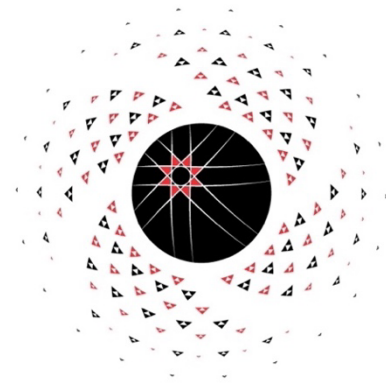


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Going home: the importance of reconnecting to Māori culture through whakapapa

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Abstract

This article explores how five research participants from my whānau, who grew up in a predominantly Pākehā (white New Zealand) environment, experienced a profound sense of loss and disconnection from their Māori heritage. The study subsequently explores their individual journeys of reconnecting with their Māoritanga. Through their narratives, we gain valuable insights into the pivotal role of whānau support in this process, as well as the significance of whakapapa (genealogy) and the physical return to marae (meeting house), whenua (land) and awa (river). It becomes evident that their reconnection to culture has played a vital role in enhancing their overall wellbeing, with participants framing their journey as a path to healing through a newfound sense of belonging. Conducted within the framework of kaupapa Māori research, this study not only strengthens the mana (spiritual power) of our whānau but offers valuable insights that can inform the development of strategies to protect our tamariki (children) from the cultural disconnection trauma experienced by their parents and grandparents. The findings from this article hold relevance beyond our whānau, extending to benefit all iwi (tribes) and whānau seeking to gain a deeper understanding of how to support their people on the journey of reconnection.

Keywords: cultural disconnection, whakapapa, whānau, marae, reconnecting with Māoritanga

*E kore au e ngaro he kākano i ruia mai i Rangiātea
I will never be lost I am a descendant of Rangiātea*

Introduction

There is no one way of connecting to Māoritanga (Māori culture, traditions, way of life) or being and belonging as Māori (the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand). Māoritanga is different for each group and individual. If you have Māori ancestry you are Māori and you belong to Aotearoa New Zealand (Durie, 1998). This means there is identity and belonging in just being Māori, not necessarily living as Māori. Yet, if a person's Māoriness is hidden, silenced, or marginalised they may not be able to access the sense of belonging that Durie (1988) speaks of. The relationship Māori have with te ao Māori (the Māori world) informs a Māori person's sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing. This paper explores the sense of identity, belonging and wellbeing for Māori who have been brought up in a Pākehā (white New Zealander) world disconnected from te ao Māori.

This research project details the complexity of reconnecting to Māori culture through the experiences of individuals within my whānau (extended family connected through a common ancestor). At the time of this research, there were no fluent speakers of te reo Māori (the Māori language) in our whānau which, according to Rameka (2018), is an indicator of Māoriness. Not speaking or understanding te reo has meant that only a small number of our whānau have the confidence to go to events on marae (Māori meeting house). Some whānau do not openly identify as Māori for fear of being embarrassed or having expectations placed on them to perform in some Indigenous way. There is a deep sense of loss due to our cultural disconnection. It is this sense of loss that my whānau are wanting to redress. They have chosen to participate in this project in the hope that together we can co-design a pathway for reconnecting our whānau to our Māoritanga. We also believe that telling our whānau's stories of cultural reconnection will inspire and support other Māori to reconnect to their Māoritanga.

This article begins by explaining the importance of whakapapa (genealogy that includes kinship ties to everything), whānau (extended family), marae (Māori meeting house), whenua (land) and awa (river) in te ao Māori. The significance of people and place in te ao Māori is highlighted to indicate the pathways Māori can take when reconnecting with their Māoritanga. There is then an overview of how this research was conducted using a Kaupapa Māori research framework. The concluding section gives voice to the five whānau members interviewed about their experiences growing up disconnected from their Māori heritage and how they came to reconnect with their Māoritanga. The three themes that structure this section are; how the participants came to recognise their disconnection, their process of reconnection and the importance of whakapapa in this mahi (work) and finally, the barriers they faced when trying to reconnect. This article concludes by identifying a pathway forward for whānau wishing to reconnect or support others to reconnect to te ao Māori.

Reconnecting with te ao Māori: the importance of whakapapa and whānau

Māori whakapapa networks stretch as far as the gods. This means we can trace our genealogical links back to the beginning of time (Waiti & Awatere, 2019). Whakapapa is the foundation of whānau and as Connor (2019) and Wilson et al. (2019) state, whānau is the expression of whakapapa. Whakapapa is the foundation that connects all Māori to one another and all Māori to their identity, knowledge and heritage. This is why connection to te ao Māori depends so much on whakapapa as well as whānau relationships. Translated into English whānau means

family but it includes more relationships than the word 'family' invokes. Whānau includes one's immediate family, extended family, as well as a collective of people connected by a common ancestor.

Because colonisation disrupted intergenerational whānau relationships (Wood, 2018) it is important for those wishing to reconnect to te ao Māori to reconnect with their whānau, as it is whānau who hold their particular whānau ways of knowing and being Māori. Haar et al. (2012) argue that whānau support is essential to Māori wellbeing because it is these relationships that influence the decisions that allow rangatiratanga (self-determination). This can be seen in Te Huia's (2015) research, which shows that connecting with whānau is a key driver in motivating individuals to learn te reo Māori, which is what gives people confidence to take up prominent positions on the marae and affirm their whakapapa.

The importance of marae

Marae are ancestral sites of cultural significance that provide a place to stand and a place to return to (Butcher & Breheny, 2016). Though many whānau no longer live on or close to their marae, marae still continue to provide a solid foundation to all Māori society, including urban Māori (Huriwai et al., 2001). This is because marae are the guardians of tribal and esoteric knowledge and the places where iwi specific Māori identity, knowledge and culture are practised and preserved (Mead, 2003; Te Puni Kōkiri, 2012). Furthermore, marae are places where whānau can resist colonial domination and revive their cultural practices (Walker, 2003).

Visiting marae and participating in marae protocol is vital to a person's reconnection journey and the maintenance of their connection. While marae provide an invaluable space for urban Māori seeking to reconnect, having people return home to their marae also strengthens the value and wellbeing of the home people and the marae itself. The marae and hau kāinga (home people) gain mana (prestige, authority), influence and spiritual power by extending hospitality to whānau who live elsewhere (Te Huia, 2015).

The importance of whenua

Translated into English whenua means both land and placenta (Mead, 2003). With this translation we can see land and placenta are one and the same and as such are both vital for life. A baby cannot live without its placenta just as whānau cannot live without their whenua. The importance of ritualising the connection with whenua is shown in the practice of burying whenua (placenta) in whenua (ancestral land). Wilson et al., (2019) explains that when a Māori body is interred in their whenua the connection between that person and their land is formalised. Rameka (2018) considers this practice of burying the placenta in ancestral whenua an important step in completing the physical connection of Māori to tribal land.

Connection to land through whakapapa forms the basis of Māori existence. Durie (cited in Wilson et al., 2019) explains that colonial separation of whānau from their whenua causes a despondency for both whānau and whenua. The whenua supports the needs of Māori and in return Māori support the whenua as kaitiaki (guardians). Whakapapa connection to whenua comes with responsibility to whenua. Forced disconnection from whenua due to colonisation has resulted in intergenerational trauma damaging the wairua (spiritual essence) of Māori ways of being and belonging. In addition, many Māori now struggle to reconnect to whenua because the whenua itself has changed and become foreign to their cultural makeup (Durie, 2017).

The importance of awa

According to Mead (2003) some Māori consider awa (water), rather than whenua (land), to be the foundation of life. Furthermore, it is understood that awa keeps those that whakapapa to it connected as one people. Awa provides spiritual and physical sustenance for iwi and is an invaluable sacred healing agent for strengthening wellbeing. Māori consider awa to be an ancestor and a living spiritual being. Because of the whakapapa connection to awa Māori have a responsibility to care for the awa and for all those who whakapapa to it (Fox et al., 2017). The importance of being able to whakapapa to awa is that it not only gives a sense of being and belonging but connects Māori to their ancestors and their future generations as it flows with and through them while they are alive, and will do so after their death. Wilson et al. (2019) maintain that the health of whānau is linked to the health of the awa and the mountain from which it originates. The awa is a place where whānau can visit and connect through wairua (spirit, two waters) to heal and be healed. It is therefore an important place to begin the journey of reconnection, as the following whakataukī (Māori proverb where the person who said it first is not known) suggests. “Kaua e kōrero mō te awa, kōrero ki te awa” (Don't talk about the awa, talk to the awa).

Summarily, whakapapa is key to all reconnection processes as it is whakapapa that connects Māori to their whānau, marae, whenua and awa. However, it is notable that the majority of literature on the importance of whakapapa in reconnecting Māori with their cultural heritage comes from health research. There is a gap in the research in terms of whānau perspectives on the reconnection process. The following addresses this gap by giving voice to whānau needs and experiences when reconnecting to te ao Māori. This follows a brief explanation of the Kaupapa Māori research methods grounding this project.

Research method

Kaupapa Māori research is grounded in kawa (customary protocols) and tikanga (customary processes) and is an ideal approach for Māori researchers wanting to ensure the mana of Māori is upheld (Smith, 2012). Aimed at accurately representing and primarily benefiting Māori Kaupapa Māori research can be used to expose power relations that create inequalities and oppression for Māori (Smith, 2017). Whilst adding to Indigenous knowledge production, Kaupapa Māori research can also work as a form of resistance against traditional Western colonial research and methodologies by keeping knowledge production within the control of Māori so the research can better enhance rangatiratanga (Walker et al., 2006; Pihama, 2010). Consequently, familial relationships between a researcher and any research participants is not only usual but recognised as invaluable (Wilson et al., 2019). My familial relationship to the participants in this research project increases my responsibility and care of the participants and the knowledge produced. Everyone in this research project is whānau, we all whakapapa to a common tūpuna (ancestor). In keeping with Kaupapa Māori research practises the decision to do this research was made collectively, for the purpose of enhancing the mana and rangatiratanga of the whole whānau.

The overall purpose of this research is to support our whānau's reconnection to Māoritanga. Interviewing whānau about their journey of reconnection and then collating their shared insights supports everyone's learnings. The initial expression of interest by whānau wanting to participate in the research occurred at an annual whānau hui (family meeting). Due to the number of people interested in participating it was decided, in consultation with kaumātua (tribal elder), that one member from each of the five whānau present would take part. The criteria for participation was to be over 18 years of age, have whakapapa connections to a

common tūpuna, and have a strong desire to reconnect to Māori culture through whakapapa. Having participants whakapapa to a common tūpuna allows an overview of the experiences of a particular whānau group. Importantly, this enables the whānau to co-construct a plan to protect their tamariki and mokopuna (children and grandchildren) from the trauma of cultural disconnection that many of the whānau have experienced. Of the five participants interviewed, two are male and three are female. For two of the participants both parents were Māori. The other three participants had Māori fathers and Pākehā mothers. Four participants were aged between 55-65 years and one participant was aged between 45 – 55 years.

Participants' sense of being and belonging as Māori

All participants spent their childhoods entrenched in Pākehā culture without a solid connection to te ao Māori. This left them with an emptiness and deep longing to connect to something they could not explain. Their cultural disconnection came from the behaviour and attitudes of their parents and grandparents. Two participants were raised by single Pākehā parents and had lost contact with their Māori parents. These Pākehā parents did not feel comfortable being involved in Māori events which meant their Māori children were brought up as Pākehā. Four participants felt their parents did not support their connection to te ao Māori. Some participants concluded that their Māori parent(s) were unable to support them because they were trying to manage and come to terms with their own issues of disconnection to culture. The sole participant who felt their parents had supported their connection to Māori culture did so because his parents took him to the local marae. However, this did not provide him with a connection to his whakapapa.

A number of participants explained that members of their whānau have a dependency on alcohol, which allows their non-dominant Māori voice to speak freely, expressing the hidden pain of disconnection and loss. One participant discussed how her sense of connection to culture and Māori identity as a child had come from the parties full of singing, alcohol and waiata that her Aunt and Uncle had put on next door. She explained that these parties were considered great times because whānau would come and stay and the next day they would go out and get kaimoana (seafood) from the beach. Growing into adulthood this participant realised her sense of connection to culture from these parties was misplaced and that her father had not actually taught her anything about her heritage. "I now know that those parties were not that great and the effects of alcohol were detrimental to the wellbeing of our wider whānau".

All five participants grew up with at least one Māori grandparent. One participant explained how in his younger years he had been lucky to have had the opportunity to listen to some of the kōrero (discussion) of his kaumātua when his father had taken him to visit them. He explained that "It was really only the older ones that spoke about things Māori, so I was lucky to meet those people, but for the younger ones in my whānau, they didn't have that influence". Another participant shared that her grandmother was fluent in te reo Māori but would only speak her native tongue when another member from her home marae visited. This participant believed her grandmother had made the choice to not speak te reo Māori to her children or grandchildren because she thought this would be better for her family. Another participant recounted being told by her grandmother to; 'Leave your Māori culture behind, or you won't get on in this world'.

All participants attended mainstream schools with few Māori students. They experienced school as a place that denied and devalued Māoritanga and saw their schooling as feeding their sense of loss and disconnection to their Māoritanga. One participant only mixed with Pākehā at school as there was no Māori influence or support for her at school. She felt that being Māori and/or expressing Māori culture was something she needed to hide at school. She explained

how “in those days, we had only just gotten past whacking peoples' knuckles for speaking Māori. That was my father's generation, which was only really 17-18 years away from me going to school”. All the participants were children of Māori who had been punished for speaking te reo Māori at school. Consequently, none of the participants spoke reo Māori as children. For the participants, the pressure to assimilate into Pākehā culture at school was not enforced through physical violence as it had been for their grandparents, but through covert measures such as treating “te reo Māori as non-academic, and hence not necessary for success in the settler state. This perception reinforced the idea of Māori culture as something backward” (Reid, J. et al., 2017, p.81).

Not wanting to appear to be Māori at school meant the participants with pale skin blended in with their Pākehā friends while participants with darker skin were unable to, which heightened their sense of not belonging. Participants noted that being viewed as Māori was often more negative for those who looked Māori than for those who looked Pākehā (Gillon et al., 2019). Despite skin colour and the differences this afforded participants, they all felt the schooling system had low expectations of them as Māori pupils and they all left school as soon as they could. Bishop and Berryman (2006) argue that New Zealand teachers in general do not see Māori students as achievers and consequently spend very little time helping them learn. It is this lack of support for Māori students that is attributed to Māori students leaving school earlier than their non-Māori peers. According to Smith (1995), low Māori retention rates in mainstream schooling are due to a colonising education system that does not provide equality for Māori or align with Māori values.

All the participants felt the schooling system and the missing influence of te ao Māori in the home were at the root of their sense of disconnection to their Māori culture. Growing up without their Māori spirit nurtured they felt forced to hide and silence an important part of themselves (Grennell-Hawke et al., 2018). This was exemplified in the stories some participants told about their grandparents changing their Māori surnames to Pākehā surnames to better assimilate into the colonisers' world. The participants who found themselves without a Māori name expressed how little confidence they felt in attending events at marae or anywhere they might be expected to perform as Māori. They explained how they would often sit in the background at these events and watch those who did have the confidence and self-determination to follow their Māori heart with the wish they could do the same.

Recognising their disconnection

Though all participants grew up knowing they had Māori whakapapa they were not especially cognisant of their disconnection from Māoridom while young. Yet, they all expressed that as children they felt an acute sense of displacement in the world with feelings of not being good enough. Even the participant who felt somewhat connected to Māori culture as a child claimed that he grew up without knowing where he fitted in the world. In his words, he was too brown to fit in with his Pākehā heritage and too white to connect with his Māori whakapapa. He recollected being told “the only thing Māori about you boy is your colour”. As a young adult this participant realised he would have to find a sense of being and belonging to something or he would end up being against everything.

Despite their alienation from Māoridom the participants experienced racism. One participant explained that there was a lot of negative talk and racism towards Māori when she was a child and because of this she felt her disconnection from her Māori heritage worked positively for her. Looking back she said, “I suppose I was almost ashamed to be Māori at times”. All the participants commented that once they realised their sense of loss could be attributed to their cultural disconnection, they questioned what real benefits there were for them to reconnect.

This questioning not only arose from the racism they encountered but the barriers they faced when trying to engage with Māori cultural practices (Te Huia, 2015).

Four of the five participants did not realise they were disconnected from their Māori culture until they became parents. With the birth of their babies came the drive to give their children the sense of belonging they did not have. The participants' realisation and understanding of the losses they suffered from their cultural disconnection grew as their children grew. Their inability to answer their children's questions about te ao Māori and their whakapapa emphasised their sense of disconnection. Some of the participants' children joined kapa haka groups (Māori performing groups) embracing their Māori heritage in ways their parents had not been able to. The participants in these situations explained that though they supported their children's embrace of Māoritanga their support felt inadequate. One participant explained that "not being able to answer my children's questions was very painful because I felt I should have known. I thought, 'oh-my-gosh', what have I missed out on all these years?". Another participant described how it was not until her children started Playcentre that she first understood that if her father was Māori, then so was she. She recalled how forty years earlier when asked if she was Māori she had replied, "Oh, my dad is", but was unable to say or even comprehend this meant she was also. She explained that now, "being able to say 'I am Māori' gives me an inner strength".

The process of reconnecting and the importance of whakapapa

For the majority of participants it was the process of having children that birthed their awareness of how disconnected they were to Māoridom. By having children participants experienced whakapapa as a continuous thread that connects Māori to each other and to those who have passed before them. They learned that whakapapa in and of-itself enables access to knowledge handed down through the generations and with it a connectedness to all things (Berryman, 2008).

Although each participant gave a different perspective of what whakapapa meant for them, the foundations were the same; it gave them a sense of connection to something bigger than themselves, the past, present, future and the natural world. As participants grew to understand more about themselves and what they needed to maintain their wellbeing they found that connecting to Māoritanga through their whakapapa made the most invaluable positive difference. This is in keeping with Stuart & Jose's (2014) research that shows connecting to culture through whakapapa gives a sense of belonging that leads to greater wellbeing, confidence and purpose by empowering whānau to achieve their aspirations. Whakapapa confirms you are Māori whether or not you know how to practise your culture or speak te reo Māori. It gave the participants confidence to stand up and speak their truth, even if it was in English.

Importantly, all five participants believe that if they had been connected to their Māori culture while growing up this would have positively impacted their education and wellbeing. They also felt they would have been more resilient to the effects of colonisation and racism. Even if participants had only known about their whakapapa and nothing else, they believe they would have been able to anchor themselves in te ao Māori, confident that they belonged.

All participants claim their connection to Māori culture is vital to their wellbeing and regard their journey of reconnecting as one where they found healing through belonging. Reconnecting gave participants a solid connection to whakapapa, their whānau, marae, awa and whenua. In contrast to how they felt in their youth these five participants now know who

they are and where they belong. In one participant's words, "I feel proud of who I am and I think we are very lucky to be Māori, to be honest".

Visiting marae was key to their sense of belonging and pride in being Māori. One participant explained how on visiting his marae he knew he was finally home and that he belonged and had a base where he could return. Returning to his marae was a spiritual journey. His wairua felt safe and at peace because he belonged and he felt "envious of those who have stayed home on their marae – they know so much and so do their children – I wish I had that". All the participants considered visiting their marae was like going to a second home and that the effort to get there was always worth the journey. They remarked on how it felt empowering to walk on the land their tūpuna had once walked on and how important it was to know they belonged to that land. They also talked about how they felt better within themselves, happier, as if a gap had been filled having returned to their marae.

According to Rameka (2018) anchoring yourself to your ancestral marae, whenua and awa provides a strength of belonging and meaning that can be drawn on as you go about your daily life. This understanding was exemplified by the participants' determination to attend tangihanga (traditional funeral) and marae hui despite it being difficult to do so due to distance and time constraints. They knew it would be worth the travel because it would strengthen their cultural relationships. According to King et al., (2015) these occasions may be the only opportunity urban Māori have to maintain their cultural connections and showing you belong to the collective by being present at collective activities is an essential aspect of being and belonging as Māori (Smith, 1995).

The barriers to reconnecting

An inability to speak te reo Māori was identified by the participants as the key barrier in their attempts to reconnect to culture. Though this was not discussed in depth by participants this sentiment is expressed in the often spoken claim that te reo is the gateway to te ao Māori. As Kāretu and Milroy (2018) posit, ko te reo Māori te tatau ki te ao; Māori language is the door to the world. Not understanding or speaking te reo Māori meant participants often did not know Māori tikanga and what was expected of them in a kaupapa Māori situation. Some participants felt especially frustrated sitting through pōwhiri (ceremony welcoming people onto marae) without understanding what was being said or the procedural format. On some occasions being the only Māori in the room instilled a fear of expectation that they would have to carry out Māori protocol. According to one participant the deeper issue was not having someone proficient in te ao Māori to accompany them and support them when they wanted to attend kaupapa Māori events. Consequently, attending these events left them feeling inadequate and vulnerable which made it all the more difficult to participate and learn. Without the language it is impossible to deeply access the culture.

For one participant, growing up and living a Pākehā lifestyle created a large barrier for her to overcome. For a long time she had no desire to do anything Māori and if she did have to attend marae she dealt with this by always going through the back entrance so she did not have to participate in the formal protocols. Reflecting on her younger self she explained, "as for the hongi (Māori greeting) and stuff, oh forget that; you hear Pākehā complaining about pōwhiri all the time, that was me". For another participant the hardest thing was connecting to their Māori heritage, despite wanting to, because of racist comments from non-Māori who saw doing things Māori as being separatist and not to be trusted. In these situations this participant would excuse herself "and go outside and have a cry and then come back in again".

A pathway forward

Despite the barriers participants faced they had all reconnected with their culture at some point and hoped their children and wider whānau would also be able to. Some of the participants' children were not yet interested in anything Māori, which they acknowledged was the same for them as children. However, unlike many of their own parents all the participants actively encouraged and supported their children to attend kaupapa Māori events. For some participants this included taking their children with them to their marae and tribal whenua. This was spoken about as a great experience and opportunity for their children to learn about their culture and broader whānau.

A key difference between the participants' ability to support their children's Māoritanga and their parent's inability to do this in the current political climate where being Māori is increasing in value (Hoskins & Jones, 2017). The growing renaissance of Māori culture in Aotearoa New Zealand is building confidence in reconnecting to Māori values and culture. This is especially important as the first step on the participants' path to reconnection was their desire to be involved in te ao Māori and contribute to life as Māori. This desire is more likely to be realised when mainstream society treats Māoritanga with respect and value. However, the participants' initial drive to reconnect did not come from society. It came from a personal need to belong. It was this need that made them step onto the reconnection pathway. They wanted to understand and learn about tikanga so they fitted in when they went to Māori events, especially on the marae: "If you are brave enough to go to marae, you can see how close everyone is; all working together and having a good time. I want some of that!"

The second step on the participants' pathways to reconnection was connecting with whānau who could help them navigate the reconnection process. One participant said she just started attending events her whānau invited her to even though she felt very shy doing this. She explained that having the whānau reach out was a lifeline to her as it allowed her a way to reconnect to her Māori heritage, which she knew nothing about and desperately wanted to. One participant started attending land meetings that her grandmother attended as a way of connecting to her hapū. Another participant took a slightly different stance explaining that for him it was important that his journey to reconnect with culture was one he took for himself and not because someone else wanted him too. At the same time he was clear that those wanting to reconnect would be wise to ask whānau to accompany them at kaupapa Māori events so they could provide support for what can be a lonely road. His experiences had taught him that "the reconnection journey can be emotional because you have to be honest with yourself about who you are and where you have been to find yourself and know where you are going". For this participant it was helpful to have someone to unpack the reconnection experience with.

As the participants began reconnecting with their Māoritanga they became aware that they were fast approaching an age where they would be the kaumatua of their whānau. This also moved them further along the pathway of reconnecting because they felt a sense of urgency and drive to gain tribal knowledge, before it was lost, so they could pass it onto the next generations. The collective need for their reconnection to culture became as important to them as their initial individual need to develop a sense of identity and belonging as Māori. By walking on their ancestral whenua, swimming in their ancestral awa, sleeping in their ancestral marae their whakapapa connections were awakened and their desire to connect to te ao Māori was strengthened (King, 2020). Finding their valued place in the whānau the participants have been able to move forward confidently, safely and proudly as Māori (Huriwai et al., 2001).

Conclusion

This article addresses the complex experiences and emotions the research participants felt growing up disconnected from their Māori culture and how this disconnection impacted their process of reconnecting with their Māori heritage. The participants come from a place of deep generational hurt and consciously made the decision to connect. In doing so they regained their rangatiratanga. Going through the interview process allowed the participants to revisit memories that they had perhaps tried to forget. This gave them a renewed sense of purpose to their reconnection journeys and a reminder of the importance of their efforts in protecting their whakapapa. The interviews served as a healing process helping participants see and understand how far they have come on their pathway to connect with their Māoritanga. Documenting the participants' pain and sense of loss from being brought up without cultural connection has highlighted the importance for all our whānau to connect with their Māoritanga, including future children. This research supports our whānau to set future learning goals for reconnecting to Māoritanga through our whakapapa. The interviews also showed the positive effects of the participants' reconnection efforts. Whānau now see their mokopuna carry their tūpuna name with pride, no longer having to hide it behind a Pākehā name. A point of interest is that the participants all felt that they were too old to go and formally learn te reo Māori, despite recognising te reo as deeply important to depth of understanding and connection with te ao Māori. However, they all strongly encouraged their children and grandchildren to learn on their behalf.

This research has proven useful to our whānau but it is also likely to benefit other whānau looking for a place to start their reconnection to Māoritanga. This article may also benefit people supporting whānau to reconnect by outlining how they can provide a safe and supportive environment for reconnection. Iwi and hapū could also find this article useful when considering how to support their uri (descendants) who are on the exciting journey of reconnecting to culture and looking to return home. Participants unanimously agreed that their journey of reconnection would have been much easier if they had someone to go along with them to share and unpack the learning experience. For those doing research in this space, this article illuminates how Kaupapa Māori research can change the Western narrative by privileging our own Indigenous stories and allowing those who have similar experiences to connect so we do not feel alone.

Importantly, the participants made it clear that physically connecting with marae, whenua and awa was integral to their reconnection journey. It was this physical whakapapa connection that gave participants their strongest sense of empowerment and belonging. It not only helped them make sense of how they belong in the world but how they can support their children to be grounded in their Māori heritage and grow a positive sense of self. Creating opportunities to reconnect to culture with meaningful cultural experiences that are whakapapa based provides a healing pathway forward as rangatira. We each must encourage and support whānau who have become disconnected and desire reconnection so that we can protect our whakapapa. It is hoped that the insight into our whānau experiences shared in this article will support others who are reconnecting and revitalising their taha Māori. The participants' advice to anyone interested in connecting to their culture is to "just do it! There is nothing to lose and everything to gain. Just do it!"

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