

Maori Children and Death: Views from Parents

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6<sup>th</sup> Dec 2011

Pre-publication draft of an article prepared for the Australia Community Psychology

<http://www.groups.psychology.org.au/ccom/publications/>

## Abstract

Research about Maori children's experiences and perceptions of death and *tangi* (Maori death rituals) is sparse. What is available tends to be generalised and stems from Western paradigms of knowledge. In this study we explore Maori children's experiences of death and tangi through the eyes of Maori parents. Through semi-structured interviews with 17 Maori parents, five areas were explored: a) the childhood experiences of parents and how they learned about death and an afterlife; b) what their adult beliefs about these matters are; c) how they have communicated the death concept to their children; and d) whether their children are likely to do the same in the future. From this study we learn that death was not hidden from children, that parents talked with their children in very open and age relevant ways, and considered their children's participation in tangi an important way to grieve and ensure continuity with kinship networks and support. This study suggests that the challenge now is to ensure that these practices continue to persist between parents and their children, and future generations.

## Introduction

In this paper we report our study of how children come to know of and understand death. In presenting this work, we realise that we write about kinship relationships, bereavement and death rituals in a general and perhaps idealised way that for many may not fully capture the range, complexity and depth of emotion that one may feel in response to a death. There is simply not enough space to explore these exciting and critical aspects of the field. Nonetheless, we are ever mindful of different ways of being together and that the nature of kinship relationships, functional and dysfunctional, may well lead to different and sometimes unanticipated bereavement experiences and outcomes. With this limitation in mind, we begin this paper with a review of the literature that informs our thinking in the field.

Most children will experience grief and bereavement in their lifetime when someone close to them dies. Some will mourn the death of a parent, a sibling or grandparent and grieve for the loss of that relationship (Dyregrov, 1991; Heaney, 2004). They have lost the love and security that was given by their parent; they have lost a friend, a playmate, a rival sibling and family member (Gill-White, 2006; Parker, 2003). Children can find the death of a loved one difficult, overwhelming and at times traumatising (Rosner, Cruse & Hagl, 2010). Nevertheless, explaining and helping children understand the concept of death can significantly reduce fear, anxiety and other emotional or behavioural responses associated with anticipating or mourning the death of a loved one (Turner, 2006).

How children understand and conceptualise and respond to death varies from culture to culture (Rosenblatt, 1997). Some theorists suggest that children cannot acquire a mature understanding of death until they have a basic understanding of certain foundational concepts (Feifel, 1977; Kane, 1979; Lansdown & Benjamin, 1984; Nagy, 1948; Speece & Brent, 1992). These include the notions of *universality*, *irreversibility*, *non-functionality* and *causality* (Cuddy-Casey & Orvaschel, 1997). *Universality* refers to the fact that eventually every living thing is destined to die and it cannot be avoided. *Irreversibility* is about death being irreversible. *Non-functionality* implies that the deceased person is no longer living and life is non-existent. The

concept of *causality* involves understanding the possible causes and circumstances of how the death occurred.

On from the need to understand these conceptual ideas, Piaget (1960) and many researchers after him (eg., Childers and Wimmer, 1971; Ellis and Stump, 2000; Kane, 1979; Koocher, 1973; Lansdown & Benjamin, 1984; Nagy, 1948; Speece and Brent, 1992; Wenestam and Wass, 1987) argued that children's thoughts and reasoning develop gradually over time and as a function of age. For example, up until about 5 years old, children tended to deny death (Nagy, 1948), up until about 9 years old, children tended to personify death (e.g. the bogey man), and beyond that age, children realise that death is final and universal (Lansdown & Benjamin, 1984). Though these studies showed parallels with Piaget's theory of cognition, findings also show that children can understand and comprehend death at a young age if they are exposed to it.

In New Zealand children are exposed to numerous accounts associated with dying and death. Death is taught as part of the schooling curriculum, it is portrayed in art, music, literature, observed in television shows and news media reporting and engaged through electronic gaming. Children see animals that are dead on the road or brought in by the family pet; they hear about death in fairy tales and/or act it out when playing imaginary games (Heaney, 2004). In contrast to New Zealand's relatively peaceful environment, children in less settled societies are often exposed to the raw reality of death much earlier because of war, civil conflict, sickness or natural disasters (Marten, 2002). In countries with high mortality rates, children are more likely to learn about real, rather than imagined death, much earlier in life.

In cultures of European origin including Pakeha New Zealanders, parents and adults have often avoided talking about the death of a loved one with children with some finding it an extremely difficult task (Granot, 2005). Some suppress their own emotions and feelings in the presence of children to shelter them from the pain, hurt and anxiety associated with the grief of losing a loved one (Granot, 2005; Smith S, 1999). Parent's grief reactions, like anger, shock and crying, are often concealed and hidden from children, for example, through prohibiting children from attending funerals (Drewery & Bird, 2004) or visiting dying family members (Dyregrov & Yule, 2008; Granot, 2005). Children come to learn that powerful emotions should be

withheld and not expressed (Smith, 1999), in turn developing a disposition that may extend into adulthood, where adults may continue to struggle to express and regulate their emotions (Dyregrov & Yule, 2008; Granot, 2005).

Token (2003) suggests that when questions are left unanswered or there is an absence of information about the death of a loved one, or delays in receiving it, it can lead children to make up their own stories about what happened, allowing fantasies of the imagination and magical thinking to play upon their mind. While there may be more, Dyregrov and Yule (2008) have, rather simplistically, identified two ways that children understand death. The first is the truth which is constructed from the information they have received about it; the second version is a construct of the child's own fantasies that does not necessarily represent reality. When children begin to believe their own fantasies, rather than accepting that someone close to them has died, their perspective can become distorted as to what is the truth (Granot, 2005; Smith, 1999). The two kinds of 'truths' identified by Dyregrov and Yule (2008) help us to understand the possible imaginings of children, but denies the possibility that death for children, as it is for adults, may well have multiple narratives that may all contribute to an overall truth narrative. None of the narratives are necessarily wrong, but some may well be more privileged than others. This way of thinking provides space for the possible coexistence of the factual and fantastical truths.

Too often bereaved children have been put to one side and left to cope with their grief alone. As a result, many are deprived of the opportunity to grieve the loss (Heaney, 2004). Adults who have experienced grief in childhood report that the failure of their parent or other adult to include them in the mourning process contributed to their increased difficulty in coping with grief (Granot, 2005). Studies have found that unresolved childhood grief, combined with their perceived loss, contributes to the development of adult psychopathology and impairment in interpersonal adult relationships (Edmans & Marcellino-Boisvert, 2002; Mireault & Bond, 1992).

Cultural and religious explanations often address themes of death and/or questions of an afterlife. Both constructs frequently help adults to explain difficult questions asked by children after the loss a loved one. These beliefs provide comfort for children, much like they do for adults (Cuddy-Casey et al, 1995; Granot, 2005).

Children absorb the beliefs and culture they are raised in and are readily accepting of the answers provided to them concerning death (Fiorini & Mullen, 2006). For Maori, the indigenous people of New Zealand, traditions and cultural beliefs mingle closely with Christian ideologies (Salmond, 1976). Though many Maori have converted to Christianity many often still retain and pursue Maori cultural practices that to an outsider may look somewhat contradictory. This apparent contradiction is consistent with what Ritchie (1992) terms 'both/and' logic; the Maori world and its cosmological beliefs sitting in a complimentary way with that of Christianity (Salmond, 1976). According to Rosenblatt (1997) the blending of cultural traditions with religion is not unusual, in fact, there are many instances where people seek guidance, comfort and understanding from both sources.

While the literature points to the presence of children and their involvement during tangi (eg., Dansey, 1992) there is no comprehensive examination of their thoughts and responses to death, or how Maori parents or adults talk to Maori children about death. Nikora et al (2010, p.401) noted that "...there is no definitive historical or contemporary published account of tangi and the Māori experience of death, which captures its fluidity, transformation and effect". Regardless of this, there is some agreement across the literature of the general pattern that constitutes a Maori ritual response to death. Nikora et al (2010) summarise the arising pattern as follows.

*Death takes place; sometimes the ceremony of tuku wairua or sending the spirit on occurs. Family and friends are alerted and if required there is an autopsy. The deceased is prepared by an undertaker, often with assistance from family members. He or she then proceeds to the marae [tribal meeting place] sometimes via the family home, for viewing, mourning, remembering and celebrating. Marae rituals are enacted over a few hours or a few days before burial and associated rites or cremation. They include the performative elements of powhiri (rituals of encounter), tangi (mourning), whaikorero (oratory), haka (posture dances), waiata (dirges), whakapapa (recitation of genealogy), poroporoaki (speeches of farewell) and karakia (prayer). These proceedings are enhanced by the display of significant artefacts that ... adorn the casket. Portraits of deceased relatives are exhibited. Closing the casket generally occurs before the final church or memorial service. Takahi whare, or the ritual cleansing of the deceased's house, usually follows internment.*

*Hakari (feasting) completes the process; this releases the family to everyday life (p.401).*

The institution of tangi is a persistent cultural practice that has largely resisted the ravages of colonisation and remains deeply embedded within Maori communities. As the authors are deeply involved in the Maori world, we know that children are present at tangi, are exposed to tupapaku or the deceased, and that they engage their peer group and adults in conversations about death. This study seeks to document and explore the communication of the death concept between Maori parents and children. Specifically, we examine: a) the childhood experiences of parents and how they learned about death and an afterlife; b) what their adult beliefs about these matters are; c) how they have communicated the death concept to their children; and d) whether their children are likely to do the same in the future.

## **Method**

Maori parents who had conversed with their children about topics relating to death and tangi were recruited to participate in this study. There were no restrictions placed on age or gender or ethnicity of partners although most had partners who identified as Maori. The sample size was determined on the basis of theoretical saturation (Bloor & Wood, 2006), that is, we continued recruiting and interviewing participants until a commonality of responses was apparent and that it was unlikely that further interviewing would give rise to any new information. The saturation point for this study was reached after interviewing 17 participants. The interviews were conducted by the first author in the second part of 2010 as part of her graduate studies, with the study receiving ethical approval from the Psychology Department's Research Committee at the University of Waikato.

Interviews with participants followed a semi structured interview schedule (available from the first author) with questions directly related to the research objectives.

Participants were keen to talk about their experiences and expressed no reservations about doing so. Each interview took about an hour. They were audio recorded, transcribed, thematically analysed and summarised into a report for verification by participants. When each participant was satisfied that their report represented their views accurately, it was added to the pool of 17 reports for overall

thematic analysis. Pseudonyms were assigned to all participants in this study except those who explicitly asked for their true identities be associated with their information.

## Findings

Participants in this study recalled numerous childhood memories and experiences of death and tangi. They remembered tangi as an event that drew families together to farewell a loved one and to provide support for the bereaved. Death and tangi were a part of everyday life even if it was a departure from everyday life routines. Because of this, they remembered a sense of excitement, novelty and anticipation, of being reunited with cousins and relatives they may not have seen for some time. As children, none of the participants found the presence of a tupapaku disturbing because the deceased was conceived of as someone familiar and precious. They were family members. As children, they remembered participating in the formal rituals of encounter on the marae, where they paid their respects and greeted the deceased and the bereaved, as did adults. They were expected to help with the many tasks to be completed and when proceedings were slow, they recalled finding delight and excitement and sometimes mischief with relatives of their own age. In later life and as parents, they included their own children in tangi, they exposed them to tupapaku, encouraged them to express themselves and to take part in marae activities. Participants supported being open and honest when talking to their children about death and tangi. They all believed in an afterlife, some subscribed to Christian beliefs, some to Maori cosmological beliefs, and some to both. To varying degrees they drew from these belief systems to explain death, tangi and an afterlife to their children. These themes are elaborated in the sections that follow.

## Findings

### **Parents remember**

Our conversations with participants ranged across many experiences including the death of grandparents, parents, siblings and extended family or whanau members.



Some deaths were sudden, sometimes accidental and unexpected, while some were preceded by illness and anticipated. When deaths were of people close to a participant, their accounts were deeply personal and moving as they remembered and relived their experiences of mourning, grief and support. All talked of their childhood memories of a grandparent, parent, sibling, cousin, uncle or aunt passing. Some remembered in detail how the news came to them through telephone calls or people visiting or through visiting others, but most memories related to going to the marae, to prepare and participate in mourning rituals, an event that was more frequent than that of close and deeply felt deaths. As Rangi mentions, attending tangi “was just part of what we did”.

*Death has always been related to how we do tangi and that. Even as a child growing up it was just part of what we did. You wake up one morning and someone's dead; someone took them (the deceased person) off somewhere; we went to the [marae] and got the [marae] ready; they came back in a casket (Rangi).*

Most participants had childhood memories of being well supported through significant bereavements by their immediate family or whanau, by their broader clan (hapu) and iwi (tribe), and by friendship and work networks lending weight to Ngata's (2005) assertion that in times of illness and death these networks pull together and act as a source of strength and support for those bereaved. While Heeni Poutu described her experiences of tangi as a child as a break from routine and mundane daily life, her account also illustrates how children are part of the ‘pulling together’ to offer strength and support.

*I know that this may sound strange, but we thought that attending tangi was wonderful! When we were children we just loved going to tangi because we saw all our relations... Wherever we went the rest of our relations would be there, so it was a great holiday experience for us (Heeni Poutu).*

Dianne also picks up on the theme of vacation and also reinforces Rangi's view of tangi being part of everyday life, familiarity overcoming any fears that may have been apparent.

*Tangihanga, death and dying were a natural part of my childhood. It was something that we commonly did or attended...it was not something that was fearful. It was just what we did...When a tangi occurred in the family the car got packed up, everyone hopped in ... kind of like a holiday really because you knew you were going to see your cousins and your aunties (Rangi).*

At most tangi the corpse or tupakaku is presented in a casket and the immediately bereaved and close relatives keep a continuous vigil over a period of about three days while people come to pay their respects, that is, "...so that the dead may be properly farewelled, his or her virtues extolled (and, quite often, faults and failings almost brutally enumerated), the bereaved comforted, [and] the ties of relationship renewed" (Dansey, 1995, p110). All participants spoke of times when they touched, kissed, viewed or were in close proximity to a tupapaku as a child. No one expressed any fear, distaste or discomfort, but rather an opposite view held. Rehua told us,

*I don't know that it was scary and I suppose when I look back on it I don't remember anyone saying to us "Ok when you go there, there's going to be a dead body. We didn't view it as a dead body, that's our whanau, somebody that we knew and loved and spent time with and we cared about...It's an awesome experience to be able to say your final goodbyes... They're not scary! (Rehua)*

While the tupapaku is the object of greatest significance at a tangi, and the focus of much attention, participants also told us about the expectations and responsibilities they felt as children. At tangi, the bereaved need to be fed, as do the waves of visitors. There is food to be gathered, prepared, cooked and served, tables to be laid and dishes to be cleared and washed, beds to be made, facilities to be cleaned, the grounds of the marae kept tidied – there are a multitude of tasks. And children are expected to share in this load according to their ability, sometimes gender, interest and initiative. Ivy explains:

*My number one job was doing dishes and table setting... You just go and start helping in the kitchen to see if there's anything you can do to make things easier... We would just help out where we could... We would stay around the marae and play the number one game "Bull Rush" and catch up with cousins; but you always knew that once manuhiri turned up you were back in the*

*kitchen setting up and getting something ready for them to eat and prepare things for the next big meal (Ivy).*

As Jane and James Ritchie noted (1979), in Polynesia children are often trusted to mind other children and are responsible for each other while their parents and other adults engage in 'adult' activity with children being quite capable of being accountable to and for each other. Even so, as Dianne told us, children can also get up to mischief.

*We kids would skedaddle off the marae. ...we would sneak around, and do things we weren't allowed to do... We set a mattress on fire one time and chucked it down the bank hoping it would get down to the river but it only got half way down!*

As Dansey (1995) asserted, maintaining relationships with kin is significantly important for Maori, and attendance at tangi is one way these relationships are maintained. For many participants, maintaining and strengthening kinship ties primarily with their cousins while at tangi was of most importance, while maintaining other kin relationships with aunties, uncles and elders came secondary.

### **Parents, their children and death**

The parents in this study were in agreement about the need to be honest and open with children about death and tangi. For them it was about allowing their children to ask questions freely, bringing their feelings out in the open as opposed to hiding them away. It was about listening and reassuring children, and letting them know that their parents were there for them.

*I believe in open communication and being honest with my children and letting them see things for what they really are and not disguising it or making things look pretty or giving them a false sense of reality. Our children learn a lot better when it's all open and I believe that's how I've communicated with them (Dianne).*

*We speak to them about it all the time. I share with them the same things that I was told when I was a kid, as much as I can remember. I wouldn't say that*

*we are blunt and brutal, we just tell it as it is. For example, what's happened and what we think is going to happen next...(Sam).*

This openness and lack of inhibition about talking of death with children and their inclusion at tangi and exposure to tupapaku supports children to come to know that death is an irreversible condition and that the cultural-emotional response is one of sadness. Sam told us about how his young children reacted when, on the death of his mother, they returned to the family home to visit with her and their extended family before she was removed to the funeral home.

*Both of them were really shocked at the news because they had just finished talking to their grandmother the night before...We had dad visiting with us at the time so we had to break the news to him too....and they saw his reaction to that news. They were scared for a little while. They felt really saddened; you could see that in their faces and in their own persona and how they talked. They knew something wasn't right. Their whole character changed...When we got there [to the family home] all the families were there, ...and the kids came with us and they saw their grandmother lying there and they knew we were upset and they openly showed their emotions just like we did, and we had time with her... (Sam).*

The involvement and exposure of children to conversations about death, to adult reactions to death, and how adults interact with tupapaku and with each other, serves to model appropriate and expected social and emotional behaviour (Alegre, 2011). It provides a learning context for children's enculturation (Grusec & Hastings, 2007) much like how knowledge was transmitted to the parents in this study.

Religious and cultural beliefs about death, bereavement, mourning and an afterlife are beliefs that are enculturated. They are absorbed by children as they engage, think about and are affected by events and influences around them. When asked about their beliefs about an afterlife, the parents in this study explained that they came to know and believe in a Christian afterlife, a Maori afterlife, or some combination of both, as Sam explains below.

*They [his parents] usually said they went to heaven. That was one side of it...Well, from the religious point of view they both said they went to heaven... Mum and Dad are Anglicans and we were brought up in the Anglican church. I'm not too sure why, but I suppose it's because the Anglicans were the first to get a church in our part of the tribe...But from a Maori point of view they knew that the bodies were going back to Papatuanuku. That was part of the Maori tradition of what we believed. For example, the bodies went back to the ground but the spirit returned back to Hawaiki. Those were the same stories that came through, through the tangihanga process. But through the religious process, and if we were to draw parallels, I suppose you could say that the spirit was heading somewhere upwards. Mum and Dad always believed in some sort of afterlife of some sort. Whether it was either religious or through Maoridom, they'd talk about that...*

According to Rosenblatt (1997) it is quite common for many traditional societies to blend culture and religion without it being terribly problematic finding comfort and understanding of death and ideas of an afterlife from both perspectives. From the accounts given by participants, we learn that they can hold strong to their cultural beliefs as well as incorporate religious perspectives without feeling conflicted (Salmond, 1976). The participants in this study learned their beliefs and values from their parents. In turn, they communicated these ideas to their children. Whatever the beliefs held by participants, two common ideas were expressed. First, that on death, they would be reunited with family who had died earlier, and secondly, that those who had died were never far away. Matiu and Frank illustrate these ideas in the follow comments.

*This is what I think will happen to me. I'd simply go and see my uncles who have just recently passed away, my koroua and my immediate whanau and there I'll be connected with the older/elder ones that I don't know of. This to me is what I think will happen when I pass on...There have been a lot of events I have witnessed that suggest to me that they're still watching over us....(Matiu).*

*To me, afterlife is never anywhere; it's always there in you, the wairua of that particular person, your beloved one. Yes they've passed away, but they're still*

*there and it will never go away... The wairua is still there and still around. That was my parents' belief and that sort of belief was handed down to me...(Frank).*

## Implications

Kinship networks are becoming more fragmented. Kin are now widely scattered in New Zealand and abroad, with the nuclear family more and more becoming the norm. Increasingly, it is only for tangi and whanau reunions that these networks endeavour to reunite (Nikora, 2007). Many have written of the challenges of urbanisation and the barriers, like the competing demands of work, education, finances, transport and distance, that Maori continue to negotiate to engage in Maori world activities like tangi, unveilings and other episodic events (*cf.*, Nikora, 2007). For these reasons, extended kinship networks may well be shrinking with priority shifting to relationships within the nuclear unit rather than extended whanau. If this trend continues with resulting isolation and fragmentation, then increased stress within parent-child relationships may well be the outcome; meaning that children have only their parents and siblings to support them through crises rather than a much broader network of many parents and cousins.

The process of transmitting knowledge of death, dying, mourning and culturally defined responses from parent to child is clearly a “within whanau process” rather than one assisted by knowledge gained from books, counseling or the internet. Parental knowledge came from participants own childhood experiences that they in turn drew on to inform their conversations and experiences with their own children. While Maori parents have prioritised honest and open dialogue about death and the life after, there is no guarantee that this will continue. This transfer of knowledge between generations cannot be taken for granted.

Maori move with ease between Christian and Maori beliefs about an afterlife. All parents interviewed believed there was life after death bringing them comfort and reassurance which they, in turn, communicate to their children. Death is not an end, but rather, a transition to a new life with relatives, ancestors and friends who had passed before. Therapists need to bear this in mind and be careful of pursuing an

'either/or approach' to thinking about what Maori believe and be aware of a 'both/and' way of thinking, a process insightfully described by Ritchie (1992).

The marae served as a therapeutic space to mourn in an appropriately emotional and cathartic manner; a space in which family could reunite and children could play, and where oratory and emotional expression is balance with song, dance and laughter. The marae, its environment and stage, its rituals and protocols have been harnessed over generations to softened the sting of death. But not all tangi are held at marae. Domestic dwellings, educational institutions and funeral homes (Edge, 2010) have also been sites for death rituals and mourning. Whether or not they afford participants, adults and children alike, an adequate therapeutic space is yet to be explored and awaits further research.

From this study we gain valuable knowledge into Maori children's experiences of death and tangi through the eyes of Maori parents. Even though these experiences have not come from Maori children themselves, by no means does it infer that the information gained from Maori parents is less relevant or insightful. What we have learnt from this study is foundational in understanding the relationship that Maori parents have with their children at times of death and tangi and the importance of transparency that is needed during these times. Most importantly, Maori parents talk with their children and involve them in all aspect of death and tangi. The challenge now is to ensure that these practices continue to persist between parents and their children, from this generation to the next.

## Notes

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scholarships the first author received from the Ministry of Health, the Maori and Psychology Research Unit, Waikato University and the Tainui Maori Trust Board.

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