Influences', looks at what has contributed to this group of peoples' understanding of the practice of whangai and how their understanding developed. The sub themes are; Kinship, and Obligations and Responsibilities.

Kinship
Kinship was the dominant theme in all the groups' experience of being and/or raising whangai, this formed the basis of their initial understanding.

Tukoroirangi told me that growing up within a traditional Māori community under the care and direction of his grandparents formed the basis of his whangai experience. Kinship, tribal customs and culture including te reo Māori were inherent to his understanding of the practice of whangai:

> Whangai to me is about a unique life experience in a completely Māori community. It means unashamedly living the values of Tainui and Kingitanga. Being a whangai means understanding the importance of our language as the back bone of our culture, values and history. It means being known as the mokopuna of your elder and not an individual. That to me encapsulates the whole kaupapa of whangai. It was the most fabulous upbringing.

Reflecting on his experience, Tukoroirangi describes being raised from the age of three weeks old by his grandparents. His earliest memory is mirrored in a Lindauer painting of a woman carrying a baby wrapped up in a blanket on her back. "That image was me and my nanny".

Hori along with his wife raised a whangai son. Part of their decision to whangai their son was to ensure he remained within the whanau group:

> My sister had a number of children so the idea of my wife and I raising our whangai son was centred around keeping him in the whanau.

Hori understands the practice of whangai to be an open practice that serves both the interests of the child and strengthens whanau bonds:

> The whole kaupapa around whangai to me is an open process. It's about nurturing children and giving whanau the opportunity to raise them. From my experience whangai builds bonds and strengthens the whanau. It also involves maintaining those links between hapu within the iwi or outside the iwi..

He further explains that shared genealogy assures children are raised within his whanau group:

> Our whaea have a lot to do with the sharing of our tamariki and it has been quite an easy open process within the whanau because of whakapapa.

Wairaka understands the practice of whangai to involve both transient and permanent placement. Her experience of being a whangai involved being raised alongside a number of whangai by her

grandparents. She maintains that the whangai institution was a whanau system that ensured children remained within the kin group:

> Whangai was common practice in my whanau. It was both short term and permanent. Age was irrelevant in terms of the whangai child and I remember those whangai that stayed short term, were never happy about leaving.

Te Ruhi was raised by her grandmother from birth. Maintaining one's whakapapa was of great importance to her grandmother. This provided the basis of her understanding of the practice of whangai:

> I was meant to be adopted out, but when my kuia found out about my birth, she marched in and took me home. I found out much later that I had an older brother who was adopted out at birth. My kuia didn't know about him. Whakapapa and taking care of your own was very important to her.

Beverly understands the practice of whangai to be free of constraints and underpinned with aroha in the sense of altruistic love. Beverly became a whangai during her adolescent years and later became a whangai parent to her grandnephew:

> Whangai to me is interpreted as a gift, of ones own free will, that comes with no restrictions.

Anita describes her experience of being a whangai to be filled with love and affection. She discusses the circumstances that lead to her being raised by her grandmother:

> My experience of whangai was a very loving grandmother who cared for me. I was born in the Pukekohe gardens. All the aunties and kuia were their so my birth was no secret. Nan was told about my birth. She came and got me and took me home.

Comments from several people indicate that Māori like other ethnic groups do not always live up to the accepted ideal as is noted in the following quote:

> When I was young I knew and saw whangai that were used as slaves. It wasn't always positive.

Obligations and Responsibilities

Most of the group describe how fulfilling iwi obligations and kin group responsibilities in later life contributed to the development of their understanding of the practice of whangai.

Tukoroirangi attributes his dedication to fulfil iwi obligations such as maintaining tribal values, culture, history and tikanga to his unique whangai experience:

> In my opinion it was preordained, there was a special reason why I was given to my old people. In later years I've taken the role that my grandfather took at the time when I was a whangai. I've assumed his place in the tribe and I'm part of the continuum to keep our culture and values alive. In essence, what it means is to be someone proudly Tainui, and to be confident with one's tribal identity. Even today my upbringing is the primary reason for my deep desire and unfailing commitment to serve my iwi.

He elaborates further:

> I model the way I've been brought up and the way I am now is on the basis of my upbringing with my grandparents. All I am is another link in the chain so

in the future, one day, hopefully I will have the opportunity to pass that on.

Te Ruhi and Anita are sisters and were raised together by their grandmother. They see as their responsibility the need to fulfil their whanau obligations by raising children within the whanau group and passing on to the next generation the love and support they received from their grandmother. Te Ruhi along with her husband raised nine whangai children and teenagers on a temporary basis. Of the nine whangai, five shared whakapapa with her husband and four with Te Ruhi:

> All my whangai are whanau. They didn't stay permanently but for me it was all about giving back what my nanny had given me, love, stability and supporting them so that they would do well later on. Some of them have become whangai parents themselves and they give to their whangai what they got from me and my husband.

Anita raised two whangai children, a mokopuna from birth and a niece who stayed for a short period of time:

> I brought my niece and mokopuna up the same way my nanny brought me up.
> It's about payback. What nanny gave to us we give to our whangai and if they whangai, that is what they will give to theirs.

Responsibility for Beverly involved having the birth parents of her whangai son stay with her temporarily to ensure they were comfortable with their decision:

> My niece knew I couldn't have children. She knows I love children and that I would love and take care of her son. I had my niece and nephew stay with me before and after the birth to ensure they were happy with their decision.

Beverly maintains that it is the responsibility of the whangai parents to ensure the child establishes a relationship with her/his birth whanau:

> You raise your whangai child in accordance to how you were raised by your
> whangai parents, and it is your responsibility to ensure that the child walks
> amongst his biological whanau.

Summary
It is clear from the groups' comments that kinship formed the basis of their understanding. For this group kinship ensured the maintenance of whakapapa, children remained within the kin group and were raised in nurturing environments. While all their experiences of being and/or raising whangai were positive; they were aware that negative experiences occurred.

For most, fulfilling iwi obligations and kin group responsibilities in later life further developed their understanding. This involved maintaining iwi values and customs, and for some this entailed giving the following generation what they had received themselves as whangai.

Environments and Institutions

The theme 'Environments and Institutions' involves the groups thoughts on; changes in the practice of whangai over time, and the difference between adoption/ foster care and the whangai institution. The two sub themes include: Māori Social and Cultural Environments, and Adoption/Foster Care.

Māori Social and Cultural Environments

Changes in Māori social and cultural environments were perceived by the group as major contributors to changes in the customary practice of whangai over time.

Beverly teaches at an urban Kura Kaupapa Māori school and believes that this contemporary Māori education environment has created a new expression of whangai. She maintains that while the customary practice of whangai valued kinship ties, this has been replaced with new values such as the teaching of te reo Māori and Māori culture:

> You may lose the whakapapa link but the cultural link is still there. That's
> what it's like for urban Māori today. Māori are diverse and adaptable
> people.

Beverly's additional comment indicates that aspects of the traditional whangai institution still remain, for example the knowledge of one's whakapapa:

> I have whangai all the time. I am the nanny to my student's babies because
> their mums and dads have passed away or live away. I have become a
> whangai nanny to those mokopuna. Its whanaungatanga operating at another
> level. That is how urban Māori experience whangai today. In some ways the
> essence of whangai has not changed. Whangai know their whakapapa, that is
> important.

For Tukoroirangi the experience of being a whangai was deeply embedded in a unique tribal environment:

> That experience rooted me to a uniquely tribal environment and its values. Together we
> were inseparable. Where as today I don't think it is the same.

Tukoroirangi believes that changes in contemporary Māori environments have contributed to a change in values that are fundamental to the whangai practice:

> While people try to maintain the integrity of whangai I think the integrity has been
> eroded as a result of the Māori community having evolved by urbanization and modern
> day pressures.

He further comments:

> The practice is diluted today. It has many faces, many manifestations.
> Gone are the values, the history and the very essence that make us
> intrinsically Māori.

The practice of whangai was common in Hori's whanau group. He assigns the decline in the use of the practice to the absence of key people that managed it:

> It goes back to those strong women that lead the whanau and made
> decisions to share mokopuna. There are not a lot of those women today, so
> to consider the option of whangai has diminished.

Hori argues that socially constructed families such as the nuclear family have replaced whanau based systems. He believes the promotion by legislation of the 'normal' nuclear family has undermined the practice of whangai:

> Societal practices and legalities have distorted the whangai institution in terms of families
> conforming to the ideal of the nuclear family.

Some of the group believe that negative circumstances resulting in whangai placement have changed how the practice is perceived today:

> Some grandparents have to seek custodial rights in the courts in order to keep
> their mokopuna safe. This has created questions from whangai about why
> they became whangai.

More positively though, is the fact that grandparents are using all avenues open to them to protect and care for their mokopuna.

Adoption and Foster care
This theme involves the groups' opinion on the differences between adoption/foster care and the practice of whangai.

Beverly experienced being an adoptee at an early age through the process of open adoption and has experienced being a whangai and whangai parent. She compares the two institutions from her personal experience:

> Whangai compared to the adoption process is different; there are no
> restrictions, no barriers. Whangai know who they are and that is what is
> special. I had one set of parents. It is different for my whangai son; he has
> two sets of parents. I knew my birth parents, but my adopted parents were my
> only mum and dad.

Tukoroirangi perceives the foster child institution to be cold, lacking in compassion and a system in which decisions for the welfare of the child are made by external agents:

> Foster child care is an imposition, forced upon people; whangai is much more caring.
> Foster care is intrinsically Pākehā, very clinical, and it is the opposite of whangai.

Hori maintains that foster care acts as a systematic process that isolates family members from each other whereas the practice of whangai is seen as a whanau system that strengthens relationships within the whanau group. His comment suggests that for as long as whanau are committed to the practice of whangai, sharing and responsibility are essential components of this customary practice:

> The reasons behind foster care are different from whangai. Foster care is very systematic,
> and children are taken away from whanau. Sharing is a fundamental part of whangai; it's
> a natural part of it; it's that whanaungatanga aspect.

The following comment by Te Ruhi implies that being a whangai is a lifelong experience that extends beyond the individual to the whanau:

> Foster care is a Pākehā thing, and money is always a part of it. Foster care is
> a quick fix..., but whangai to me is forever. And in my experience it is more
> than the child, it's about the whanau as well.

Summary
All participants identified changes in Māori social and cultural environments. They accepted that the Māori world had moved on from when they were children. They had grown through these changes and so too had their sense of being a whangai. As children, they may had been seen: as 'gifts to and from others'; as 'a responsibility to be cared for and nurtured'; or as part of the 'social connective tissue' between people, parents, whanau and other social groups. However, in

later life, changes to how they viewed themselves as whangai changed in tandem with and in response to changes in their broader contexts.

Comments by the group portray a shared opinion that the practice of whangai greatly differs from adoption/foster care. The main differences were: the practice of whangai serves the interests of both the child and whanau group in contrast to adoption and foster care; the customary practice ensures decision making remains within the whanau group as opposed to being controlled by external agents as is the case for adoption/foster care; and boundaries are attached to adoption/fostering while openness, fluidity and flexibility typifies the practice of whangai.

The future practice of Whangai
The theme, 'the future practice of whangai' involves the groups' thoughts on: the future continuance of the practice; what will support or diminish the practice in the future; what changes need to occur within the institution to better support the whangai and birth family, and will there be a need for the whangai institution in the future. The dominant theme that emerged was, 'The role of whanau'.

The role of whanau
The group identified the 'whanau' as playing a pivotal role in the continuance of the whangai institution, including the principal source of what will support and/or diminish its future practice.

Beverly believes that education has a clear role in the preservation of the whangai institution. She maintains that it is the responsibility of current Māori to lead by example and teach future generations the benefits and values of this customary practice:

> Education is the weapon for Māori children, and it is through education that the idea of whangai will continue to be honoured in the future. We are the role models, so we give the next generation what we have learnt from the generation before us.

She argues Māori must continue to practice the institution of whangai as a traditional customary practice to ensure that it is not constrained by social structures and legislation:

> It is up to the current generations to ensure that the practice of whangai is continued into the future, and that it is not limited by social structures and legislation.

Wairaka believes whanau that are dedicated to the practice and the traditional values that underlie it are essential to its continuance:

> We have to teach the essence of whangai, aroha, wairua and love or our culture including whangai will breakdown. You have to have that strong whanau base first, then hapu and iwi.

She further said that whangai is the only choice for some Māori and maintains that positive experiences are fundamental to the maintenance of this practice:

> There will always be whangai because we don't feel comfortable with adoption. To adopt means you take away the child's identity and whakapapa. I think it comes down to your experience of being a whangai and if the experience is positive like mine then it will continue.

Tukoroirangi believes that, honouring the values of this traditional practice will ensure it is maintained for future generations however he refutes the idea that this customary practice needs to change to meet the needs of current and future Māori. He believes that conceding the values

intrinsic to this customary practice will result in a practice that parallels foster care. He believes this to be of no value to Māori:

> The only way to maintain the integrity of whangai is to change to fit the kaupapa of whangai and not the other way around. So we should never compromise the sanctity of whangai, because it becomes another form of foster child relationship, and of what value is that to us? That's a Pākehā kaupapa that has been forced upon us.

He further comments:

> The way I see whangai now might not be how someone else sees it in ten years time, but for as long as whanaungatanga exists the practice of whangai will always be there. Being a whangai is so very special, and it is maintaining the integrity of whangai that is the challenge that faces us all. Our major problem is that we compromise too much. When we compromise, we compromise what is important to us, and that is who we are and whangai is part of that.

Tukoroirangi sees family environments that both nurture and ensure active participation in the wider whanau group to be vitally important to the development of the whangai child:

> The kaupapa of whangai will always remain as long as whanaungatanga exists. Whangai has lots of faces. What is important is the nurturing of the child. It is a huge responsibility and like our old people we try to model them. It's the ability to connect them back to their Māori communities so that they can enjoy the richness of their people. Whangai is an age old concept of caring for our young. It is an experience couched within the belief,' only a village can grow a child'.

Te Ruhi argues that the future practice of whangai is dependent upon whangai being raised by whanau who can provide resources such as love and guidance that are necessary to a child's health and wellbeing. She states that this is a basic right of every whangai child:

> If the whanau are not healthy, then they shouldn't whangai. How can they look after the well-being of the child when they are not healthy.

Hori believes that the greatest challenge for Māori whanau is retaining this kin based practice as Māori evolve:

> It's about how we maintain the essence of whangai and provide opportunity for whanau to experience the whole kaupapa of whangai. The question is, how do we hold true to the kaupapa whilst we evolve.

He further notes that:

> We are losing the opportunity to share our tamariki; what is missing today is sharing. Whangai is one of those kaupapa that will evolve like everything else. To me it's holding on to our whole culture and all aspects of it.

Hori considers the need for a new term instead of whangai. He speaks to the diverse circumstances and situations in which the term whangai is used, and believes this to be unacceptable as it misconstrues the true meaning of whangai:

> The term whangai is all we have and it becomes the term used for all the circumstances and causes, it is totally inappropriate. We need to create a

> term that is applicable to today's circumstances then whangai maintains its
> essence, like a gift.

He questions the capabilities and experience of some young parents and grandparents to provide guidance, nurturing and teachings that are necessary to a child's development and wellbeing:

> A lot of the time Māori parents are tamariki themselves and there are so
> many young grandparents now, so how do they learn to be young adults let
> alone parents and grandparents. The result is that there are less whanau
> capable of nurturing our mokopuna.

Beverly maintains that the preservation of the whangai institution requires Māori to engage in Māori whanau systems and not be constrained by legislation:

> It is vitally important that a whanau structure to Māori is retained. Therefore
> it is vital that any form of legislation does not impact on whanau, hapu or iwi
> status.

She further notes that:

> The current social aspects of New Zealand society are changing. Legislation
> is becoming a parental body; it is now telling people when, why and how we
> should raise children. Therefore, the initiative of parenthood is being taken
> from the soul of whanau. It is therefore in the hands of us as Māori to fight
> against this agenda. Ka whawhai tonu tatou.

Summary

Shared views from the group suggest that the preservation of this traditional practice is reliant upon Māori whanau practicing and living by the values and principles that underlie it. Also seen by most to be pivotal to its maintenance are: current Māori participating in the practice; teaching future generations the values of this practice; and providing whangai with positive environments that include the opportunity to interact in the wider whanau group. The absence of nurturing whanau environments and Māori conforming to societal practices were seen to contribute to the demise of this customary practice. While discussed, the idea of making changes to this customary practice to better support the biological and whangai whanau was dismissed. The opinion of some suggests that there is a need to create a new term that caters for today's diverse circumstances and situations as a means of maintaining the integrity of the customary practice. It is clear from the interviews that there is a desire to retain and continue the practice of whangai.

Discussion

The most dominant theme arising from discussions with participants in this study was a desire to retain and continue the customary institution and practice of whangai as opposed to adoption or foster care. Whangai, as a concept, practice and institution, was something that was seen to be uniquely Māori and therefore intrinsically valuable. It is an idea weighted with expectations of care and responsibility carrying with it the capacity to increase the social and cultural capital and cohesion of those whanau involved as well as broader relational networks.These strengths are underscored by Bradley (1997) and Metge (1995) who speak of the advantages of the whangai institution as an invaluable kin based customary resource that serves the interests of the whangai child and kin group alike. Adoption and foster care were not seen as facilitators but inhibitors of these things. Work by Bradley (1997) and Pitama (1997) compare the underlying ideologies of adoption and the whangai institution which clearly identifies the vast differences between the two.

While the above view was expressed, it was done so with the awareness of living with and through changing times, adversity, dispersed communities, intrusive legislation, familial and social dysfunction, and dominant cultural and social influences and expectations. Positioned within this context, resistance becomes a vital contributor to the continuity of the whangai institution. It is important to point out that the resistant nature of participants views is not one that is blind, rather, it is one that is considered and realistic. It points to the present and future as presenting challenges that will require an investment of energy to overcome. Māori initiatives described in the Puao-te-ata-tu (1988) report provide an insight into the level of commitment that is needed for present and future generations to benefit from this customary practice.The findings from this study also suggest the possibility of creative responses and adaptations, for example, the evolution of language to describe new transformations to better preserve existing terminology and institutions.

Pitama (1997) and Mikaere (1994) both point to the intrusion of legislation upon the institution of whangai. Participants in this study referred to this intrusion but did not make comment on the impact of their status as whangai on any succession experiences or expectations that they might have had.Though no comment was sought or forthcoming, this does not mean that status as whangai is unproblematic when it comes to these matters. This requires further investigation.

Change was an important focus of this study, as was understanding the continuity of institutions. The findings suggest that how participants conceive of and experience the institution of whangai has not changed significantly as they correspond directly with what Metge (1982; 1995) found in her studies.

Limitations of this study

The primary limitations are the small number of participants. The small sample size suggests that it may be unwise to generalise the findings to the wider population. In future research, it would be desirable to interview a greater number of people who have experienced being and/or raised whangai. Despite the small sample size many of the issues identified were consistent with previous research findings.

In retrospect, the study would have been strengthened had the participant group been equally distributed in terms of gender, a more diverse age range and from a wider geographical spread including urban and rural settings. The information gathered may have yielded greater diversity in terms of peoples experience and understanding of the whangai institution.

While the qualitative methodologies used in this study allowed the exploration of peoples' experiences, understanding and perspectives of the whangai institution, the additional use of quantitative methodologies may have resulted in more generalised findings to the wider population group. In particular, the use of cross sectional surveys would have allowed comparisons to be made between subgroups (Breakwell, Sean & Fife-Schaw, 2000) for example, males versus females or urban Māori versus rural Māori. This would have provided information that lead to identifying specific groups understanding, knowledge and experience of the whangai institution.

Although the use of semi structured interviews in this study produced rich information, employing focus groups may have elicited new information not gained in this research. Focus groups facilitate interaction between participants (Rice & Ezzy, 1999). This interaction may have encouraged participants to further explore their understanding of the whangai institution and enabled participants to clarify their views in ways that were less accessible in the one on one interviews. A disadvantage of this method is the presence of other participants this may have discouraged some people from voicing their experiences or views. Co-ordinating a time that would have suited all the participants may have been problematic.

Contribution made by this study

Findings from this study promote a unique Māori child placement practice that meets Māori values and aspirations. Findings also point to Māori whanau to be responsible for ensuring that whanau are healthy in the first instance. That is, to continue this customary practice Māori need to be confident that their own whanau are able to provide positive environments that enhance Māori children's health and wellbeing.This would involve ensuring knowledge of their whakapapa, an affirmed cultural identity, are provided the opportunity to engage in their broader whanau group as well as being supported and nurtured to reach their full potential. Whanau responsibility would enable Māori children to participate in te ao Māori and the wider New Zealand society. With these factors in place the ideal situation would involve Māori seeking support within the whanau group as opposed to requiring assistance or surrendering control to the state to decide what is in the best interests of Māori children.

Health service providers and policy makers alike would benefit from this research. This study clearly identifies the reciprocal orientation of the whangai institution including advantages and strengths. Most importantly though this study provides evidence for a workable Māori child placement practice that can benefit both Māori and non Māori. Under the pretext that whanau environments are positive to begin with, the practice of whangai has the capacity to perpetuate strong healthy whanau groups and therefore contribute to the overall well-being of the nation.

Glossary

Aotearoa	New Zealand
Ata whangai	Child or individual not raised their biological parents, placement is either temporary or permanent.
Extended whanau	Extended family (grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins)
Hapu	Sub tribal group
Iwi	Main tribal group
Mana	Spiritual power; prestige
Mokopuna	Grandchild
Tainui	A confederation of independent tribes
Tamaiti whangai	Child or individual not raised their biological parents,
Te Reo Māori	Māori language
Tikanga	Māori customs and protocols
Whanau	Immediate family and extended family
Whanau toto	Biological family
Whanaungatanga	Love and commitment
Whangai	Child or individual not raised their biological parents, placement is either temporary or permanent (literally 'to feed')
Whangai	Institution
Whangai	Māori customary practice of raising children, either transient or permanent
Whangai whanau	Kin whanau the raise whangai child
Whakapapa	Ancestry

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