Identity threats and opportunities for Māori youth

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Abstract

Numerous theories have been put forward to describe diverse expressions of Māori youth identity. However, these theories often fail to fully capture the fluidity of Māori youth identity, and tend to overlook motivations Māori youth might have for occupying particular identity positions. This paper draws together Māori and Western psychological identity literature to map some of the common identity spaces that Māori youth occupy in 21st century Aotearoa. Māori students at a low-decile, urban, State secondary school were interviewed, along with their family members, and the Push–Pull factors (Identity Threats and Identity Opportunities) that motivate migrations between identity spaces were identified using thematic analysis. Extracted themes include Contextual factors (Identity Affirmation, Membership Definitions) and Individual/Group factors (Identity Aspirations, Identity Mobility). The Māori identity migration model put forward in this paper accommodates the dynamic and diverse nature of urban Māori youth identities, and allows for the analysis of the resources and threats available to urban Māori youth who occupy different identity spaces.

Keywords

Māori identity, urban Māori, Māori youth, identity migration

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Introduction

In 21st century Aotearoa, there are multiple ways of being Māori. Theories describing this diversity have been offered (Davies, Elkington, & Winslade, 1993; Durie et al., 1995; E-Learning Advisory Group, 2002; McIntosh, 2005; Houkamau & Sibley, 2010). However, these theories often consign Māori to particular fixed identity positions, thereby failing to capture the fluidity with which Māori may shift identity positions (for example, Durie et al., 1995). In addition, factors that might motivate Māori to occupy particular identity positions are often overlooked.

Māori urban youth in particular have been shown to identify in novel and dynamic ways (see Borell, 2005; Webber, 2012). In this paper I will present a brief overview of approaches that have been taken to account for Māori identity diversity, as well as influential identity literature from Western psychology. A thematic analysis of interviews with Māori students and their family members at a low-decile, urban, State secondary school will then be presented. Extant identity literature and the extracted themes will then be incorporated to produce the Māori identity migration model, illuminating how identity threats and opportunities motivate Māori urban youth to migrate between particular identity spaces.

Māori identities

Traditionally, Māori collective identities were structured around whakapapa (see Rangihau, 1975). According to a “traditional” Māori worldview, all things (both living and non-living) descend from the atua, and can therefore be linked through whakapapa (Walker, 1990). Māori maintained important whakapapa links to their gods, mountains, rivers, lakes, oceans, forests, lands and human ancestors, and it was through whakapapa that essential Māori social collectives were formed (Walker, 1990). Therefore the bases of Māori collective identities include particular atua, whenua and other geographic features, and tipuna. Essential Māori social collectives included whānau, marae, hapū and iwi.

European contact transformed Māori identities in a number of ways. The legacy of colonial processes is that Māori are a culturally diverse group of people. The extent to which Māori maintain “traditional” worldviews, beliefs, values, practices and social structures varies widely between Māori individuals, and between Māori collectives (McIntosh, 2005). While some Māori are deeply imbedded in “traditional” Māori culture, others, through various voluntary and involuntary processes, have more or less assimilated to Pākehā culture, while others still invent novel identity positions. The extent to which people of Māori descent identify as Māori, and the importance they place on this social category also varies (Kukutai, 2003).

Measures of Māori identity

To capture much of the cultural diversity that exists within the Māori social category, McIntosh (2005) distinguishes between Māori identities that are fixed, fluid and forced. According to her definitions, fixed Māori are those who maintain traditional Māori cultural practices, fluid Māori are those who may be less distinct from mainstream culture but still identify positively as Māori and reject negative stereotypes, and forced Māori are those who do not have access to Māori cultural resources and are categorised as Māori by non-Māori as a form of exclusion, rendering them doubly marginalised.

Efforts have also been made to measure Māori identities quantitatively. For example, seven indicators of Māori cultural identity were put forward by Durie et al. (1995). These indicators were self-identification, whakapapa, marae participation, whānau associations, whenua tipu, contact with Māori people, and Māori
language. These indicators were used to distinguish between Māori identities that are labelled as compromised, notional, positive and secure. According to this system of classification, those who have considerable access to Māori cultural resources and engage predominantly in te ao Māori have the most secure Māori identities. While this research advances understanding of Māori cultural identity considerably, the identity labels used are not affirming of the multiple identity positions that Māori youth might occupy.

A bi-dimensional model of Māori identity positioning was proposed by the E-Learning Advisory Group (2002) in their report on how digital and online resources could be aligned with Māori learning aspirations. In this model, positions are determined by cultural interaction (close or distant), and disposition towards Māori culture (positive or negative). Those with high cultural interaction and a positive disposition fall into the “cultural inheritors” category. Those with high cultural interaction and a negative disposition fall into the “cultural dissenters” category. Those with low cultural interaction and a positive disposition fall into the “cultural seekers” category. Finally, those with low cultural interaction and a negative disposition fall into the “cultural rejecters” category. This model is useful in that it allows for a person’s access to cultural resources and personal disposition to be considered simultaneously.

A Māori identity model that considers broader contextual and social factors that influence identity positioning was put forward by Davies et al. (1993). In their model, the habitats of the pūtangitangi are used as a metaphor for the identity spaces Māori occupy. The pūtangitangi model is bi-dimensional, organising identity positions based on the strength of a person’s cultural identity, and the effect of the dominant culture. The four habitats of pūtangitangi are land, rivers, sky, and sea. According to this model, if the strength of Māori cultural identity is high, and the effect of the dominant culture is low, the identity position is labelled land. If both Māori cultural identity and the effect of the dominant culture are high, the identity position is rivers. If Māori cultural identity is low, and the dominant culture effect is high, the identity position is sky. Finally, if both cultural identity and the dominant culture effect are low, the identity position is labelled sea. This model suggests that there are benefits associated with the different habitats and draws particular attention to the stability of the land identity position (high Māori cultural identity with low effect of the dominant culture), and the danger and uncertainty of the sea position (low Māori cultural identity, and low effect of the dominant culture).

The pūtangitangi model is particularly useful for considering Māori identity spaces, as it is fundamentally a dynamic identity model that deals well with identity development, and with individuals who move fluidly between identity spaces. While not explicitly drawn out in Davies et al.’s research, the model is also useful as it is grounded in a landscape metaphor that allows the importance of the environment or social context to be considered. The use of landscapes in the model also allows for the incorporation of resources and threats in the particular landscape that might motivate migrations between identity spaces.

A measure of Māori identity that reflects multiple ways of being Māori was developed by Houkamau and Sibley (2010). They produced the multidimensional model of Māori identity and cultural engagement, which consists of the following six dimensions: (1) group membership evaluation, (2) socio-political consciousness, (3) cultural efficacy and active identity engagement, (4) spirituality, (5) interdependent self-concept, and (6) authenticity beliefs (that is, whether or not one believes that some people are “more” Māori than others). The benefit of this model is that multiple factors that Māori may consider central to their identity are considered, and no one identity position is promoted as superior to others, thereby affirming diverse Māori identity positions.
Western constructions of social identity

The social identity approach

Social psychology researcher Henri Tajfel (1982, p. 24) defines social identity as “that part of the individuals’ self-concept which derives from their knowledge of their membership of a social group together with the value and emotional significance of that membership”. According to his social identity theory, people are categorised into groups, come to identify with their group, and attempt to derive positive distinctiveness by evaluating their group favourably compared with other groups. Self-categorisation theory (Turner, 1982) describes how these group categorisations take place. According to this theory, multiple social identities are available at any one time, and the social context will determine which social identity will become salient. Examples of potential concurrently available identities include gender identity, national identity and ethnic identity.

Ethnic identity

Ethnicity categorises people based on factors which could include ancestry, culture, language and religion. Ethnic identity is the part of one’s sense of self that derives from one’s membership of an ethnic group. The most commonly used measure of ethnic identity in psychology research, the Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; Phinney, 1992), originally consisted of three factors, which included ethnic behaviours. However, Phinney and Ong (2007) produced a revised version of the MEIM consisting of identity exploration, and commitment only. The ethnic behaviours factor was removed from the measure, as these external actions were not considered part of the internal experiences that make up ethnic identity. As opposed to being part of ethnic identity, it has been suggested that ethnic behaviours are indicators of acculturation (Roberts et al., 1999).

Acculturation

Acculturation refers to culture changes that result from intercultural contact (Sam & Berry, 2010). These changes can be affective, behavioural or cognitive (Ward, 1996). Berry (1984) distinguishes between four acculturation strategies, based on the extent to which people maintain their cultural heritage, and engage with wider society. The four strategies are assimilation (low cultural heritage, and low engagement with wider society); marginalisation (low cultural heritage, and low engagement with wider society); separation (high cultural heritage, and low engagement with wider society); and integration (high cultural heritage, and high engagement with wider society). Berry’s model is highly prescriptive, suggesting, as it does, that the integration strategy is the most adaptive (a strategy that may not resonate with the aspirations of Indigenous peoples who have experienced forceful State initiatives to integrate them into mainstream society). The acculturation strategies put forward by Berry resonate with the Māori identity positions suggested by McIntosh (2005) and Davies et al. (1993) in that the models include the effect of the heritage culture, and mainstream culture. However, unlike Davies et al.’s model, Berry’s model fails to recognise the fluidity of ethnic identity, as the ethnic identity categorisations are presented as fairly static.

Māori and Western identity research

The social identity approach, outlined above, is useful in accounting for Māori identity diversity, as it acknowledges the importance of social contexts in identity salience. However, there are differences in the way in which identity is constructed in the social identity approach and the Māori identity research presented earlier in this article. In the Māori identity research above, identity is conceptualised as incorporating beliefs, attitudes, cultural competencies,
institutional engagement and connectedness. In contrast, in the social identity approach, identity is defined more simply as part of one’s sense of self, which is not necessarily related to any form of cultural expression. While the concept of ethnicity captures culture (for example, language, values, beliefs, behaviours), the concept of ethnic identity, as it is applied in psychology, usually refers to how one feels about one’s membership of an ethnic group, without reference to cultural engagement, which is instead considered to be a feature of acculturation.

According to social identity theory, ethnic identity is considered part of one’s sense of self: an internal experience. In contrast to this notion, the bases of Māori identities include the atua, whenua and tīpuna that members of the group descend from and have a relationship with. Māori identity then resides not only within the individual as an internal experience, but within the whakapapa relationship. Indeed, the literal meaning of the Māori term for identity, tuakiri, is all that exists externally of the individual (Mead, 2003). Commenting on the contrast between Western and Māori notions of identity, Professor Sir Mason Durie notes, “Identity is not primarily an inner experience or personal conviction, rather it is a construct derived from the nature of relationships with the external world” (2003, p. 50).

It is possible the separation of internal experience from observable behaviours and external relationships that is evident in psychological identity theories is due to the historical roots of psychology. Psychology, as a product of Western science, bears the hallmarks of Cartesian dualism, as distinctions are made between mind and body, between the subjective and the objective, and between experience and behaviour (Durie, 1989). While this dualism is deeply embedded in Western scientific thought, mātauranga Māori tends to be holistic (Durie, 1989).

The present study will take a holistic approach to the study of Māori urban youth identity, as factors both internal and external to Māori youth will be considered, as the identity spaces that Māori youth occupy and migrate between are explored. This will be achieved via thematic analysis of interviews with Māori youths and their families, at a low-decile, urban, State secondary school. This site was conducive to the study of contemporary Māori youth identity for two reasons: many of the youths at this school lived outside of their traditional tribal areas, and the community had a high deprivation index. Therefore, these youths might be more likely to be doubly marginalised from both mainstream society, and “traditional” Māori society (see McIntosh, 2005) and, as a result, might create novel, non-“traditional” ways of identifying as Māori. Extracted themes from the analysis will be used to construct a model of Māori identity migration.

**Method**

**Participants**

Interviews and focus groups were conducted with 14 Māori students (8 young women and 6 young men) and 9 of their family members who were involved in a cultural reintegration initiative at a State secondary school.

**Materials**

Interviews followed a semi-structured interview schedule, designed to gain information on participants’ views of the cultural initiative at their school. Interviews were recorded with an Olympus WS-200S Digital Voice Recorder, transcribed, and coded using NVivo software.

**Procedure**

Ethical approval was given for this research by the School of Psychology Human Ethics Committee at Victoria University of Wellington. Introductory meetings were held with key stakeholders. Ethnographic data were
collected during numerous visits to the school. Community members who participated in interviews and focus groups were given information about the research as well as personal consent forms. Parental consent was also gained for student participants. Participants received reimbursement in the form of movie vouchers. Interviews and focus groups with Māori students and their families took place at the school-based marae. The duration of the interviews/focus groups ranged from 15 minutes to 72 minutes (M = 30 minutes, 47 seconds). Interviews were conducted in English.

**Analysis**

Interview data were coded into basic elements of meaning. Codes that related to identity migration factors were selected from the corpus and included in the data set. These codes were organised into provisional themes and overarching themes using thematic analysis (see Braun & Clarke, 2006). The constructed overarching themes were Individual/Group factors, which included the subthemes Identity Mobility and Identity Aspirations; and Contextual factors, which included the subthemes Cultural Affirmation and Membership Definitions. These themes are presented in Table 1. The themes were organised into the Māori identity migration model. This model and interview excerpts that illustrate each of the themes are presented in the following section.

**Results and discussion**

The purpose of this study was to identify factors that influence migration between identity positions for Māori urban youth. The first overarching theme extracted was Contextual factors. This theme consisted of the conditions of a social context that motivate, or allow for, identity migration. This Contextual factors theme consisted of two subthemes: Cultural Affirmation and Membership Definitions. Cultural Affirmation was used to refer to how conducive a given context is to the expression of particular cultural identity positions. Participants in this study noted that the value placed on Māori language, culture and people was not particularly high in the context of their school, and that negative stereotypes and racism directed towards Māori discouraged students from wanting to engage in Māori cultural settings.

In the following excerpt a student describes how she believes her teacher views herself and other Māori students at the school:

P7: You’re gonna be a bum. Gonna go on the dole.

The stereotype “naughty” was also described by participants as being associated with Māori students. According to the following excerpt, this stereotype discouraged students from engaging in kapa haka.

P6: There’s a lot of talented people back in the school that want to join but they’re being

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put-off because they don’t want to be classed as the naughty people.

The second contextual subtheme, Membership Definitions, referred to how group membership is defined in a given social context. If an individual fits the membership definition of a social group in a particular social context, their position within that group will be uncontested. However, if an individual does not fit the membership definition, migration to that social category may need to be negotiated. In the following excerpt, participants within a focus group discuss how, at the school, those of Māori descent are able to choose whether or not they identify as Māori. They contrast this process of self-categorisation with the process of categorising all those of Māori descent as Māori that the participants had observed within kura kaupapa.

P2: At a kura kaupapa they all interact in Māori things, but in a mainstream they’ve got the choice whether they want to or they don’t want to ...

P1: But at the kura ...

P2: You have to!

P1: You have to [laughter].

P2: You’ve got no choice [laughter]. You’re Māori! [laughter]

The second overarching theme to be extracted was Individual/Group factors. This theme consisted of individual or relational-group characteristics that influenced identity migration. This overarching theme consisted of two subthemes: Identity Aspirations and Identity Mobility. Identity Aspirations referred to how positive or negative individuals felt about being Māori and whether they aspired to identify as Māori and engage in Māori cultural settings. In the following extract, a participant describes the significance she places on her involvement in Māori cultural settings.

P7: If I don’t come to school then I’m not allowed in kapas [kapa haka]. That’s basically why I come to school ...

Int: What is it that you like about kapa haka?

P7: Everything ... Better than anything really.

Int: So what, what does kapa haka mean to you?


In contrast, the following extract describes how many students of Māori descent may choose not to identify as Māori or engage in Māori activities.

P1: ... if they don’t want to be Māori they don’t have to be Māori. We have like 200 kids that are Māori, from Māori descent, yet only about 100 of them recognise themselves as Māori, which is sad, ’cause they don’t want to be Māori.

As mentioned above, the second subtheme within Individual/Group factors was Identity Mobility. Identity Mobility referred to how easy or difficult it was for individuals to migrate between identity spaces. This subtheme was broken down further into two minor themes: Cultural Competence and Appearance. In the following extract, a participant describes how a perceived lack of Māori cultural competence may discourage Māori youth from engaging in Māori cultural settings.

P23: I also see it as one of the reasons why um Māori students stand-off, because a lot of the Māori students that are in kapa haka
groups, and all that kind of thing, know exactly where they’re from, if not speaking te reo fluently, you know. So, it is quite scary or intimidating when your peers know everything, and you just know that you’re Māori because you’re brown.

In the following exchange between two participants, many of themes extracted in this study are touched on, including Appearance.

P7: I’m glad I’m black. I’d rather be black than white [laughter].

P8: You are white! [laughter]

P7: That’s on the outside! You know [laughter], I’m blacker on the inside!

In the extract above, the first speaker has labelled herself “black”. Her appearance (in this case colour) can be seen to conform to a Māori membership definition that may be in place in the social context. This allows her the identity mobility to migrate to or stay within the social category. The first speaker then states that she is “glad” she is black, indicating that her position corresponds with her identity aspiration. She clarifies this further, stating that she would “rather be black than white”. However, this positioning is contested by the second speaker, who has darker skin than the first speaker, and labels the first speaker “white”. The first speaker then negotiates her membership of the category black, stating that she is “blacker on the inside”. She is presumably comparing herself to the second speaker when she says she is “blacker”, thereby negating the ability of the second speaker to challenge her “blackness”. Being “blacker on the inside” presumably refers to some personality characteristics or behaviours that the first speaker believes to be associated with “blackness”. As the first speaker holds leadership roles within the kapa haka group, it is likely that the characteristics of behaviours that she refers to could include cultural competencies, but may also include other characteristics or behaviours; for example, those associated with stereotypes associated with being “black”.

The Māori identity migration model

In this section I present the Māori identity migration model (see Figure 1), showing how the extracted themes (Contextual factors, Individual/Group factors) relate to identity migration. Contextual factors determine Push–Pull factors in identity spaces, which are responded to differently, based on Individual/Group factors.

The Māori individual/group is represented by a rectangle in the centre of the model, with arrows showing that the individual/group may move between identity spaces. As noted above, individuals and groups vary in their responses to the Push–Pull factors present in different identity spaces. Individual/Group factors that influence whether Māori urban youth choose to stay in particular identity spaces or move to other spaces include Identity Aspirations (for example, attitudes towards Māori language, culture and people) and Identity Mobility (that is, their ability to adopt different identity positions). As outlined in Turner’s (1982) self-categorisation theory, when members of a group hold negative perceptions of their group they may attempt to move out of their group, and into an alternative group that is viewed more favourably. They will only be able to do so, however, if the boundaries between social categories are permeable.

In the Māori identity migration model, dotted lines represent the semi-permeable boundaries between identity spaces. While some Māori might find migrations between identity spaces easy, and may even “commute” on a daily basis between identity spaces, other Māori urban youth may experience less identity mobility (see McIntosh, 2005). This may in part be due to the identity policing that takes place. Houkamau and Sibley (2010) outline how Māori vary in
their beliefs of who is “authentic” within an identity space, and positioning within an identity space may need to be negotiated. Sources of contention regarding identity authenticity can centre on any number of “criteria” (such as those outlined by Durie et al., 1995), and commonly include assessing an individual’s or group’s cultural competencies, and appearance, which were found to contribute to Identity Mobility in the current study.

As well as including the extracted themes from interview data, the Māori identity migration model draws together existing theories that capture the diversity (Durie et al., 1995) and fluidity (Davies et al., 1993; McIntosh, 2005) of Māori identities. This model borrows from the environmental metaphor presented in Davies et al.’s (1993) pūtangitangi model, and Lee’s (1966) theory of migration, which states that Push–Pull factors in geographic locations are calculated to predict physical migration.

In the Māori identity migration model, environmental domains represent identity spaces that Māori occupy, and migrate between. Identity domains are determined by the level of Māori cultural engagement (represented on the horizontal axis) and the level of mainstream cultural engagement (represented on the vertical axis).

**FIGURE 1** Māori identity migration model showing how Māori migrate to identity spaces based on Contextual factors, and Individual/Group factors.
axis). This bi-dimensional model has similarities with Berry’s (1984) acculturation strategies model. However, the fundamental difference between these models is that the Māori identity migration model is not a system for categorising Māori based on their acculturation strategy. Rather, the model categorises identity spaces that Māori move, often fluidly, between. In addition, a particular identity strategy or cultural profile is not purported to be superior to others in this model, unlike Berry’s conclusion that the integration strategy (with high engagement with both the dominant and the “heritage” culture) is the most adaptive.

Within each identity domain represented in the Māori identity migration model, Push–Pull factors are represented by plus and minus signs. Just as there are many reasons why individuals might migrate between geographic locations (see Lee, 1966), Māori urban youth are aware of many negative (Push) factors and positive (Pull) factors in available identity spaces. Decisions to remain in the same identity space or migrate to a new space are made by calculating the Push–Pull factors in the available spaces. The Push–Pull factors can also be framed as Identity Threats and Identity Opportunities.

The Identity Threats and Identity Opportunities that influence identity migration are multiple, interconnected and subject to change based on Contextual factors, represented by the external ring of the Māori identity migration model. In this study, Identity Affirmation (how conducive an environment is to the expression of Māori identity) and Membership Definitions (how group membership is defined in a given social context) were seen to influence identity migration. Just how conducive an environment will be to the expression of particular identities, and how identity will be defined in a given social context will be determined by broader Contextual factors; for example, historical context, political context and population demographics.

While the Māori identity migration model is useful for considering the fluidity of, and motivations for, Māori urban youth identity migration, it should be considered only as a simplified model of complex phenomena. It also should be noted that this model is not exhaustive, as it does not present all the possible identity spaces that Māori urban youth might occupy. For example, those of dual (Māori and Pākehā) descent who may not be fully accepted by or identify strongly with Māori or Pākehā people may express dual dissent, declare independence and establish their own identity space that is not accommodated by the Māori identity migration model (see Kukutai, 2003; Meredith, 1998; Webber, 2008). Also, in its simplicity, this model does not capture the multidimensional nature of Māori identity described by Houkamau and Sibley (2010). To address this, the model would need to tease out the level of Māori cultural engagement in different domains of experience (for example, socio-political consciousness versus Māori language proficiency).

Conclusion

Māori urban youth occupy diverse identity positions, and may migrate fluidly between identity positions (Webber, 2012). The purpose of the present research was to explore factors that motivate migration between particular identity positions. Thematic analysis of interviews with urban Māori secondary school students and their family members was used to extract the following themes: Contextual factors (consisting of Cultural Affirmation and Membership Definitions) and Individual/Group factors (consisting of Identity Aspirations and Identity Mobility, which was broken down further into the two minor themes: Cultural Competence and Appearance). These extracted themes were then used to construct the Māori identity migration model.

The Māori identity migration model is a useful tool in conceptualising some of the characteristics of the identity spaces Māori urban
youth occupy in 21st century Aotearoa, along with the motivations Māori urban youth have for occupying those spaces. This conceptualisation of Māori urban youth identity allows the landscapes of particular identity positions to be mapped. For example, rather than assessing the resources (for example, employment opportunities, healthcare, education) that are available to individuals based solely on their geographic location, a consideration of the resources and opportunities available to Māori urban youth who occupy different identity positions could be assessed, along with the threats that Māori youth occupying different identity positions might face when attempting to access resources and services. Initiatives designed to minimise identity threats, and increase available resources could then be implemented, so that Māori urban youth are not being forced or coerced to occupy identity spaces they are uncomfortable with.

In order for the potential benefits of this model to be realised, more research is needed to map out threats and opportunities present in different identity spaces, in given contexts (for example, access to healthcare, or Māori language education for Māori urban youth occupying different identity spaces), and to describe how those Māori urban youth who seek to migrate to alternative identity spaces (for example, Māori urban youth wishing to become more involved in Māori society) might improve their identity mobility. In addition, new representations of Māori urban youth identities that do not conform to Māori-mainstream dichotomies (see Borell, 2005; Webber, 2008) need to be explored further to capture the diversity of Māori urban youth identity in 21st century Aotearoa.

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Glossary

Aotearoa

New Zealand

atua
dieties

hapū
tribes/nations

iwi
confederations of tribes/nations

kapa haka
Māori performing group

kura kaupapa
Māori language immersion schools

marae
ancestral meeting houses

mātauranga Māori
Māori knowledge

Pākehā
New Zealanders of European descent

pūtangitangi
paradise shelduck

tē ao Māori
the Māori world

tē reo
the Māori language

tipuna
ancestors

tuakiri
identity

whakapapa
genealogy

whānau
extended families

whenua
land

whenua tipu
access to tribal lands
References


