

Whanaungatanga: an illustration of the importance of cultural context

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Abstract

The word 'whanaungatanga' is often used by people who lack an intimate understanding of the philosophical base in Māori culture out of which it emerges. Thus, it is sometimes used simply to describe the camaraderie that can be associated with team sports or with reference to the 'glue' that connects people to one another socially. This is not necessarily a problem in itself. After all, change and development in the lexicon is a characteristic of living languages. However, real problems can emerge where words become divorced from their cultural roots to such an extent that two speakers using the same word can completely fail to understand one another. It is argued here that this is what can happen when Māori words, such as 'whanaungatanga', are used in the context of modelling in the social sciences, particularly where that modelling is conducted in the context of Western social and cultural values. In particular, the essential spiritual dimension of *whanaungatanga* may be overlooked or misunderstood.

Whanaungatanga: dictionaries and glossaries

In view of the fundamental nature of the concept of *whanaungatanga*, it is interesting to note that both *whanaungatanga* and *whakawhanaungatanga* are omitted from Barlow's glossary of key concepts (Barlow, 1991), Williams' dictionary of the Māori language (Williams, 1992) and Salmond's study of lexical sets in terms of values and value-relationships (Salmond, 1978). There are several possible explanations for this omission. It may be, for example, that both Barlow and Williams believed that the meaning of the concept could be recovered from the meanings of its component parts. This explanation is, however, an unlikely one: complex concepts rarely have meanings that are recoverable directly from the meanings of their component parts, particularly where these components themselves have a variety of senses. Thus, for example, 'whānau' is defined by Williams (1992, p. 487) under the heading of 'verb' and 'noun' as follows:

1. v. i. *Be born....*
2. *Be in childbed....*
3. n. *Offspring, family group....*
4. *Family. (mod.)...*
5. A familiar term of address to a number of people . . .

On the other hand, 'whanau' is defined as:

1. v.i. *Go.*
2. *Lean, incline, bend down.*

'Whanaunga' is defined as a 'relative' or 'blood relation' (p. 487) and '-tanga' is defined in the following terms as a suffix:

... passive termination, *tanga*, which is sometimes added to a verb or to an adverb qualifying a passive verb, and apparently indicates a rapid sequence of events....

A noun denoting the fact, circumstance, time or place or action of a verb may be formed by adding one of the suffixes *nga*, *anga*, *hanga*, *kanga*, *manga*, *ranga*, *tanga*, *inga*,...

Similar nouns may be formed from nouns, adjectives, or participles and denote the fact, etc., of being, or of becoming, the thing or of the quality or the condition indicated by the original word.

(Williams, 1992, p. xxxvi).

It is important to note here that the definitions of 'whānau' and 'whanaunga' make no reference to values or beliefs.

Also relevant is Williams' definition of 'whaka-' in that 'whaka-' is often combined with *whanaungatanga* as *whakawhanaungatanga*:

Whaka- (ii), causative prefix; probably connected with the previous word.

1. Combined with an intransitive verb, an adjective or participle to form an intransitive verb, it signifies a beginning of, or approach to, the action or condition indicated....
2. Combined with a noun to form an intransitive verb, it signifies the assumption of the character or form expressed by the noun....
3. As a strict causative it may combine with a verb, adjective, participle or noun to form a transitive verb . . . Other varieties and shades of meaning will be found under the word to which **whaka** is prefixed in each case.

(Williams, 1992, p. 486.)

The omission of references to values and beliefs and the diversity of grammatical meanings associated with '-tanga' are such as to make it impossible to recover from Williams' dictionary any real sense of the word '*whanaungatanga*'.

What are the possible explanations for the fact that the concept of *whanaungatanga* is omitted from Barlow's glossary of key concepts and Williams' dictionary of the Māori language? One possible explanation is that neither Barlow nor Williams regarded the concept as being relevant to traditional Māori society in spite of the fact that it is commonly now used with reference to those inter-relationships that give thematic meaning to society. Another possible explanation relates to the availability, and use, of sources. Thus, for example, Barlow sources much of his material from the Te Hikutū hapu of the Hokianga district of Tai Tokerau. It may be that this particular hapu chose not, in communicating, to emphasise *whanaungatanga* or, indeed, the concept that is represented elsewhere by the word 'whanaungatanga' may not generally be expressed by the use of that particular word by that hapu. Equally, Barlow, as a male, may not have had full access to the narratives of females and of the young. Finally, it is possible that the concept of *whanaungatanga* is so pervasive and so deeply embedded within Māori culture that it seems to some to be unnecessary to

gloss it. The fact that Salmond (1978), whilst omitting any direct reference to *whanaungatanga*, nevertheless includes references to a range of values associated with *whānau* that many have associated with *whanaungatanga* suggests that this last explanation may be the most likely one.

Defining *whanaungatanga* by use and association

The centrality of *whanaungatanga* to the Māori world view is evidenced by the fact that it is referred to, directly or indirectly, in a wide range of different contexts, where its meaning emerges through association rather than explicit definition. Thus, for example, Salmond (1975) notes that the commonalities and differences in relationships in the Māori world are acknowledged and tested in rituals of encounter, formal and informal. Rangihau (1992) notes that all of the diverse aspects contained within *whanaungatanga* are fundamental to Māori identity. In seeking to identify structures that can be useful to Māori in discussing development processes, Durie (1998) associates *whanaungatanga* with the term 'haputanga'. In discussing those things that need to be taken into account in designing a 'management framework' that accommodates identity, Moeke-Pickering (1996) identifies both traditional *whānau* (kinship), and contemporary *whānau* (kinship as the consequence of urbanisation). For Bishop (1996), the term *whakawhānau* is fundamental to the establishment of collaborative processes in research.

The approaches of non-Māori academics to the concept of *whanaungatanga*

Ritchie (1992) claims that *whanaungatanga* is derived from a combination of *whānau* ('family...or body of close kin, whether linked by blood, adoption or fostering'), *nga* (as a generalised extension of *whānau*) and *tanga* ('a process concept concerned with everything about relationships between kin'). On this basis, he describes *whanaungatanga* as the "basic cement that holds things Māori together" (p. 67), noting, however, that there can be no simple, straightforward translation of terms standing for complex concepts.

Ritchie introduces *whanaungatanga* in an interrelated grid of value processes (processes that include *manaakitanga*, *kotahitanga*, *rangatiratanga*, and, finally, *wairuatanga* as an overall governing principle). He argues that none of these terms has a simple translation and that, furthermore, the use of any one of them draws upon a host of meanings linked to the others. Thus, the use of the word '*whanaungatanga*' would involve indirect reference to themes associated with *wairuatanga* (spirituality), *manaakitanga* (responsibility for hospitality, reciprocity and caring), *rangatiratanga* (hierarchy, structure and authority within the group), and *kotahitanga* (the collective unity of the group)¹.

In spite of Ritchie's approach, Metge (1995) argues that in traditional usage the term 'whanaunga' was restricted to "relatives . . . connected by descent and sometimes by marriage"(p.52). Citing Williams (1971), she argues that this word is not derived from 'whānau' (in any of the senses listed by Williams) but, instead, that it is related to 'whānau' in the sense of 'leaning together'.

Looking again at the concept of *whanaungatanga*

All of the approaches to the origin and meaning of the word '*whanaungatanga*' that have so far been discussed raise issues and questions. Metge (1995) and Ritchie (1992) disagree about the etymology of *whanaungatanga*. Ritchie provides no

justification for his own assumptions regarding origins. Metge (1995) makes reference to the categories used by Williams (1992) in seeking to explain its origins. She draws selectively on his definitions of 'whānau' and 'whanau', failing to provide any adequate rationale for the conclusions she reaches. Although each of the meanings to which she refers is in current usage, it would be dangerous to assume that all of them were also all necessarily present in pre-European times. Critically, the very selection of some categories rather than others runs counter to that association of related meanings that is fundamental to the concept itself. In any case, although a number of meanings are listed separately and may, to those unfamiliar with Māori culture, appear unrelated, those who are familiar with the culture will appreciate their inter-relatedness in terms of common descent and common goals and activities. Furthermore, since the meanings of words are rarely, if ever, simply the sum of the meanings of their parts, there is always potential danger associated with the use of etymology to elucidate meaning.

An important aspect of Ritchie's account is that he cautions against a search for simple translations and stresses the significance of value relationships. Even so, accepting the significance of value relationships, important though it is, is not the same thing as communicating the real nature of the values themselves or the culturally-specific ways in which they assume additional shades of meaning through these relationships.

Te Rangihiroa, writing in 1925, pointed out the dangers of accepting definitions and explanations that are not culturally rooted (p. 101):

Much error already has been handed on in ethnological writings through inexact translations of Māori words. In cases where the European and Māori look at a question from an entirely different viewpoint, the use of particular English words often gives to the general European reader the impression that the Māori shares the view that the word conveys to him; when in reality their views may be as divergent as the poles.

Writing as a counsellor firmly rooted in a traditional Maniapoto background, Tuti Aranui (Barrett-Aranui, 1999) locates *whanaungatanga* in relation to the complex inter-relationships - social, cultural, spiritual and ancestral - that characterise her own situation. Taking the cues from her own ancestral house, Te Tokanganui-ā-noho (located in the King Country township of Te Kuiti) and locating herself in terms of her "femaleness, age, [64 years] and subtribal (hapu) responsibilities" (p. 4), she describes a web of inter-related aspects of life processes. These processes are governed from within the four sub-tribal areas of Maniapoto. They concern the spiritual essence and physical placement of objects and involve protocols, histories, genealogy (whakapapa) and role responsibilities and duties. Implicit in the account are the many subjective experiences of processes that constitute, for Tuti Aranui, the holistic concept of inter-relationship that is *whanaungatanga*. Her account, grounded as it is in Māori wisdom, provides that cultural and spiritual resonance that is fundamental to understanding. In locating *whanaungatanga* in terms of physical, cultural and spiritual being, it both simplifies and clarifies a concept that so many writers have struggled to define.

Thus, *whanaungatanga* can be seen as a concept that varies depending on context. Although it always involves value processes that are inter-related, the nature of the

issues involved in any particular instance of use will activate these inter-related value processes in different ways, allowing for different emphases on different occasions. Underlying any specific emphasis, however, will always be at least six value sets: *take/kaupapa* (principles associated with the dependent issue), *whakapapa* (principles associated with descent), *wairuatanga* (principles associated with spiritual embodiment), *manaakitanga* (principles associated with duties and expectations of care and reciprocity), *kotahitanga* (principles associated with collective unity), and *rangatiratanga* (principles associated with governance, leadership and the hierarchal nature of traditional Māori society).

***Whanaungatanga* and modelling in the social sciences**

Any principled *whanaungatanga* model designed for use in the context of the social sciences must include reference to at least the six value processes referred to above. However, the complex nature of these values and, in particular, their inter-relatedness, means that great care must be exercised in model construction. Even so, designing a model based on the concept of *whanaungatanga* has considerable potential notwithstanding the fact that such a model is likely to conflict with models based on Western thinking, particularly in the area of *wairuatanga*. Although contemporary Western approaches to model building in the social sciences do not necessarily exclude spiritual values, there has been a tendency for them not to do so, a tendency that has been associated with scientific and academic analysis since Descartes (Foster, 1991). So far as *tikanga* Māori is concerned, any omission of the spiritual dimension would wholly invalidate the model.

In the Māori cosmology, there is a relationship between the spiritual realm and the physical world, the former being reflected in the latter. The relationship between the cosmological *whānau* and the earthly *whānau* is fundamental (Walker, 1990). It includes the primary principal *Io*, the secondary principals *Ranginui* (sky father) and *Papatūānuku* (earth mother) and their various offspring, and provides the foundation of spiritual, psychological, emotional and physical ways of being. For some Māori, what Walker (1990) refers to as the 'Maui/Tāwhaki cycle' is fundamental; for all Māori, demi-god cycles involving *mana* (power and authority emanating from the Gods) are critical and expressive of relationships within the *whānau* (Marsden, 1975). Among the responsibilities and duties of reciprocity are *tuākana- tēina*, *tūpuna - mokopuna*, *tāne - wāhine*, *tungāne - tuāhine*; among those of care and protection are *aroha* and *manaakitanga*.

With reference to social anthropology, Metge (1995) describes the principles of *whānau* in relation to sets of *whakaaro nui* (great ideas) in terms of values. Perhaps, *mātua whakaaro* (foundation concepts) might be a more appropriate choice than *whakaaro nui*. Irrespective of the choice of terminology, the fact remains that *whānau* is a term which can have a range of associated values. From this point of view, it could be said that *whānau* has a default set of values which is associated with a range of inter-related values. Which of these values are given priority in any particular instance will be determined on the basis of circumstances and context. Importantly, whatever the situation should be in relation to such priorities, the concept of *whanaungatanga* includes within itself all of them, and central to all of them is subjective experience. However, because Western approaches to knowledge have difficulty in accommodating subjectivity, including *whanaungatanga* in social science modelling can create considerable potential for conflict, misunderstanding and even

misrepresentation. What is at stake here is the validity of the Māori world view. It is, therefore, hardly surprising that simplistic interpretations of *whanaungatanga* are resented. From a Māori perspective, paying lip service to the concept of *whanaungatanga* represents cultural colonisation at its worst. Those who make use of the word must, therefore, recognise the implications of doing so. These implications include an acceptance of the fact that collective subjectivity and spiritual causality will be fundamental to applications and will be at the very core of social interventions. Thus, whether approaches to *whānau* are issue-orientated (*take/kaupapa*) or descent orientated (*whakapapa*), the associated values resonate and have a fundamental impact on meaning and interpretation.

***Whanaungatanga* and the process of evaluation: an example**

With reference to the concept of *whanaungatanga*, Bishop (1996) has analysed Huata Homes' evaluation of the impact of (a) the *Taha Māori* programme, and (b) *Mahi Tū Tonu* (a compendium of resources for the *Taha Māori* program) on schools in Otago and Southland. What this analysis reveals is that approaches based on *whanaungatanga* can be both appropriate and successful. Unfortunately, however, the academic context within which Bishop's critique is located means that a range of important aspects of the approach, and of the principles underlying it, are not given full recognition. Some of these will be the focus of attention here.

Taha Māori was a programme initiated by the Department of Education in the 1980s in answer to requests from both Māori and non-Māori educators that the status of *tangata whenua* (original inhabitants) in Aotearoa be acknowledged. Its implementation was inevitably affected by two significant government policies: *Tomorrow's Schools* (with its devolution of power to local Boards of Trustees), and the requirement that schools should reflect the *Treaty of Waitangi* in their principles and operations.

So far as schools in Otago and Southland were concerned, the operation of the *Taha Māori* programme had been criticised for the following reasons:

- Lack of clear goals and guidelines and appropriate resources;
- Colonisation processes leading to serious neglect of Southern Māori *tikanga* (customary practices);
- Pakeha 'capture' (and, hence, misrepresentation) of Māori knowledge;
- Resource allocations that privileged non-Māori;
- Use of resources that did not adequately reflect the local *iwi*, thus leading to cultural homogenisation and, hence, a 'generic' view of Māori that was unacceptable to *tangata whenua*.

In 1992, Huata Holmes began an evaluation of the *Taha Māori* programme as put into practice in Otago and Southland. Importantly, Huata Holmes is a *kaitiaki* of the Southern Māori *tikanga*, acknowledged as a *kaumātua* of Kai Tahu, Kāti Māmoe, and Waitaha. He was at that time also an adviser to the Education Department at the University of Otago and to the research group *te Rōpu Rangahau Tikanga Rua*.

Huata Holmes began his evaluation by a courtesy phone call to the schools followed by a letter of introduction in which he explained what he hoped might be achieved and

made suggestions in relation to who might be involved in the process. The agenda and the final decision about who to include was left to the schools themselves.

Hui were attended by Holmes as a member of a small group (*ope whakaeke*), a group in which there was always at least one woman. The members of that group were visitors (*manuhiri*); the school was the host. In the protocols of encounter, Holmes established his connections, connections "between himself, the landscape, the schools, the local communities and the teachers" (Bishop, 1995, p. 83). An important detail omitted by Bishop in his analysis is that the *karakia* invoked spiritual connectedness and correctness of purpose, invocations that were a significant part of the ritualised welcome (*pōwhiri*). The central purpose of the *hui* was then addressed, with the discussion continuing until understanding was reached, the quality and integrity of that understanding being itself susceptible to analysis. Thus, the term 'value' could be applied both to process and outcome in line with the concept of *pono* (authenticity, truth).

Fundamental to Holmes' approach were the principles of listening and being attentive (*whakarongo*), making observations (*titiro*) and speaking and questioning (*kōrero*). In this way, the credibility of both the researcher and the researched were enhanced. The informants were neither directly challenged nor belittled. The sharing of experiences (researcher and informants) was based on the principles of collective oneness (*kotahitanga*) and reciprocity (*manaakitanga*).

That there was a need for resources arising out of the *tikanga* of Southern Māori became clear as a result of the discussions. Hence, a resource development project was jointly initiated, the agreement being that the *tapu* (sacred nature, significance) of these resources (mainly stories) would be protected by use of the Southern Māori dialect: although the resources would be available to all who desired them, the greatest benefit would derive to those who were sufficiently committed to seek to achieve competence in the Southern dialect. Thus, the projects that emerged were bound into the *tikanga* by the processes of *whakawhanaungatanga*. In a reciprocal relationship, the *tikanga* demonstrates the *whanaungatanga*, and the *whanaungatanga* demonstrates the *tikanga*.

The dangers inherent in the use of whanaungatanga as a process

Because all things (every person, animal, plant, rock and thought) have their own *mauri* (essence, potential, essential life force), acknowledgment of the particular *mauri* associated with any project is an essential aspect of an approach that is motivated by *whanaungatanga* (Marsden, 1975). We have seen (see 5.0 above) an example of a successful process based on *whanaungatanga*. Critical to that success was the fact that the *mauri* of the project was fully acknowledged. In any process based on *whanaungatanga*, concession to an alternative ideology (in the form of, for example, an attempt to integrate it with processes based on Western scientific method) is unacceptable: it affects the *mauri* of the project thus rendering it inauthentic and, hence, invalid.

Conclusion

Attempts to define Māori words using English are doomed to failure: such definitions imply a type of cultural congruity that simply does not exist. Equally, attempts to define words in terms of their supposed etymology is unlikely to be successful: the

meanings of a word are more than the sum of the parts from which they may have originally derived. In the case of a complex concept such as the one symbolised by the word 'whanaungatanga', understanding is an integrated process that takes fully into account a range of related concepts. Furthermore, it involves a willingness to accept the importance of the role played by personal experiences in deciding, in particular contexts of use, whether some of the inter-related values involved are to be given more emphasis than others. Where *whanaungatanga* is used within the context of subjective value processes to underlie intervention, the integrity of these processes is dependent upon adherence to Māori principles at all stages. Should philosophical principles or structural approaches derived from any other source be allowed to play a role, the *mauri* of the process will be damaged and the outcomes will, therefore, be unlikely to be satisfactory.

He Tauparapara:

Tihei Mauriora
Ki te whai ao ki te ao mārama
E manawa mai te putanga a te Ariki
E manawa mai hoki te putanga he tauira
He tauira putanga Ariki no runga
Ki te whai ao ki te ao mārama
Whano whano
Hara mai te toki
Hui e,
Haumi e,
Taiki e.

Endnote

¹ "Ass. Prof. Ray Harlow (email dated 27.09.2001) traces thru the proto-language of Polynesia the direct relationship between 'fanau' (short 'a') and 'fānau' (long 'a') - both related to 'family', i.e. those of common parentage - in his opinion, leading to the present-day Māori 'whānau' (long 'a') and its direct relationship with 'whanaunga' and 'whanaungatanga' (both short 'a'). On a confirming note one Maniapoto kaumātua asserts, 'Whanaunga has as direct a relationship with whānau as hua has with huānga!' That is, the importance of the inter-relationship is retained through the context of his Tikanga Māori."

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