

Lessons of and from whānau research

**Whakapapa Research Project series:
Research methodology and methods**



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Whakapapa Research Project series

This is part of a series of writings from eight whānau researchers on nine kaupapa.

This kaupapa is about research methodology and methods.

Whānau researchers**Miriama Cribb**

Grant Huwyler

Tania Kara

Raukura Roa

Kaapua Smith

Rachael Tinirau

Hayden Tūroa

Raymond Tuuta

Research kaupapa

Aspirational letter to future generations

Deoxyribonucleic Acid (DNA) and whakapapa

Kai

Matriarch

Research methodology and methods

Whānau event

Whāngai

Whenua

Taonga



He kupu whakaūpoko: Introduction

‘Mīroi e Tāne, koakoa e Tāne, rangahau e Tāne’. This line comes from an ancient karakia performed during the making of the Aotea waka and talks about the search for the right tree from which the waka was made. The voyage to Aotea from Hawaiki-nui and the navigation skills required to sail across Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa confirms that, for Māori, the process of rangahau has always existed. But in what ways is rangahau practised? Responses to this query continue to be discussed as we look to define and redefine what Kaupapa Māori research looks like in changing times. We are reminded though of its existence through whakataukāi, whakataukī, and kīwaha, such as ‘rapua te mea ngaro’, and ‘e kore au e ngaro he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea’. Together with tikanga, these kīanga and traditional stories are what I have used as the ethical foundations for this project, which too must be considered with caution and great respect.

I have never conducted whānau research in a formal or informal setting. That is not to say it did not exist. Whakapapa is the cornerstone of our existence, so there have always been elements and practices of rangahau within us. Given that whānau researchers were to interpret the various kaupapa conceived through this project in the context of their own whānau understandings and realities, it did not make it any easier to navigate ‘how’ best to do whānau research. What made it more challenging, was that it was difficult and near-impossible for me to remove my university-trained academic lens. Hence the name of this paper is appropriately titled ‘lessons of and from whānau research’. Of course, the temptation to (critically) analyse, compare, and reference it with other kōrero, would defeat the purpose of whānau research. So here I present, in the rawest form possible, a reflection of lessons learnt of and from whānau research.

Whānau research is one of the hardest types of research

Is it Whanganui kaiponu or Te Arawa māngai nui? Tribally, one of my iwi have a kīanga ‘Whanganui kaiponu’, which speaks to being reserved and protective with our kōrero. On the other hand, ‘Te Arawa māngai nui’ very much came through in the topics involving my koroheke of Ngāti Pikiao, celebrating the depth and skills of the paepae of Te Arawa. Navigating the uncertainty of how to approach the topic became testing. What am I trying to achieve? What do I want to know? What do I present? What do I leave out? Who will be affected? Who will be supportive? Who will have issues with it? These are but some of the many questions permeating the grey space that is whānau research. What is most significant about these questions is that whānau research means you cannot remove the individual from their social kinships. Therefore, your decisions, your research, your writings, your actions and even inactions, can both be impacted by and have an impact on your whānau, because what you do is not yours alone.

Perhaps the true lesson here is to be prepared for it all. Be prepared for the inconsistencies, mistakes, imperfections, unanswered questions, and varied and contradicting stories. Whilst other types of research may experience similar challenges, what differentiates whānau research is that the researcher must be prepared to take ownership of it all: the topic, the process, the methods, and most importantly, the outcomes. Be prepared for your whānau to be in agreement one day and resentful the next; for some to participate and others to be disinterested; and for support, criticism, and challenge. Ultimately, be prepared to manage the contextual and extremely subjective nature of doing whānau research. And although all whānau have skeletons, accept early in the process that doing anything with your whānau is not going to be easy—research is no exception.

On a positive note, also be prepared for surprises: the bizarre, the unheard stories, the light-bulb moments, the moments of healing, the interesting points, the already existing kōrero waiting to be brought to life, and the new teachings. What makes whānau research hard in this sense is that you can never be fully prepared for the rollercoaster of emotions that change faster than what your mind and body can keep up with. Also, be prepared for the evolving methods and methodology of whānau research. That is, you might find yourself being clear about the process for one topic and having to go ‘with the flow’ for the next. If you have a clear, fixed, and romantic view of how whānau research is or should be, prepare to have that notion constantly challenged. Some topics will come with ease and others, not so. Finally, the biggest lesson learnt here is that there is no one right way to do whānau research.

What makes whānau research hard is also what makes it so interesting

Although I did not intend on doing whānau research without there being some form of reciprocation, there were elements of privilege and entitlement, which I will touch on later. For now, this lesson speaks mostly to the dynamic nature of doing whānau research. In all the challenges of this project came some of the most rewarding revelations; had no mistakes been made, no lesson would have been learnt. One particular challenge for me was responding to some feedback made by a whānau member after seeing a draft submission on one of my topics. Although the whānau member agreed to be interviewed and was generally happy around the conversation that took place, the feedback was in reference to the written submission.

Therefore, the challenge was around framing: how to tell uncomfortable stories, how to present the truth or our version of the truth, how to say something without actually saying something, how to read between the lines, how to make good choices around what to include and what to leave out, and how to present the story as accurately as it was received. The lesson learnt here is that your role as a whānau researcher is merely the storyteller. Your role is to tell a story, to bring it to life, and to portray the story in a way that does justice to the story without causing further

injustices. As an oral people, these guidelines are more difficult to apply when your output is in the written word. You also have to know the right time to tell the story, who to tell it to, how to tell it and why. If you are not equipped with these skills, you leave yourself vulnerable to criticism. I acknowledge the special place of knowledge holders, hapū historians, tohunga, and others who carry out this special role within their whānau and wider hapū and iwi.

As the storyteller, you also have a role to protect yourself, those within the story, and more importantly, those who have shared the story. I refer to the earlier point raised on 'tikanga' establishing the foundation of ethical guidelines for this project. In this project, that meant simply opening your submission with a karakia or mihimihi to appropriately set the context for the story. It was also about the careful selection of sources of information and when to use them. For example, the whenua submission included technical data from the Māori Land Court, kōrero from our hapū historian and whakapapa expert, and personal experiences of particular whānau. The storyteller has a responsibility of upholding tikanga, not only for the story to be told but the process of getting to that story as well. This will be touched on further in this kōrero around methods. The ultimate lesson being, tikanga and tikanga rangahau is paramount.

The way I responded to the feedback was with acceptance. This is a whānau project; I will be led by my whānau and if this is not what you want, e pai ana. But it does not help you too much more in terms of moving forward, you know, so what do I do now? It is eerie though how Māori have this uncanny way of coming full circle with all things. I guess it lies within the notion of duality, holistic well-being and reciprocity. When I spoke earlier of the whānau researcher not being able to be removed from its social contexts (te taha whānau), the same can be said in terms of not being able to separate te taha tinana from te taha hinengaro and te taha wairua. That you cannot separate emotion from content, that subjectivity is as important as objectivity, that you too must give and not just take, to listen and not just speak, and more importantly, that although the topic might be whenua, there will also be elements of history, the environment, identity, whakapapa, and the social sciences. This is an indication of how things Māori are all relative and interconnected—including rangahau.

This leads nicely into the final interesting lesson, which is that wairua very much exists in whānau research. I am unsure of how other whānau researchers feel, but I felt that wairua was present in all topics of this project. In academia, there is an aspect of rigour to research. In whānau research, for me that included a measure of good or not-so-good wairua. If the wairua did not 'feel' right, your kaupapa continuously encountered problems, or participants were refusing or were reluctant, you would know that the wairua was not quite on par. While I was totally wrong about the 'wairua' for my topic which resulted in the feedback from a whānau member, the 'wairua' of my taonga assignment which followed immediately after was beautiful. The decision made in identifying my taonga kaupapa came by accident and funnily enough everything that followed also came by accident. The story came with ease and continued to flow. The many 'signs' I received throughout this topic told me that the wairua for this piece was tau.



The method is just as—if not more—important than the topic

Methods and methodology are critical components of any research undertaking. As mentioned before, they are more important in te ao Māori because of the tikanga associated with the kōrero and the process to obtain and share that kōrero. I think of this lesson as not being able to go to the marae and enjoy the kai on the table, without having to go through the necessary rituals of encounter, involving pōwhiri, whaikōrero, hariru, and so on. From developing the idea, to confirming the research question (if there is one) or interesting point, to planning for the final output, and deciding the sources of information, these all form part of the overall methods for each topic. Again, being an oral people, Māori place significance on the spoken word, which is just as valuable, if not more important, as the written one. The difficulty of this project and literature is that the written word cannot always paint the same picture as spoken words. Or perhaps I am yet to master the skill of such transition.

The methods for the seven topics of this project were varied. For the matriarch topic, I spoke to different whānau members. The method changed more than once because the one person I did want to interview was reluctant. A completely new piece was then submitted. For whenua, I used a variety of information: Māori Land Court records; published books; our hapū historian; and, one interview. For kai, no interviews were conducted and instead a story was crafted on the historical information I could find, such as records from Archives New Zealand. For the whāngai assignment, I spoke to whānau members experienced in the whāngai journey. For the event-related story, there were lots of low-hanging fruit, so I used material that had already been published, such as the kōrero on my tā moko and my grandmother's submission to the Waitangi Tribunal. For taonga, I focused on my late Koro and used mostly old newspaper articles and clippings. And for genetics, there were whānau members who took DNA tests and we were able to compare results.

As such, a mixed methods approach was used throughout this project. What perhaps was more interesting is that I found using anecdotal evidence more useful than doing formal interviews. Whānau members found interviewing quite confrontational. Whereas having simple conversations over kai or dropping questions at random times to get them to retell a story, was more effective when needing to speak with whānau. The lesson learnt is that anecdotal evidence, whilst difficult to reference, is very much a valuable method in whānau research. The sharing of memories and retelling of stories at times were the only sources of information and had to be valued, particularly for those topics where the subject of the story was no longer alive. You had no choice but to rely on what information existed, whether reliable or otherwise.

The writing for this project was perhaps the most difficult part. The process of obtaining information, either by way of collecting existing data or conducting interviews, to translating into a story had its challenges. The writing style of the submissions included personal reflections, a review of a timeline of events, a somewhat creative story, producing themes from interviews, an opinion piece, and an explanatory piece. Some pieces were checked by

whānau members and others I have taken full ownership of the way they have been written. Come publication time, another process of editing, checking and consenting will likely take place. What was also an interesting find, was that whānau members had a lot of written pieces already. These included speeches, old assignments from either school or wānanga, blogs, and written pieces they had prepared for others. Had I known this earlier, I might have taken a different approach to the submission of topics—or perhaps not.

Whānau research is complexly layered and intergenerational

Engagement with whānau for this project began with permission to participate. My whānau is quite dynamic, spanning four generations with varying backgrounds. They are headstrong and constructively critical, yet all come with their own skills, lived experiences, and unique characteristics. Their agreement was important because anything I do is a reflection of my whānau, and they too are reflected in all that I do. They agreed that the kaupapa was important, despite not knowing the topics or seeing any of the submissions. The intention was to collaborate and co-create depending on the topic. The lessons around whānau research being complex, layered, and intergenerational are in fact around access, consent, and privilege (what I soon describe to be generational privilege). Throughout this project, there were different reactions concerning how I, as the whānau researcher, engaged with different members of different generations within my whānau.

Access to information and kōrero came in many forms and waves. There were periods of motivation and energy to find, share, and communicate stories. There were also times of reluctance and hesitation. Some topics were dormant and tell the bare minimum, some deep, some light-hearted, some controversial, and some interesting. The lesson learnt is that the presentation of submissions is a result of the ability to access information during a particular time and place. You have to be prepared for gaps in stories and ‘missing’ information. As the storyteller, you have to creatively come up with a way that can tell a cohesive story without having ‘all’ the available information. With what information you do have, you also have to tell a cohesive story with conflicting versions from different people of the same story. There is an art to that, an art that at times I did not feel I had.

This leads to the next point on perception. I think of our Awa when trying to explain how perception manifested itself in this project. When speaking to different whānau members about their experiences of the same story, you can get some really interesting contributions. Even though everyone is speaking about the same river, where they are standing along the river, what season or time of the day it is, or the different issues affecting their ability to see the river, differing perspectives can deliver some interesting viewpoints. Your role as the storyteller is to not only tell a cohesive story but to integrate and layer all of the kōrero together to do justice to the story. In this sense, as a whānau researcher, not only are you the storyteller but you are also a weaver of kōrero. You are a negotiator and a decider of information. You also have to consider your perspective and role within the story that you are telling—I am unsure if there is such a thing as a neutral storyteller.

Another contributor to the complexity of whānau research is consent and permission. In whānau research, there is more to consent than a consent form. Our understanding of consent is also not fixed and can change over time. For particular topics within this project, some whānau agreed to be interviewed, but this was not automatic permission for publication. Some consented to sharing kōrero with me, but that same consent did not apply to me sharing it with others, including other family members. Some gave consent for me to write about the 'outcome', but not the particular event or situation. Some information I included in my written submissions was previously published; a process still had to take place to get consent to 're-publish' the kōrero. There were even circumstances where advice was given by whānau members of how to retell stories that were already told by others.

I conclude with an idea, which to this day I am unsure is factual or is a figment of my imagination, that there exists in each generation a different level of right and therefore access to kōrero. I came to the conclusion that my generation were the willing ones: willing to talk, willing to share, willing to question, and very much willing to challenge. Our parents' generation would share what was needed—nothing more, nothing less—and were a lot more cautious and respectful. Our grandparents' generation were willing to share to an extent, which at times came with consequences. What surfaced around privilege were key considerations that became critical lessons. Were these my stories to tell? It became apparent to me that previous generations' loss was our gain, their struggles were our rewards, their mistakes our learnings. The lesson today is that our role as whānau researchers, particularly mokopuna researchers, is to be aware and have more understanding and consideration of the privilege we have today.

Whānau research continues to evolve—both in definition and in execution

While I do not think there is a need for whānau narratives to be validated by anyone other than whānau, I do think there could be a bit more work done around refining the methods and their ethical guidelines. Growing up in te ao Māori, I would never have predicted some of the feedback I received in this project, so having more robust guidelines would be awesome. Unfortunately, learning by experience seems to be the only way this can happen. I am aware that definitions and guidelines around Kaupapa Māori research continue to evolve and whānau research will continue to evolve alongside it. And whilst it is dangerous to compare whānau research against academic research, I appreciate academic conventions, rules, and processes that exist to guide, and to some extent protect, the research and the research process. The development of protocols around protecting the whānau researcher and research process must also be considered.

Whilst whānau research continues to evolve both in meaning and in practice, there have been many lessons learnt throughout this project. Whānau research is what it is and will be what it will be. Whānau research is not something that has a specific starting point nor an ending point. You pick up where you pick up, and you leave where you leave.

But the stories, the narratives and the teachings will continue. Whānau research is grey. There are tikanga and there are guidelines, but there are also no specific rules. It is contextual, subjective, and everything is interconnected. Whānau research grounds you, changes you, shapes you, informs you, and makes you real. Whānau research is as challenging as it is rewarding. Finally, you cannot do whānau research without whānau, otherwise, it would be individual research. Because whilst it is hard to minimise researcher input, whānau in one way or another will be engaged, involved, and or impacted.

He kupu whakakapi: Conclusion

As this submission opened, I think there is merit in considering the role and purpose of whānau research. Particularly, to develop an understanding of how research was conducted by our tūpuna. I assume this would start with challenging the term 'research', as our past has told us that there have been bad experiences and often negative connotations associated with the word 'research'. A development of kawa and tikanga around research, writing, and rangahau is needed. Like most things Māori, and with the support and gains already made by Māori and Kaupapa Māori researchers, this will involve decolonising methodologies and a reawakening and relearning of what rangahau was, is, and will be.

