# Collegial Support from a Mäori Perspective: A Model for Counsellor Kinship

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ABSTRACT

Counsellors sometimes struggle with personal or professional challenges, stresses, and strains, a situation that can be made more difficult by a lack of support among colleagues. Finding an alternative community of support can make a crucial difference for a counsellor's well being. As a model for such a community, we look to the Mäoris of New Zealand, whose kinship networks include collegial relationships within extended families of affiliation. Recommendations are drawn from this model for expanding counsellors' support systems.

RÉSUMÉ

Les conseillers doivent parfois faire face à des défis personnels ou professionnels surtout quand l'absence de soutien collégial rend la situation particulièrement difficile. Trouver d'autres sources d'appui communautaire permet d'améliorer considérablement la situation du conseiller. Afin de trouver un modèle pour ce soutien communautaire, nous avons étudié les Maoris de Nouvelle-Zélande. Leurs réseaux familiaux comprennent, entre autres, des liens collégiaux à l'intérieur de familles élargies de même affiliation. Grâce à l'observation de ce modèle, des recommandations ont pu être établies pour élargir les systèmes de soutien des conseillers.

Counselling is, for many, a profession that offers a deep sense of personal fulfillment. Working with clients is a way to express the value of making a positive difference in human lives and a way to feel connected and involved with others in meaningful ways. However, counselling also has its own set of occupational hazards that sometimes threaten to negate these fulfilling aspects of professional life (Guy, 1987; Kottler, 1993; Sussman, 1995).

Counsellors often suffer from occupational stress and personal strain, not only from clients who may be resistant or even hostile, but also from external sources (Guy, Polestra, & Stark, 1989; Sowa, May, & Niles, 1994). Government spending in preventive and mental health services continues to be minimal. Managed care organizations of various forms can be so restrictive that they seem to reduce the practice of counselling to an assembly line. Public perceptions of our profession are bringing our work under closer scrutiny, and unfavourable perceptions often drive that scrutiny (Kottler & Hazler, 1997). Additionally, counsellors must compete with other mental health care providers for clients, and often we

encounter stressors from our own colleagues in the form of organizational politics and disputes among co-workers (Sherman & Thelen, 1998).

We also spend much of our time in isolation, alone with people who are in excruciating pain. Ironically, many of us became counsellors in the first place because we sought a profession that would allow for intimacy and interpersonal connection. Perhaps we wanted to belong to a professional family, to feel a part of a group whose members devote themselves to helping others. What a disappointment it can be to realize that most of the time, we essentially work alone. Independence is part of our heritage in North America; we are pioneers whose ancestors were proud of their individuality and their resourcefulness, not needing to depend on anyone else in order to survive. Not surprisingly, we have tended to construct work and family environments in ways that maximize and reward self-reliance and independent functioning. But our clients can be needy and demanding; sometimes, their suffering is contagious (Rodolfa, Kraft, & Reilley, 1988). Once we emerge from sessions, more than anything we need to replenish our energy and fortify our spirits before we once again slip back into the arena to do battle against the demons that infect those we are trying to help.

Because of all these factors, it may no longer be possible for us to practice well unless we have considerable collegial support. Ideally, the colleagues we work with on a daily basis give us the support and sense of connection that we need to sustain ourselves. However, our interactions with colleagues are sometimes less than supportive. Political skirmishes, dysfunctional systems within our organizations, and interpersonal struggles can make conflicts at work more frequent than we would prefer. Even when staff teams work together cohesively, many counsellors still do not receive the personal support they need and deserve. These low levels of social support are associated with higher occupational stress among counsellors (Sowa, May, & Niles, 1994). Thus, it is not surprising that many members of our profession struggle with boredom and burnout at some point during their career (Farber, 1990; Guy, 1987; Kottler, 1993).

Each of the authors has worked in a number of clinical and educational settings, and perhaps not unlike the reader, has witnessed behaviour on the part of colleagues that is sometimes neglectful, disruptive, disrespectful, or even abusive towards others. While one solution is to search for a work environment that provides the kind of mutual support and caring that is needed in order to flourish as a practitioner, these can be hard to find. Another solution is to wait and hope for the best, for an unsupportive environment may be a basically nurturing environment undergoing a period of reorganization or external stress. Nevertheless, under these circumstances, other sources of support and connection become even more crucial.

One solution that people often employ, when they long for a stronger sense of support and community than their present circumstances allow, is to find others and create an informal group based on shared concerns or like-mindedness. Throughout history, affinity groups, or "psychic families" as they are sometimes called, have sustained people through all kinds of challenging situations (Goleman,

1995; Steinem, 1992). Indeed, many counsellors create such groups for clients in order to foster their progress and well being. But where can we ourselves find more of the support and sense of community that we need, professionally?

The solution we offer in this article is for counsellors to reframe their thinking about a supportive climate to include important collegial relationships that exist beyond the immediate environment of the individual work setting. That, after all, is one appeal of attending conferences and workshops—not only to obtain new information and refine clinical skills, but also to forge new relationships and create supportive networks for oneself and one's colleagues. This means creating an extended "family" of cherished and trusted colleagues around the city, around the province and country, or around the world. At this point in history we are no longer geographically bound to interact only with those nearby. Instead, we can use meetings, conferences, the telephone, fax machine, professional journals, and the Internet to create a community of like-minded professionals who provide the support and sustenance required to flourish in this challenging work we do.

## A MODEL FOR A "FAMILY" OF COLLEGIAL RELATIONSHIPS

As a model for such a community, we look to the Mäoris of New Zealand, whose circle of kinship includes friendship or affiliative relationships as well as family ties. Among the Mäoris, the indigenous people of New Zealand, the concept of "family" includes much more than relations by blood. Similar to tribal peoples in North America, extended networks of affiliation are created by choice, based on feelings of love, respect, and caring. These kinship relations, called *whanaugatanga* in Mäori, transcend blood relations, and even cultures.

I (B. A.) am a Mäori leader in my land of Te Aroha (New Zealand). I am also Head of Mäori Studies in a college of education where I prepare counsellors and teachers in narrative approaches for working with minority children. Although I sometimes feel different from my pakeha (people of European ancestry) colleagues, and also misunderstood, the concept of extended family, which we call *whänau*, is very important to my people and me.

In a world that makes so many demands, and is constantly changing, I could not survive without my whänau, my kinship family (two of whom are helping me to express myself in this article). With the pressures, stress, and isolation that I (and most of us) experience at times, supportive collegial relationships are even more crucial in helping us remain balanced.

### The Nature of Whänau

It must be understood that the Polynesian people of the past believed in the kinship of all living things and people. The whole of the Mäori people were regarded in principle as one huge family. Kinship between any two people might be far removed but could be traced through the *whakapapa* (genealogical family trees). Like many indigenous kinship groups, there was rivalry, warfare, and interactions that separated and joined *whänau* groups.

The most recognizable aspect of a *whänau* kinship group was the primary family unit consisting of the father, mother, and children. The parents were responsible for the welfare of the children, feeding and clothing them, and their education. However, other relatives of the family were responsible for the upbringing of the children as well. In all, this made up a considerable number of people from the *whänau* that had a major influence on how the values and attitudes of each member of the group would be shaped. The large (but manageable) size of the *whänau*, and the close ties between its members, made it a very useful work unit where the activities required cooperation, teamwork, and understanding.

I grew up in a small farming community where the majority of residents were Mäori. It was a community where children were allowed to do the things that children do: riding horses, farm chores, milking cows, harvesting, and helping one another. The children, the parents, and even the aged all had a part to play in community affairs. I grew up observing the special way that everyone in the community was able to work and play together in a large group, for the good of that group. As a child I learned what it meant to be part of an extended family.

The community *marae* (gathering place) that held the local carved meeting house was located next to our family farm. This sacred place helped to develop the idea of family togetherness. It was here that Mäori families could gather and carry on with the rituals of the past, especially ceremonial rituals of weddings and funerals. As a young person growing up in that setting, I learned to participate in the community rituals by chopping wood, preparing food to be cooked in the *hangi* (steam cooker) and observing the elders speaking and singing on the marae. Kinship brought our people together in these ceremonies. To me, kinship is comprised of the *manaki* or care for each family group, the *awhi* or help that you give to each other, and the warmth of being together as a family group. Through this "active" kind of kinship, the strength and resources of the group replenish those who need assistance.

### Creating Kinship

Among my people, kinship recognizes and formalizes the bond of people who share common interests and caring. Individuals may be adopted into a *whänau*, or invited to become a brother or sister with the same rights as anyone related by blood. It is this process of sharing and interacting with one another that makes a Mäori *whänau* very special. What holds a *whänau* together is not only the past traditions and histories of our ancestors, or the rules of the *marae*, or the interconnections that have been developed over the years, but the love and respect that the people in a group hold for one another.

I believe that the value of kinship can be a major influence on what we do and how we operate as professionals and human beings. Similar to the indigenous peoples in North America, Mäori create extended networks of affiliation by choice, based on feelings of aroha (love), mana (respect) and manakitanga (caring). Since childhood, I have tried to recreate the spirit of *whänau* in all aspects of

my life, at home and at work — a spirit that involves the whole community working together to support one another. As a counsellor and educator, I see this as a key part of my work — not only with respect to helping clients to build support, but also helping my colleagues to do so.

## Composing and Maintaining a Professional Whānau

An intriguing aspect of the Māori perspective of *whānau* is the notion that relationships based on particular qualities — *aroha* (love), *mana* (respect), *awhi* (helpfulness), and *manakitanga* (caring) — can take on the characteristics of a kinship relationship. Equally important, these "kinship" relationships can be an affiliation of choice. Thus, we can learn from this model and create networks of professional "kinship" that are similar to extended families.

When we work with clients to improve the quality of their lives we often seek to help them improve the quality of their interpersonal relationships. Social support, as the commodity these relationships provide is sometimes called, is known to counteract the stresses that accumulate in daily life and sustain our health and sense of emotional well-being (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Goleman, 1995; Seeman, Seeman, & Sayles, 1985; Ward, Sherman, & LaGory, 1984). However, let us remember that this is as true for us as professionals as it is for our clients as individuals. Those of us with strong support systems, such as the *whānau* described earlier, are better able to cope with major life changes and with daily hassles in our work (Pines & Aronson, 1988). We will flourish personally and professionally when we both nurture and enjoy *whānau*-quality relationships in both arenas.

How can one build and maintain a professional "*whānau*"? A good place to begin is to consider the quality of relationships that are in your closest work context. Are they characterized by *mana* (respect), *awhi* (helpfulness), and *manakitanga* (caring)? Sometimes they are not. For example, lack of support can be the result of contexts that promote isolation, or contexts defined by conflict and disharmony (i.e., disrespect, unhelpfulness, lack of caring), or by our own neglect to support others in our personal network in important ways. Table 1 illustrates how "kinship" type relationships are supportive (or unsupportive) in ways that are similar to the extended family relationships. Based on these distinctions, counsellors can evaluate the actual supportiveness of their own professional relationships.

Here are some questions to consider when taking stock of the supportiveness of one's current professional setting:

1. Which supportive characteristics (or lack thereof) do I experience in my immediate professional relationships?

2. Which supportive characteristics do I seek to provide others?

3. Which supportive characteristics are most acutely missing in my work setting?

4. Which relationships in my work setting might provide me with more of what I need?

TABLE 1

*Supportive and Unsupportive Characteristics of an Extended Family Network*

| Unsupportive | Supportive |
|---|---|
| Shares history of superficial events. | Shares history of meaningful events. |
| Assumes it knows you and understands you when it doesn't; undervalues you. | Knows you as you are; accepts, values, and believes in you. |
| Is indifferent to our needs for information or understanding; creates confusion with erroneous or irrelevant information. | Provides informational support; help us define and understand our problems and find solutions. |
| Unrelentingly focuses on problems that need to be solved and work that must be done. | Provides companionship and fun; gives us a break from pressures and stressors. |
| Remains detached and insists that people need to solve their own problems, or becomes over-involved and takes over. | Exchanges instrumental support: tangible help that assists with our daily challenges. |
| Is rigid in roles and rules. | Roles and rules can change as mutually agreed upon. |
| Makes you forget who you really are and negates who you want to be. | Helps you remember who you really are and helps you grow toward who you want to be. |

*Note:* Table summarizes findings from several studies of organizational and family health, i.e., Cohen & Wills, 1985; Curran, 1983; Seeman, Seeman, & Sayles, 1985; Ward, Sherman, and LaGory, 1984.

Evaluating the quality of one's current work environment may indicate some things that need to be changed. Often, the best place to begin creating change is in one's most immediate context. Following are some possibilities for cultivating a greater sense of community in one's work setting.

1. Explore the ways that you might have isolated yourself in your work, making it difficult for you to find the nurturing you require, and resolve to make changes.

2. Invite colleagues at your work setting to think about ways to create greater mutual support. Consider how you might include more occasions for eating together and celebrating each other's special events. Some of these could become rituals that people begin to look forward to, such as a monthly breakfast or holiday pot-luck dinners — and once initiated, they may take on a life of

their own. In one of our work settings, for example, we suggested that one day a week, one person could bring lunch for all the others on a rotating basis. This grew into a tradition with each person sharing foods from their family or ethnic backgrounds and became a very meaningful way to build bonds.

3. Be generous in helping out with specific needs when someone encounters difficult times.

4. Develop group projects that give everyone an opportunity to work together for a common good. This can be as simple as getting everybody together to donate blood (except for the squeamish) or as elaborate as helping to sponsor a weekend fundraiser for a special cause. In any case, the enhanced sense of kinship is as important as the project's tangible results.

These ideas may help to create a sense of a cohesive professional family at its best (and, as a side effect, reduce conflict and interpersonal disharmony). However, as we discussed earlier, it is not unusual for counsellors to work in settings that appear to have many of the characteristics of a dysfunctional family network, and it may be extremely difficult to initiate systemic changes within the organization. What then? Can you find others with whom to build mutually supportive relationships?

It is still possible to find or create a positive and supportive *whānau*, or extended family network, by broadening your extended professional network and enlarging your circle of colleagues to include individuals who live and work in distant settings. Vehicles such as this journal, the Internet, and professional associations create opportunities for nurturing relationships that transcend geographical proximity. In order for this to happen, however, it is up to each counsellor to proactively initiate more collegial contact and support. This can happen in a number of ways:

1. Go to conferences, meetings, continuing education, etc., where you will have a chance to meet others with values and interests similar to yours. Initiate new relationships and follow through by maintaining contact. Even brief and occasional contact can go a long way.

2. Introduce the concept of *whānau* to your closest colleagues and friends. Make a commitment to create and maintain a professional "family"; create a ritual (perhaps an exchange of symbolic gifts, or the annual "party after the party" at a yearly annual conference) that signifies your intentions.

3. Find or make occasions to get together, even though you may live far apart. Exchanging visits with persons from another part of the country or another part of the world can be very enriching experiences, both personally and professionally.

4. Take photos of gatherings and share them with each other; give special places of prominence to some of these reminders of your professional family.

5. Brainstorm together for your own ideas that uniquely suit your own situations, personalities, and needs.

Ideally, of course, the kind of supportive relationships we are describing would be present in both your immediate and your extended professional contexts. Wherever you find them, acknowledge that you value certain collegial relationships for their qualities of *awhi* (helpfulness), *mana* (respect), and *manakitanga* (caring) in addition to the qualities we more often associate with good professional relationships — productivity, equity, and stimulation. Express appreciation for the positive difference these qualities bring to your work and your life.

In conclusion, we draw this lesson from the Māori concept of *whānau*. What holds a professional "family" together is not blood relations or the shared common traditions and histories of our ancestors, not the rules and requirements of the workplace, or even the inter-connections that have been developed over the years. Instead, we believe that what holds a professional family together is the feeling that each person belongs to a special network that cares and nurtures each one, is responsible for the well-being of each one, and values each one's contribution for the good of all. This sense of special relatedness balances the other stressors we inevitably encounter in a line of work — and in a world — that requires the best of us, often under difficult circumstances.

Finally, we would like to end with the personal note that writing this article about our own "*whānaus*," personal and professional, has given us a chance to reflect on our own relationships through the coming together of different cultures. In doing so, we have gained a deeper understanding of what brings people together, across spheres of work and friendship. We hope our story gives encouragement and strength to others who wish to make deeper contact with colleagues: *E mihi nui ki a koulou katoa* — greetings to you all.

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