

# WaiRuaRangiRua – Reflections from Indigenous Researchers

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## Introduction

Indigenous researchers working on research projects in their communities face a number of challenges. This is especially so for those who are members of the communities they are researching. This paper describes challenges faced by two indigenous community researchers working on a research project entitled, “*Supporting Traditional Rongoā Practice in Contemporary Health Care Settings*” and focuses on insider/outsider tensions from each of their respective viewpoints. These tensions are articulated as **WaiRua**; which symbolises the spiritual connection that an indigenous researcher has with a kaupapa of indigenous & traditional significance and **RangiRua**; which, in the context of this paper, denotes the symbolic, sometimes competing views of an insider or outsider involved in a research project. Bringing WaiRua and RangiRua together is about managing these tensions, maintaining integrity, learning and sharing the experiences.

## Background – Rongoā Māori Services

Rongoā Māori is a traditional form of healing specific to the indigenous population of Aotearoa, New Zealand. It is based on a cultural framework that incorporates a range of healing activities (Durie, 1996), such as, but not limited to; wairua (spiritual healing), rongoā rakau (herbal medicines) and mirimiri (massage). Once an integral

part of traditional Māori life, Rongoā Māori was outlawed in 1907 with the passing of the Tohunga Suppression Act (Durie, 1998). The passing of legislation to outlaw traditional forms of healing was supported by European settlers and some prominent Māori who believed such practices and beliefs were impeding Māori advancement. A more political reason was an attempt to reduce the influence of Tohunga, some, of whom, such as Rua Kēnana, had large followings. The Tohunga Suppression Act was repealed in 1964 however whilst the law had been in existence, rongoā practices were forced underground and skills and knowledge were not passed on to younger generations as had been the practice in the past. It is unknown exactly how much traditional knowledge was irretrievably lost during this period.

In 1993, two events occurred that signalled the resurgence of Rongoā Māori; namely the production of a paper on Traditional Māori Healing for the National Advisory Committee on Core Health and Disability Services (NACCHDS) (Durie et al, 1993); and the establishment of Ngā Ringa Whakahaere o te iwi Māori, the National Organisation of Māori Health Practitioners.

The recognition of greater control by Māori in the health services that were delivering care to them, in combination with a purchasing and funding framework that supported the development of contracted third- sector health service provision, led to the emergence, in the late 1980s and early 1990s of separate and alternative Māori services, and in particular of kaupapa Māori services (Boulton, Brannelly & Tamehana, 2013). These services have provided Māori with an unprecedented opportunity to develop approaches based on their own priorities, culture, and traditions. Iwi and Māori organisations have had the space to experiment and pilot with service delivery models and incorporate kaupapa Māori philosophies and practices in different ways.

Kaupapa Māori approaches to service delivery provide examples for mainstream services of ways to improve effectiveness for Māori and other population groups, demonstrating an ability to manage and provide for socio-economic and cultural diversity. Not only do such services highlight the shortcomings of mainstream approaches for delivering healthcare to Māori, they demonstrate alternative

approaches and how things may be done differently to achieve improvements in health for Māori whānau. Māori health providers have also provided experience for mainstream services on how to integrate cultural values and traditions into service management and delivery. Rongoā Māori, as one specialised aspect of Māori health, has seen somewhat of a revival in recent years. More and more Māori are becoming interested in, and turning to, Rongoā Māori as a method of healing and for the prevention of ill-health. This increased interest in its revival and desire for sustainability of Rongoā as a legitimate healing practice has prompted calls for its formalisation within the New Zealand public health system. However, whilst we know how many contracts for Rongoā services exist, actual information about the health and vitality of the Rongoā sector; the degree to which current contracting and funding arrangements support traditional healing practices; and indeed the sustainability of the sector in the long-term does not exist. It was as a consequence of identifying real gaps in our knowledge about the sector (refer to Ahuriri-Driscoll et al, 2008) that the “*Supporting Traditional Rongoā Practice in Contemporary Health Care Settings*” project was conceived.

## **Context– Explaining the Research Project**

The insider/outsider tensions this paper discusses have emerged as a result of undertaking a Health Research Council (HRC)-funded project exploring how Rongoā services are delivered in NZ. Since McLeod’s seminal work conducted in 1999 (McLeod, 1999) there have been eight other notable rongoā research projects. Two of these, *The Future of Rongoā Māori: Wellbeing and Sustainability Project* (2006-2008) and the *NgāTohu o te Ora: Traditional Māori Healing and Wellness Outcomes Project* (2008-2011), have informed the development of the current research. Whilst those two projects described issues around sustainability and Rongoā practice, the current research addresses the question: what types of service arrangements best support traditional Rongoā Māori practice, in a contemporary healthcare setting?

The purpose of the project is to find out what we need, from a health systems perspective, to best support Rongoā Māori practice now, and in the future. Our intent is to provide the rongoā sector (practitioners, planners, funders and policy-makers) with appropriate evidence to assist the sector to become sustainable in a way that

does not compromise the values of the practitioners or the integrity of mātauranga Māori. Ultimately our aim is that the research be of benefit to practitioners, their whānau, hapū and the communities they seek to serve, and whose health they strive to improve.

The study employs a Māori-centred approach and a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods. It is anticipated the research will identify the features of health service arrangements that are both consistent with principles of rongoā practice and that ensure cultural integrity. As a consequence of undertaking the study the research team will: develop an understanding of the rongoā service provision landscape, its breadth, scope and “health”; train two community-based researchers; provide advice to the national collective, Te Kahui Rongoa; and develop what we have termed a “Service Development Model” (SD model). In effect the SD model will be capable of demonstrating the service arrangements required to support improvements in rongoā service provision. The model can then be used by healers seeking a more systematic approach to service improvements, in their negotiations with health funders, thus contributing to the future sustainability of rongoā providers.

## **Discussion**

The concepts WaiRua and RangiRua have been coined to describe the tensions that have emerged as a result of a conscious decision create a research team that is made up of emerging researchers who are themselves sector participants and more senior Māori academics. Specifically, this paper discusses the tensions experienced by the two community-based researchers, both of whom are new to the research arena and still developing their research skills. Whilst relative neophytes in a research sense, in terms of knowledge about their respective communities and the Rongoā sector itself, they are second to none.

Within this research project there are a number of parameters that guide the research team. Firstly, as an indigenous researcher he or she must subscribe to a belief that the research is beneficial for indigenous communities they are part of and that it provides information for those communities to effect change. Secondly, open communication and exchange of information between the researchers and those

being researched is paramount. In the view of the research team, such a stance will ensure the data collected is actually useful for the sector. Thirdly, mentoring and supporting emergent researchers through provision of academic advice and oversight is incorporated into the research design and timeframes. Finally, the project is guided by ethical standards to ensure indigenous communities are appropriately consulted and both those communities and the researchers are kept culturally safe.

In this project, members of the research team declared strong interest in the research topic. The community researchers who are members of the team both have historical knowledge of the Rongoā sector through their earlier roles at a provider level. One of the community researchers is also currently a Trustee on the national governance body Te Kahui Rongoā), while the second is a member of the wider Rongoā whānau, and actively practises Rongoā traditions with her whānau. Both have a strong personal interest in the area, and both have proficiency in the reo, with one being fluent and the other a good working knowledge. The senior researcher, knowledgeable in the policy arena, had strong collegial relationships within the rongoā research sector. This collective awareness provided the research team with combined knowledge on the topic and access to previous research, to sector changes as they were occurring and to potential participants. In addition, the team initiated an open flow of communication between themselves and the sector before the project began, seeking advice on research design from the Rongoā fraternity and in turn supplying strategic advice back to the Rongoā governance body, Te Kahui Rongoā.

Having people within the larger Rongoā collective inform, and comment on, the research design assisted the team to write the application and subsequently plan and complete initial data collection. This was invaluable during the first year of research when major changes in the national governance body occurred. Whilst these changes could have had serious consequences for the study, research team member who was also a national governance group member, acted as a conduit or liaison facilitating the open and two way flow of information from the research team to Te Kahui Rongoā and back again. This team member kept the research team

updated, allowing the research team in turn, to keep funders informed of potential delays in the study and where necessary, reprioritise research outputs.

For the researcher who was also a member of the national governance body, this role of a conduit or liaison, facilitating a two-way information flow, became crucial to the success of the project in the first year, however this dual role also brought its share of tensions or challenges. Smith (1999) describes this particular place in a research project as the “space between” where, on one hand being Māori and an active participant in the revitalisation of Rongoā Māori positions the researcher as an insider, whilst on the other hand being clearly aligned to a research organisation and project defines them as an outsider. It is this “space between” that provides balance allowing researchers to move freely between these positions. Regular team meetings: face to face and SKYPE have provided room for the community researchers to discuss this. Senior researchers have provided advice from an academic perspective referring to the research project ethics and ethical guidelines for working with Māori (HRC, 2008; Pūtaiora Writing Group. (2010).

A consideration of one's role as an iwi member, adds a further level of complexity to the concept of insider/outsider tensions. Both the community-based researchers faced the challenge of maintaining their integrity as iwi members as the research project was being rolled out. As Māori researchers operating in their respective tribal a research researcher is connected to the rohe through whakapapa and through common community participation. As iwi and community members, their actions must be consistent with the (usually unspoken) values of tikanga Māori such as whakapapa, whanaungatanga and manaakitanga. For Māori researchers, working according to these values or principles this affords a sense of safety - Māori researchers tend to feel comfortable that they can express themselves without feeling compromised. Ideals of reciprocity however, can be double edged sword for a research project, as this value means that research participants have the right to challenge research questions and the practice of research. Community researchers therefore, must find a way to manage the obligations of the research and yet maintain their community relationships and produce robust research without prejudice.

A further challenge for both researchers has been to convince the wider Rongoā sector of the value of the work when, as a sector, it is currently dealing with multiple and competing demands on its time and limited resource. At a national level one researcher has had to make a case to the governance group to support the first ever survey of Rongoā practitioners, a key data collection component of the study, while at the local level, the research team has been discussing the merits and value of such a survey to local providers, as a key piece of strategic information that can inform future planning.

The research requires completion of research activities locally, regionally and nationally. For this to happen in a manner where the community feels that it has been consulted, been listened to, and able to provide useful advice to the research team has also been challenging. As a researcher and a member of the governance group, one team member noted that:

*“trying to describe what role depicted an insider and outsider view respectively became an interesting task - governance and Chair of a national rongoā Māori entity, or a new Māori community based researcher”*

The second researcher found similar challenges although at a local level, almost as though she was being ‘tested’. Some of these challenges related to data collection where key informants would not agree to being recorded. This meant that data could potentially be misinterpreted or subject to perception. Another challenge was rising above personal interest to ensure research objectivity was maintained.

Bishop (2005, p111) provides clarity around these insider/outsider roles. For instance, as a cultural “insider” and leader located inside a national network, the implication is that undertaking research as an insider Māori researcher might well be done more sensitively and in a more responsive manner than an outsider might achieve. While the thought of having easy access to the network and the ability to interact appropriately might support the view of being a cultural insider, it can also be a disadvantage as familiarity prevents asking those critical questions for desired research outcomes.

However, having made that observation what further literature could explain what actually went on as a cultural 'insider' that could help community-based Māori researchers understand the dynamics of an outsider role? Bishop (2005, p112) again provides a useful insight and clarity into this. Bishop's "locus of power" framework accurately reflects some of the concerns raised during an 'inside' governance discussion. For example, for our project, some of the concerns raised by other governance members can be summarised according to the Bishops headings: initiation; benefits; representation; legitimacy; accountability. Each of these points are illustrated below

Initiation– this focuses on how the research process begins and whose concerns, interests, and methods of approach determine/define the outcomes. While much consultation was done in the early stages of the research debate over the value of the research continued and overtook the ensuing discussion;

Benefits - As an important political aspect the governance discussion revealed concerns around direct gains that the research would provide the national entity and whose interests were being served, the researcher as the outsider role or the governance role as the insider?

Representation – Additional concerns were raised around how traditional research has sometimes misrepresented true Māori knowledge and in this case the authenticity of traditional medicine. Despite having an insider as a researcher directly involved in the governance discussion what is brought into question is the of integrity of the individual from the view of competing perspectives;

Legitimacy – given the history of research involving Māori, there was considerable disquiet raised by the governance group around how the research would be of benefit. This included whether the research information was going to be used legitimately to promote, protect, nurture and develop rongoā Māori;

Accountability - further inside discussion revealed an inherent view about the accountability of researchers in general and questioning the control and ownership of the process, including the information.

The most revealing finding will have to be the struggle spiritually each individual has as an insider and outsider. The challenges, and indeed the experience, that both roles brought to bear will be measured in some ways by the difference, if any, made to the rongoā community. What will go unnoticed by others, but needs to be identified and managed by oneself is the interplay that goes on, or connection and disconnection to the most significant element of Māori wellbeing – WaiRua. The struggle or what's been coined as RangiRua and having to compete with the varying sometimes very challenging views of being an insider then an outsider will inevitably play havoc with any indigenous researcher's wairua or wellbeing. The key is to find that space - *a hinengaro, a tinana, a wairua*, that comfortably addresses the competing thoughts or RangiRua as a new Māori researcher. One will only find that space through further experience and support.

## **Conclusion**

As Māori we juggle many different roles and responsibilities on a day-to-day basis. As Māori researchers, one of the more challenging of these is our roles as outsiders, when we are also insiders by virtue of being iwi and community members. Researching with Māori demands that consultation is a key consideration (HRC, 2008; Pūtaiora Writing Group, 2010), not least because at the ends of the day, we want what we do to be useful and relevant to our people. What we have learnt however, is that no matter how mutually beneficial and agreeable the consultation process is there is no guaranteed knowledge sharing past that point. When dealing with communities at national level you are dealing with diverse groups. In this case the communities were directed to restructure or be forced into an entity and as such, the research was viewed as a secondary consideration with limited advantages. As indigenous researchers there is an implicit understanding of the impacts of being researched on and the process this involves. As researchers who can see the wider value of their researchers it is nevertheless frustrating.

What then is the solution to a situation where research is desperately needed, but where other priorities are also equally important? In our view, at least part of the solution must be to continue to consult with indigenous communities, to maintain open and honest communication and to complete high-quality and timely research that is of value and relevance for those communities. As indigenous researchers we have the responsibility of working with whānau, hapū, iwi, community and other collectives in an open and ethical way and with perseverance that will enable them to understand the value of research. As Nelson Mandela said

*“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.”*

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