

Te Wharerau

Kaupapa Māori Methodologies and a Kāi Tahu Research Paradigm

Hannah Rapata*

Abstract

Completing a doctorate as a Māori researcher within a Western research institute, whilst also engaging in decolonial and cultural revitalising practices in personal and professional settings, is a journey that stretches the mind and soul. This paper traces the development of my theoretical and methodological positioning for my doctoral research, alongside reflections on the type of researcher I want to be and the research I seek to undertake.

A detailed discussion of kaupapa Māori theory, methodologies, methods, and strategies of enquiry is presented, along with a framework for a Kāi Tahu research paradigm developed through my doctoral research, “Te Wharerau.” The Te Wharerau framework is an example of an Indigenous research paradigm, used for grounding my research within localised places and knowledges. While originally developed for personal use, it may also be relevant for other taura Kāi Tahu or rangahau projects specific to Kāi Tahu whānau.

Keywords

kaupapa Māori, Indigenous, methodology, Kāi Tahu/Ngāi Tahu

Background

In this paper, I share a reflective discussion of my journey to understanding and working within and across kaupapa Māori theory, methodologies, methods, and strategies of enquiry. I also detail the Te Wharerau framework, which served as a research paradigm for my doctoral studies. Indigenous research paradigms such as the Te Wharerau framework can help Indigenous researchers bridge the epistemological divides created by the institutionalisation and colonisation of Māori peoples and knowledges.

I share my reflections and learnings with the intention that they may support other Indigenous researchers and taura in engaging with the realms of kaupapa Māori theory, methodologies, methods, and strategies of enquiry, and in creating more of our own frameworks and research paradigms.

I completed my doctorate at the University of Auckland between 2021–2024 and did a project that ended up exploring the theoretical intersections between race, data, and identity with kai from a critical kaupapa Māori positioning (Rapata, 2025). Within this research, the intersections between kai and identity were explored among Kāi Tahu rakatahi, as there was a gap in the Indigenous food sovereignty literature of rakatahi voices, particularly rakatahi with diverse experiences yet commonalities in ancestry. Therefore, my positionality as a wahine Kāi Tahu and researcher undergoing processes of cultural reclamation and re-Indigenisation made this project very personally meaningful, presenting it as a mechanism for strengthening my connections with my own whakapapa.

My reflections on kaupapa Māori theory, methodologies, methods, and strategies of enquiry are shared below and highlight some of the pathways between research theory and praxis. These discussions also demonstrate the centrality of identity in Indigenous research.

*Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Rahiri tumutumu. Te Manawahoukura, Te Wānanga o Aotearoa, New Zealand. Department of Nutrition and Dietetics, Faculty of Medical and Health Sciences, University of Auckland.

Kaupapa Māori Theory

Theories have been described as “an organised and consistent system of general propositions used to explain and predict a specific set of social phenomena” (Sullivan, 2009, p. 517). Theories provide frameworks for understanding ideas and the relationships between ideas and all living and non-living entities and phenomena. Theory underlies research processes and guides notional and relational thinking on the complexities and constructs across research methodologies, methods, results, and research outcomes (Mertens, 2015; Tolich & Davidson, 2018). Conducting research without explicitly connecting it to an underlying theory is like building a house without a robust and tethered foundation. The research process may be able to be completed; however, the outcomes or results are at risk of falling away from the research aims and broader contexts, producing a null effect. As Assata Shakur (2021) said, “Theory without practice is as incomplete as practice without theory.” (Shakur, 2021, p.180).

The framework presented in this paper is derived from my doctoral research project that is unapologetically and strategically grounded in kaupapa Māori as a theory, methodology, and research method. Kaupapa Māori is the strength and essence of what it is to be Māori. Kaupapa Māori is not a new way of thinking, being, or doing; for Māori peoples, kaupapa Māori is in our bones (Pihama, 2010). Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2011) described kaupapa Māori as all-encompassing and not something that can be strictly defined. Kaupapa Māori is what binds us to our Māori language, culture, and identities. Graham Smith (1992) characterised kaupapa Māori as “the philosophy and practice of being Māori” (p. 2). Therefore, kaupapa Māori, in the context of research, can be a theory, a method, a methodology, and everything in between (L. T. Smith, 2011).

Research involves exploring, gathering, and testing knowledge. It is about control, resources, information, power, knowledge and struggle (R. Mahuika, 2008, 2015). Kaupapa Māori research has been articulated as a site of Indigenous struggle within the academy (Smith, 2015), which includes the struggle to exist and function in the academy and be Māori, doing Māori research. Kaupapa Māori theory is also deeply rooted in political struggle, as the development of kaupapa Māori as a research theory evolved through what has been referred to as the Indigenous Renaissance in the 1970s–1980s (G. H. Smith, 1997). This period included major events and milestones in Aotearoa New Zealand, such as the Māori language petition in 1972, the 1974 Māori land march, the 1977 Takaparawhau (re)occupation (Bastion Point) and the establishment of te kōhanga reo and kura kaupapa Māori education in the 1980s (L. T. Smith, 2021).

However, as kaupapa Māori and Indigenous research has evolved in contemporary settings, we, as Indigenous researchers, long to speak beyond our pains and colonial entrapments (Pihama, 2010; Tuck & Yang, 2012). We wish to speak of and research our dreams and transformative visions. However, describing and analysing the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism are essential for developing meaningful strategies for transformative visions (Smith, 2015; G. H. Smith & Smith, 2018). Furthermore, kaupapa Māori research can be about finding joy in resistance – resistance through imaginings grounded in love for our people and our whenua. I hold to and speak of this joy in resistance to continue to dream of and live our collective emancipatory visions where we are all living well whilst being portrayed how we want to be.

Through processes of trust and listening, kaupapa Māori theory supports kaupapa Māori researchers to be reflexive – to not just do the research but to be a part of the research and let it change us and our thinking. This was paramount for me during my doctoral studies, removing myself from being an impartial body in the research journey, to creating bridges across the divides of person and process. By bringing our whole selves into our research, we are better equipped and safer as Indigenous researchers, no matter where our research sits, within the academy, community or somewhere in between.

Research Methodologies

In considering research methodologies as the principles and theories that guide our research methods and processes (Walter & Andersen, 2013), kaupapa Māori research methodologies become theoretical and practical approaches to research that claim Māori spaces and affirm Māori thinking, knowledge, language, and culture as central and legitimate (Pihama, 2010; G. H. Smith & Smith, 2018).

This section describes a kaupapa Māori methodological approach and demonstrates how kaupapa Māori theory developed into praxis within my doctoral research. This methodological approach can stand on its own, and it can be applied within the Te Wharerau framework presented further on in this paper.

For example, the methods and processes expressed in my doctoral project were underpinned and influenced by mātauranga Māori or Māori epistemologies (Mulholland & Tawahi, 2017; Pihama, 2010; Smith, 2015), whakapapa, Māori ways of doing, and our own researcher backgrounds or standpoint (Walter & Andersen, 2013).

These four aspects are depicted by the four pou in Figure 1. An explanation is provided of how these pou were applied in my doctoral project and how this methodology can be applied in other research projects.

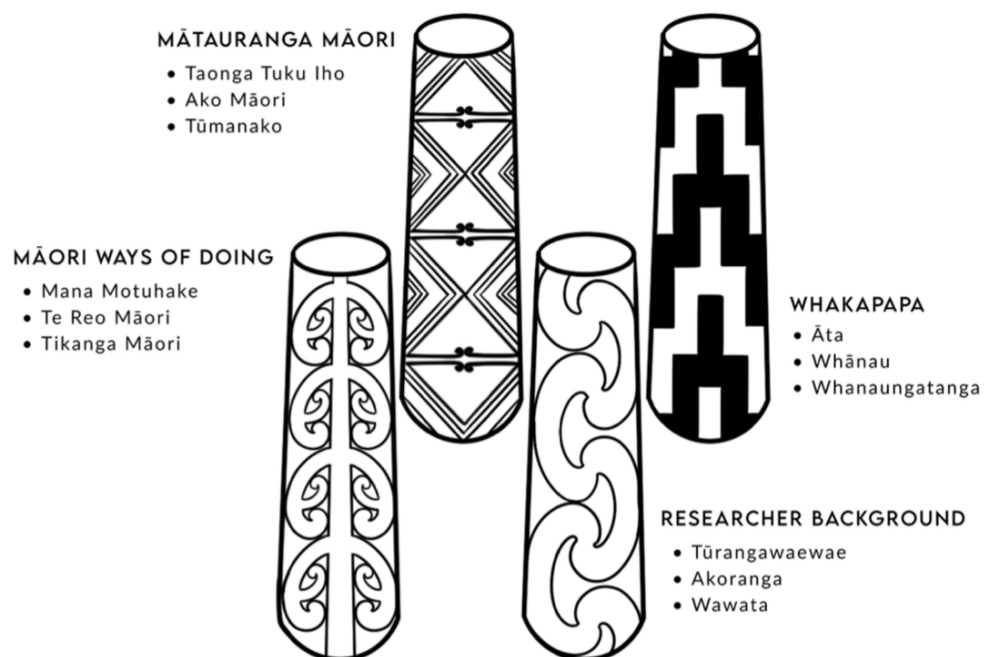


Figure 1 A Kaupapa Māori research methodology

Mātauranga Māori

Mātauranga Māori is a modern term used to refer to Māori epistemologies or Māori ways of knowing that have been gifted, used, and preserved by our tūpuna (Mead, 2025; Royal, 2012). In kaupapa Māori research, mātauranga Māori is commonly centred through key principles such as taonga tuku iho (cultural aspirations) and ako Māori (Māori pedagogy), which substantiate Māori values, views, and ways of knowing in research (Pihama, 2010). The intentional grounding within these central principles supported my research that explored Māori sovereignties, kai, and data in a way that emanates and centres mana motuhake Māori.

Furthermore, taonga tuku iho and ako Māori are inherently Māori views and principles that are tied to the unceded sovereignties, mana, and power of Māori as tangata whenua and kaitiaki. Therefore, these values can support research methodologies and projects that prioritise Māori ownership, inherent rights, and control over our resources, representations, and taonga, which connect us to our pasts and our futures (Burgess & Painting, 2020).

The third principle detailed under the pou of mātauranga Māori is tūmanako, which is a concept that embodies aspirations and hopes. Tūmanako can be epitomised through the processes of ruminating on the aspirations and dreams our tūpuna hold for us, and the aspirations and dreams we hold for our mokopuna, while connecting these aspirations and dreams across time through the actions we take as those living in te ao mārama (Burgess & Painting, 2020). Centring Indigenous research within tūmanako as a grounding principle is critical for the longevity and creativity required to complete research projects within and outside of the academy, and to complete them with the best possible outcomes for the people for whom we are doing the work (McAllister et al., 2025).

The symbol used in the mātauranga Māori pou is the niho taniwha, or the taniwha tooth, which symbolises strength, stability, whakapapa, and traditions. This symbol is used to demonstrate the strength and stability that can be found as kaupapa Māori researchers when we engage with and express mātauranga Māori despite needing to exist and operate within Western academic institutions and structures at times.

Whakapapa

The principle and embodiment of tūmanako in this methodological approach links to the concept of whakapapa. Whakapapa is a way of being, seeing, and knowing that encapsulates organisational and generational order across all living and non-living entities (N. Mahuika, 2019). The rumination and exploration of past and future hopes is a whakapapa approach to developing deeper and more relevant understandings and articulations of our research kaupapa (Burgess & Painting, 2020; N. Mahuika, 2019). In the context of my doctoral project, a whakapapa understanding and approach supported critiques I developed of colonialism and its impacts on kai, whilst simultaneously holding space for explorations that have sought to articulate what kai is, and what kai sovereignties can and will be. Drawing on the concepts of whakapapa and tūmanako enables us, as Indigenous researchers, to simultaneously sit with and across opposing and contradictory ideas and settings, while drawing out the necessary ideas and outcomes. For example, this is often done when we are engaging in research with the academy whilst also engaging with community; and when we are engaging with Indigenous research methodologies but from within colonial institutions. Therefore, the concepts of whakapapa and tūmanako support us to move through these tensions authentically.

The need for authenticity as Indigenous researchers connects to the concept and practices of whakawhanaungatanga and āta (building respectful relationships) (Pohatu, 2013). Burgess and Painting (2020) discussed the notion of whanaungatanga as being in good relation by understanding the relationships and balances between all living and non-living entities. In my doctoral research, practices of whakawhanaungatanga included karakia, kōrero, waiata, poetry writing and reading, and koha. These practices (and others) supported me in maintaining respectful relationships and connections with myself and others throughout the project and beyond.

The poutama pattern is represented on the whakapapa pou, symbolising whakapapa connections, advancement, growth, and development.

Māori Ways of Doing

Māori ways of doing are outward expressions of our whakapapa (way of being) and mātauranga (knowledge/way of knowing). Mana motuhake is a kaupapa Māori principle that denotes Māori leadership, autonomy, and control (Mutu, 2021). Honouring mana motuhake is central to Māori ways of doing and was supported in my project through privileging and advocating for Māori control and ownership over our data, stories, and representations, as well as supporting and listening to rakatahi Māori voices as experts. These approaches contrast with a lot of Western empirical research, which seeks to hold control over Māori voices and dismisses young people and their knowledge and experience due to their perceived immaturity or lack of experience (King & Cormack, 2022).

Tikanga Māori encapsulates Māori cultural practices, Māori law, protocols, and ethics. Practices of tikanga Māori are in place to maintain balance and wellbeing across all levels of whakapapa (Mead, 2003). A state of noa occurs with balance, and, generally, a state of tapu occurs when there is an imbalance. Tikanga Māori practices and protocols maintain or restore balance to a state of noa, for activities and practices to resume freely (Mead, 2003).

I sought to draw on tikanga Māori in my doctoral project through wairuatanga and kaupapa Māori ethical research practices, by seeking to listen to and follow the wairua of conversations, ideas, and practices until a state of “noho puku” was reached (Hiha, 2015). Using this approach and method across all the kaupapa I explored in my project enabled me to explore various topics and utilise various methods until a settled or balanced state was reached.

The mangōpare (hammerhead shark) symbol is used in this pou to demonstrate the strength and courage required in many instances to do research in a Māori way, particularly kaupapa Māori health research within a Western university.

Researcher Background

The conceptualisation of the four pou in this methodology was influenced by literature on Indigenous research theory and methodologies (L. T. Smith, 2021; Walter & Andersen, 2013). Our own personal backgrounds and positionalities also influence the principles and theories that guide our choice and use of methods in research. Our tūrangawaewae is our standing place, and, as Indigenous researchers, our standing place or the lands we belong to or connect to through whakapapa influence our thinking, ideas and positionalities. No matter where we are, we cannot be separated from our tūrangawaewae. Therefore, our tūrangawaewae and the lands we connect to are an ever-present influence on us and the research we conduct.

Furthermore, our position as researchers comprises many complex aspects of our beings, identities, and experiences. Under this pou I have detailed two other aspects of this that are important for researchers to be open and explicit about. This is our akoranga (profession/training path) and the wawata (aspirations, dreams, intentions) we carry for the project, for the people we work with, and for ourselves and our whānau.

For me, my training and studies as a clinical dietitian deeply influence my views and understandings in the areas of kai and hauora. However, throughout my doctoral project and the ongoing research I do, I carry an ongoing awareness of the need to question and challenge my learnt approaches, especially as I engage in kaupapa Māori research and decolonial practices.

The researcher background pou holds the tohu of the koru, which resembles an unfurling fern and symbolises strength, new developments, new growth, and new opportunities. This symbol is drawn upon here to demonstrate how, as kaupapa Māori researchers, we bring our whole selves into our work, and that we grow and develop in line with our work and the people around us.

Strategies of Enquiry

During my doctoral studies, I found it challenging at times to navigate the movement between theory and praxis, and therefore between methodologies and methods in practical and tangible ways. Cliff Whiting described research methodologies as matters of the mind and research methods as matters of the hands (Christensen, 2013). I also found the concept of “strategies of enquiry” detailed by Shawn Wilson (2008) in *Research Is Ceremony* supportive as a bridge between research methodologies and research methods. Using strategies of enquiry helped me to build upon the research methodologies I had developed and arrive at the research destination, ready to use the decided-upon methods (Wilson, 2008).

I found that strategies of enquiry are an innate aspect of an Indigenous researcher’s praxis, they are interrelated and non-linear, alongside the research methodologies and methods. The following four strategies of enquiry were used in this manner. These concepts were integral to my research praxis during my doctoral project.

I share these strategies of enquiry to demonstrate how kaupapa Māori theory and research methodologies are not just a research practice but a lived experience. Strategies of enquiry can be uniquely individual and personal, or collective. However, the following strategies demonstrate how spiritual and intellectual elements interact and influence research processes, because “for Indigenous peoples, knowledge is approached through intellect, senses and intuition” (Codero, 1995, p. 30).

Kia Noho Puku

Indigenous research strategies and methods are often a combination of existing methodological approaches and Indigenous practices (L. T. Smith, 2021). “Kia noho puku” is an example of this and translates to having a settled belly. It is an approach and principle that has been articulated in kaupapa Māori research as a strategy of ongoing critical reflection until an idea or practice sits well within you (Hiha, 2015). My ability to use noho puku as a kaupapa Māori research strategy developed particularly over the first year of my doctoral studies, while I completed kaupapa Māori health research papers. Completing these papers enabled me to gain historical insights and essential skills as a Māori researcher, including the ability to critically analyse research from a Māori perspective. I also learnt how to bring my whole self into my research and gained confidence through doing this. These processes of decolonising my mind and practice as a researcher enabled me to engage more with the concept of noho puku and trust these instinctual insights throughout the rest of my doctoral journey until issues or ideas resonated well within me.

Whakarongo

“Whakarongo” translates to listen, hear, or obey; to whakarongo means to listen with all senses: ears, eyes, mind, and heart. One must look, listen and be aware of external and internal cues, as well as tohu in the natural environment. For me, whakarongo is closely related to noho puku in that, in order to reach a state of noho puku, one must whakarongo. Across my research activities and daily life, I conduct various processes and cultural traditions to support my ability to whakarongo with my ears, eyes, mind, and heart. These include karakia, waiata, and mauri tau. These practices, in addition to receiving regular cultural supervision during my doctoral research, have often enabled me to “zoom out” and whakarongo.

Mānawa Ngāwari

In a kaupapa Māori research context, “mānawa ngāwari,” involves treading forward with a soft and kind heart, supporting good motivations for doing Indigenous research. When researchers have soft and kind hearts, with good motivations and intentions, the project is more likely to benefit all who are involved (Wilson, 2008). Mānawa ngāwari is a strategy I endeavoured to incorporate and practise during my doctoral research journey by being mindful of the centrality of humility in kaupapa Māori research practice. For me, this strategy links to the “community-up” kaupapa Māori principles of “aroha ki te tangata” and “kaua e takahi te mana o te tangata” (G. Smith, 2015), through the importance of not flaunting ideas or outcomes but continually reflecting gratitude and acknowledging the right people in the right way, as well as asking for help when it is required.

Waiata and Physical Metaphors

Many kaupapa Māori researchers find strength and inspiration through grounding in traditional knowledges and practices. In my research, I find strength and inspiration through waiata and metaphysical metaphors (Haami, 2024). For example, the metaphysical foundation of my doctoral project lies within a physical metaphor of travelling across Te Ara a Kiwa (Foveaux Strait), coming to the waka-landing place, looking up to Motupōhue (Bluff Hill), journeying up Motupōhue and then looking at the surrounds and the journey that has been. This is a journey my tūpuna did many times, and I found many metaphors between that journey and the journey of my doctoral research. For example, during my voyage, I changed “waka” (research topics and supervisors) and navigated the turbulent waters of learning to be a kaupapa Māori researcher within the academy. During this navigation, I was guided by various stars and landmarks to arrive at the waka-landing place and decide upon my research aims and objectives. This journey was guided by a traditional waiata from my hapū.

I began the second year of my doctoral journey gathering tools, ideas, and the people I needed to begin the journey to the top of “my” Motupōhue. This hīkoi can be effortless and enjoyable on a warm and sunny day. It can also be extremely challenging in other conditions, much like the undulating journey of doctoral research, and kaupapa Māori research in general. Therefore, the remainder of my project and doctoral journey was likened to making this ascent, reaching the peak, and viewing where I had come from while also giving thanks for where I had been and the things I had learnt. Since completing my doctoral journey, I now have the privilege of looking towards the horizon and speculating on the future journeys ahead for myself, my whānau, and all who have walked this journey with me. I was fortunate to travel down to Motupōhue several times during my doctoral work. Across this time, I wrote a waiata about the hīkoi up Motupōhue as a metaphor for my doctoral research journey.

I share these examples of strategies of enquiry to demonstrate the importance of finding culturally grounded strategies that enable us to navigate across te ao Māori and te ao Pākehā, which we must do as Māori researchers, whilst walking these journeys with the strength and safety of our whakapapa, our tūpuna, and our mātauranga.

Te Wharerau: A Framework for a Localised Kaupapa Māori Research Paradigm

Te Wharerau is a framework for kaupapa Māori research that was developed during my doctoral project and is inspired by my marae structure. The Te Wharerau framework serves as a research paradigm as it displays the interrelated and underlying beliefs and assumptions that guided my doctoral research; it is presented in this paper as a framework and paradigm that could guide other taura Kāi Tahu and/or Kāi Tahu-related research projects.

The four pou outlined in the methodology above could be applied and utilised outside of this framework; however, they are the central pou within the Te Wharerau research framework depicted in Figure 2 below. Developing and grounding myself within this model was a process that helped me remain connected to my whakapapa, meaningful spaces and places, and kaupapa Māori values and principles throughout my doctoral studies.

TE WHARERAU MODEL

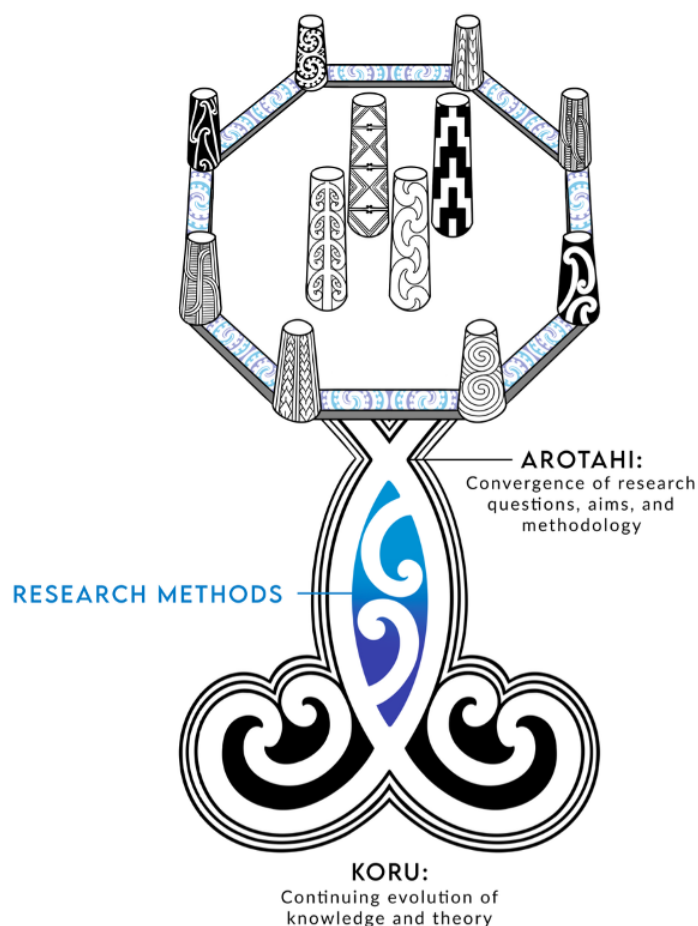


Figure 2 Te Wharerau: A research paradigm

The Te Wharerau framework is named after the traditional wharerau structures unique to Kāi Tahu. Wharerau were designed and built to be temporary spaces of living and learning as whānau moved according to the changing seasons of abundance at different mahika kai gathering sites. Te Rau Aroha marae is the southernmost marae in Motupōhue (Bluff), and one of the marae that I whakapapa to through my tupuna Wharetutu, who is one of the tūpuna within the whareniui. Wharetutu is known for her leadership and sacrifices for the survival of our hapū during the early colonial settler period in Motupōhue and Whenua Hou.

I was inspired by Te Rau Aroha marae, not just due to its personal significance to me but also due to its unique features and qualities. The marae is octagonal in shape, to resemble the traditional wharerau structures. Additionally, each of the tūpuna carved in the whareniui are wāhine, which pays tribute to the mana wāhine of my hapū. They are wāhine who sacrificed and worked hard to preserve our whānau, hapū, and iwi in the face of devastations such as land loss, wars, and diseases. Therefore, the inspiration drawn from my tūpuna and my marae structure draws on the powers of mana wāhine, Kāi Tahu, and Indigenous resistance.

The theories and assumptions depicted by the four pou were integral to guiding me through the initial phases of this project, which involved extensive literature searches, wānanga, and kōrero on various kaupapa and topics related to my doctoral project. Just as the central four pou in Te Rau Aroha marae are structurally integral to the whole whare, these four pou were central to guiding me through the various topics and ideas as I decided what was and was not important for my research project.

Furthermore, Figure 3 is a depiction of the internal angles of an octagon and is included in this discussion to demonstrate how all the aspects or topics relevant to my project are interconnected and must go through the four central pou. This visually demonstrates my lens as a researcher that centres mātauranga Māori, whakapapa, Māori ways of doing, and a continual reflection on my personal and professional backgrounds. In the same way that all the internal angles of an octagon can connect to the four central lines, my review of topics, ideas, and potential methods throughout my project always returned to this paradigm.

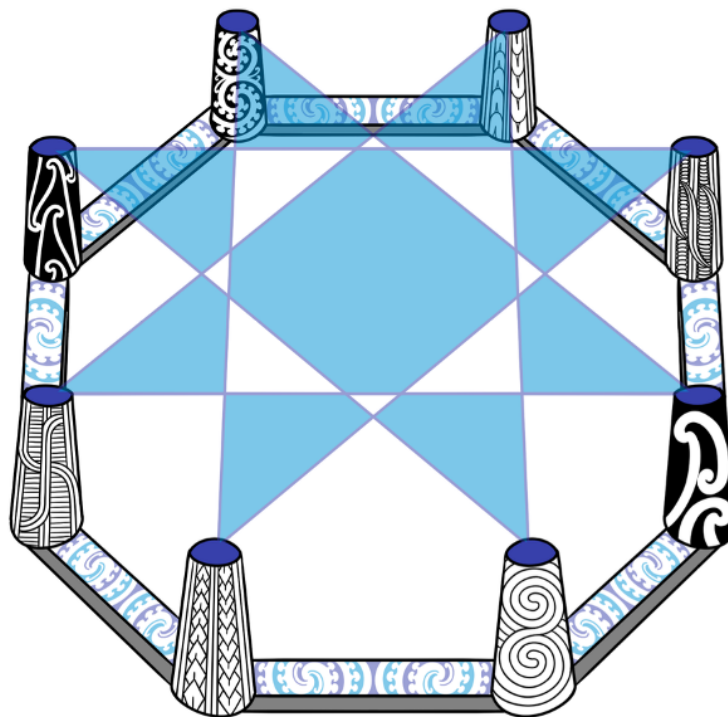


Figure 3 Te Wharerau: The internal angles of an octagon

Symbolism and Meaning in the Te Wharerau model

The arotahi (Figure 2) is the convergence point of the four central methodological pou and the kaupapa, contexts, topics, and themes that were explored in my project. Therefore, this point of convergence is where the research aims and questions are formed.

The arotahi is the meeting point for the theoretical and conceptual matters of the mind and the physical actions of the hands. Below the arotahi is a visual depiction of research methods, which includes all the actions researchers take to answer the questions and aims of the research (Figure 2). The koru, which symbolises new growth and development, represents the research outputs or outcomes because it is the continuing evolution of new knowledge and theory that support the development of changes we wish to see in the world around us (Figure 2).

Summary and Reflection

This paper presents a discussion of kaupapa Māori theory, methodologies, methods, and strategies of enquiry, as well as a framework for a Kāi Tahu research paradigm, developed through my doctoral research, Te Wharerau. My doctoral research project instigated a journey through these connections and boundaries, and I share my reflections and interpretations of this journey for other kaupapa Māori researchers who are seeing, feeling, and thinking their way across these spaces. The methodological groundings (four pou) are broadly applicable to any kaupapa Māori research; however, the Te Wharerau research framework developed through my doctoral project was created specifically for personal use; however, it could be applicable for other taura Kāi Tahu and Kāi Tahu-specific research kaupapa, and the methodological groundings (four pou) are broadly applicable to any kaupapa Māori research.

As I progress in my career as an early-career kaupapa Māori health researcher, these foundations of kaupapa Māori theory, methodologies, methods, and strategies of enquiry continue to guide both my direction and approach.

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GLOSSARY

Arotahi	Focus/concentrate on /centre point
Hapū	Subtribe
Iwi	Tribe
Kāi Tahu/Ngāi Tahu	Southern-most tribe in Aotearoa New Zealand
Kaupapa	Subject/topic
Koha	Gift or offering
Mahinga/Mahika kai	Cultivated garden/area
Māori	Indigenous person of Aotearoa New Zealand
Mātauraka/Mātauranga	Indigenous knowledge
Māori	
Motupōhue	Bluff Hill (located in the South Island)
Pou	Pole/post
Rakatahi/Rangatahi	Youth/younger generation
Tauira	Student
Tohu	Sign, symbol
Wahine	Female
Whakapapa	Heritage
Wharerau	Traditional structures built and disassembled by ancestors of Kāi Tahu

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