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Transformations in Māori Women's Identity: Some Things Change, Some Stay the Same

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While Māori (the indigenous people of New Zealand) retain a strong collective identity, cultural heterogeneity renders traditional conceptualisations of Māori identity increasingly problematic. To demonstrate the diverse ways Māori define and express their own identities, this article reports research that uses life-story interviews to explore personal perceptions of identity among 35 Māori women ages 18–75. Content analysis revealed traditional cultural factors (particularly whānau/family commitment) were important for identity among all participants, although the expression of these factors differed along with age and background. Older women raised in rural communities expressed family commitment through participating in social and economic activities within their own tribal networks. Younger, urbanised Māori expressed their identities by choosing careers which advanced Māori interests, supporting Māori political aspirations, and forming close relationships with other urban Māori. Life-story excerpts are used to illustrate distinct intergenerational differences in expressions of Māori identity as well as descriptions of “Māoriness,” seldom articulated in literature on the topic. The need to expand current paradigms of Māori identity to incorporate the diversity of group members is emphasised.

Keywords: ethnic identity; indigenous psychology; life-stories; Māori identity; narrative psychology; personal identity

Introduction

As the international movement towards indigenous decolonisation has gained momentum, a number of authors have explored the socio-historical legacies of colonisation for indigenous identity and culture (Fahy & Muschenheim 1965; George & Nahwegahbow 1993; Smith 1999; Weaver 2001). Likewise, in New Zealand, the consequences of colonisation for Māori identity have become a key theme of contemporary Māori scholarship (Durie 1985, 1986, 2001, 2004; Hirini 1997, 1998; Kupenga, Rata & Nepe 1993; Puketapu 1979; Ratima & Ratima 1997; Te Whaiti & Puketapu-Andrews 1997). Early in 2009, an all-Māori political party, The Māori Party, established a coalition government with New Zealand's National Party, further highlighting the relevance of Māori aspirations for national identity in New Zealand. The topic has become increasingly prominent in the national media, political circles and academic literature, particularly in relation to Māori and their relationship with Pākehā (New Zealanders of predominantly European ancestry) and other New Zealanders.

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Central to discourses around Māori identity is the Treaty of Waitangi. This was signed in 1840 by (some) Māori Chiefs and representatives of the British Crown and founded New Zealand as a British Colony. While the legal meaning of the treaty remains a source of debate, it continues to play an influential role in New Zealand politics (Orange 1992, 2004). Government officials performing public duties are legally obliged to act consistently with its inherent principles by ensuring that Māori rights to cultural and social equality with Pākehā ('bi-culturalism') are recognised (Orange 2004). Against this backdrop, understanding Māori identity has genuine practical implications for New Zealand's future. Māori are the largest ethnic minority in New Zealand (17.7% of the population) (Statistics New Zealand 2007) and feature prominently in most negative social statistics. Finding ways to effectively "close the gaps" between Māori and Pākehā has become a matter of some urgency to policy makers (Brown 2000; Ministry of Social Development 2002, 2004, 2005; Ministry of Women's Affairs 2001; New Zealand Department of Social Welfare 1988). Reflecting this, government initiatives designed to reduce Māori inequalities in relation to health, criminal offending, and education are required to enhance outcomes for Māori while recognising the unique cultural identity of Māori people (Cram et al. 1999; Hohepa & Jenkins 2004; New Zealand Department of Corrections 2005; New Zealand Ministry of Health 2003).

In terms of addressing Māori cultural needs, prevailing views of Māori identity cohere around concepts which derive from a traditional Māori ecology and emphasise the centrality of traditional Māori values and social organisation (Moeke-Pickering 1996). For the purposes of understanding this approach to Māori identity, a brief historical background is required.

Māori Identity: Socio-Historical Context

Precolonial Māori were socially organised around close-knit kinship groups, and Māori identity was determined by satisfactory fulfilment of social obligations towards kin through service to *whānau* (extended family based on shared genealogy), *hapū* (subtribes composed of several *whānau*), and *iwi* (tribes comprised of *hapū*) (Walker 1990). *Hapū* occupied ancestral (tribal) areas and cultivated communally shared land. *Whānau* obligations were central to self-definition; conducting one's self in a way that honoured the collective mode of operation enabled individuals to achieve a sense of social standing, social acceptance and an identity within their social world (Barlow 1991).

Traditional Māori communal living arrangements were maintained during the early years of Pākehā arrival in New Zealand. By the 1870s, however, Pākehā had gained political power, Māori had lost much of their land through war, and land sales and confiscation and Māori became more reliant on Pākehā landowners for employment (Walker 1990). Until the 1950s, Māori lived largely in rural areas while Pākehā lived in larger New Zealand cities. The maintenance of a distinct Māori identity was possible for Māori in rural environments because *whānua*, *hapū* and *iwi* structures were still largely intact. Further, Māori maintained traditional economic practices such as communal gardening and food gathering from the sea, as they had for generations (Biggs 1960). Moreover, since generations of Māori *whānau* lived in the same communities, Māori were able to observe older Māori role models and hear the Māori language spoken as part of their day to day lives (Beaglehole & Ritchie 1958; Metge 1976, 1990). Māori society changed significantly after the 1950s, however, as New Zealand's economy grew and Māori moved to the cities to seek work. Many Māori found urban settlement a challenge as racism towards Māori was commonplace during that time (Beaglehole & Beaglehole 1946; Edwards 1992), making it hard for

Māori to obtain quality housing and well-paid work (Simon 1998). From the 1970s, the economic and social divisions between Pākehā and Māori widened (Walker 1990).

The relevance of the 160-year period up until the 1970s for understanding definitions of contemporary Māori identity cannot be overemphasised. Māori became disconnected from their extended family networks (*whānau* and *hāpu*) and traditional economic practices. In an effort to “fit in” and succeed among Pākehā, many young urban Māori lost interest in their own culture and language and/or made a conscious effort to become “less” Māori and more like Pākehā (Walker 1975).

The process of Māori deculturation (cultural loss) began to change after the 1970s, however, when educated Māori became increasingly concerned with reversing the effects of Māori land loss and urbanisation (Greenland 1991; Poata-Smith 1997, 2004; Webster 1998). Literature produced by key Māori political figures proposed Pākehā had “stolen” Māori lands, forced Māori to assimilate to Pākehā culture, and suppressed the unique identity of the Māori people (Awatere 1984). Māori political leaders began to demand that Māori rights to cultural equality be exercised by promotion of the Māori language and culture throughout Government institutions, the education system and throughout New Zealand society as a whole (Webster 1998). Political efforts in the 1960s and 1970s were diverse and included high profile “land marches,” land occupations, and regular protests at Waitangi (in the North Island of New Zealand where the Treaty of Waitangi was signed) (Chadwick 1997; Hazlehurst 1993). Māori activism gained media and public attention and placed the New Zealand Government under pressure to deal with Māori demands for restoration (Sissons 1993). Reflecting this, the Treaty of Waitangi was given greater recognition after 1975 with the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal (a forum where Māori could make claims for compensation for breaches of their Treaty rights). In the mid-1980s, the government extended the jurisdiction of the Tribunal to examine Māori grievances retrospective to 1840. This was an important turning point for Māori as it enabled them to make claims to the government for historical injustices against their ancestors (Van Meijl 1995; Van Meijl & Goldsmith 2003).

In response to Māori demands for cultural recognition, the New Zealand government tried various ways of revitalising Māori culture from the 1980s. Sissons (1993) has documented a range of programmes implemented through the New Zealand education system designed to assist Māori to learn their own language (*te reo Māori*) and educate all New Zealanders about the Treaty of Waitangi. A particularly influential initiative was the Kohanga Reo movement launched in 1982, which emphasised teaching Māori under five years of age to speak Māori, as well as encouraging Māori parents to embrace Māori cultural practices in their homes (Tawhiwhirangi et al. 1988; Te Kohanga Reo National Trust 1995). During the 1990s, ‘Kura kaupapa Māori’ (primary and intermediate schools which operated according to Māori pedagogical practices) were also established (Bishop & Glynn 1999), as well as extra curricular activities in “mainstream” schools such as Kapa Haka (cultural) groups, Māori speech contests, and Māori cultural festivals. The focus on Māori cultural revitalisation has continued. For example, a government-supported Māori television station began broadcasting in 2004, with its key mission to promote Māori language and culture to Māori throughout New Zealand (Horomia 2004).

The last 30 years have seen massive changes in New Zealand’s social landscape. Māori have reaffirmed the value of their culture and identity among their own people and gained substantial recognition of their political rights to equality with Pākehā (Metge 1990, 1995). At the same time, the mass assertion of the inherent value of traditional ‘Māoriness’ fostered the view that Māori identity is most appropriately expressed in a traditional way by speaking Māori, engaging in traditional cultural practices and associating with *whānau*,

hapū, and *iwi* (Borell 2005). The tendency to associate Māori identity with these features has become commonplace in New Zealand culture (Webster 1998), and it is these elements which now feature prominently in written descriptions of Māori identity (Barlow 1991; Karetu 1979, 1990, 1993; Pere 1979, 1988; Puketapu 1979) in measurement instruments that assess Māori identity in terms of enculturation (Durie et al. 1996; Stevenson 2001, 2004; Thomas 1998), as well as in models of Māori identity underpinning social and welfare policy effecting Māori people (Sissons 1993; Te Puni Kokiri 1998a, 1998b, 2001, 2001).

While this conceptualisation of Māori identity is influential, to say that Māori are “culturally diverse” is certainly an understatement. As a reflection of socio-historical processes, as well as a high degree of intermarriage and social integration, many Māori are physically and culturally indistinguishable from Pākehā and other non-Māori (Callister 2004; Meredith 2000). Moreover, data from the latest New Zealand census indicate only 23.7% of all Māori can speak Māori, and 20% did know their own tribal affiliations (Statistics New Zealand 2007).

In recognition of Māori cultural heterogeneity, several commentators have divided Māori as “a people” into groups according to the extent to which they are enculturated (can engage competently with “traditional” Māori culture) as opposed to deculturated (distanced from Māori cultural values and practices). For example, Durie (1994) describes three groups of Māori. One group he refers to as “conservative.” Members of this group understand Māori genealogy, speak Māori, and are familiar with Māori custom. Another group are “bi-cultural”; that is, they identify as Māori yet are socially competent among Pākehā. A third group find it difficult to be accepted by Pākehā yet know little about their Māori heritage, ancestry, and culture. Williams (2000) acknowledges four different “types” of Māori and estimates their population sizes. He describes “traditional Māori” (numbering 100,000–150,000) as those who live near traditional tribal areas and are bi-cultural to varying degrees. A second group he describes as “primarily urban” (also numbering 100,000–150,000). This group identifies with their extended Māori *whānau*, *hapu*, and *iwi* but live in urban contexts. These individuals tend to look physically Māori and are also “culturally Māori.” A third group he refers to as “unconnected” and number 100,000–150,000. This group has no strong association with Māori *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi*. Physically they are identifiably Māori but may not see that identity as particularly positive. The fourth group he refers to as New Zealanders of Māori descent. These group members have Māori genealogy but may claim to be New Zealanders (or ‘Kiwi’). In his view, this group comprise around 170,000 of the New Zealand population.

Research supports the view that Māori are diverse in terms of their perception of what it means to be Māori. For example, Te Hoe Nuku Roa (a longitudinal survey of Māori families carried out by researchers from Massey University, New Zealand) found that among 956 Māori over 15 years of age (from the Manawatu, Gisborne, Wellington, and Auckland regions), more than 50% saw their Māori identities as a “very important” aspect of how they saw themselves. However, when asked if speaking Māori or being able to speak Māori was important to them, only 42.4% said it was extremely important, 37% said it was important, and 19.5% said it was unimportant or extremely unimportant (Te Hoe Nuku Roa 1999).

While some Māori may not view Māori culture and language as personally important to them, other studies indicate Māori have a keen interest in expressing themselves culturally as Māori. For example, a report from Creative New Zealand (1999) indicated that from 1997–1998, Māori were more likely than other groups to be involved in cultural arts and activities as a student or teacher. Nearly half of Māori (45%) took part in some form

of Māori arts or cultural activity. Māori women and those between the ages of 45 and 59 had the highest level of participation (50%).

Results from the 2001 New Zealand census showed that Māori parents seem committed to encouraging their children to learn their language and culture. In testimony to this, in July 2001 nearly 10 000 Māori children were enrolled in *kohanga reo* (Māori “language nests”), and these children made up 31% of all Māori enrolments in early childhood education (Ministry of Education 2001).

How, then, do we reconcile cultural hybridity (Meredith 2000), variations in the interest Māori show in their culture, with statistics that indicate that Māori identity remains very important to many Māori people? Perhaps some Māori who self-define as Māori simply feel Māori culture has little relevance in their lives, while others want to express themselves culturally as Māori to promote their self-esteem or simply for enjoyment. Indeed, international research has suggested that negative experiences “push” ethnicity to the fore for minorities, and this inspires them to learn their own history and culture to promote self-esteem (Jackson 1999). This could apply to Māori. Given that the national media frequently publicises negative statistics about Māori people (in relation to crime, health, unemployment and education), it is virtually impossible for New Zealanders to avoid exposure to the idea that Māori are a group which is “behind” *Pākehā* in most areas of public life (Walker 1995). In addition, several recent studies indicate Māori continue to be the victims of prejudice and negative stereotypes from *Pākehā* New Zealanders (for discussions see Bayard, Holmes & Murachver 2001; McCreanor 1993b, 1995, 1997, 2005). Embracing Māori culture may be a way of buffering Māori from the negative impacts of these factors.

This prompts the question: How should Māori identity be conceptualised if *not* in terms of enculturation? Limiting understandings of how this question may be addressed is a scarcity of published research that explores the diverse ways in which Māori interpret and express their own identities. While some recent research in this area has explored identity among urban Māori youth (Borell 2005), scholarly literature has tended to be descriptive rather than explanatory and is concerned with articulating traditional conceptions of Māori identity (Barlow 1991; Karetu 1979, 1990, 1993; Pere 1979, 1988; Puketapu 1979). In addition, studies of Māori identity have tended to use quantitative measures to explore levels of enculturation and deculturation (Stevenson 2001, 2004; Te Hoe Nuku Roa 1999; Thomas 1998) as opposed to identifying the key aspects that Māori individuals see as relevant to their own Māori identities. This article aims to shed light on diverse Māori identity forms by discussing research which explores the meanings a group of Māori women associate to being Māori.

Identity: The Life-Story Model

For the purposes of the research, identity was treated as “held” within life-stories (explained below). To define identity, I follow Harris (1995) and Scheibe (1998), who describe identity as those aspects of the self-concept that pertain to “who” a person is and how they “fit in” with others in the social world. Māori women’s identity is defined as how Māori women see themselves as Māori, that is, the self-definitions, self-descriptions, and self-evaluations they attach to themselves when asked to describe their Māori identity.

In seeking a theoretical treatment of identity, several approaches were reviewed which fall into two broad perspectives. The first assumes identity is something “real,” that is, constructed and fashioned into a comprehensible form “in the mind” of the person. For example McCall and Simmons (1966) treat identity as akin to social role and argue that people internalise (adopt as their own) the characteristics associated with the roles they

occupy. In their view, people learn beliefs about what they “should” be like, which are stored in the mind as self-concepts that determine how they should think, act, and feel as the occupant of a particular social role. Tajfel (1981) distinguishes between personal identity and social identity. He suggests, however, that “internalised identities” are shaped by social roles, and since individuals are not simply passive absorbers of societal expectations, each has a personal identity of his or her “own.” Stryker (1968, 1980, 1987) also conceives of identity as a multifaceted internal structure, but stresses the flexible nature of identity — particularly how different role-identities (including nationality, ethnicity, gender, family, social class, occupation and sexuality) vary in salience, depending on social demands (Stryker & Statham 1985).

The strong influence of social circumstances upon identity has given rise to the second broad approach to identity, which bypasses the notion of any internal aspects in order to focus specifically upon the representations of self that people display in the course of social interactions (Alexander & Lauderdale 1977; Alexander & Wiley 1981; Goffman 1959, 1963).

From this perspective, identity is not present in the mind of the person; rather, “it” emerges in response to social context. While several studies have found that individuals change their self-presentation in an effort to present their most desirable features (Alston, Bell & Feist-Price 1996; Snow & Anderson 1987), the treatment of identity as a situated aspect of self-experience posits a rather extreme version of the individual as constantly changing to fit into the social milieu (Burr 1995). This has led Abrams and Hogg (2001) to suggest that what is described by situated treatments of identity is an “interpersonal aspect” of self, which does not necessarily reflect the “true” objective identity people have but rather testifies more to the powerful human drive to save face in social situations (also see Brewer 1991). Indeed, there is little evidence to suggest that people actually experience their identities as “fragmented” and constantly changing to gain the acceptance of those around them (Rosenberg 1981). Rather, the need to consolidate a firm identity (or clear sense of who one is and what that means as a member of society) has been found to be central to adolescent development (Marcia 1966, 1967, 1976, 1980, 1993). In fact, it is difficult to imagine living without an identity we see as “ours” that we carry with us throughout our lives (Smith 1988). In this respect, situated expressions of identity may best be viewed as “managerial,” or as a selection of an appropriate aspect of a person’s identity, influenced by situational factors but not entirely determined by them (Abrams 1999).

In an effort to reconcile the changing and consistent features of identity, Turner (1968, cited in Gordon & Gergen 1968) sees identity as a multidimensional feature of self-experience, made up of self-conceptions and self-images which are flexible and ever-changing. In his view, individuals have objective dimensions of identity (self-definitions, self-evaluations, and self-meanings) that accumulate over the course of a lifetime. While some of these self-conceptions are stable and enduring, they can also be malleable and may alter over time and situation as the appropriateness of those concepts is evaluated and changed to accommodate new information.

In developing a conceptual framework for understanding how people weave the changing and consistent elements of identity into a cohesive sense of self, a key task for theorists has been to clarify how identities and the life-events that shape them are integrated in the mind of the individual in a way that connects the past, present and future (Eakin 2000; Ezzy 1998; Glover 1988; Lieblich & Josselson 1994; Linde 1993). Numerous theorists (Atkinson 1999; Bruner 1987, 1997; Glover 1988) have suggested that the process of ordering one’s life meaningfully in this regard is achieved through the construction on an internal narrative or “inner story” that amalgamates a person’s self-knowledge, associates

that knowledge with life experiences, and orders those experiences within an intelligible autobiography (Atkinson 1999; Ezzy 1998; Kenyon & Randall 1997; Sarbin 1986, 1993). A key contributor to the theoretical development on this topic, Dan McAdams (1985, 1994, 2001), argues that one's life-story may be conceived as an inner and objective identity. That is, for McAdams, life-stories are socialised, private, resilient, and comprise an accumulation of the person's own personal understandings of who he or she is and what that means as a member of society. At the same time, the life-story may be situation-specific because the expression of identity that people make publicly may be viewed as a selection of the appropriate aspects of a person's life-story expressed to accommodate the demands of a particular situation.

Reinforced by the capacity of this view to acknowledge both the situational and resilient aspects of identity, I adopted this life-story model for my own research. However, the appeal of the model was not limited to its theoretical inclusivity. This approach to identity doubles as a data collection method (discussed below). Given that a key aim of this research was to discover perceptions of Māori identity not typically studied, it seemed important to use research methods which allowed women to talk about identity without being influenced by my own ideas. Bertaux and Kohli (1984) have suggested the life-story method of interviewing is appropriate in this regard as the technique gives "free reign to individuals" to speak about issues as they see fit and thus minimises the imposition of the researcher's preconceptions on the topic reported. Moreover, Māori have been found to show a strong cultural preference for the use of story-telling to pass on knowledge (Bishop 1996; Bishop & Glynn 1999), partly because the method is relatively empowering insofar that it gives people who would not typically have their ideas expressed in academic literature the chance to have their own words acknowledged (Oplatka 2001). Given the salience of Māori issues in the national media and education system, I believed women would be able to speak with authority about their Māori identities without being guided by specific questions and therefore was confident employing this technique.

Participants

Participants were located by various means. Seven of the participants were known to me personally. To elicit their involvement, I simply asked if they would be prepared to speak about their Māori identity as part of my research, and if they agreed we set an interview time. Another seven participants were students at the University of Auckland, whom I did not know personally prior to the study. To locate these women I placed notices around the university advertising my research. Interested students contacted me by telephone, we talked about the research, and if they agreed we met for an interview. The remaining women were associated with an Auckland-based Māori Urban Health and Social Services organisation that provided support for the study. Once I had been given permission by the Chief Executive Officer of this organisation to approach staff, employees of the organisation were asked if they would be prepared to participate, or if they knew women who would be interested in speaking about their Māori identity as part of my research. Twenty-one participants were located using this approach.

Sample Characteristics

All women were of Māori descent, identified as Māori, and stated the following *iwi* affiliations (four women reported affiliation with more than one *iwi*): Ngāpuhi (4), Te Aupouri/Whakatohea (4), Te Rarawa (3), Ngāti Whatua (1), Tainui (2), Te Arawa (1),

Tuhoe (1), Ngāti Porou (6), Ngāti Kahungunu (1), Te Ati Awa (1), and Ngai Tahu (1). Three age-related cohorts were defined. The first (cohort one – aged over 60 years) comprised women born prior to the 1950s who were raised in mainly Māori communities and in Māori cultural contexts. The second (cohort two – between 35 and 49) comprised women born between 1950 and 1970, a period marked by rapid Māori urbanisation and increased contact between Māori and Pākehā. The third (cohort three – between 18 and 35) comprised women born after 1970, who came of age after the beginnings of the Māori cultural renaissance.

The first cohort included 19 participants, the second included eight, and the third included eight. The women were working in a variety of occupations. Five were in health and social work, one woman was a tertiary teacher, two were self-employed, one was a clinical psychologist, and one woman held an administrative position in local government. The remaining participants were either students, retired, between jobs, or occupied on a part-time basis in voluntary work. Of the 18 participants under age 60, 15 participants had at least some formal tertiary education (eight of these women were university students at the time of participating in the study) and one had been schooled to secondary level. Data regarding education were not gathered from participants over 60. However, none mentioned tertiary education as part of their life-stories, and because it is so uncommon for Māori women in this age group to have had any tertiary education one would expect them to mention it if they had.

The choice to interview women exclusively was made for several reasons. Because of my own gender and ethnicity (as a Māori woman), I was particularly interested in the experience of Māori women. I also felt more qualified to interview women. Asking someone to provide their life-story is a relatively intrusive form of data collection. The interviews are also time-consuming and often touch upon issues that are difficult or uncomfortable to discuss with a stranger (Anastas 1999). As such, the establishment of rapport between the interviewee and researcher is an essential aspect of the method. With this in mind, I believed it was more appropriate to work with women as they might be more likely to feel an affinity with me and feel comfortable speaking freely about their personal issues.

It is also important to note that in traditional Māori society, women were barred from participating in certain activities and barred from taking up certain social roles (Fletcher 2000). While these practices are not universal among contemporary Māori, I was concerned they would effect what older Māori men would discuss with me. While no studies have examined this specific issue among Māori, research has found that older European men alter what they discuss about themselves when interviewed by an opposite sex interviewer more than older women do. In a study which explored discourses around ageing, Stephenson, Wolfe, Coughlan and Koehn (1999) found people over age 67 changed how they spoke about themselves during interviews depending on the interviewer's gender. While I certainly do not propose that only women should interview Māori women, the potential for data to be obscured by gender dynamics was enough to prompt me to focus solely on women for this particular study.

Methods

Life-stories were gathered from these 35 Māori women using an open-ended story telling technique, whereby interviewees were asked to tell their life-story freely. Protocols were kept as consistent as possible for all interviews. I began by introducing myself, gave an explanation of the research, asked women to sign written consent forms and for permission to tape-record their life-stories. Once completed, I explained that "I am interested in your

Māori identity.” I then asked them to describe their Māori identity by recounting the story of their life from year to year until the time they were interviewed. Rather than explaining every event recalled, women were asked to focus on how they interpreted what it meant to be Māori and the factors (events/people/experiences) that shaped those beliefs. When women asked for clarification I suggested they describe some of their earliest childhood memories, then school experiences, and then work experiences and/or relationships and children (if appropriate) and how they may have shaped how they felt about being Māori. As it was important to gather “unexpected material” in personal accounts (Anastas 1999), I emphasised that participants should feel free to include any details they felt appropriate without censoring their ideas in any way. During the course of the interviews I avoided interrupting the women; however, when appropriate I asked pertinent questions, asked them to clarify points of interest and to provide examples when aspects of their stories were not clear.

Data Analysis

Collected data comprised 35 verbatim transcripts varying from 8–25 pages in length (single spaced). Although other analyses were conducted, in this article I discuss results from a content analysis (Berelson 1952; Holsti 1969) conducted to identify the most common meanings, descriptions, and associated behaviours women recounted they “had” or “did” because they were Māori. To do this I read through each transcript and identified any references (e.g., statements, paragraphs, or longer vignettes) women made that described what their Māori identities meant to them. Each transcript was treated in the same way and was read at least three times to ensure references were not overlooked or categorised incorrectly. All efforts were made to identify the manifest content of manuscripts by analysing each transcript line by line. I looked for recurring words, experiences, concepts, and phrases in transcripts. In cases when the woman’s data were not clear or the category in which references should be included ambiguous, the women were contacted for clarification. Once recurring words, experiences, concepts, and phrases were noted and checked for accuracy, these were counted to identify the most common factors women cited. Once this was completed, I examined all available data and synthesised recurring concepts into salient categories. This allowed me to identify key themes as they emerged from the data and define the key factors women associated with their Māori identities. All of the women were offered a copy of their interview transcripts, and these were provided on request. No participants returned amended transcripts although one participant telephoned me and pointed out an error in the *iwi* affiliation she had reported.

Results

Each woman expressed her own unique view about what it meant to be Māori; however, several factors were commonly cited. I understand “common” to mean that more than 10 women referred to each factor. Although these numbers are too small to be amenable to statistical analysis, when working with a modest sample one may view them as potentially significant.

All women, regardless of age, reported that they defined themselves as Māori because they were biologically of Māori descent. Eighteen women from cohort one, seven women from cohort two, and six women from cohort three reported that *whānau* (family) and *whānaungatanga* (fostering family relationships) were central to their Māori identity. Twelve women from cohort one, eight women from cohort two, and five women from

Table 1
Meanings associated to identifying as Māori by cohort

Meaning	Cohort one Aged 60–75	Cohort two 35–49	Cohort three 18–35	Total
Genealogy	19	8	8	35
Whānau/Whānaungatanga	18	7	6	31
Tikanga Māori	12	8	5	25
Spirituality	15	3	3	21
Racism	3	8	7	18
Total	19	8	8	–

cohort three reported that Māori custom and language was important to their Māori identity. Fifteen women from cohort one, three women from cohort two, and three women from cohort three reported that religion and spirituality (Māori and non-Māori spiritual beliefs) were central to their Māori identity. Three women from cohort one, eight women from cohort two, and seven women from cohort three reported that identifying as Māori meant that one may be subject to racism and that their experiences in this regard shaped their Māori identities. Table 1 provides an overview.

In examining women's stories it was evident that, although women associated the same factors with being Māori, how they expressed those factors varied according to their specific life experiences. The richness of qualitative data makes it difficult to extract one single aspect of identity to illustrate these diverse identity expressions. However, given that *whānau* and *whānaungatanga* were so frequently cited, I have chosen to focus on these particular factors. Excerpts below are used to demonstrate how *whānau* and *whānaungatanga* were important for the identities of Māori women of diverse ages and backgrounds and how, as socio-economic conditions changed across generations, so did the way in which these particular aspects of Māori identity find expression.

Excerpts on *whānau* and *whānaungatanga*

Women from cohort one, born prior to the 1950s, spent their formative years in rural communities when Māori social, cultural and economic structures were still intact. Many recalled sharing homes, material belongings and food with their extended families and, when they described what it meant to be Māori, referred to the close *whānau* relationships they experienced. For example:

To me Māori identity is about whānau. Though I don't think that was ever taught to us directly. More that was just the normal way to live. We all lived and worked together. (Cohort 1:11)

As many Māori of that era continued to engage in communal economic practices the association of *whānau* to Māori identity was linked directly to working alongside their own *whānau* members. Women recalled that large families were common, that children all had their role in the *whānau*, and each individual member had chores to perform in the service of *whānau* well-being. Activities such as cultivating gardens and gathering seafood

together, caring for younger relatives, and doing chores for their parents and grandparents were typically mentioned. For example:

All of the Māoris in them days bring each other up, you know, the children would pair off and mind a younger one . . . That's how the Māori becomes united because the children brought one another up even though the parents were there. And we all went to church and we all, we all had chores to do before we went to school and that was right through, right through our lives. (Cohort 1:3)

Apart from supporting each other, women frequently commented that Māori identity was predicated upon sharing basic resources with extended *whānau* members. For example:

If we had a lot of seafood one week, mum would send one of us over to their house with some of it. Same with vegetables from the gardens. That's how Māori never went without because it worked the other way as well. If others had a lot of something, and we were short, then they would share it with us. (Cohort 1:9)

Given that Māori identity was seen as related to social and material support from close kin, women of this generation lamented that younger Māori families are disadvantaged because of their isolation and dislocation from their extended *whānau*. For example:

I actually feel sorry for the younger ones these days. We never went without anything because, we shared what we had. (Cohort 1:6)

Women from the next cohort of participants, between 35 and 49 years old at the time of being interviewed, were among the first generations of Māori raised in city environments after the 1960s. These women reported very different formative conditions from cohort one, as well as limited contact with biological *whānau* during their childhood years. For example:

We didn't see our whānau back home because . . . we couldn't really afford to go home a lot. It was really hard, well we loved to go, we always wanted to go. Dad was so stressed. He would stress all the time. Probably because of money, you know it was expensive to just up and go so we tended not to see our whānau much at all. (Cohort 2:3)

Despite being distanced from biological *whānau*, seven of the eight referred to *whānau* as central to their Māori identities. For example:

We were raised to be family-orientated which may sound strange because we didn't have anything to do with our extended Māori family. Mum never really talked about that side of things and we didn't ever get to see them. But our own whānau, was really very close – we had to be – to look after each other. (Cohort 2:1)

In the absence of their “real” *whānau*, women established *whānau* relationships with other Māori they had met at school, work, and through sporting and religious activities. Based

upon shared interests and close proximity, these relationships were seen as real *whānau* whom they could call upon for support when necessary. For example:

We couldn't have a lot to do with our Māori cousins as such until we got a lot older so the families that we grew up with – there was about six families in our street who became a whānau. We still are today. They are like my whānau more than my blood whānau because we made and became a whānau. We all arrived and that in that area in the late 1950s early 60s so we all went to school together, went through all the schools together, we grew up together, our kids grew up together so we've made ourselves, like our street is our whānau. (Cohort 2:7)

Women in this cohort also suggested that by choosing work that advanced Māori interests they were expressing a commitment to Māori “as a people” and therefore expressing their Māori identities. For example:

Even though I don't speak Māori and – I am pretty fair-skinned I think I am just as Māori as other Māori people. My way of expressing that is through my priorities in my life. I think I do a lot for Māori people in my work and I commit myself to Māori students. I guess that I wear that commitment on the inside. (Cohort 2:5)

Several of the women in cohort two believed that their choice to associate with Māori they met through work and education was motivated by the desire to find a sense of belonging in situations where Māori were underrepresented. In this respect, associating with (supporting and being supported by) other Māori was seen as a source of security in primarily Pākehā environments. They referred to such relationships as being ‘*whānau-like*’ relationships. For example:

When I first started working there I found that all the Māoris there would kind of stick together. Probably because there was just a handful [few] of us at work. I guess that is normal. So we formed our own whānau support network. (Cohort 2:3)

While women in this group were aware that Māori identity is typically associated with specific cultural features, several emphasised that Māori identity should not require specific cultural skills. Rather, being Māori was about having a subjective commitment to identifying as Māori. For example:

I don't think there's one type of Māori— or that there should be an ideal way to be. I don't think you can say this is a Māori person and this is Māori identity because it's different for different people. It is really how you choose to identify yourself. (Cohort 2:2)

Similar sentiments were evident among women from cohort three, 18–35, who had also been raised in urban environments after the 1970s. As a reflection of the Māori cultural and political renaissance, many in this group had attended Māori language schools and studied Māori identity at university. Reflecting this, they described their Māori identities as being related to ‘*whānau*’ they had met through university and school. For example:

How I started to really connect with my Māori side was when I started taking classes at AUT . . . So, yeah, we connected as a whānau through that and that is how I got in touch with my own Māori identity. We had all sorts of sports and cultural things going on – but I think at the bottom of it I feel most Māori is when I am with other Māori people – my own whānau or my Māori friends and work or netball or whatever. Like we weren't like related but it didn't really matter because we were all Māori. (Cohort 3:1)

Women in cohort three had been exposed to educational experiences which conveyed the message that Māori are a unique people with a “special” culture worth celebrating and special rights as partners under the Treaty of Waitangi. Reflecting these circumstances, many talked about *whānau* as something special that Māori value and therefore important for Māori identity. For example:

I think Māori priorities are like family and . . . support and stuff and that's no really, oh well it is, but Pākehā people have a more like “me first” and then “if I'm all right, then I can look after everyone else.” Māori people help others and then they help themselves from, you know, being a support system for others, like they feed each other. (Cohort 3:2)

Due to their relatively higher levels of socio-political education younger women were more likely to see *whānau* as a concept that extended beyond biological family to Māori people in general and even to indigenous people as a broader group. In addition, several women in the younger cohort were acutely aware of the current distinction between enculturated and deculturated Māori and expressed frustration that alternative Māori identity forms tend to be perceived as “less” Māori. For example:

I'm not saying that te reo and Kapa Haka (the Māori language and performing arts) aren't important, they are important but that's not all there is, you know, for us to think that that's all there is denying the whole majority of us . . . if you look at the people who . . . are the culturally connected in that strongest sense, they are a very small proportion of all of us and yet so much resources and so much decision making power is centered in that small group, it makes me wonder who . . . are we aiming at, it ain't us. . . you know. As far as I'm concerned you are Māori if you have whakapapa (you can claim Māori descent). And whakapapa is a concept that I think transcends all those things because it exists regardless of your knowledge of it. (Cohort 3:3)

This comment highlights the view of some of the women of cohort two and three that Māori identity should not be evaluated in terms of cultural abilities. This notion is captured in this final excerpt from a young participant who was urban born and raised.

I remember when I was about 10 we had to do this speech at school. We had to like say our tribe and marae and our mountain. I was saying that to my class before I even knew anything about where my tribe was from. I mean I knew it – but didn't really relate to it. For me, when I think about being Māori I don't really think about my mountain although I am supposed to. I think more about my Māori friends at school and what it was like for us. There are a lot of

negative things about Māori out there – on T.V. So being Māori for me is about sticking together – with each other. That to me is whānau. (Cohort 3:1)

As this comment demonstrates, Māori identity for younger women in this study was derived not from the factors typically associated with being a “real Māori” but from feeling connected with other Māori in their social networks. The reference made to Māori friends at school as being ‘whānau’ is meaningful in this regard because it highlights the resilience of whānau commitment for younger Māori although the expression of that commitment may differ from previous generations.

Summary

Participants' accounts demonstrate the ways in which common features underpin the identities of Māori women of different age groups and from diverse backgrounds. Having Māori genealogy, whānau (family), and whānaungatanga (family relationships) were central to Māori identity for all participants. However, because women reported different social contexts and life experiences they expressed those elements of identity in different ways.

Reflecting their formative conditions, participants born prior to urbanisation described their Māori identity as derived from communal economic activities (gardening and fishing) and resource-sharing with biological kin. Younger participants, ages 35–49, also described their Māori identities as related to whānau, however their definition of whānau included Māori they had met through work, education, and social activities in their urban contexts. Rather than communal economic activity as the basis of these whānau connections, they emphasised that Māori united together in urban contexts out of a need to establish a sense of unity or belonging in situations where Māori were the minority. In this respect, urban whānau provided psychological and emotional support to them in contexts which were challenging for Māori to succeed as individuals. Postrenaissance Māori, ages 18–35, also extended the concept of whānau to include nonbiological kin and saw their Māori identity as related to a psychological commitment to Māori people as a broader social category.

Discussion and Conclusion

Before drawing any conclusions, several limitations in this study are obvious and require mention. The study sample was small and men were not included; therefore, the findings are not generalisable to men or to Māori as an entire group.

It is also recognised that the validity of life-stories as factual data sources has been challenged by several authors. Baumeister (1991), for example, argues that because few people can tell a life-story that encompasses every single act or experience, they are a product of selective memory, and as such, we must be sceptical of the authenticity of people's accounts of their own past. Similarly, Burr (1995) comments upon the fallibility of recollections of one's personal past, observing that as they are constructed from memory they share memory's incomplete nature.

In relation to this concept, McAdams recognises that an individual's memories may be distorted in order to maintain consistency with the individual's current views. This is known as “retrospective bias” (Baumeister 1991; Marcus 1986). Given the potentially selective, distorted nature of the recollections of our own past, one might ask whether recollected life-stories should be dismissed as too subjective to be included in a scientific study.

However, in his defence of the use of the life-story method, McAdams (2001) observes that life-stories should not be seen as lacking authenticity. He argues that life-stories must rely upon actual events to some extent because they would be very difficult to imagine “out of thin air.” In his view, life-stories should be seen as a product of real personal experiences and what the individual chooses to remember and understand and adopt. As such, life-stories seem to be based upon the facts of a person’s life, although not completely consistent with them.

To argue for the validity of life-stories as data sources, I emphasise that the aim of this study was to explore women’s interpretations of their own identities and not to collect factually precise historical data (Bluck & Levine 1998; Kenyon & Randall 1997; Kestenberg 1994; Robinson & Taylor 1998). As such, it was unnecessary to try and verify the precise accuracy of each woman’s account. Aside from this justification, the authenticity of each individual life-story is also supported by the fact that many of the women, in the same age cohort but from diverse familial backgrounds, recalled similar factors as influential in shaping their identities. The fact that many women reported that the same type of personal relationships, significant experiences, and key events shaped their lives suggests that women’s accounts describe the effects of genuine social phenomena, which touched all of them.

These results do not imply that Māori women are somehow unique in their emphasis on family for self-definition and self-conception. Previous research has highlighted the centrality of domestic roles and family ties for Western women (Josselson 1996) and men (Stephenson et al. 1999). Rather, Māori women’s accounts have been compared in order to convey the effects of urbanisation on the identities of generations of Māori women and to demonstrate that personal experiences of Māori identity should be seen as a reflection of the communities and historical contexts in which individuals are born and raised.

Even with these limitations in mind, I believe the study highlights a number of issues relevant to contemporary understandings of Māori identity. Current convention is to define Māori identity in terms of enculturation and conceptualise Māori identity as most appropriately expressed by speaking Māori, engaging in traditional cultural practices, and having an active engagement in one’s own *whānau*, *hapū*, and *iwi* (Borell 2005). However, women in this study saw their Māori identities as defined by their relationships with other Māori people — the connections they shared with them and the social, material, and emotional support derived from those relationships. The variants of traditional *whānau* forms discussed here reflect socio-historical transformations. As Māori have adapted to urbanisation, many have developed ways of finding support and connection with other Māori who face similar circumstances. The development of new *whānau* forms can be seen as an adaptation to the social milieu as a way of ensuring Māori culture and people continue to prosper and survive in environments in which they are the minority and, in some cases, subject to prejudice and discrimination.

The finding that Māori associate their identity with belonging to a close knit group of Māori (not necessarily biologically related) is consistent with research conducted by Borell (2005), who found that Māori youth in South Auckland described their identities as being influenced by variables that were relevant and specific to their own social networks and daily practical needs as opposed to traditional markers of Māori enculturation. Borell used qualitative interviews to explore the subjective perceptions of identity among young Māori living in South Auckland. Participants were aware that having an

“authentic Māori identity” was typically related to cultural features. However, many participants talked about a sense of being Māori that reflected their own social networks, which were highly valued and with which they interacted daily. Participants said they gained a sense of self-confidence, status, and belonging from being associated with close friends in their local community, and this gave them a sense of pride and endorsed their identity.

Research involving Māori youth gangs in the Auckland area has also highlighted the centrality of a sense of belonging to Māori identity. Eggleston (2000) recorded and conducted thematic analysis of 54 recorded interviews with young Māori gang members and found that Māori youth are attracted to gang membership due to a deep desire for togetherness in the gang and the sense of belonging that gang membership provided. Gang membership provided a sense of identity because members were seen and accepted as part of a group that they could call their own.

In describing contemporary forms of *whānau* variation among Māori, Durie (2001) has distinguished between ‘*whānau*’ (groups which affiliate on the basis of biological descent) and ‘*kaupapa whānau*’ (groups which affiliate on shared interests and aspirations). According to Durie, both forms may be seen as constituting *whānau* because both provide the social, material, and psychological support that is the essence of *whānaungatanga*. If, as the findings of this modest study and previous research suggest, the essence of Māori identity is *whānaungatanga*, this points to an alternative definition of Māori identity as the person’s unique interpretation of what it means to be Māori which provides them with a sense of belonging and reflects their own social background, relationships and circumstances.

This is not to suggest that speaking Māori and understanding Māori culture or having a close connection to one’s own *whānau* and *hapū* is not important to Māori identity. Instead, it is suggested that these factors may be seen as a potential resource in the development of a positive sense of being Māori and not as a gauge of who is really Māori.

In terms of addressing the question of how Māori identity may best be supported three comments may be made.

First, in investigating Māori culture, we need to move beyond seeing authentic Māori identity as related to being involved with ‘*iwi*,’ as Māori communities have changed. It is important to acknowledge the changing nature of identity and intergenerational differences.

Second, the findings reported here support the view that strengthening Māori *whānau* is critical for the promotion of Māori identity, and therefore any policy or approach to facilitating Māori development which is not compatible with *whānau* values and aspirations is not likely to be received well by Māori people (Durie 1985, 1998, 1999, 2001). At the same time, while this research endorses the centrality of *whānau* for Māori identity and Māori well-being, the findings outlined here indicate the concept of *whānau* is a very broad one among Māori. It therefore seems appropriate that policy should be developed that is responsive to differing forms of *whānau*, since what is important for achieving a positive sense of identity and well-being is a sense of belonging.

Finally, given that the majority of Māori are young and urban-dwelling (Te Puni Kokiri 2001) and that a key requirement for a positive Māori identity is a sense of connection and belonging, identifying ways to ensure young Māori are provided with positive *whānau* associations is pivotal. Further research could focus on identifying the particular challenges younger Māori face in forming positive *whānau* networks and which social relationships promote pro-social values and activities among this group. Better understanding of these phenomena may highlight how Māori identity may be nurtured and shed light not only on how Māori may move forward as a people, but also on how New Zealand’s wider social fabric is continually transforming.

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