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Collective action by Māori in response to flooding in the southern Rangitīkei region

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ABSTRACT

The capacity of Indigenous communities to respond collectively to crises consistently shows the importance of shared traditions values and practices and genealogical ties. Government responses to traumatic events that affect whole communities tend to be generic in their scope overlooking the significant strengths and resources held by Indigenous peoples. This study presents a Kaupapa Māori case study of collaborative efforts to respond to traumatic events between several communities of local tribes, immigrant tribes, and tau-iwi (non-Indigenous people). Concentrated on a rural community prone to flooding, this study examined community efforts to provide support for those affected by flooding in the Southern Rangitīkei area of New Zealand. Key informants included 10 Indigenous community leaders (ICL), and 22 health and social service community practitioners. Four key themes were identified: Collective aspirations mobilise in traumatic events; genealogical relationships bring people together; collective leadership drives the vision; and Indigenous values inform responses to traumatic events. A salient outcome was that shared historical connection, and shared aspirations for cultural regeneration activated Indigenous communities to engage in collective action. Key barriers and enablers to collective action between Māori and tau-iwi are presented. Recommendations for analysing further responses to trauma in Indigenous communities are proposed.

Introduction

Māori are the Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand. As a country colonised by the British, Māori have endured and survived massive depopulation through mortality and decreased fertility due to infectious disease, war, land alienation, malnutrition and mass immigration from Britain and Europe (Moewaka Barnes and McCreanor 2019). Survival under colonisation has meant that Indigenous people are able to draw on collective worldviews and practices that center our survival when government responses, through direct or indirect actions, place Indigenous communities at risk, or exacerbate existing vulnerabilities (Wimsatt 2017). While the effects of colonisation for Indigenous peoples globally have seen significant disconnection from tribal lands, language, culture, and knowledge, research shows that traditional responses to disasters are grounded in cultural worldviews (Kenney and Phibbs 2015; Lambert 2014). A consistent finding in

the disaster management literature with Indigenous communities highlights the importance of cultural values: the role of extended family, (whānau) community vision, responsible caring (manaakitanga) Indigenous knowledge (mātauranga), tribal institutions and infrastructures (iwi, hapū and rūnanga), customary protocols (tikanga) and leadership (rangatiratanga) (Hudson and Hughes 2007; Krieg 2009; Rumbach and Foley 2014; Wimsatt 2017). Indigenous cultural values therefore play a vital role in disaster responses, and disaster management plans as they reflect the salient worldviews and prioritises within these communities. Indigenous responses however are often hampered by government responses that while sometimes well intentioned, ignore the effects of historical trauma on a community's capacity to prepare and recover from a disaster. Effective collaborations between official organisations and Indigenous communities are vital to a recovery process that ensures that tribal traditions are maintained (Groom, Cheyenne, LaRoque, Mason and McLaughlin, et al. 2009; Hudson and Hughes 2007).

Hudson and Hughes (2007) undertook a comprehensive study of Māori responses to a flood that occurred in 2004 across the Manawatu-Whanganui region. The area in the Hudson and Hughes study while closely related through the river and its tributaries lies outside the tribal region within this study. However, the impact of the flood and the collective responses are highly relevant. The authors noted that an estimated 2500 people were displaced and 400 homes remained uninhabited three months after the floods. The significant infrastructure damage included four bridges that were destroyed, major highways were blocked for up to 75 days, 15,500 households experienced power outages and both cell and landline telecommunications were affected. These impacts highlight the importance of locally based and coordinated responses to disaster that also involves understanding of the strengths, resources, needs and preferences of indigenous communities (Kenney and Phibbs 2015; Lambert 2014; McLachlan et al. 2012).

This article takes a closer look at a previous PhD study focusing on health and social service collaboration in the southern Rangitikei (McLachlan 2019). By revisiting aspects of the PhD research, this paper seeks to explore the collective actions of Indigenous communities as they respond to traumatic events. Rangitīkei district in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand has a population of less than 20,000. The Rangitīkei district is less culturally diverse than the rest of the country with 16% Māori and 84% European (Thomas and Cowie 2004). Ngā Wairiki – Ngāti Apa are the paramount tribes of the Southern Rangitīkei (Huwyler 1998). The area and tribes of the southern Rangitīkei are not strangers to trauma and devastation. The Ngāti Apa Mana Whenua report (Huwyler 1998) describes internal conflicts between Ngāti Apa hapū (sub-tribes); however, during times of conflict and war with other tribes (Huwyler 1998), collective relationships were strengthened to ensure the tribe's survival.

Strengthening relationships during traumatic events are very much a part of the Ngā Wairiki – Ngāti Apa tribal narrative (Smith 2010). Smith recorded a series of interviews with elders from one of Ngā Wairiki – Ngāti Apa hapū who described how tribal members re-engaged with their community following a significant flood. The tribe's response to the flood sparked a revival of interest in returning to and protecting their lands, people and community,

The interviews referred to in this book were given at an important time. One year earlier, a flood devastated the Kauangaroa valley. Most of the whānau (families) who lived on

> *Kauangaroa were forced to evacuate their homes and were lucky to escape with their lives. Some homes were lost and everything in them. The marae (tribal home) was badly hit, but the wharenui (ancestral home) Kimihia, remained intact. Whānau have regrouped and begun to put their lives back in order. The flood has resulted in increasing numbers attending marae hui (meetings) and working bees, and in turn, a sense of excitement and hope has been created about the future of Kauangaroa. (Smith, 2010, 6).*

Respondents in the book identified previous memories and responses to large traumatic events in the community, including the 1918 influenza pandemic, and floods in the 1900s, 1950s and the 1980s.

> *... when the flu epidemic happened out at Kauangaroa there used to be a whole lot of coffins down by Nanny Aggie's house, on the corner just opposite what is now the entrance of the marae. ... So that's another story I've heard of the epidemic. Apparently there was [sic] just lots and lots and lots of coffins going past because of the epidemic. ... Yeah. Like Nan used to say Kauangaroa was a huge community, there were lots of people there compared to now. There's only a few families out there now. Kauangaroa used to be the hub of the valley. At the time, there were lots of people and lots of families. So, when the epidemic came it obviously would have affected a lot of people. (Rihi Karena; in Smith, 2010, 6)*

Methods

This study utilised a Kaupapa (agenda, method) Māori qualitative case study design. Kaupapa Māori research method focuses on Māori aspirations; explores systemic post-colonial issues and is guided by local Māori and their practices and preferences (Moewaka Barnes 2000; Bishop 1996; Smith 1999; Walker, Eketone, and Gibbs 2006). Five Māori principles guided the design, conduct and analysis of the research. As shown in Figure 1, five principles of Kaupapa Māori practice are centred between the community of interest (research participants) and the data analysis process. These five principles are well established within Kaupapa Māori Research theory and practice (Cram 2001; Jones, Crengle, and McCreanor 2006; Hudson et al. 2010; Smith 1999). The left side of Figure 1 shows the case study of community collaboration and the impact on Iwi, organisational development and governmental policy histories; practitioners and organisations; and rural location.

The right side of Figure 1 follows the generally accepted process of thematic analysis described by Braun and Clarke (2006) and is framed within the three broad stages of thematic analysis outlined by Saldana (2013). This included 'organisation of the data' (structural and descriptive coding); 'data reduction' (Pattern coding); and interpretive coding and the development of broader themes' (development of themes, reporting of themes, and development of model).

Participants

This study was approved by the University of Otago Human Ethics Committee. A whānau support group provided guidance on local context issues and the application of locally congruent tikanga (cultural practices). This group was made up of local Māori researchers, iwi representatives and representatives from Māori health and social service providers.
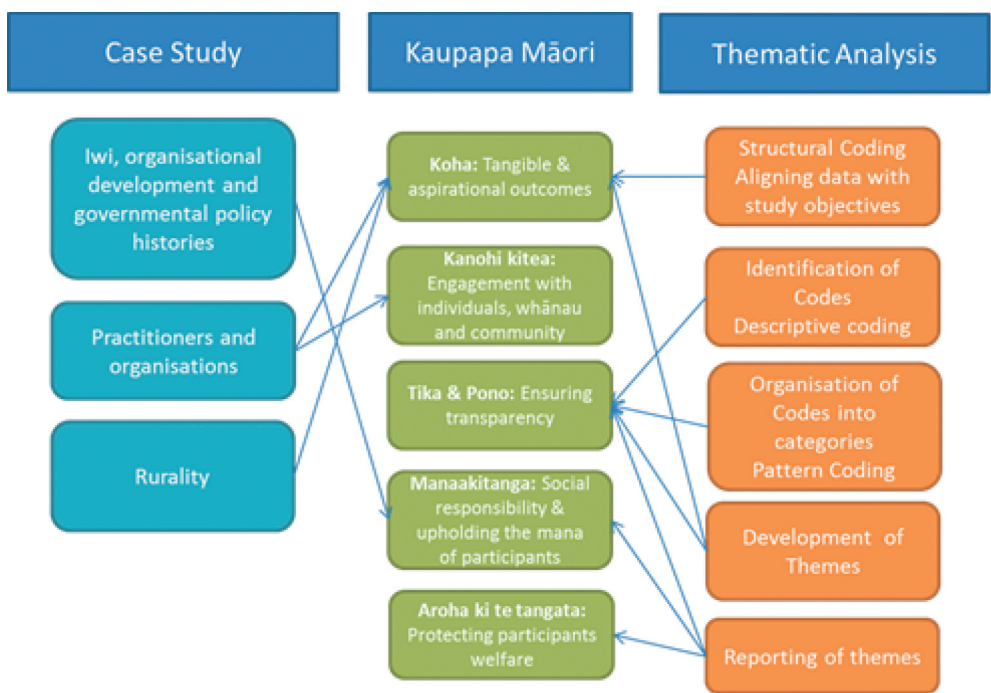
Figure 1. Thematic analysis aligned with a Kaupapa Māori case study.

Individual interviews were conducted with key health and social service community members (ICL; n = 10). The whānau support group and snowball sampling were used to identify participants. Three focus groups with health and social service practitioners (PFG; n = 22). These groups included practitioners from a range of iwi (tribal), non-government community groups and statutory services. Questions for the focus group focussed on their experiences of collaborating with service users and their whānau, and other practitioners, professions and organisations in the area.

Results

Four key themes were identified: Collective aspirations mobilise in traumatic events; genealogical relationships bring people together; collective leadership drives the vision; and Indigenous values inform responses to traumatic events.

Collective aspirations mobilise in traumatic events

Participants reported a range of natural disasters and industry closures that inspired collaboration at a community and regional level. These crises brought Māori together for a specific and meaningful purpose in times of need, that is, to respond to the immediate social and safety imperatives of their people. Responding to crises allowed local Māori to show their strengths, to be aware of whānau needs, and to show their ability to provide hospitality and care for large numbers of people experiencing crises in the community.

The responses included the needs of Māori, and the needs of others in the community. This was seen as an enabler of collaboration for Māori, that is, a unifying event.

> *Our marae (ancestral common ground) had burnt down. I think probably that was the first time that I saw what it meant for our hapū (subtribe) to lose something that we had come to treasure. And that was when our Marae burnt down. The night our marae burnt down our families came from everywhere, within a really short space of time. There were at least 100 of us, standing at the Marae, watching it burning" (ICL 10).*

Due to the long history of significant flooding within the Rangitīkei, participants reported that the community had particular skills and attitudes that contributed to them banding together to meet their own needs, and those of other community members.

> *I think they are more likely to have that kind of "can-do" attitude and "make-do". I'm just thinking about the floods. I live Whangaehu and I have lived in town. I lived in town through the 2004 floods and this recent flood and we were blocked off from civilisation and its incredible how everyone just pulled together. We had our whānau from Rātana helping and people were saying, "Where's Civil Defence?" Who needs Civil Defence we can just do this for ourselves. That was just the attitude. (PFG1)*

Participants observed that Māori responsiveness during flooding was quicker than local governments' ability to coordinate and provide disaster response. This flexibility and responsiveness reflect both the necessity of broad skills of staff in rural communities, and the core values of manaaki (caring and hospitality) in meeting the needs of families and communities when needed, irrespective of roles, funding or contract limitations. This was particularly salient when government responses were too slow to meet the needs of the community.

> *February 2004. It was devastating; really devastating. And I'll say this about John again. John heard that WINZ (Work and Income New Zealand) were going to put together work teams to go out and assist with the floods and he found out that this was going to take about a week and, he says "I'm not waiting a week." He went out into the community of Marton, hand-picked people and says, "Come on we're going out to help at these marae." And we were working before any of the work groups were established by WINZ. And we got out to Kaingaroa – eventually they let us through. They wouldn't let traffic through. (ICL Three)*

Collective leadership drives the vision

Participants noted that Māori taking leadership of coordinating and addressing community needs at times of crisis provided an opportunity for Māori collective skill and action to be in the front of mind for tau-iwi communities and organisations. These leaders were noted as being able to identify and activate resources from within or across Iwi.

> *So I think that an achievement for us is that we're good at identifying who, within the tribe, is really good; who has skills in one specific area or in a particular area and how can we use those. And we're not afraid to say, "Cuz you're really good at that we want you to help". (ICL Nine)*

Leadership was also described as an important factor in addressing conflict between key stakeholders. This included leaders applying specific skills and strategies to clarify the concerns, needs and preferences of key stakeholders in order to ensure effective collaborative communication, negotiation and planning.

Leadership is about really binding the people, uniting the people. So you can say you're a (chief) rangatira all you like, but if you ain't uniting the people you're not leading anyone. So what's the most important? From my perspective it's that unity that can come through a common purpose. (ICL Seven)

Participants reported that in order to mobilize community strengths, skills and resources leaders needed to be aware of community leaders, groups, cultures and organisations. Participants acknowledged that better awareness of these resources led to local solutions. This was seen as a key enabler of rural collaborative practice.

Genealogical relationships bring people together

Genealogical relationships (whakapapa) were identified as a key foundation for successful collaboration for Māori. Comprising blood, tribal and pan-tribal ties, genealogical relationships were acknowledged as providing a natural historical bond between iwi, and within whānau, hapū (subtribe) and iwi. Participants observed that ties to waka (traditional migrating canoe) continued an historical bond that allowed iwi groups to work collaboratively. While there was a noted history of inter-tribal warfare, the participants used broader concepts of whakapapa to establish collective responses to traumatic events,

Well you know, funny, we looked through the history …. all of the war and that happened, 'cause there was heaps of it … you know all those hundreds of years and all that, but hey it's as though we've found another reason for us to stop warring and start looking after each other. (ICL2)

Genealogical ties also incorporated experiences of and connection to land and the river that enabled a common anchor point for collaboration. Despite differences in Māori and Pākehā worldviews, a connection to land and place provided a basis to work together.

So if you're talking relationships, even to the Pākehā communities now, it's about that; who are we and where's our identity in the Rangitikei River? Even if the Pakehas call it "Rangy Tiky,". (ICL6)

Indigenous values inform responses to traumatic events

Māori cultural values of family and extended family wellbeing were noted as a cornerstone of wellbeing. This was evident during times of financial hardship, caused by loss of the primary income due to industry closure, or families not receiving income during strike actions (i.e., protesting for better working conditions). Participants noted that Māori community leaders formed committees to identify families experiencing financial hardship, to coordinate food parcels, and to raise funds to pay the mortgage, rent and power. The shared cultural values held by community members ensured that responses were fast, and targeted.

I don't see our health and our social, and our cultural and economic [sic] as separate things. I see them as encapsulated in everything that we do. It doesn't matter what it is, … we have to have an understanding of how that all fits together. And how that strengthens us and helps us to grow. (ICL10)

So our kuia (female elder) again here in the Pā (marae) with their 60 plus group … they decided to do a food bank and everyone, and at the end of it they had to tell people to stop giving money 'cause they just had so much of it they didn't need it. So what they did is every week food parcels would go out to those 36 homes. And these are not like city food parcels; these are like you had homemade relishes, and you had baking and you had rewena bread and you had all that good stuff; and kai (food) and a pot of boil up went out and you know. All those sorts of things to sustain whānau during those hard times. (ICL 9).

Limitations

The study's original goal was not focused specifically on collaboration within disaster responses. Disaster was a theme within a broader study on Indigenous models of collaboration. A more specific focus on disaster responses may have involved identifying other Indigenous leaders who were more involved and experienced in responding to disasters.

Discussion

This study identified the impact of natural disasters as a rallying call for collective Indigenous action. The results underscore the importance of understanding, acknowledging and implementing cultural knowledge and practice as part of a disaster response in Indigenous communities. The findings align with national and international Indigenous disaster response literature that consistently highlight the role of cultural factors in promoting recovery (Groom et al. 2009; Rumbach and Foley 2014; Wimsatt 2017). While Māori have been increasingly included in government and local planning disaster meetings, decisions are often made without meaningful consultation (Hudson and Hughes 2007; Phibbs, Kenney, and Solomon 2016), and in spite of international best practice standards to include cultural considerations (UNIDSR 2008).

This research is pertinent to the growing number of disasters (human made and natural) and offers a re-analysis of a previous study to contribute to the growing literature on Indigenous cultural practices. Consistent with other Indigenous groups, Māori used genealogical relationships to people and land (whakapapa), and tribal canoe (waka), shared history, shared language, and shared cultural practices to bind communities to a common cause. Having shared bonds to a place, such as a river and work site, enabled the enactment of Indigenous notions of guardianship (kaitiakitanga) and, '*aroha nui ki te tangata*' (extending love to all people) (Kenney and Phibbs 2015, 46). Relationship bonds also aided recovery responses as tribal members were able to identify and reach out to the most vulnerable members of their communities such as children, elderly and people with disabilities. These relational cultural values are known protective factors in disaster recovery (Hudson and Hughes 2007; Krieg 2009; Lambert 2014).

Examples of tribal infrastructures being used as shelters, kitchens, and coordination hubs for psycho-social responses highlighted the ability of local tribes to respond more quickly than civil defence or other aid organisations (Hudson and Hughes 2007). Collective action relied on Indigenous leadership models of rangatiratanga (chieftainship), responsible caring (manaakitanga) and holistic concepts of wellbeing. Holistic wellbeing ensures that relationships act as a starting point for responsive action, and offers a long-term approach to recovery. Wellbeing from an Indigenous perspective implicitly addresses the effects of colonisation by privileging the self-determination rights

of peoples who have extensive experience dealing with trauma and recovery. Indeed, Indigenous recovery responses act as a mode of cultural regeneration of practices and of sites that have been impacted by colonial trauma, or conflict and warfare (Dueck and Byron 2011; Kenney and Phibbs 2015).

Conclusion

A highlight of this study is that Indigenous communities were brought together to collectively respond to a disaster that threatened lives, and livelihoods. Notably, these communities have a much greater connections and bonds that reflect traditional values of aroha, manaakitanga, kaitiakitanga, mātauranga Māori and rangatiratanga, (Hudson and Hughes 2007; Krieg 2009; Lambert 2014; McLachlan et al. 2012). Furthermore, these values and practices occurred within a distinctly Māori environment – the marae, under the protection of elders and ancestors. Notably, despite the impact of colonisation on Māori, they retain knowledge and practices that are being applied as a comprehensive psycho-social response to disasters. It is important that Māori communities are resourced by the local and central government to plan and respond to disasters as they occur, and as part of a disaster prevention response. Non-Indigenous organisations who hold responsibility to fund and coordinate disaster responses are encouraged to build meaningful and ongoing relationships with Indigenous communities.

Going forward, further research could seek to highlight the role of collaboration between Māori communities and local, and national government agencies in contributing to disaster response policy. Examples from New Zealand include the 2019 Whakaari volcanic eruption in Whakatane; the 2011 earthquakes in predominantly urban Christchurch; and at the time of writing, the COVID-19 pandemic sweeping the globe, and across Aotearoa New Zealand.

Disclosure statement

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Authorship statement

Dr Andre McLachlan and Dr Waikaremoana Waitoki contributed to the research, analysis, and development of the paper 'Aituā: Collective action by Indigenous communities in response to disasters'.

The authors grant permission for the final version to be published.

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The work presented in the manuscript 'Collective action by Māori in response to flooding in the southern Rangitīkei region' has not been published elsewhere and is not being considered by another journal.

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