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RESEARCH ARTICLE (PEER-REVIEWED)

Restorative Listening: Conditions for Reciprocal Partnerships in the Context of Harm and Healing

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Abstract

This study explores the experiences of 22 skilled professionals and community leaders across diverse fields, cultures and positionalities in Aotearoa New Zealand and their perspectives about what listening means and what it takes for listening to be possible in their efforts to engage individuals and communities. Establishing the connection between reciprocity and listening, and drawing from the field of restorative practice, this qualitative study introduces the concept of *restorative listening* to the community engagement field. It reveals that listening is fundamentally an interpersonal and relational act, but one that is contextualised by community and organisational climate and culture. Increasing attention to theories and methods of restorative practices and other forms of conflict transformation will support the field of community engagement to more fully and appropriately address harm that is experienced directly by partners in the context of their partnerships. Co-authored by a team consisting of American academics with an Indigenous Māori academic from Aotearoa New Zealand, we explored themes that arose from interviews conducted by the lead author whilst in the country, which were then collaboratively coded, analysed and written to present key insights. Importantly, this study highlights the profound influence of sociocultural context on listening and the importance of culturally respectful and inclusive approaches to exploring research findings. In this study, Māori perspectives had particular influence on how listening was conceptualised, with the Māori worldview emerging as a central framework for understanding deep, relational listening. Key themes are related to the development of relationships as a

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first and essential step for listening to be possible, as well as the importance of space and time for this work to occur and the challenges that organisational or societal pressure can create for such interpersonal and intergroup relationship building. This research positions listening as a deeply ethical and political practice and, extended to the community–university engagement field, suggests that achieving reciprocity – the ability to become collaborative thought partners in partnerships – may depend on the ability of individuals to proactively cultivate relationships at the interpersonal level, even as they are acting on behalf of groups, communities and organisations. We invite further exploration of the systems and structures in organisational settings that may be essential to fostering institutional culture and conditions for restorative listening.

Keywords

Restorative Practices; Listening; Reciprocity; Partnerships; Aotearoa New Zealand

Introduction: Listening as a Requirement for Reciprocal Relationships

Community–university engagement, as a field of practice and scholarship, is defined by two principles: mutual benefit and reciprocity ([Carnegie, n.d.](#)). Whilst mutual benefit is demonstrated by partners advancing and achieving outputs and outcomes that meet their own priorities respectively and together, reciprocity is demonstrated by the inclusive, equitable and relational *processes* that allow partners to be thought-partners and co-labourers such that they feel valued for their knowledge, resources and efforts (Janke et al., 2021). Through reciprocal processes of full inclusion in key phases of decision-making, such as the direction, activities, analysis, dissemination and review of partnership endeavours, institutions of higher education demonstrate their commitment to ethically, effectively and sustainably advancing community and academic outcomes ([Dostilio, 2014](#); [Dostilio et al., 2012](#); [Saltmarsh et al., 2009](#)).

Whilst the scholarship of community engagement has established its own terms, definitions, values and literature ([Butin, 2006](#)), its foundations rest on theories and concepts adapted from other fields. The very concept of reciprocity, for example, is steeped in experiential, liberatory and participatory traditions of scholarship that emphasise the inclusive, collective ways of knowing (i.e., epistemologies) and transformational change systems ([Saltmarsh et al., 2009](#)). Asset-based approaches for community development (ABCD), introduced by [Kretzmann and McKnight \(1993\)](#), form the intellectual bedrock of reciprocity, demonstrating the importance of engaging community residents *not* as participants but as co-conspirators, collaborators, designers and doers; these approaches are less extractive of communities, instead focusing on the assets available within the community to define problems holistically and design the most effective and enduring solutions. Epistemic inclusion, the idea of seeking out and bringing into the scholarly conversation diverse knowers who have diverse ways of knowing and diverse expressions of knowledge, has roots in philosophy (e.g., epistemic injustice; [Fricker, 2007](#)) as well as higher education studies (e.g., epistemic exclusion; [Settles et al., 2021](#)). Many other traditions beyond these have formed the conceptual basis of reciprocity in community engagement. Our work seeks to continue this evolution by exploring listening through a restorative practice framework.

In what follows, we describe a study that connects the perspectives of community engagement leaders and facilitators who work across diverse fields, cultures and positionalities in organisational and community settings to an emerging concept we call *restorative listening*. In particular, we explore this question: What does it take to create the conditions in which listening is possible, particularly when it is hard to do because of current and/or past harm that has led to the estrangement of individuals and communities?

RESTORATIVE PRACTICE

Restorative practice is an overarching movement and social science that prioritises building and restoring relationships, particularly in the realm of conflict transformation ([Wachtel, 2016](#)). Aligned with principles of community engagement, the broad aim of restorative practice, as described by Aotearoa New Zealand Pākehā (New Zealanders descended from the British and European colonial settlers) scholar Chris Marshall, is ‘the creation of interpersonal relationships and societal institutions that foster human dignity, equality, freedom, mutual respect, democratic engagement, and collaborative governance’ ([Pointer et al., 2020](#), p. 30).

Aimed at fostering relationships through all phases of development, harm and repair, restorative practices are designed to support interpersonal and community connection, accountability and healing. Restorative approaches, grounded in relational theory, posit that individuals are fundamentally interconnected and that relationships are central to human development and learning ([Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015](#)). At the core, restorative practices are those that help individuals and communities understand their interconnectivity and the essential role of relationships in individual and collective wellness, and give them dialogic tools to positively transform their relationships when harm inevitably occurs.

[Llewellyn and Morrison’s \(2018\)](#) development of *relational ecology* expands and highlights the many levels of interconnectedness between institutional and systemic issues (macro-level) and interpersonal relationships (micro-level) as they relate to harm and healing. It emphasises that individuals and their communities are embedded within organisations, systems, structures, cultures, histories and socio-political contexts, all of which shape interpersonal experiences of relationships, harm and healing. A restorative approach to listening requires recognising these sociocultural contexts and the external factors – such as community history, cultural dynamics and systemic structures – that influence both individuals and their communities ([Browning et al., 2024](#)).

Speaking with restorative scholars and practitioners whose approaches to listening and community building are foundationally connected to the lived realities of harm and healing can provide insights for community engagement scholars and practitioners who seek to better understand and more skilfully navigate community–university relationships.

LISTENING

This study used Bodie, Worthington and Beyene’s definition of *listening*:

Listening is an action, ideally an ethical one, undertaken in the spirit of mutual respect void of goals to marginalize or otherwise suppress competing voices. When engaged properly, it entails genuine presence in the service of others and leads to awareness, understanding, trust, and more productive and peaceful communities ([Bodie et al., 2023](#), p. 2).

As an action, listening is most often described as the work of individuals, although recent research has shown that listening is also an action of larger-scale groups, organisations and communities. For example, considerable community engagement scholarship is aimed at helping individuals develop empathy and understanding, discuss difficult topics ([Schirch & Campt, 2015](#)), navigate dialectical tensions ([Dumlao & Janke, 2012](#)), communicate collaboratively ([Dumlao, 2018](#); [Dumlao & Shearman, 2023](#)) and practise dialogue and storytelling across differences, particularly regarding politically and culturally polarised topics ([Longo & Shaffer, 2019](#)). Skills for being a ‘good listener’ focus on communication patterns and signals, such as effective body language, crafting open and honest questions, reflective listening and appreciative inquiry in order to foster the development of interpersonal relationships based on understanding and empathy ([Bodie, 2025](#)).

Community engagement scholarship also illustrates different types of ‘listening sessions’, such as community town halls, focus groups, community boards, discussion groups at partner appreciation luncheons and surveys that are intended to help institutional members gain feedback, insight, buy-in and collaboration ([Holman, 2007](#)). Interpersonal approaches to listening are not easily translated at scale, as the tools and relationships required for a person to listen are meaningfully different from those required for an organisation ‘to listen’ ([Macnamara, 2016](#)).

Restorative practices and listening scholarship align with and underscore foundational values of reciprocity, namely, the usefulness of dialogue tools to transform relationships impacted by harm, individually and collectively, directly and indirectly, through approaches that foster presence, awareness and trust towards more productive and peaceful communities. A focus on listening, as a particular aspect of dialogic communication, offers insights into the challenges that professionals tend to face when working in their roles as representatives of institutions with communities that may be rightfully wary of engaging with organisations and systems that have caused harm.

POSITIONALITY STATEMENTS

I, Emily Janke, initiated the study and conducted all interviews whilst on my fourth extended trip to Aotearoa New Zealand to study restorative practices hosted by the Te Ngāpara Centre for Restorative Practice at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka. I am a white, American woman who identifies professionally as a scholar-administrator ([Janke, 2019](#)), serving as both a full professor in the Peace and Conflict Studies Department, and the director of the Institute for Community & Economic Engagement at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). Broadly, my scholarly agenda aims to support ethical and effective practices of community-engaged scholars and the institutions of higher education that they represent.

I, Adreanne Ormond, am an Indigenous Māori academic from Aotearoa New Zealand, deeply rooted in my cultural identity. Raised on my ancestral lands and immersed in Te ao Māori (Māori world), this grounding shapes my worldview, values and approach to research. Within our diverse authorship team, my contribution is characterised by this dual positioning as both indigenous Māori and academic. Being raised within my Māori community has given me knowledge of tikanga Māori (cultural protocols) and mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge systems), informing how I understand listening and reciprocity in this work. My ability to navigate between Te ao Māori and the wider Aotearoa New Zealand society enables me to interpret nuances in how different knowledge holders engage with the study, recognising distinctions between Māori and Pākehā cultural concepts, values and expectations.

I, Michael Hemphill, am an associate professor of kinesiology now at my second university, both located in the Southern United States. My research has centred on youth development in physical education and physical activity, including interests in how youth develop personal and social life skills as well as how adult leaders develop competencies to serve youth in educational contexts. My contribution is my scholarship grounded in the values of restorative justice and, as such, centred on equity issues in my teaching, research and service. This has included long-term relationships with local community partners in Greensboro, North Carolina, and international partnerships focused on restorative justice and youth sports in Aotearoa New Zealand.

Methodology

To reiterate, this study explores the question: What does it take to create the conditions in which listening is possible, particularly when it is hard to do because of current and/or past harm that has led to the estrangement of individuals and communities?

SETTING

Aotearoa New Zealand was chosen for this study because of its renowned decades-long work integrating and refining restorative practices, particularly in the youth justice system and schools ([Maxwell & Morris, 1993, 2006](#)). New Zealand's restorative justice programs have evolved from youth justice innovations to including adult court mediation ([Ministry of Justice, 2019; Morris & Maxwell, 2003](#)), whilst a network of 'restorative schools' ([Drewery, 2016; Wearmouth et al., 2007](#)) has been developed with support from university researchers ([Jansen, 2018](#)). Recent initiatives are expanding these approaches to develop restorative universities and cities ([Pointer, 2018](#)). The depth of practice, scholarship and knowledge developed in Aotearoa New Zealand's restorative justice journey offers valuable insights into the subtle art and science of listening, as demonstrated by practitioners and researchers who have refined and articulated these facilitative approaches over many years.

Conversations about intercultural harm and healing carry weight in Aotearoa New Zealand due to the nation's colonial history and ongoing engagement with Indigenous rights. The nation's dual naming reflects these contested histories: Aotearoa, meaning 'land of the long white cloud', honours the Indigenous Māori who arrived from Polynesia around 1300 CE, whilst New Zealand marks British colonisation beginning in the 19th century. Te Tiriti o Waitangi (Treaty of Waitangi), signed in 1840 between approximately 530 Māori chiefs and the British Crown, established agreements regarding sovereignty and the protection of Māori rights and resources. Nevertheless, fundamental differences between the Māori and English texts – particularly regarding sovereignty – set the stage for broken promises that continue to shape the nation. Today, Māori comprise approximately 17.4 per cent of the population, whilst Pākehā represent around 70 per cent, with Pacific peoples (8.1 per cent) and Asian communities (15.1 per cent) forming growing minorities ([Stats New Zealand, 2023](#)).

Colonial policies in the 1800s, including land confiscation and assimilation, resulted in Māori losing approximately 95 per cent of their land by 1975 ([Walker, 1990](#)). These systemic actions created disparities in health, education, employment and incarceration that persist today, with Māori disproportionately represented in negative social statistics ([Tauri, 2016](#)). However, the Māori cultural resurgence of the 1970s initiated significant change, including the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal (1975), *Kōhanga reo* (Māori for 'language nest', a total immersion preschool movement designed to revitalise the Māori language) in 1982 and the recognition of Te reo Māori as an official language in 1987 (see [Waitangi Tribunal, 1986](#)). Te ao Māori (Māori worldview) concepts have since gained visibility in institutional settings, although this cultural recognition has not yet translated into material equity ([Dell et al., 2022; Mika et al., 2022](#)).

STUDY ADVISORY COUNCIL

To support appropriate sociocultural awareness, the lead author established a study advisory council. Its purpose was to (1) inform the study design; (2) identify knowledge holders; (3) provide feedback on findings; and (4) encourage future scholarly relationships among members. Members included five in-country hosts, three of whom were currently or previously affiliated with the Te Ngāpara Centre for Restorative Practice at Victoria University of Wellington Te Herenga Waka, one of whom is emeritus faculty in the School of Education and one whose consultancy provides embodied, collective leadership development to communities and organisations, including the New Zealand Police. Two were community-engaged scholars based in American universities with related areas of scholarship. The council supported the identification of Te ao Māori as a significant theme in the findings and the inclusion of a co-author who belonged to the cultural community to support ethical and appropriate representation and analysis of the ideas and culture expressed in the interviews.

KNOWLEDGE HOLDERS

We use the term ‘knowledge holder’ ([Kimmerer, 2021](#)) rather than participants throughout this study as a way of recognising the inherent and learned wisdom of those interviewed, in particular, indigenous ways of knowing. This study includes voices from individuals of various positionalities whose work and life routine see them intentionally and effectively help establish, maintain and repair relationships, particularly within and across organisational and community spaces. These individuals operate in contexts shaped by Aotearoa New Zealand’s unique restorative justice practices and its broader historical and cultural dynamics. Their insights reflect not only the technical aspects of facilitation but also the deeply relational nature of listening across two different cultures, in a society navigating colonial legacies, cultural resurgence and ongoing reconciliation efforts. This approach allows for the capture of rich, contextualised insights into how practitioner-leaders facilitate listening within and across organisational and community contexts. Consistent with the praxis-oriented nature of conflict transformation and community engagement, this approach emphasises the interplay of experiential knowledge, relational dynamics, reflective processes and the ongoing evolution of understanding through action ([Creswell, 2013](#); [Lederach, 2005](#); [Schön, 1991](#)).

Twenty-two knowledge holders were identified and referred by members of the study advisory committee. Criteria for inclusion were professionals and/or community leaders with expertise in relational or restorative practices, grounded in direct experience supporting relationship building and repair in organisational and/or community settings. These persons included Māori ($n = 7$), Pākehā ($n = 10$) and Tauiwi ($n = 5$) (people who reside in Aotearoa New Zealand, who are not Māori or Pākehā) (see Appendix 1). These include a variety of professional roles, including mediators, facilitators, educators, scholars and Kaumātua (Māori elders) in institutions of higher education, a secondary school, regional and national police departments, human relations services, a community leadership nonprofit and Māori iwis (communities). Interviews were conducted either in person or via video in country, either individually or in groups, by the lead author in March 2024. Knowledge holders were given pseudonyms, and interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. This study was given exempt status by the UNGC Institutional Review Board, and knowledge holders were given information sheets about the study purpose and publication intentions.

ANALYSIS: COLLABORATIVE CODING

Focused on listening as a dialogic aspect of professional and community work required for ethical and effective engagement with communities, this study asked questions such as the following (see Appendix 2 for the interview protocol): What does listening mean? How do you know if listening has occurred? What kinds of approaches and practices support listening well? Where did you learn these approaches and practices?

Through a collaborative qualitative analysis process ([Richards & Hemphill, 2018](#)), this study began with deductive analysis related to the conceptual frameworks of restorative practices and listening and then iteratively applied inductive analysis, intentionally seeking to generate new ideas beyond the conceptual frameworks ([Patton, 2015](#)). The initial phases of the collaborative coding process include the lead author reviewing all interview transcripts and writing memos about preliminary themes, which were then shared, discussed and refined with the other two co-authors through a videoconference. After several iterations of reviewing the data and discussing emerging themes, the lead author developed a codebook with themes, definitions and examples of data that help explain each theme (see Appendix 3). This codebook of findings was again discussed among the authorship team and refined several times until consensus was reached.

Findings

This section describes key themes that emerged across interviews and focus groups. Quotes excerpted here illustrate some of the ways that knowledge holders across various positionalities, roles, and

organizational contexts described their understanding and approach to facilitating listening as professionals. Themes suggest the importance of interpersonal relationships and the time and space to build and nurture them. Themes also demonstrate ways that collaborative processes support relationships, and the influence of organizational expectations and cultural contexts on their ability to foster the conditions in which listening may be possible.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF LISTENING IN THE AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

Although not initially conceived as a Te ao Māori (Māori worldview)-focused study, the extent to which the majority of knowledge holders interviewed expressed Māori values, principles and terms in their descriptions of listening was striking. To help readers unfamiliar with Aotearoa New Zealand to understand how Te ao Māori contextualises the knowledge holders' responses as well as our analysis, we share a brief overview within this section, as well as a glossary in Appendix 4 for quick reference. It is important to note that the meanings of these terms are highly contextualised, and therefore, the concise definitions provided here offer only a basic interpretation of their use within the interview context. Fuller explanations of the terms and concepts exist; we invite readers to explore their deeper meanings and the cultural significance of Te ao Māori beyond this work.

Te ao Māori encompasses the values, practices and ways of being that shape Māori understanding of the world. In the context of this study, Te ao Māori emerges not simply as a cultural background but as an active framework that many of the knowledge holders draw upon to conceptualise and practise high-quality listening. This framework operates through *tikanga* – often translated as customs, protocols or correct procedures, but encompassing far more than rules or guidelines. Derived from the word 'tika', meaning correct or right, *tikanga* represents the values and practices developed over generations to guide relationships and interactions in ways that maintain balance, respect and the spiritual integrity of all involved. It is simultaneously a philosophical framework and a practical methodology – the 'right way' of doing things that ensures that the *mana* (power/prestige) of all knowledge holders is upheld and relationships remain harmonious.

Tikanga provides the architecture for creating spaces where transformative dialogue may emerge. It encompasses both visible and invisible practices that cultivate the conditions for genuine *kōrero* (dialogue). Visible practices include *karakia* (prayer/incantation) for centring and establishing spiritual connection, *whakawhanaungatanga* (the process of relationship building) and the enactment of *utu* (balance/reciprocity) and *aroha* (compassion/love). The invisible dimensions are equally vital – the recognition of embodied knowledge, the acknowledgement of *tūpuna* (ancestral) presence and the awareness of collective memories that shape current interactions.

For example, Tawa described a relatively brief and informal Māori approach when meeting someone, which demonstrated the ways of establishing relationship and connection, not just to each other, but to one's collective narrative and community.

There's a wee bit in terms of the way that we introduce ourselves. A typical way when we engage with others is we say, 'Nō hea koe?' which means, you belong where? ... And so in a sense, this underpins our connection ... I'm not sure if you've ever heard that phrase, 'it takes a village to grow a child?' And so in a sense, there is never much about you, the individual; it is more about the place that you come from. And so we reinforce that in the language and the introductions and all of the tikanga that we abide with.

As illustrated further in this section, the Māori, Pākehā and Tauiwi knowledge holders who inform this research deeply understand the colonial harm and the challenges of rebuilding relationships across cultural boundaries. Their insights into listening are shaped by navigating these legacies and the ongoing work of addressing harm, recognising cultural differences and fostering understanding across communities once

divided. Hence, the colonial history and the ongoing process of healing and reconciliation between Māori and Pākehā communities lend particular significance to the study of listening and restorative practices as demonstrated by knowledge holders' statements.

However, it is important that we do not over-represent the uptake and influence of Te ao Māori nationally or on all of the knowledge holders interviewed. Whilst nearly all spoke to the ways in which Māori–Pākehā histories and current relations impact how they approach and build engagement among communities, they also spoke to other influences, such as training and lessons received in restorative justice/practice, and mediator or ombuds training, as well as via family upbringing and cultural immersion.

'IT STARTS WITH A RELATIONSHIP'

An overarching finding is that when asked about what listening is and how they facilitate it, many knowledge holders spoke not about what they do, such as the practices they set up, but rather, they began with whether a relationship has yet been established. In essence, has the groundwork of relationship building been done?

Across Māori, Pākehā and Tauīwi cultural backgrounds, knowledge holders tended to embrace and engage with Te ao Māori concepts of relationships as an essential pathway to understanding and enacting deeper forms of listening. For many, listening and relationships were inseparable and even indistinguishable. Speaking of his leadership role in the New Zealand policing community and in his Māori community (iwi), Tawa shared his understanding of listening as rooted in relationship: 'it starts with a relationship [...] you need to establish a relationship with someone'. He went on to share, 'What I think you're calling listening; I would call it, kind of like, real relationship and real conversation. Yeah, because of course you're listening, you know, you're choosing to say, "what's going on in your world?"' Whilst serving in his professional role, it was his interpersonal and relational role that served as the pathway for engagement. This was noted in other interviews as well.

Jared, a senior police member in a leadership role, shared a similar view about the 'foundational' nature of relationships, particularly when working in Māori communities where harm has engendered long-standing distrust of institutions, such as police and government. He spoke of the challenges of convening members from the iwi (Māori community): 'you have to have the foundational relationship in order to even enable the restorative process to happen in the first place.'

Hugh also underscored the importance of first establishing and nurturing relationships before trying to speak about issues of matter. Hugh serves in a leadership position in an organisation that connects various stakeholders in the region to identify, fund and enact community-led efforts to address community priorities. Similar to others interviewed, he shared that he does not 'really think about the term listening so much as (he) think(s) about building relationships' and that this view is informed by Te ao Māori. He understands that without including appropriate and sufficient opportunities for introductions and connection at the start of his meetings, one has difficulty laying the foundation of trust necessary to get people to share ideas and listen to one another for potential collaborations. The time taken at the start pays off in deepened engagement and commitment to future partnership.

When Pākehā and Tauīwi incorporate *Te reo Māori* (language) and draw from *Te ao Māori* principles, they demonstrate that they are open to hearing the historical context of colonialism and its ongoing impacts. This expanded form of listening – to histories, to injustices and to what remains unspoken yet powerfully present – establishes the foundation for authentic relationship.

Communities that feel they did not have a voice previously, or that what they shared did not lead to any results, do not have the level or type of relationship for listening to occur. Tawa shared that 'Māori will talk about *aroha* and about *utu*. *Aroha* is compassion, empathy and a lot of those things. *Utu* is around accountability, reciprocity'. He went on to say, 'when you're working with Māori communities, Pacifica

communities, ethnic communities, you have to invest a bit of time. So you have to have this authentic relationship and a connection so that when you need to have a conversation or something, you already have this connection or this avenue’.

Across all of the interviews, knowledge holders emphasised the role of relationships, and their primary importance for creating the conditions in which listening may be possible. The quotes shared here express the importance of relationships through sharing one’s own stories and connection, which are primarily acts of interpersonal and relational engagement, as aspects of their professional and leadership work.

‘CREATING SPACE’

A second theme that emerged as we listened to knowledge holders speak about the conditions required for listening to be possible was the importance of, as well as the challenges, of creating space and time for relationships. They discussed the importance of building trust, understanding and accountability – as well as the tensions of managing expectations that they felt from dominant societal culture or organisational cultures, for expediency and efficiency, focusing on tasks, next steps and deliverables.

Heather’s description of her role as a restorative mediator similarly included the concept of creating space. She pointed to the role of facilitators in creating space, or the right condition, for listening, particularly when harm has occurred. How can she create a space for connecting to understand what happened, what harm occurred and what needs to be done to restore the persons harmed? These echo the importance of sharing personal experiences and stories as a way of relating and developing empathetic understanding of the other. She shared,

In a way it’s space for them to figure out what’s going on. What’s the stimulus behind the feeling that’s creating this position. But then also the next step was that they needed to be able, I mean to share with each other but also presumably to hear each other. They needed somebody in a role who could help create that safe space, that container.

Later in the interview, Heather concluded, ‘My role as a facilitator in there was to hold a space which created the safety for them to be open and honest and challenging of each other.’

Hugh described his own understanding of cultural context in creating safety within community meetings, sharing that

in western culture, we don’t have words for all of that. And that’s why they [Māori/indigenous cultures] find it really clunky to go into a western situation where there’s no karakia, there’s no whanaungatanga. It’s just, you could say, unsafe. I don’t even know you. I can’t trust you. What do you know, like why would we do this?

The importance of creating a sense of safety was also echoed by Miro in how she considers whether and how to engage with Māori communities, her own and/or others. She preferred the concept of ‘reading’ to ‘listening’ as she considered what was required in order for listening to be possible. Miro shared,

So if you’re talking about listening, for me, it’s about reading the context in a number of ways, and that is going to change according to the timeframe and the context in the space, in the audience, in the community, it’s going to shift what I’m reading. So, I see it more as reading the situation and the people, more than listening. So there are times I will be physically listening when they’re responding, but a lot more is going down in the situation that I’m reading [...] I’m listening or reading the cultural protocols that keep me safe and the community safe.

On the whole, reflections from knowledge holders suggested the importance of ‘space’ for creating presence and understanding, and its qualities of safety, trust and accountability.

'HAVE IT COME FROM THE PEOPLE THEMSELVES'

Knowledge holders spoke of various types of skilful practices that they had learned through formal professional development training and experiences, as well as through personal and cultural mentors and upbringings. However, these practices tended to emphasise collective leadership, and the role of facilitator in guiding the collaborative process.

Hugh used the metaphor of an empty glass or a cup placed on a table before the group to describe his role and the work of the group to co-create their agenda, goals and roles. His role as the convener of a community leadership group is to establish the conditions for people to come together to identify their priorities and to commit their contributions to a shared goal. 'At the heart of it was that we did not go and look at the deliverable of a project and say, "we should do this"; we started with nothing at all. We call it the glass. It could be a cup of coffee, but it's the thing on the table. What's the reason we're here? What's the reason why this conversation is happening?' Practices for co-creating not only the agenda but also the ground rules – in other words, the what and the how of engaging with one another – were shared by many of the knowledge holders.

Kāraka spoke about the challenges of bringing together persons and communities that have experienced acute instances of harm, as well as the importance of guidelines for gatherings to be co-constructed based on the values that each person brings. He shared, 'I would have it come from the people themselves rather than me wanting to guide them and put down a piece of paper and say, here's the guidelines. When people come up with their own guidelines, you can just have a better connection for them with those guidelines. You can use it later on. So, what you just said then, how does that impact on the guidelines?' He emphasised his intention to shift the power dynamic so that those he was supporting were able to express themselves and ask for what they needed in order to seek resolution and a sense of justice.

'UNIVERSITIES RUN ON BUDGETS AND TIMEFRAMES'

We also heard knowledge holders speak of the opportunities and challenges of creating the conditions for listening to occur due to organisational or institutional pressures on time and space. Rimi expressed dismay at the pressure to be results-oriented and how that creates a 'barrier to listening'. Pointing to the mentality in which time spent developing relationships with individuals and communities can be seen by some in the policing community as a 'means to an end', Rimi argued for a person-centred approach. 'All the time we're taking to do the things that are good for people takes time. Is there a way for us to cut out the time? Then you forget the people!'

Miro, a community-engaged scholar at a university, described the challenges of creating opportunities to be present, to listen and to be in relationship with her community partners whilst enacting her institutional role as researcher.

It's an idealistic sense, you've got to have time and space, and that is just not always the case, because time and space within the university equates to power, and so you don't always have the power to create that. Usually you're pushed, your mind's tired, and you just want to get this through. So, you need time and space, and you need a quiet mind, and you know, that's like near impossible; it just doesn't happen ... universities run on budgets and timeframes, and so they'll be like, no, we can't do that, we're not doing that.

Kāraka, a restorative mediator who is often hired to help with out-of-court agreements, described the importance and challenges of creating a 'listening space' that allows individuals to be their authentic selves, able to discern how they feel and how they want to engage with others when harm has occurred. Meeting with the parties before the formal joint meeting is essential, as it creates the conditions for the parties to come together. However, he lamented that it can be difficult to get paid as a restorative mediator for private meetings with each of the parties beforehand to help them feel safe enough to engage with the other party;

some organisations want only to pay mediators for the formal mediation where all parties are present, not realising that, without the preparatory work, the conditions for listening in order to address the harm may not be possible. Whilst there is the organisational intent to support restorative justice to heal harms, the policies, practices and institutional culture that prioritise the financial bottom line can erode the conditions for listening to occur, making the desired outcome no longer possible.

In contrast, Sue, a restorative practice dean in a high school, experienced institutional support for creating listening opportunities. She shared that in order to listen properly, she ‘sets aside time’ and finds ‘quiet space’ free from interruptions and distractions so that the persons who need to listen to one another can ‘slow down ... to properly listen’. This requires finding a private space for conversations, as well as carving out time in otherwise very busy school schedules and commitments. Having formal roles and responsibility to facilitate these meetings means that making time for restorative listening is valued, and she is able to get the resources and support she needs, including from another colleague who shares a similar role and responsibility for restorative education and services. Ultimately, she is able to create space for those who need to be heard, as well as for those attempting to listen.

In summary, the five themes illustrated in the findings suggest the following. First, the presence and importance of cultural context in how listening is conceptualised and enacted. Second, interpersonal relationships are foundational and must be present in order for listening to occur. Third, ‘space’ may be facilitated for listening to the extent that it creates presence, feels safe and builds trust and accountability among participants. Fourth, individuals are able to inform and contribute to guidelines and goals. Fifth, institutional infrastructure and systems can support or deter listening, which is established interpersonally and relationally.

Restorative Listening

Restorative listening affirms the foundational nature of relationships, accepts the presence of harm, affirms the necessity of healing and seeks to create the conditions for listening interpersonally through skilful practices and supportive infrastructure and systems. In this section, we examine the findings for the purpose of developing insights and implications that may be extended from restorative practices to the community–university engagement field.

POWER TO HOLD SPACE

Introducing a restorative ecology ([Llewellyn & Llewellyn, 2015](#); [Llewellyn & Morrison, 2018](#)) framework helped us recognise the presence and influence of external pressures and the presence of significant institutional climate and culture issues in how interpersonal relationships are structured and experienced. A relational ecology perspective shows that institutional and systemic issues (macro-level) are closely connected to interpersonal and interactional relationships (micro-level). Recognising these connections highlights the complexity of listening when working within or on behalf of an organisation or community. That is, listening is inherently interpersonal, yet listening is also nested within organisations, systems and structures, as well as cultures, histories and socio-political contexts. Specifically, the reflections shared by knowledge holders about the Aotearoa New Zealand context helped to illustrate the presence of historic and current harm, and efforts to heal the harm through greater recognition and inclusion of Te ao Māori in community engagement and restorative facilitation.

The concept of space is not just about physical space; it is also about establishing parameters, defying norms and creating a different kind of experience for individuals to connect in ways that may not be otherwise available or possible. Restorative listening requires the ability to create space for learning about one another, particularly at initial meetings and the start of meetings. The role of the leader or facilitator

is to create or hold space for the relationship to be developed through sharing personal feelings and perceptions of experiences, and other forms of storytelling.

Therefore, space is also about power – who gets to have space and who gets to create and hold it. In communities and settings where harm is or has been present, which is to say, everywhere, space is created, occupied and contested ([Brigg & George, 2020](#)). In this way, space for listening is relational and situated – it is about the people present, as well as the contextual factors. It is as much about how and who holds space for listening as it is about what is said. A relational and situated understanding of space expands the effort of community engagement practitioners from planning for a location or physical space for listening to occur, to preparing for co-producing space through acknowledging and managing power dynamics. The dynamics of power continue to be a critical area for further research in the field of community engagement ([Post & Ruelle, 2021](#)).

This study suggests that, perhaps, all of the speaking and expressing in the world will not generate or result in listening, unless there is a relationship present. Listening for connection must precede listening for collaboration, as the relationship serves a foundational context for listening. In many different ways, the knowledge holders interviewed responded to the question of how to support listening for collaboration with a question of their own: ‘how can we work together if we don’t, first, know each other relationally?’ Knowing whether a relationship exists was, for many, the first question, as it gives them a sense of whether and how to proceed in whatever activity or endeavour they are pursuing. This finding is in contrast with the perception that listening is the ‘glue’ that begins to hold a relationship together over time and, instead, suggests that in order to do restoration, one must already have a relationship.

Hence, the answer to three common questions – “Why won’t they listen?” “How do I get them to listen?” and “Why won’t they tell me?” – may all share a similar answer: because relationship is essential for creating the conditions in which listening may occur. In other words, listening for engagement requires certain conditions; it is contextual. Deep relational listening, first, may create the foundation for collaboration and participatory forms of engagement.

In their edited volume of international perspectives of listening, community engagement and peacebuilding, [Bodie, Worthington and Beyene \(2023\)](#) argued that ‘the power of listening (and the larger process of reconciliation), if it is to be truly transformative, must include justice; that is, societies must create mechanisms to deal with wrongdoings so that injustices do not occur again’ (p. 14). [Bodie et al. \(2023\)](#) encouraged us to consider reconciliation ‘and the larger project of peacebuilding’ as central aspects to community engagement initiatives. Persistent lack of recognition of harm in the community engagement field is likely because harm and healing are widely viewed as something that occurs among individuals and are connected to, if not caused by, some interpersonal interaction ([Bodie et al., 2023](#)). This study demonstrates the interplay and interconnectedness of interpersonal relationships in organisational efforts and offers a restorative framework for exploring the opportunities and pitfalls of such interaction.

INSTITUTIONS ARE NOT WELL STRUCTURED FOR LISTENING

As described earlier, many of the knowledge holders expressed the challenge of facilitating listening within and across organisations and communities in their professional roles, as well as the necessity of investing significant and sustained time in getting to know and be known. They have been tasked by their institutions to engage with the communities or to facilitate restorative practices for the purpose of listening and understanding needs, the causes of issues of concern and ideas about how to collaborate effectively. Therefore, whilst Te ao Māori may provide an important cultural touchstone for some of the knowledge holders, they still continued to feel at odds with institutional expectations. Hence, whilst interpersonal relationships and practices for listening are necessary, they are not sufficient; if the power of listening is to be truly transformative at scale, then it must address the larger relational ecology, those systems, structures and cultures that continue to create power imbalance and injustice.

[Macnamara's \(2015\)](#) scholarship on large-scale listening reveals the ways in which organisations, public and private, tend to be set up well for speaking, but not for listening. Although they purport to listen, and may have sincere intentions to hear the voice of the communities that they seek to serve or ally with, many different factors can make it difficult to develop the necessary genuine presence, awareness and trust required to facilitate both speaking and hearing. To create an 'architecture for listening' at large-scale requires the following: a *culture* of listening, *policies* for listening, the *politics* of listening, *structures* and *processes* for listening, *technologies* for listening, *resources* for listening, *skills* for listening and the *articulation* of listening to decision-making ([Macnamara, 2015](#)). The benefits of attending to the architecture for listening include the following: upholding commitments to democracy and to engender the engagement of those who feel most marginalised and disenfranchised; more successful and effective strategies through aligned efforts, improved morale and early detection of critical and potentially divisive issues; increased social equity through listening to marginalised voices across differences, cultures and borders; and increased honesty about the asymmetry of power and the ability for organisations to truly conduct two-way communication and dialogue ([Macnamara, 2016](#)).

Even though institutions say that they *want* to listen to what others have to say, the concept of voice is misunderstood, and little attention is given to who is speaking, who is listening and how listening can be effectively accomplished ([Macnamara, 2015](#), p. 7). As noted by several knowledge holders who recalled mistreatment of communities by institutions and subsequent distrust and estrangement, attempts of organisations to listen are almost always undertaken for the benefit of the organisation, solving a particular problem or advancing an interest of the institution such as research, customer relationship management or developing a positive reputation. Historic and present harms caused to individuals, communities and populations by researchers and institutions for personal, professional and institutional gain have created significant breaches of trust, causing many communities, especially those that are underserved and underrepresented, to be circumspect in partnering with, or even listening to researchers and messages shared by institutions ([Godrie, 2025](#); [Tuhiwai Smith, 2012](#)). Hence, community engagement must develop not only skilful practices for engaging individuals interpersonally, but in order for listening to occur, they must also be aware of and able to navigate institutional and community systems, structures, climates and cultures ([Bodie et al., 2023](#)).

The Carnegie Community Engagement Elective Classification provides a framework for what it means for an institution to be community-engaged. The application requires campuses to describe how institutional mission, values, budgets, infrastructure, personnel policies, professional development, student learning and development, community–university partnerships and the inclusion of community voices support mutually beneficial and reciprocal engagement. The Carnegie framework parallels Macnamara's architecture of listening and begs the following question: What does an *architecture for restorative listening* in community–university engagement look like? Current approaches for addressing difficult conversations tend to focus on structuring formal dialogues and facilitating interpersonal discussions about key aspects of partnering and do not adequately address the influence of external pressures.

If the presence of harm were understood more fully as it relates to community–university engagement, the field would have established conflict transformation as a key area of competency. Professional development would be offered to help partners openly and proactively discuss how harm enters into their work. They would learn ways of viewing conflict as an opportunity to gain more information, learn about each other, and in so doing, build partnership resilience. They would learn about practices for transforming tensions through restorative practices. Therefore, whilst there is much-needed and growing attention to dialogic practices related to intergroup discussion on difficult topics, there remain relatively few theoretical or practical frameworks aimed at transforming conflict and repairing relationships, specifically.

PRACTICES AND PROTOCOLS TO PROVIDE STRUCTURE FOR BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS

If one is to address and improve institutional practices for listening in and with communities, turning towards restorative and relational practices may be a key starting point. In our study, restorative practices training, as well as Te ao Māori, provided important reference points for knowledge holders' approaches to listening. In their sociocultural context of Aotearoa New Zealand, the presence of Te ao Māori, although not fully or ubiquitously embraced by all or integrated sufficiently into community and organisational life for authentic representation, provided an opportunity to introduce relational practices that may be less accessible to people in other nations and settings. Both Māori and Pākehā/Tauwei knowledge holders shared the importance of creating time at the start of meetings to establish relationships and connections, before any attempts to convey information or address an agenda. Tikanga gave many of the practitioners the awareness and the approach to facilitate introductions and hospitality, as well as the expectation that time devoted in this way was not only culturally appropriate but also facilitative of effective and sustainable community engagement.

Perhaps the most helpful aspect of both restorative practices and Te ao Māori was the ability of those facilitating listening to rely on a set of common practices that served as a familiar reference point. Restorative practice and mediation training provides standard practices for inviting participants, establishing guidelines and facilitating listening that they can rely on. Tikanga provides community and professional groups in Aotearoa with a familiar framework for structuring conversations. Several knowledge holders spoke of being able to 'trust the process', the ability to rely on core practices or rituals ([Pointer, 2021](#)) that facilitate relationship repair and justice.

PEOPLE LISTEN, NOT ORGANISATIONS

A key concept advanced in this article is that listening is a primary mechanism for building trust, identifying and agreeing upon shared goals and navigating the tensions and conflicts that inevitably arise in community engagement work and partnerships ([Bodie et al., 2023](#)). In short, listening is instrumental for reciprocity, as one cannot be a thought-partner in the absence of partners being willing to share – and to hear – each other. However, establishing reciprocal community–university partnerships, at the institutional level, is difficult because they are enacted by individuals who not only represent their institutions but are also in positions where they represent different groups, communities and organisations, which requires them to work effectively across interpersonal and intercultural differences ([Weerts & Sandmann, 2010](#)).

The fact that universities are not well structured to support reciprocal community–university partnerships is well-documented ([Dostilio et al., 2012](#)). The effect is that, even though best practices have long been established and reinforced, namely, that community engagement necessarily values multiple kinds of knowledge and life experience, pursues shared goals and requires joint effort in decision-making, and effective conflict transformation to establish mutual trust, respect, accountability, open communication and commitment to each other ([CCPH Board of Directors, 2013](#)), power imbalances can overwhelm personal intentions and interactions, making it difficult to enact full equity in processes, outputs and outcomes of community engagement ([Sandmann & Kliever, 2012](#); [Davis, Kliever & Nicolaidis, 2017](#)).

A dilemma occurs, therefore, when a community engagement professional is asked to act on behalf of the organisation to 'listen' to the community as part of well-intended efforts to serve community needs. This is because institutions must rely on individuals to establish the relationships necessary for listening to occur in the first place. Perhaps, similar to [White's \(2012\)](#) observation that 'institutions don't care, people care', in his keynote describing the challenges of institutions in higher education to engage with communities, it may be helpful to understand that institutions do not listen, people listen. To put a fine point on it, listening is a human act; it cannot be an organisational act. Whilst organisational leadership and culture are important, listening requires relationships that are experienced interpersonally ([Macnamara, 2016](#)). To personify

institutions as agents with a capacity to listen may set up inaccurate and unhelpful anthropomorphising institutions and overlook the emotional and political labour of the community engagement professionals themselves. It is the responsibility, labour and obligation of individuals who use their own positions, their own relational reputation and their own skills to establish relationships that are capable, and aimed in the direction of, establishing time and space in which real understanding can occur through trusting, reciprocal relationships.

Conclusion

This study widens the scope of understanding and practice of community engagement relationships, as it relates to listening, an aspect of dialogic communication, particularly the desire for more authentically reciprocal community–university engagement. Restorative listening affirms the foundational nature of relationships, accepts the presence of harm, affirms the necessity of healing and justice and seeks to create conditions for genuine presence and understanding in the service of others, supporting more productive and peaceful communities.

By examining the experiences of knowledge holders in Aotearoa New Zealand, a cultural context that has a legacy of harm, as well as ongoing restorative efforts to redress past and ongoing harms, we gained insight into the central importance of individuals who work on behalf of their organisations and communities to create relationships that are based on trust, accountability and collaboration. Findings emphasise the importance of the individual work of relationship building and encourage efforts to address organisational systems and infrastructures to turn from architectures for speaking and telling to ones designed to listen relationally and with accountability. Adopting and adapting restorative and relational practices that have established norms and protocols for creating connection and fostering communication in the context of harm may support a ‘right way’ of doing things that are culturally and contextually appropriate and effective.

Appendix 1: Knowledge Holders

Name	Ethnicity	Organisational sector/role
Hugh	Pākehā	Community leadership development
Jack	Tauiwi	Higher education mediation/facilitation
Tara	Pākehā	Higher education mediation/facilitation
Miro	Māori	Higher education Māori scholar
Brad	Tauiwi	Higher education/engagement director
Justin	Pākehā	Higher education/restorative scholar
Jordan	Tauiwi	Higher education/restorative scholar
Heather	Tauiwi	Independent mediation/facilitation
Arthur	Pākehā	Independent mediation/facilitation
Sam	Pākehā	Independent mediation/facilitation
Maya	Tauiwi	Independent mediation/facilitation
Zoe	Pākehā	Independent mediation/facilitation
Stella	Pākehā	Independent mediation/facilitation
Tōtara	Māori	Iwi leadership/kaupaupa
Luke	Pākehā	Independent secondary education training
Kāraka	Māori	Policing/mediation
Oliver	Pākehā	Policing/iwi relations
Rimi	Māori	Policing/iwi relations
Tawa	Māori	Policing/iwi relations
Mānuka	Māori	Policing/iwi relations
Kāwhai	Māori	Policing/iwi relations
Sue	Pākehā	Secondary education leadership

Appendix 2: Interview and Focus Group Protocol

This study used a semi-structured protocol to learn about knowledge holders' experiences and perspectives in the following areas.

PART 1: PARTNERSHIP CONTEXT AND LISTENING

1. I'd love to learn more about you and what brought you into your current position.
 - a. What kinds of things motivated you to take this position?
 - b. How long have you been here?
 - c. What are some of the things that you like best about this position?
 - d. What are some of the things that challenge you most?

2. I'd love to learn more about the types of collaborative relationships you have developed professionally, particularly those that span across different organisations or communities. Who do you collaborate with and what kinds of goals and activities do you have together?
3. What does listening mean to you?
 - a. How is it different from auditory hearing?
 - b. What does it look like if someone is listening well?
4. How did you learn the skills to foster listening? Have you taken courses or do you have a mentor or role model? Something you are figuring out on your own?
 - a. Did your education/training specifically address relationship building? Conflict resolution?
 - b. Are there any lessons or topics that you tend to use a lot or be reminded of frequently?

PART 2: EXPERIENCES OF CONNECTEDNESS VERSUS SEPARATENESS

1. I'm interested in how people listen to each other – or don't, as a foundational step of collaborative partnerships. I've discovered that there are at least three levels of listening. Listening to oneself, listening to others and then listening in community. I'd love to learn your thoughts on each and any of these levels.
 - a. Can you describe a time when you felt that the practice of listening – or not listening – made a meaningful difference in how something happened?
 - b. What are some practices that seem to help foster or facilitate listening?
 - c. Do any of these practices seem harder to do than others? Why, why not?

PART 3: EXTERNAL CONFLICTS THAT IMPACT PARTNERSHIPS

1. Sometimes when people are working collaboratively, there are things outside of the partnership that can affect how they are able to work together. This might be organisational differences, or policies that hamper collaboration or cultural differences that have to be navigated. Does this happen to you? What kinds of things get in the way of listening, and how do you handle them?
 - a. Personal interactions, organisational policies, cultural barriers

PART 4: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND CONNECTIONS

1. If a professional development workshop were provided on the topic of restorative practices generally, or listening more specifically, what aspects do you think would be most important to cover?
2. Are there any resources that could be useful for me to learn more about collaborative relationships and/or listening well to others? Books, films, people, conferences, podcasts?
3. Is there anything that I should have asked you about but didn't?
4. Is there anyone else you think I should have a conversation with to learn about their experiences and perspectives with collaborative partnerships?

Appendix 3: Codebook

The following shares the themes identified through deductive and inductive analyses, collaboratively coded among the three co-authors. The example quotes provide a sample of the larger lists and memos developed for each theme.

THEME 1. RELATIONSHIPS

Description: Importance of either having or creating relationships among the people who are listening to/ sharing with each other in order to be able to listen.

Example quote: 'What I think you're calling listening, I would call it kind of like real relationship and real conversation.'

THEME 2. PRESENCE OF TE AO MĀORI

Description: Naming a specific word or concept that is attributed to the Māori language or culture.

Example quote: '... we think about creating space yeah and that's really big for us so creating space for and in Māori the word kōrero...'

THEME 3: TIME AND SPACE

Description: The opportunity for people to be present in the moment together.

Example quote: 'In a way it's space for them to figure out what's going on. What's the stimulus behind the feeling that's creating this position?'

THEME 4: CO-CREATED

Description: Working with individuals and communities to establish the guidelines, priorities, questions and solutions

Example quote: 'At the heart of it was that we did not go and look at the deliverable of a project and say, "we should do this"; we started with nothing at all. We call it the glass. It could be a cup of coffee, but it's the thing on the table. What's the reason we're here? What's the reason why this conversation is happening?'

THEME 5: ORGANISATIONAL CONTEXT AND INFLUENCE

Description: Organisational or institutional influence on how listening is facilitated.

Example: 'You've got to have time and space, and that is just not always the case, because time and space within the university equates to power, and so you don't always have the power to create that.'

Appendix 4: Glossary

Aotearoa: The Māori name for New Zealand, meaning 'land of the long white cloud'

Aroha: Love, compassion, empathy

Crown: The government of New Zealand, including its agencies and representatives, acting on behalf of the state. Often used in the context of Treaty obligations and Māori-state relations

Hiko: March, walk or protest march – often significant in political activism

Iwi: Tribe or large kinship group

Karakia: Prayer or incantation, in modern settings often used to open or close meetings or ceremonies

Kaumātua: Elder(s), respected tribal community leaders

Kōhanga Reo: Māori language preschools

Kōrero: Talk, dialogue, conversation

Māori: Indigenous people of Aotearoa New Zealand

Mana: Spiritual power, prestige or authority; often linked to personal or group integrity

Marae: Communal and sacred meeting ground, central to Māori communities

Mātauranga Māori: Māori knowledge systems, including traditional, contemporary and intergenerational knowledge

Pākehā: New Zealander of European and British descent, especially descendants of colonial settlers

Tauīwi: People who reside in Aotearoa New Zealand, who are not Māori or Pākehā

Te ao Māori: The Māori worldview; encompasses Māori ways of knowing, being and doing

Te reo Māori: The Māori language

Te Tiriti o Waitangi: The founding document of Aotearoa New Zealand. Signed in 1840 between Māori chiefs and the British Crown

Tikanga: Customs, protocols or the ‘right’ way of doing things; ethical practice rooted in Māori values

Tūpuna: Ancestors

Utu: Restoring balance to relationships through reparation and sometimes reciprocity

Waitangi Tribunal: A commission of inquiry that investigates Māori claims of Crown breaches of the Treaty of Waitangi

Whanaungatanga: The process of building and maintaining relationships and kinship ties

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