



Pai tū, pai hinga: Exploring rangatahi Māori experiences and understanding of Māuiui Kōtihitihi (perfectionism)

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Abstract

Perfectionism is a transdiagnostic risk factor linked to many illnesses. Several factors related to colonisation, such as negative media portrayal of Māori potentially leading to feelings of needing to prove these stereotypes wrong, suggest perfectionism may be relevant and prevalent for rangatahi Māori today. However, perfectionism research focuses on Western contexts. A Kaupapa-Māori consistent approach was used to conduct semi-structured interviews with 10 rangatahi Māori. Reflexive Thematic Analysis was used. Four themes were identified: Perceptions and Expectations; Claiming a Māori Identity; Māuiui Kōtihitihi; and Support. These findings highlighted the need to contextualise rangatahi experiences within broader experiences of colonisation to understand why they had these perfectionistic feelings. Ultimately, challenging the blind use of Western-developed measures, definitions, and interventions with Māori.

Keywords: Perfectionism; Rangatahi Māori; Māori Wellbeing

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Introduction

Positionality

I have elected to begin this paper with a positionality statement, as I find it important to outline who I am, and where and who I come from to ensure my interpretation and explanation of my findings and current research is transparent. I am a wahine Māori with whakapapa to Te Āti Haunui-a-Pāpārangi, Ngā Rauru, Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō, and Ngāti Tūwharetoa. Aside from Ngāti Apa ki te Rā Tō (which I only recently discovered my whakapapa to), my iwi are located in the centre of Te Ika a Māui (North Island), however I grew up in Nelson located in Te Waipounamu (South Island). I am not unique in my experience of disconnection from my taha Māori both physically and culturally (Durie, 1997; Kukutai, 2014) with approximately 85% of the Māori population living in urban centres away from their whenua (Kukutai, 2014). Throughout my schooling, I was routinely met with experiences of racism such as being called an ‘Oreo’, implying I was not a ‘real’ Māori; being told I ‘wasn’t like other Māori’ or that I was ‘one of the good ones’, leading me to resent being Māori. I was also a high-performance athlete which only added to the pressure that I felt to succeed and ‘overcome’ the typical Māori stereotype which I had internalised. I am certain that I was, and probably still am, problematically perfectionistic. It is one of the reasons I chose to conduct this research. This is to say that I am not objective in my interpretation of this data. However, my bias and subjectivity are not weaknesses as the Western world perceives, rather they are strengths. As Graham Hingangaroa Smith (2023) put it: “my academic credibility is to be also seen in the blisters on my hands”. I position myself within my work and I endeavour to speak and write about things which I have experienced.

Perfectionism

Perfectionism has been defined as a complex multidimensional construct and identified as a possible transdiagnostic risk factor for wellbeing issues such as depression, anxiety, non-suicidal self-injury, and eating disorders (Egan et al., 2011; Campbell et al., 2018; Claes et al., 2012). Perfectionism is defined as an individual’s tendency to set high standards and goals for themselves which they may, or may not, be flexible about achieving (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). Frost and colleagues (1990) highlight six features of perfectionism: concern over mistakes, doubt about actions, high parental standards, harsh parental criticism, high personal standards, and organisation.

Other conceptualisations of perfectionism view perfectionism as being socially prescribed (i.e., feeling social pressure to succeed), self-oriented (i.e., holding yourself to high standards of success), or other-oriented (i.e., holding others to high standards) (Hewitt & Flett, 1991).

Additionally, perfectionism is sometimes viewed as being adaptive or maladaptive (Claes et al., 2011; Frost et al., 1990). Adaptive perfectionism refers to an individual who holds themselves to high standards which they are flexible about achieving when they need to be (Claes et al., 2011; Frost et al., 1990). Additionally, adaptive perfectionists are motivated by previous success (Eum & Rice, 2011; Frost et al., 1990). Although ‘adaptive’ suggests that one’s wellbeing does not suffer from this type of perfectionism, research remains unclear. For example, adaptive perfectionism is associated with less procrastination and higher academic achievement, however it is also associated with increased eating disorder symptoms, high likelihood of readmission to inpatient units, and increased depression (Asseraf & Vaillancourt, 2015; Slof-Op’t Landt et al., 2016; Vall & Wade, 2017).

Maladaptive perfectionism is characterised by an individual holding themselves to high standards but not being flexible about reaching these when needed (Claes et al., 2011; Frost et al., 1990). These individuals are motivated by a fear of failure (Eum & Rice, 2011; Frost et al., 1990), and typically maladaptive perfectionism is associated with poorer wellbeing outcomes such as increased non-suicidal self-injury, depression, anxiety, lower academic achievement, and increased procrastination (Asseraf & Vaillancourt, 2015; Gnilka et al., 2012; Stoeber et al., 2014).

As with many areas of psychological research, perfectionism research is dominated by WASP (Berry, 2015) and Western Educated Industrialised Rich Democratic (WEIRD; Heinrich et al., 2010) perspectives. This is problematic when we consider that Māori are overrepresented in negative mental wellbeing statistics (He Ara Oranga, 2018), but are receiving mental health care which has been validated on WEIRD populations and is conducted by WASP academics. Additionally, there are many expectations and stereotypes around Māori performance (e.g., Māori are criminals, lazy, primitive, violent, ignorant, uneducated, state dependents, savage warriors, cannibals, Borrell, 2005; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2012; Wall, 1997). The combination of these negative perceptions, the overrepresentation of Māori in negative mental health statistics, and the transdiagnostic nature of



perfectionism, may lead some Māori to feeling a need to disprove these stereotypes by behaving a certain way, achieving highly academically, in sport, in their jobs, or in other facets of their lives. Thus, it would be unsurprising to find that Māori experience some form of perfectionism. However, given this research is dominated by WASP and WEIRD perspectives, it is unlikely that current definitions, research, measures, and interventions include adaptations to account for perfectionism from a Māori perspective.

Perfectionism and Māori concepts

Culture can influence the way behaviours are perceived. Using a single definition that has been developed and validated on experiences of Western individuals only does not provide a culturally responsive or relevant approach to mental wellbeing and may contribute to the over pathologization of indigenous peoples (Duran, 2021). Below I discuss some preliminary ideas of culture-specific experiences and values which may be relevant to perfectionism for rangatahi Māori.

Tikanga

Tikanga is one aspect of te ao Māori where a high degree of accuracy is both valued and necessary. Mead (2016) defines tikanga as “the ethical and common law issues that underpin the behaviour of members of whānau, hapū and iwi as they go about their lives and especially when they engage in cultural, social, ritual and economic ceremonies of their society” (p.19). Tikanga may be public (e.g., pōwhiri) or private (e.g., separation of clothes and items which are associated with food). Additionally, there is a ritual aspect to tikanga, such that incorrect implementation of tikanga is believed to lead to misfortune. Breaches of tikanga, regardless of intention, are often corrected harshly, resulting in a potentially unpleasant experience and whakamā, but also a lesson which will not be forgotten. Thus, the breach is unlikely to be made again. As breaches of tikanga have deep consequences for both the individual and their whānau and iwi (Mead, 2016), and many Māori are unsure of tikanga (Toki, 2018), pressure (whether personal, interpersonal, perceived, or real) to uphold tikanga may be a source of perfectionism for rangatahi today.

Whakamā

Whakamā literally refers to becoming pale or white, and is a holistic concept that encompasses emotions and feelings of shame, embarrassment, and guilt (Smith, 2019). Knight (2019) describes the

connection between whakamā and mana, explaining how whakamā is grounded in social context, and is often rooted in perceived or actual loss or diminishment of mana. Whakamā can affect people on several levels and be felt with varying degrees of severity. For example, as a fleeting feeling after making a fool of yourself or lingering due to addiction.

Whakamā is often felt by Māori who are navigating their journey of reconnection to te ao Māori. Te Huia (2022) speaks to whakamā being a barrier for a lot of second-language learners of te reo Māori which is related to guilt or shame for not being able to speak te reo Māori, or not understanding tikanga Māori. Avoidance of whakamā could be linked to maladaptive perfectionism through concern over mistake-making in relation to tikanga, kawa, or te reo Māori, and socially prescribed perfectionism, such as being hyperaware of how others view Māori, or being conscious of how not being the ‘perfect’ Māori may reflect on all Māori.

Rationale & Aims

Structural and institutional racism are prevalent in mental health and research settings. Within mental health services, culturally relevant treatments are a necessity. However, as research is the foundation for clinical practice, culturally responsive and relevant treatments are unlikely to be developed if they are not the focus of research and researchers (Duran, 2021). As such, indigenous conceptualisations of perfectionism likely include culturally-bound aspects which are missing in Western definitions, and contributing to the overpathologisation of indigenous peoples. Through utilising a kaupapa Māori-consistent approach, this research aims to provide an understanding of perfectionism from a rangatahi Māori perspective, with the hopes of laying the foundation for future perfectionism research in Aotearoa to build upon and develop culturally appropriate measures and interventions for perfectionism.

Methods & Methodologies

Decolonising this paper through kaupapa Māori methods and methodologies

A kaupapa Māori consistent approach was utilised throughout this research project. Cunningham’s (2000) taxonomy of research requires ‘pure’ kaupapa Māori research to be conducted by Māori researchers, with Māori, produce Māori knowledge, use Māori analyses, and is accountable to Māori stakeholders and communities. As this project was



carried out as part of a broader project to fulfil the requirements for a PhD qualification and was funded by Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, it does not meet these standards for ‘pure’ kaupapa Māori research. As such, I feel more comfortable situating my research as kaupapa Māori consistent currently (for further discussion on this decision and the definitions of kaupapa Māori research see Rukuwai, 2024).

Throughout the process of this piece of research, I have endeavoured to adhere to kaupapa Māori principles and guidelines. Some examples include: participants chose when and where we met for our pre-interview meeting and interviews (e.g., Kingi, 2018); interviews were conducted kanohi ki te kanohi unless otherwise preferred by the participants (e.g., Hall, 2014; Kingi, 2018); and being upfront about my positionality and being cautious of any preconceived hypotheses I may have about this research to prevent drawing conclusions prematurely (e.g., Te Huia, 2013). Additionally, I have elected to take a strong decolonising stance when it comes to the writing of this paper. I shall write in first person, apply my own experiences where relevant, be upfront about my biases, and apply my culture through te reo Māori, toi Māori, methodology, and more. I incorporate te reo Māori to the best of my ability as a second language learner still early on in her acquisition of the reo. I have elected not to underline, italicise, or provide brief translations of Māori words as I wish to weave te reo Māori into my writings rather than marking it as *out of place* (Fox, 2023). Additionally, based on the kaupapa of this special issue, I feel it would be counterintuitive to uphold colonised expectations of translating the indigenous language of Aotearoa while discussing how racism is perpetuated in psychology.

Participants

Participants were 10 rangatahi (8 wāhine, 1 tane, 1 takatapui) aged 17-24 (see Table 1) who were based around Aotearoa (Wellington, Nelson, Ōtaki, Auckland). Rangatahi occupied diverse Māori realities, with some growing up immersed in te ao Māori, speaking te reo Māori, practicing tikanga, or living on their marae. Others were still early on in their reconnection journeys, learning te reo Māori at university or after work. Many occupied a space somewhere in between. The diversity of my participants captures the perspectives of a variety of ways of being Māori, thus although these rangatahi are not experts in Māoritanga, they *are* the experts of their own lives.

Table 1

Participant demographic information

Name	Iwi	Age
Erana	Ngāti Raukawa	21
Emily	Whakatōhea	19
Kaitlyn	Ngai Tūhoe, Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, Te Arawa (Ngāti Uenuku-Kōpako, Ngāti Tūteniu, Te Roro o Te Rangi, Ngāti Whakaue), Kāi Tahu	19
Sarah	Taranaki, Kāi Tahu	24
Stacia	Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Uenuku- Kōpako, Ngāti Apa, Ngāti Toa, Te Aitanga-a-Māhaki, Ngāti Porou (Te Aitanga-a-Hauiti), Ngāi Tāmanuhiri, Rongowhakaata	18
Jade	Ngāti Tamatera, Ngāti Maru	18
Māhanga	Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa, Waikato	18
Matahana	Kāi Tahu, Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Raukawa	23
Taea	Ngāti Tūwharetoa, Ngāpuhi	17
Awhi	Ngāti Pikiao, Ngāti Mahuta, Ngāti Ngāimuri Kaitoa	17

Additionally, rangatahi were not required to identify as perfectionists or pass a screening test to participate in this study. As perfectionism is a transdiagnostic risk factor rather than a mental disorder (Campbell et al., 2018; Claes et al., 2012), I felt that any rangatahi who opted to participate in these interviews would have at least some interest in or experience with perfectionism of some kind. Conversely, even if rangatahi did not hold these interests or experiences, I still felt it necessary to provide a space to discuss their whakaaro around perfectionism from a Māori perspective.

Materials

A semi-structured interview schedule and an audio recorder were used. The interview schedule was developed using basic concepts of perfectionism definitions from research to draw out specific questions. These concepts were altered to allow for a purposefully Māori perspective to be taken. For example, expectations were assessed using questions such as, “As a Māori person, what are your expectations for yourself?”.

Procedure

Participants were recruited in a variety of ways. Recruitment posts were made on social media platforms, posters were put up around Te Herenga Waka and I advertised across multiple te reo Māori courses at Te Herenga Waka.

Interviews were conducted in a private room on the University campus or via Microsoft Teams. There was a preference for kanohi ki te kanohi interviews,



however if required (e.g., covid restrictions, participant preference), Teams was available for use. \$40 Prezzie cards and printed copies of the cover art commissioned (see Figure 1) were provided as koha regardless of if participants chose to withdraw their data from analysis. Kai was also provided at the completion of the interviews to help whakanoa after being in a state of relative tapu.

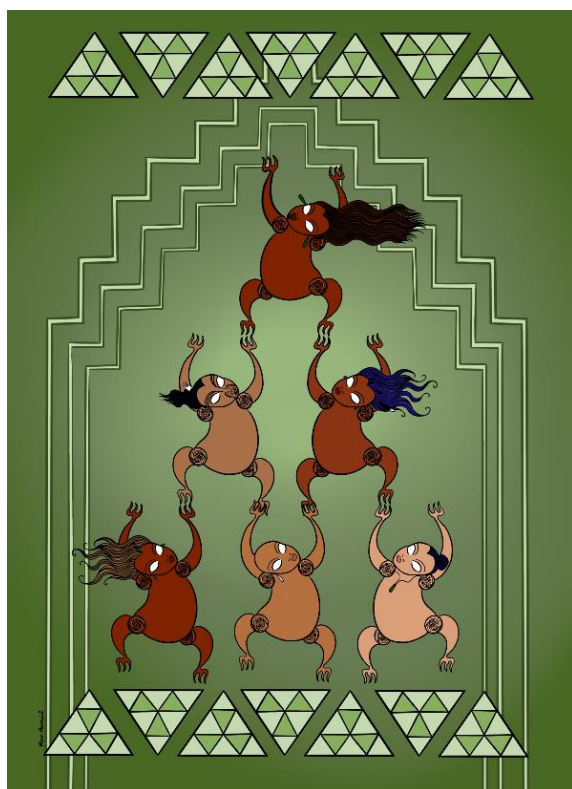


Figure 1. Commissioned Cover for my thesis. This piece depicts the diversity of Māori while also acknowledging our journey (into te ao Māori, our jobs, our identities, our whānau, our studies) through the poutama in the background.

Interviews were transcribed without software and familiarisation began with the first transcription. Before coding occurred, each transcript was read through at least twice. Coding was conducted using NVivo14. Upon completion of coding, I placed each code into broader themes using the codes as a guideline (Braun et al., 2019). These themes were then revisited and reworked until I was happy with how they sat together (Braun et al., 2019).

Analysis

RTA allows for flexibility in the way that data is collected (Braun et al., 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2020), meaning I could follow kaupapa Māori methods of interviewing such as incorporating karakia and tikanga. Additionally, RTA allows the researcher to engage with the data more deeply, ensuring I was able to capture each pūrākau and

whakaaro shared with me by rangatahi (Braun et al., 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). Compared with quantitative methods, I was able to include the context of each rangatahi more intricately and consider how this impacted their experiences of perfectionism. Finally, RTA ensures the researcher reflects on how they impact their research through their positionality, values, and experiences (Braun et al., 2019; Terry & Hayfield, 2020). This last reason is particularly important to me as it acknowledges that we cannot be fully objective observers of data as Western, empirical methodologies suggest.

A note

The first two themes of this analysis may not appear directly related to the purpose of this research: to understand how rangatahi Māori conceptualise and experience perfectionism. However, during my interviews, participants often discussed the broader contextual factors as well as their personal experiences of perfectionism. I feel these contextual factors are important to consider seeing as WASP research perpetuates racist perspectives and is so often used *on* Māori with little regard for contextual, societal, and historical factors in Aotearoa.

Analysis and Commentary

I identified four themes through thematic analysis. The first theme, Perceptions and Expectations, explores how Māori are perceived by others and the impact this has on our perceptions of ourselves. The second theme, Claiming a Māori Identity, seeks to discuss the ways rangatahi feel connected with their identity as Māori. The third theme, Māuiui Kōtīhitihi, examines the intersection between Māori perspectives of perfectionism and Pākehā/Western definitions of perfectionism. Finally, Support Ecosystems, explores who rangatahi seek support from and how this may impact their experiences of perfectionism.

Theme One: Perceptions and Expectations

This theme explores how Māori are perceived by a range of individuals and how this impacts our perceptions of ourselves (see Figure 2). Additionally, this theme seeks to understand what expectations are held of Māori and by whom. Participants widely agreed there were two alternative perceptions of Māori which are reflected in the names of the subthemes: Negative Perceptions, Positive Perceptions, and Expectations.

Negative Perceptions

When asked how they believe Māori are viewed by mainstream society, participants all indicated they believed there were negative perceptions about Māori. Emily shared, “I think overall it is negative”, Stacia said, “the first thing I thought of was majoritively [sic] negatively”, Taea shared, “ooh, bad [laughs]. Bad, like really bad”. The overwhelming consensus being Māori are viewed negatively; consistent with previous research which found looking more Māori predicts decreased rates of owning a home (Houkamau & Sibley, 2015), Pākehā attitudes towards te reo Māori tend to be more negative (Boyce, 2005; Nicholson & Garland, 1991), and experiences of discrimination and racism remain persistent for Māori (Houkamau et al., 2017).

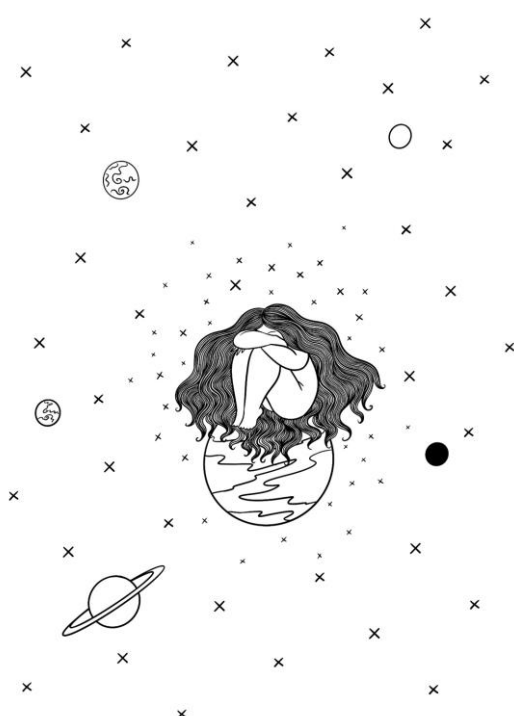


Figure 2. Art by Māori Mermaid depicting the journey of a wahine Māori struggling with perfectionism. In this figure, she is overwhelmed by the whetū and does not know how to start organising them.

Media were seen as the main perpetrators of these perceptions:

Kaitlyn: ...it's like the headlines of like, 'Māori teenage reckless boy does this' versus 'high school student in East Auckland does this', you know. We're constantly getting the short end of the stick for some of the same things that Pākehā do.

While the media today may not present overtly racist headlines and characterisations, it continues to

perpetuate racist stereotypes by focusing on Māori criminal activity (McCreanor et al., 2012; Moewaka Barnes & Moewaka Barnes, 2022) and avoid printing positive stories about Māori (Nairn et al., 2012). Kaitlyn's whakaaro highlights the reciprocal relationship between media and society, such that the media uses race-baiting tactics for profit, consequently fuelling negative opinions and disdain for Māori, ultimately impacting our wellbeing (Harris et al., 2012).

The notion that Māori are 'uncivilised', or 'savages' (McCreanor et al., 2014) was raised as still existing. Awhi discussed, "...kind of like hori and gross, and like uncivilised", and Erana shared, "like we're no goods to society". Similarly, Māori being inherently criminal was shared:

Jade: whenever anyone talks about gangs... it always gets brought back to Māori and Pasifika communities.

Throughout colonial history, the portrayal of Māori as savages and barbaric has been used to justify colonisation (Smith, 2011). The criminalisation of Māori is one of many ways in which Pākehā have reinforced these perceptions of Māori (Jackson, 1990; Moewaka Barnes et al., 2012), forced assimilation into the dominant Pākehā culture (Stanley & Mihaere, 2018), and contributes to systemic and institutionalised racism today by continuing to portray us as lesser than.

Some indicated negative stereotypes centred around academic performance:

Stacia: The general thing is like a negative kind of idea, like the idea that Māori students won't like, finish high school. And that you'll just have to work a tradie job or something.

Teacher's expectations and perceptions of their students impacts their students' performance. For Māori students, previous research found Māori students excel in school when they have positive relationships with their teachers (Bishop et al., 2009; Highfield & Webber, 2021) and that teachers may hold lower expectations of achievement for Māori students than Asian or Pākehā students (Adams, 2013; Rubie-Davies & Peterson, 2016). Perceptions around taurira Māori academic performance is necessary to promote academic achievement (Berryman & Eley, 2018; Bishop et al., 2009). It is also important when considering perfectionism among rangatahi as pressure to perform academically may contribute to Māori experiences of perfectionism.

Other participants raised that Māori are disadvantaged systemically, which contributes to Māori over-representation in crime statistics and prison populations (52.0% of the prison population, Department of Corrections, 2023), lower homeownership rates (47.2% Māori compared to 70.6% Pākehā own their own homes, Statistics New Zealand, 2021), poorer physical wellbeing (e.g., Māori mortality rates for heart disease are almost eight times those who are non-Māori non-Pacific; Māori are more likely to die from cancer, Ministry of Health, 2019), and poorer mental wellbeing (e.g., 34% of Māori report depressive symptoms compared to 24% of non-Māori, Russell, 2018; and Māori men are 1.9 times more likely to die by suicide than non-Māori men, Bellamy, 2022). As these negative statistics stem from systemic racism and disadvantage, it seems unfair, yet inevitable, that these statistics play such a large role in determining societal perceptions of Māori, something which was acknowledged by rangatahi. For example, Emily shared, “they [Pākehā] don’t really acknowledge the fact that they [Māori] have had a lot taken from them and kinda starting from the bottom”. Similarly, Matahana stated, “they [Pākehā] don’t really recognise any nuance about why Māori have been disadvantaged now because of events of the past... they’re choosing to forget why that may be the case today [laughs]”. Matahana’s laughter after her statement indicates the absurdity of Pākehā being able to forget the impact of colonisation, something we will never have the privilege of forgetting.

Other’s perceptions and expectations of us (whether racist or not) play a significant role in perfectionism and/or striving to achieve higher standards (Flett et al., 2002; Frost et al., 1991). While the motivations behind these may differ based on the person, it is necessary to consider how negative societal perceptions may impact rangatahi Māori who are striving for perfection. Thus, those of us in clinical, teaching, research, and other psychology related occupations, must consider the impact of these negative societal perceptions on our rangatahi Māori clients and students.

Positive Perceptions

Participants gave fewer examples of positive perceptions of Māori, with many rangatahi expressing their hope for change: Sarah expressed, “like there’s one side that is starting to be like, ‘yeah te ao Māori is cool! Te reo Māori is cool! We wanna do this, we wanna be good treaty partners’”, Taea shared, “it’s definitely better than times”. While

there is some hesitation, there is still hope that positive perceptions of Māori will persist.

Participants also discussed the impact of positive Māori representation:

Māhanga: ...the Māori party just got more seats that it’s ever had. And it’s had like the biggest growth of any party in like the last 10 years or so...

Jade: ...sometimes, you know, you hear like a haka, it could be at a rugby game or something... I have like a very deep emotional feeling tied toward it.

Both Māhanga and Jade’s kōrero underscore the importance of seeing yourself represented. Often, we forget the impact that seeing ourselves reflected in positions of authority or status can have, whether it is in terms of race (e.g., Davis, 2020; Fan et al., 2019), gender (e.g., Fan et al., 2019), or sexuality (e.g., Galdi et al., 2023). Relatedly, it is necessary to have ourselves represented in research and treatment to ensure the outcomes are culturally relevant and responsive to Māori, and to reduce the likelihood of further harm being done (Duran, 2021).

Expectations

For Māori, public perception is tied to expectation. As described above, there are many negative perceptions regarding Māori, meaning we must be cautious of what we are doing and how we may be perceived. As such, we need to be cautious of perpetuating these perceptions ourselves, placing expectations on us to behave a certain way.

Participants agreed with the notion of there being an expectation to succeed because they were Māori. Erana shared, “Yep. Do I have to say more? [laughs]”, Māhanga said, “Absolutely”, and Awhi stated, “yes, definitely”. The source of these expectations varied for rangatahi. Some felt as though they set these expectations for themselves, e.g., Taea shared, “...it’s really just, yeah, myself”; while others reported feeling that other Māori had high expectations of them, e.g., Erana said, “I feel like our people, like our elders... that is where the majority of the expectation comes from... they do it out of love”. Parent and whānau expectations were also raised, e.g., Kaitlyn shared, “she [kuia] always expected us to learn [te reo Māori] at some point... I know if she was still alive, she would expect good things and that would be a motivating thing”. Finally, societal expectations were also raised by participants, highlighting that rangatahi likely have heightened experiences of societal expectations as



well as carrying the expectations of their iwi, whānau, and personal expectations.

The feeling of being disappointed was commonly expressed when participants were asked what would happen if they did not live up to the expectations they, or others, had for them: Awhi shared, “disappointed”, Emily said, “I’d be pretty disappointed in myself”, Erana stated, “That it’s going to be the worst thing in life if I don’t live up to those expectations”, Jade shared, “it would be like, ‘oh my gosh! What is wrong with me?’”, and Stacia said, “I just feel stink ael!”. However, the cost to rangatahi of reaching or trying to attain the expectations set for them appeared to be detrimental in some cases:

Kaitlyn: it’s so hard to just not succumb to things. Like I don’t just wanna be... another stereotype that is used against other Māori... then in year 13, I was like “I need to get excellence because I’m going to uni and I need to do well”, and then I got straight excellence. And that was like ‘yay I’m so proud of myself!’, but also like ‘I’ve lost 20kg’s because I’m too busy studying to eat and I have no social life because I’m too busy’. And then I hit uni and I was like ‘I need to do great’... and then I dropped out.

For Kaitlyn, not only did she not want to disappoint her whānau, she also did not want to be used by Pākehā as an example of Māori failure or as ammunition for why Māori should not be receiving the perceived ‘benefits’, such as scholarships, alternative pathways into jobs, study, and homes, specialised positions at work. Although she can achieve personal and others’ goals, this cost her health and wellbeing. This is not to say non-Māori do not have these experiences, however Pākehā do not carry the weight of being used against other Pākehā if they fail.

Combined with ‘Negative Perceptions’, the current subtheme highlights the unfair position that rangatahi Māori are placed in, such that they are assumed ‘guilty’ until proven innocent. This reflects both racism and responsabilisation, such that rangatahi are expected to prove to the white majority that they are not criminals, ‘dole bludgers’, ‘dumb’, ‘uncivilised savages’ (e.g., Amsler & Shore, 2019). Ultimately, this translates into rangatahi feeling as though there are exceedingly high expectations of them to always be perfect to resist these racist stereotypes. Thus, leaving little room for mistake making.

Theme Two: Claiming a Māori Identity

This theme gets its name from McIntosh (2006) and explores the ways rangatahi Māori have experienced claiming their identity. This theme covers the challenges experienced in being Māori, particularly for those who may not fit the physical stereotype of a Māori person (see Figure 3). While this may not appear directly related to perfectionism, having an unstable or highly criticised identity may contribute to the development of perfectionism as we may obsess over ‘getting it right’ to have our identity validated by others.



Figure 3. Art depicting a wahine Māori attempting to make sense of the whetū in her ao but struggling to do this on her own.

“You’re not like other Māori”

The idea that there is a ‘right’ way to be Māori can be damaging and counterintuitive to encouraging reconnection and embracing of te ao Māori. There are many ways of being Māori, none of which are inherently better than the other (Durie, 1994; Greaves et al., 2015). However, amongst rangatahi, it was common to feel as though they were not Māori enough. This subtheme explores these experiences while also considering how this may contribute to a Māori experience of perfectionism.

For some rangatahi, not feeling Māori enough revolved around them feeling as though they did not grow up ‘in a Māori way’ and they did not hold the mātauranga or cultural knowledge other Māori did



(Borell, 2005). For example, Awhi shared: “I guess that whakamā I get when I don’t know waiata that everyone else knows”. Similarly, for fair-skinned Māori they often felt they were mistaken for Pākehā, resulting in some feeling like they had to act more Pākehā around Pākehā. Both experiences may contribute to rangatahi feelings of need to be the ‘perfect’ Māori or as though there is a ‘correct’ way to be Māori.

Taea also experienced being explicitly told she was not Māori enough by others. Taea’s whānau would often refer to her as “a plastic Māori or like a fake Māori or like the whitest Māori I know”. The impact this had on Taea was devastating, “tears were streaming down my eyes, and I was like shaking and I like couldn’t get to sleep and I literally just like hated myself”. Whānau is an important part of te ao Māori, thus having your whānau say you are not Māori enough is understandably difficult for Taea. These comments also reinforce the idea that there is a right and wrong way to be Māori which is dangerous for the mental wellbeing and wairua of our rangatahi and whānau who have not had the privilege of growing up immersed in te ao Māori or speaking te reo Māori (Borell, 2005). This may contribute to the development or maintenance of perfectionistic tendencies via identity stress/crises and striving to be the ‘perfect Māori’.

Being compared to Pākehā, or perceiving this as a possibility, was stressful for rangatahi and often made them feel whakamā about their haerenga and progress in te ao Māori:

Taea: Hmmm, oh it gets me down when I don't get the poi down... when I don't get something down within like, te ao Māori it like really gets me down, cause I just think I'm a failure... especially if like a Pākehā can do it.

Identity exploration and cultural reconnection are high emotional valence situations (Isomottonen et al., 2019; Moeke-Pickering, 1996; Te Hiwi, 2007), particularly when rangatahi place significant importance on their cultural identity for their personal identity (Paringatai, 2014). Being in a position where individuals from the majority, and colonising, ethnic group are perceived to be performing at higher levels in activities or arts related to your culture, raised feelings of inferiority, embarrassment, and whakamā for rangatahi.

Tikanga and Identity

Tikanga is an important part of te ao Māori which many Māori have been alienated from because of

colonisation, assimilation, and urbanisation (Toki, 2018). For participants, learning about and implementing tikanga and kawa was viewed as an important part of expressing or claiming one’s identity as Māori. For Erana, being Māori was about “just upholding tikanga and kawa that were left for us by our tūpuna”. Although there are various ways you can learn about tikanga and kawa, Māhanga explained that we learn these best through being embedded in our culture rather than through a Western institution. Māori institutions incorporate tikanga and whakaaro Māori into their teachings and acknowledge that learning tikanga, kawa, and Māori values comes alongside the learning of te reo Māori (Mead, 2016). However, attending Māori institutions is a privilege that many Māori may not be able to afford (Education Counts, 2023) whether that is due to finances, time, or lack of available spaces at the institution. As described in the previous subtheme, many Māori may experience feelings of anxiety of not ‘being Māori enough’ if they cannot attend Māori-medium institutions or if they do not know the appropriate tikanga or kawa. Ultimately, this may lead to heightened feelings of needing to be a certain way in order to be perceived as Māori, perpetuating personal and outwards expectations of the ‘perfect’ Māori.

In times where they did not feel as though they could uphold their values or beliefs, rangatahi tended to struggle to reconcile this within themselves. Māhanga shared, “I’d be dead... dead or arrested [laughs]”, portraying a more Enculturated (Durie, 1994) or Traditional (Greaves et al., 2015) cultural identity by holding staunchly to his values. Despite finding these situations frustrating to encounter, other participants expressed they would likely just go along with the Pākehā process:

Taea: ...that would annoy me, but I’d probably just do what they wanted to because like, I probably just wouldn’t go there to be honest.

Sarah: ...cultural shock going from being at uni and being involved in like my rōpū and being involved in wider te rōpū Māori stuff. And then going there and it was like nobody knew anything and it was like just very corporate and like they had karakia in like the divisional meeting, but I don’t think anyone knew why they did it and pronunciation was awful.

For some participants, even though they may feel strongly about upholding their values and beliefs, they feel there are situations where it is difficult for them to do so. In some cases, this may be a protective measure, such that they are protecting their identity or position by avoiding outright or casual racism,



while still making positive changes for Māori in the background. Navigating this discrepancy would likely impact rangatahi feelings of perfectionism, as they may be choosing between their ideal of a 'perfect' Māori person and protecting their wellbeing. Thus, they may feel as though they are failing themselves or failing to 'claim' their identity as Māori.

Theme Three: Māuiui Kōtīhitihi

Māuiui kōtīhitihi was developed by Keri Opai as part of an indigenous eating disorder research rōpū who were looking to translate critical components of eating disorders into te reo Māori. Māuiui is to be unwell or out of balance (Moorfield, 2023); kōtīhitihi refers to the top, peak, or summit of something, typically a maunga (Moorfield, 2023). Māuiui kōtīhitihi refers to being out of balance or out of sorts with the pinnacle of perfection (Opai, 2023). This theme explores what rangatahi consider perfectionism to be through their experiences and explores the intersection between Western perfectionism and uniquely Māori experiences (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Art depicting a wahine Māori and her tūpuna who are helping her to make sense of the whetū.

“If it ain’t perfect, I ain’t fuckin’ doing it”

The most prominent and widely known component of Western perfectionism is that perfectionists have extraordinarily high standards for themselves (Frost et al., 1990; Hewitt & Flett, 1991). This was no different for rangatahi: Emily shared, “as an artist, I’m very critical of my work”, Erana shared, “to succeed in whatever I do”, Taea said, “if I’m not doing excellence at everything, then it’s just like dumb”, and Sarah indicates, “I was like ‘getting all in the A range my entire degree’. Obviously, that did not happen [laughs]”. Each whakaaro shared indicates the excessively high standards these rangatahi hold themselves to.

Emily and Sarah both downplayed their achievements with Emily sharing, “well, in my main course I’m like pretty good at it, like it’s pretty easy to get an A”, and Sarah saying, “if it was a good grade, I would look at it and be like, ‘oh that’s good but why didn’t I do better?’”. These whakaaro demonstrate the standards which rangatahi hold themselves to and how unwilling they are to accept praise or acknowledge they perform to a high academic level. This is consistent with the Cognitive Behavioural Model of Clinical Perfectionism which stipulates perfectionists have a cognitive bias in which their attention is more oriented toward their failures than their successes (Shafran et al., 2016).

Two participants discussed the feeling of relief when they reached a goal. Emily shared, “it definitely lifts a lot of weight off my shoulders”, and Stacia said, “I think it’s more relieving more than it’s like ‘oh, I’m so proud of myself’. It’s like ‘fuck, thank god I did what I wanted to do’”. Participants reflections speak to the pressure that they are under to succeed and not perpetuate negative stereotypes about Māori. There are many negative perceptions of Māori which rangatahi may internalise (e.g., Boyce, 2005; Houkamau et al., 2017; Nicholson & Garland, 1991) or actively work to disprove (e.g., Berryman & Eley, 2018). However, disproving these perceptions is a high stakes activity: if participants do not disprove these perceptions, they risk reinforcing them. However, disproving these perceptions does not guarantee they will receive credit for their achievements, similar to sexism research which shows a parallel finding (e.g., Forschi, 2000). Thus, when participants do achieve their goals, it may manifest as a sense of relief that they are disproving negative stereotypes rather than reinforcing them. Additionally, these feelings of relief reflect maladaptive perfectionists’ motivations for achieving highly: fear of failure (Frost et al., 1990).

There was some concern over making mistakes for participants, however this was centred around te reo Māori. For Jade’s her concerns centred around being unable to pronounce te reo Māori in front of others even though she can on her own. While non-Māori feel at least some level of language anxiety when learning te reo Māori, for Māori who are heritage language-learners, there is an added layer of cultural identity validation (Te Huia, 2013; 2022). For heritage-language learners, te reo Māori has a significant amount of anxiety attached due to te reo Māori becoming a key marker of Māori identity when other markers of being Māori (e.g., skin-colour) are not present (Te Huia, 2015). Finally, as te reo Māori remains an endangered language,

rangatahi may feel an additional pressure to ensure they are upholding the integrity of the language and continuing to use te reo Māori. Thus, while there are similarities with the Western-developed definition of perfectionism, there is more at play for rangatahi who are learning te reo Māori today and greater consequences if they are to make a mistake.

A common experience for rangatahi was the feeling of not being good enough. For example, Awhi said, “Ohh yeah, pretty much every day [laughs]”, Jade said, “Oh definitely [laughs]”, Kaitlyn shared, “Yes, Yeees, oh my gosh”, Māhanga shared, “Hard, every day. Every day”, Sarah said, “yeah [laughs]”, and Taea said, “Oh yeah, like all the time [laughs]”. That each participant responded similarly highlights how often rangatahi feel they are not good enough. Doubting one’s actions and feeling unworthy if you do not meet the standards you have set for yourself is a key aspect of perfectionism (Frost et al., 1990). Although there may be other explanations behind these feelings, it is likely that their expectations, and others’, coupled with the negative societal perceptions of Māori, are influencing these feelings at least to some extent. Again, this suggests that there is some overlap with rangatahi experiences of māuiui kōtitihi and Western definitions of perfectionism but the underlying mechanisms are likely different.

However, as my research focuses on rangatahi experiences and noticing the nuances of these experiences for rangatahi, the laughter after saying they often did not feel good enough may signal that participants are aware of the absurdity of feeling they are not good enough. Each of these rangatahi hold a significant amount of mana, they are all doing incredible things and making huge strides for the kaupapa. To feel they are not good enough is an inaccurate representation of themselves.

Me te wai korari: perfectionism through a Māori lens

This subtheme described the uniquely Māori perspectives on perfectionism through the exploration of how perfectionism is actually experienced by rangatahi. Me te wai korari translates to ‘like the nectar of the flax flower’ (Elder, 2020), which means to take joy in the little things in life. Many rangatahi wove in trying to focus on the positive sides and the small things they could do to reframe their experiences of perfectionism, suggesting a more strengths-based approach. Additionally, the use of this whakataukī highlights the complexity of rangatahi experiences. Although many of the experiences described below have negative sides to them, rangatahi focused more on the positive things which came out of these.

Similarly, this reinforces a more fluid approach to understanding how perfectionism may be experienced by Māori, directly contrasting with the more rigid definitions in Western psychology.

For some rangatahi, they were the first, or one of the first, in their whānau to go to university and receive a tertiary education. Tertiary institutions hold settler-colonial whiteness at their core (McAllister et al., 2019) and many Māori are first-generation university students (Theodore et al., 2016). In Aotearoa, Pākehā staff, students, methodologies, and knowledge are centred and privileged, while Māori staff, students, methodologies, and knowledge are marginalised and their worth questioned (Kidman et al., 2018). Universities have been referred to as a “white place” (Mayeda et al., 2014, p. 174), reinforcing that these institutions privilege whiteness and deter Māori engagement and access. For Māori, having the additional challenge of navigating a tertiary education system while also holding high expectations for yourself may present difficulties when you do not live up to these expectations.

In line with being a first-generation university student, and succeeding in general, Stacia discusses how whānau success is derived from your personal success:

Stacia: Whānau success derives from like the individual success, as the family, in te ao Māori... maybe you’re the... kaikaranga or something, that reflects really well on your whānau... [what] I do or do not achieve reflects back on my nan and my whānau. So, like I need to do really well in order to uphold the mana of my whānau, like make them proud of me... [if I] like took a big L in uni or something or like I dropped out that would be really, I think it would be real detrimental in my relationships with my whānau.

This kōrero reflects mana tūpuna and the whakataukī “Ehara taku toa i te toa takitahi engari he toa takitini” (my strength is not that of a single warrior but that of many, Mead & Grove, 2001). This whakataukī reflects the necessity of the collective for something to be successful (Mead & Grove, 2001), indicating the success of an individual is a reflection on the collective. Thus, if you do well, it reflects well on your whānau, your tūpuna and your mokopuna, upholding or enhancing the mana of your entire whānau. Stacia’s whakaaro explores the experience of having this weight hanging over your head and the added pressure is not something non-Māori would experience as mana is culturally bound (Barlow, 1991; Mead, 2016).



Interestingly, there appeared to be a lot of flexibility surrounding whether rangatahi reached their goals or not:

Emily: Well, in different ways, like it could be something great and amazing like Whina Cooper. But it could also just be like I wanna be a museum creator and just looking after our taonga.

Māhanga: if that means fuckin' cracking a mean as acting career, going to Hollywood, or something. Or that shit fails and I have to drop out of uni, become a tradie and put some food on the table for the whānau, then fuck that's, that's yeah, that's still aligning with my goals.

The flexibility seen in adaptive perfectionists does not account for the flexibility demonstrated by rangatahi here. For Emily and Māhanga, the broader sentiment is most important. Emily is happy to contribute to looking after Māori taonga however she can, and Māhanga wants to be able to provide for his whānau. This highlights that, traditionally, Māori roles were dependent on our natural abilities and interests (Toki, 2018); acknowledging that everyone must do their share. Western perfectionism tends to be centred more around obtaining a prestigious role or job, such as a doctor, lawyer, sportsperson, rather than attaining a general goal (Pere, 1991).

Many rangatahi discussed the need to create or have space for learning about te ao Māori and te reo Māori. In this sense, perfectionism was often abandoned:

Matahana: I try not to like beat myself up about it if I'm like not sure about what someone might be saying in te reo or like, what, why something might be happening, but just asking.

Sarah: I think I have less pressure on myself for that and that I know that that's gonna be a longer-term thing.

For those who are reconnecting, I expected there to be more perfectionism surrounding their implementation of tikanga and te reo Māori. However, participants demonstrated a clear understanding of situations where they, or someone else, would not know the tika way of doing something, e.g., pōwhiri, te reo Māori. Thus, mistakes should be approached with care and compassion where appropriate and reinforcing that perfectionism does not always have a place in te ao Māori.

The size of the mistake made was also a point of concern for rangatahi when they discussed mistakes in Māori contexts. For example, many rangatahi shared some variation of "it just depends on how bad the mistake is". This indicates that the severity should be considered. For example, Mead (2016) discusses how manuhiri were often approached more gently regarding breaches of tikanga than mana whenua stating, "they [monitors of tikanga] were particularly helpful to visitors, but rather rough on the locals" (p. 25). Alternatively, transgressions with intention to harm, such as abuse, were considered severe transgressions of mana and required appropriately severe consequences (Pihama & Cameron, 2012). For mistakes by non-Māori, as indigenous people who continue to live in a colonised state, we learn to play the game. The cost of taking the wrong approach can also be damaging for relationships and reputations with Pākehā (e.g., you may be seen as a stereotypically 'angry brown person', Motro et al., 2022), as such there is significant pressure to approach these situations 'correctly' from both a Māori and a Pākehā perspective; adding yet *another* layer to the experience of perfectionism for Māori.

Discussion

Despite Māori having poorer wellbeing outcomes in Aotearoa (Ministry of Health, 2019), and the transdiagnostic nature of perfectionism (Campbell et al., 2018; Claes et al., 2012), perfectionism has been under-researched for Māori leading to little consideration of how perfectionism may be experienced by rangatahi Māori. This study provides the first qualitative exploration of perfectionism experiences for rangatahi Māori, thus beginning to lay the foundation for future research (see Figure 5).



Figure 5. Art depicting a wahine Māori and her tūpuna making sense of the whetū by placing them on a tukutuku panel in the shape of poutama.

Participants *kōrero* reflected the necessity of including contextual factors when investigating the experience of perfectionism for rangatahi. WASP approaches use Western-developed and validated research on non-Western groups (Berry, 2015), indicating that context is not taken into consideration. While there is evidence that some components of Western-defined perfectionism are at least partially relevant to Māori, there are alternative explanations for why participants reported the experiences they did. For example, other's having high expectations of you is consistent with Western perfectionism. However, when the context behind these experiences or feelings is left out (e.g., negative public perceptions of Māori and low academic expectations leading to a need to disprove these negative perceptions), people are homogenised, and culturally bound experiences swept under the rug. Ultimately, this results in culturally inappropriate practice, theory, and research, further perpetuating the colonisation of indigenous peoples. By considering the context of our clients, students, and research participants, we are actively pushing back against the racist views of psychology that WASP is objective, and culture is irrelevant (Berry, 2015).

While necessary to consider these contextual factors, I feel it is also important to highlight that no two experiences will be the same. Thus, clinicians should take an individual approach to each rangatahi by exploring their experiences of perfectionism thoroughly rather than discounting anything which is not directly related to the attributes outlined in research. For researchers, while it is more convenient to have a structured measure, I would suggest that we have some flexibility in our measures of perfectionism for Māori. For example, incorporating short answer or open text-box answers in surveys which allow participants to share experiences which have not been included, but which they feel are important to share. Approaching perfectionism measures this way will not only lead to more culturally appropriate and relevant treatment of rangatahi, it directly contests the objective, materialism, and individualistic assumptions of WASP research (Berry, 2015).

Secondly, participants often discussed the pressure they felt to be a 'good example' for other Māori. Although their definitions of a 'good example' varied, it often revolved around demonstrating to other rangatahi that we can achieve highly, of surpassing the standards Pākehā may have for us, and of dispelling the stereotypes which are held about Māori. These experiences of trying to live up

to a standard which has been decided by Pākehā is a unique experience for Māori who are striving for perfection. Through a Pākehā lens, Māori represent all Māori in their failures but not in their successes. Thus, when we achieve it is only ourselves who benefit from this, being told that we are "not like other Māori", but when we fail it is all Māori who are seen as failures, i.e., "you're Māori so you're just lazy", "if you really tried then you would do well". Alternatively, through a Māori perspective, we carry the mana of our whānau and iwi with us in our successes and in our failures (Barlow, 1991; Mead, 2016). So, when we achieve highly or when we fail, it is ourselves, our whānau, and our iwi who experience an impact on our mana.

Rangatahi also reported the difficulty of navigating how to walk within Pākehā and/or Māori spaces, while still upholding their identity and values as Māori. Most rangatahi described instances where they would accept mistakes such as mispronunciation of their names, or hapa made by someone more senior. While this could appear as not sticking to their values, there are additional factors at play. For example, rangatahi may "play the game" by presenting themselves to Pākehā in a particular way to ensure they have a seat at the table of change. In this case, rangatahi would be rejecting the colonial idea of perfectionism internally, but may still be impacted by the feeling of needing to present themselves as "different" or up to the colonial standard of perfection to receive job offers.

Although rangatahi described instances where they were more lenient, there were also occasions where they staunchly stood by their values, particularly around tapu and tikanga. Many expressed feeling protective over tikanga Māori and ensuring we upheld it. Thus, there appears to be situations where perfection should be required and the definition of perfection may differ based on the context.

In summary, I suggest the following to form the basis of a culturally relevant definition of māuiui kōtiritihi (perfectionism) for Māori:

- Ongoing impact of colonisation: inclusion of colonisation, racism, discrimination, media portrayal, and stereotypes will provide a more holistic and encompassing understanding of what perfectionism is and how it is experienced by rangatahi.
- Social Desirability: the extent to which one feels they need to appear and behave in a socially desirable way for the dominant group (i.e., Pākehā in Aotearoa);



- Mechanisms of development and maintenance: exploration of the mechanisms through which different types of perfectionism may develop or be maintained for rangatahi;
- Identity: considering how one's pursuit of a Māori identity may be impacted by the narrative that there is a 'correct' or 'perfect' way of being Māori;
- Cultural contexts: there are situations where we must be perfect, for example, to prevent tikanga breaches we must be perfect when enacting tikanga, ultimately ensuring the safety of ourselves and whānau. However, we need to be aware of the potential reasons individuals do not know tikanga Māori.

Limitations

There are two limitations which I would like to highlight here. The first concerns the lack of typical generalisability of these findings. However, given psychology is WEIRD-dominant and WASP research has historically been 'tried out' and 'sold' to non-Western cultures, I do not feel this limits my research in the conventional way. That is, I do not feel this is a limitation to be addressed in future research. Rather I see this as a strength of my research as it highlights and uplifts marginalised voices. While this may limit who this research is directly applicable to, other indigenous or non-Western groups may be able to utilise these findings as a basis for exploring perfectionism from their own perspectives. Given indigenous groups around the world have, and continue to, experience colonisation, I suspect aspects of my proposed definition will resonate in some way (e.g., ongoing impact of colonisation, social desirability). Similarly, culture varies around the world, with many having overlapping, yet unique, values, ideas, perspectives, and more. As such, considering the local cultural context and how one may develop perfectionism is another similarity for non-Western groups.

Secondly, while I endeavoured to get a broad range of Māori to interview, there were still groups who I was not able to reach. For example, I recruited online, around the university, and by word of mouth. Many of the participants I interviewed came from different parts of the country, spanning the whole length of Aotearoa, but the majority were currently based Wellington when I interviewed them. Additionally, many of these rangatahi were university educated or were intending to go on to university once they finished high school. This is not the reality for all Māori (in 2021, 18% of Māori aged 25-64 received a bachelor's degree compared with

35% of the general population, Ministry of Education, 2022), meaning the perspectives of these individuals has not been captured within my research. Although online advertisement through social media allowed for a much broader range of rangatahi to be recruited, this method of recruitment neglected those who do not have (reliable) access to the internet. Many rural adolescents do not have access to the internet as readily as those living in urban areas for a variety of reasons such as not having access to a phone, laptop, computer (Digital.govt.nz, 2021; Grimes & White, 2019). This also presents a challenge for future researchers and mental health advocacy groups who endeavour to recruit rangatahi from diverse backgrounds.

Conclusion

This research provides the first account of rangatahi Māori experiences of perfectionism, a WEIRD-dominated kaupapa within a WASP-dominant discipline. This research highlighted that māuiui kōtīhitihi is a complex and multifaceted construct for Māori, which involves many additional layers such as considering the impact of colonisation, perceptions of Māori, culturally bound concepts such as whakamā and tikanga. Finally, my research advocates for the development of a Māori-specific definition of māuiui kōtīhitihi to provide researchers and clinicians with a culturally responsive conceptualisation, and a fluid approach to māuiui kōtīhitihi, ultimately leading to the best possible care for rangatahi Māori (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. The final piece of art depicting the wahine Māori and her tūpuna having completed the tukutuku panel. Note there are still whetū in the sky to represent ongoing learning.

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