

TRACING THE WHAKAPAPA OF DESIRE:

Understanding the Origins of Want within Te Poutama o te Ora

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the concept of the 'whakapapa of desire' as a tool for critical self-inquiry within the Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) wellness framework. Drawing on the Māori concept of whakapapa — the genealogy and layered origins of all things — this paper argues that desires, wants, and longings are not simply personal preferences. They are shaped, cultivated, and sometimes colonised by external forces including advertising, social comparison, cultural messaging, and intergenerational conditioning. To understand what we genuinely need, we must first trace where our wants come from. The paper situates this concept within existing Māori health literature, draws on self-determination theory, consumer psychology, neuroscience, and decolonising frameworks, and offers practical implications for wellness educators and practitioners. The whakapapa of desire is proposed as both a reflective practice and a decolonising act — one that restores tino rangatiratanga (self-determination) to the inner life.

Keywords: whakapapa, desire, Te Poutama o te Ora, decolonisation, wellness, tino rangatiratanga, wants vs needs, Māori health

1. INTRODUCTION

We live in a world engineered for want. Digital platforms, advertising industries, and consumer economies depend upon our capacity to desire — and upon our inability to distinguish between desires that arise from within us and those that have been

carefully planted. In 2023, global advertising spend surpassed \$890 billion USD (Statista, 2024), with the primary purpose of creating or amplifying human longing. The result, for many people, is a life spent chasing a horizon that continually recedes — accumulating, consuming, comparing — and never quite arriving at a sense of enoughness.

This is not a personal failing. It is, in the language of Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO), a form of colonisation of the inner landscape. Just as tangata whenua have experienced the occupation of their lands and the suppression of their language and culture, individuals today experience the occupation of their desire — their longing redirected away from what is nourishing and toward what is profitable for others.

Within the TPO framework, a concept has emerged that of: the whakapapa of desire. Whakapapa, in te reo Māori, refers to the genealogy of things — the layered histories, relationships, and origins that explain how something came to be what it is. When we apply this lens to desire, we ask a deceptively simple question: where did this wanting come from? Is it rooted in something authentic — a genuine need for connection, purpose, nourishment, or expression? Or has it been handed to us by external forces that have little interest in our flourishing?

This article explores the concept of the whakapapa of desire from theoretical, cultural, scientific, and practical perspectives. It is written in plain language, a recognition that the most transformative ideas should be accessible to all peoples.

2. WHAKAPAPA AS AN ANALYTICAL AND HEALING FRAMEWORK

2.1 Understanding Whakapapa

Whakapapa is one of the most foundational concepts in te ao Māori. At its most familiar level, it refers to genealogy — the recitation of ancestral lines that establish identity, belonging, and relationship to land, people, and cosmos. To know one's whakapapa is to know one's place in the web of existence.

But whakapapa is more than a family tree. As scholar and philosopher Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal (2009) explains, whakapapa is an epistemological

framework — a way of knowing by tracing origins and relationships. To understand anything fully in te ao Māori, one traces its whakapapa: how it came to be, what it descends from, what relationships sustain it. This applies not only to people and places but to concepts, phenomena, and practices.

Māori scholar Māui Hudson and colleagues (2010) note that whakapapa encodes layers of meaning across time, functioning as both archive and analytical method. It asks us to look beneath the surface of what something appears to be and inquire into its deeper genealogy. Reverend Māori Marsden (2003), in his collected writings, describes whakapapa as the means by which Māori make sense of reality — it is not merely description but a living method of interpretation and orientation.

2.2 Applying Whakapapa Beyond Genealogy

The application of whakapapa as an analytical method beyond literal genealogy is consistent with its role as a cosmological framework. TPO draws on this tradition to propose that human experiences — including our inner states of wanting, longing, and desire — have a whakapapa. They did not emerge from nowhere. Every craving, aspiration, and longing has a lineage.

This is a profoundly empowering insight. If our desires have origins that we can trace, then we have the capacity to evaluate those origins — to ask whether they serve our wellbeing or undermine it, whether they come from our deepest values or from the conditioning of systems that profit from our dissatisfaction.

3. THE COLONISATION OF DESIRE: WHAT SCIENCE TELLS US

3.1 The Neuroscience of Wanting

Neuroscientist Wolfram Schultz's foundational research on reward systems (1997, 2015) established that the brain's dopamine pathways fire not primarily in response to receiving something pleasurable, but in anticipation of it. This 'wanting' system is distinct from the 'liking' system (Berridge & Robinson, 1998). We can intensely want something and feel deeply unsatisfied once we have it — a phenomenon that consumer systems exploit with precision.

Robert Sapolsky (2017) expands on this in his exploration of human behaviour, noting that the dopamine spike associated with anticipation is actually larger than the satisfaction of attainment. The brain is, in effect, biologically primed for perpetual longing. This is not pathology — it is a feature that once served survival. But in a modern consumer economy, it becomes a vulnerability.

Importantly for our purposes, neuroscience also tells us that the brain is profoundly social and relational. Much of what we desire is shaped by social comparison — what we see others have, what we perceive as normal within our communities, what signals belonging and status. This is not vanity; it is neurologically hard-wired social cognition (Sapolsky, 2017). The implication is significant: our desires are never purely our own. They are always co-constructed with our social environment.

3.2 Consumer Psychology and the Engineering of Want

Consumer psychologist Paul Marsden (2011) identifies 'desire engineering' as a core discipline within modern marketing — the deliberate construction of needs that did not previously exist. From the early insights of Edward Bernays (1928), who applied psychoanalytic principles to create mass consumer desire, to the algorithmic precision of twenty-first century digital advertising, want has been systematically manufactured and cultivated.

Research by Dittmar and colleagues (2014) on materialism and wellbeing demonstrates that people who strongly organise their lives around the acquisition of material goods show significantly lower levels of wellbeing, higher anxiety, and poorer relationship quality — regardless of their actual income level. The problem is not poverty; it is misdirected desire. Wanting the wrong things — or rather, wanting things for the wrong reasons — consistently predicts diminished human flourishing.

3.3 Self-Determination Theory and Authentic Needs

As previously discussed in “TPO Navigating Wants and Needs”, the Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a framework that aligns closely with the whakapapa of desire concept. That of: autonomy (acting from one's own values), competence (mastering meaningful challenges), and relatedness (genuine connection with others). When these core needs are met, people flourish. When they

are unmet, people often substitute them with external compensators — material consumption, status-seeking, approval-chasing — that provide temporary relief but do not address the underlying need (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

To SDT intrinsic motivation — wanting something because it is aligned with one's values and genuine interests — and extrinsic motivation — wanting something because of external reward or social pressure. The research is consistent: intrinsic motivation is associated with wellbeing, persistence, creativity, and authentic engagement. Extrinsic motivation, particularly when it overrides intrinsic desire, is associated with anxiety, emptiness, and reduced vitality (Deci & Ryan, 2000; Vansteenkiste et al., 2006).

The whakapapa of desire, as a practice, is an invitation to trace our wants back to their source — to distinguish between desire rooted in genuine need (intrinsic) and desire manufactured by external systems (extrinsic). It is, in SDT's language, a practice of restoring autonomy.

4. THE WHAKAPAPA OF DESIRE IN TE POUTAMA O TE ORA

4.1 Core Concept

In the TPO framework, we call this tracing the whakapapa of desire. Whakapapa is about lineage — the genealogy of something, its origins, what it comes from. When we apply this to our wants, we are asking: where did this longing come from? Is it rooted in something authentic in me, or has it been shaped by external forces — by advertising, by comparison, by a story I was handed about what I need to have in order to be enough?

This concept sits at the intersection of multiple TPO dimensions. It draws on taha hinengaro (the psychological self) in its attention to the inner origins of thought and feeling. It connects to taha wairua (spiritual wellbeing) through its inquiry into what is genuinely life-giving. It relates to taha pūtea (financial wellness) because misdirected desire is one of the primary drivers of financial harm. And it connects to taha kai

(food and nourishment) because the same colonised relationship to wanting that drives overconsumption of goods also drives disordered relationships with food.

4.2 Two Kinds of Desire

The TPO framework proposes a working distinction between two broad categories of desire, while acknowledging that human experience rarely fits neatly into two categories – Moana and Ngaru.

Moana desire describes authentic inner desire that tends to be persistent, quietly compelling, and connected to a sense of purpose or meaning. It does not necessarily feel urgent or loud. It is the desire to belong, to contribute, to grow, to heal, to create. When we follow moana desire, we typically feel more ourselves, not less. Within TPO this links to Tuakiri, Wairua and Whakapapa.

Ngaru desire describes externally generated desire, and often arrives as urgency, as comparison, as the feeling of being left behind. It is frequently triggered by advertising, social media, peer observation, or cultural messaging about what constitutes a successful or sufficient life. Ngaru desire is not inherently wrong — waves are part of the ocean's life. But when we mistake ngaru for moana, we spend our energy and resources chasing what will not ultimately feed us. Within TPO this links to Tuakiri and Hinengaro.

4.3 The Practice of Tracing

Within TPO, tracing the whakapapa of desire is offered as a reflective practice rather than a prescriptive system. It involves a series of open inquiries:

When did this wanting first to appear in me? What was happening in my life at that time?

Who or what introduced me to this desire? Was it my own discovery, or was it shown to me?

What does this desire promise me? What do I believe I will feel when I have it?

What genuine need might sit beneath this specific want? Could that need be met another way?

If I imagine having this thing fully, and still feeling empty — what then would I want?

These questions do not aim to eliminate desire. Desire is life-force. Rather, they aim to restore the individual's capacity to be the author of their own wanting — to distinguish between desire that is truly theirs and desire that has been implanted by systems with no investment in their flourishing.

5. DECOLONISING THE INNER LANDSCAPE: A TINO RANGATIRATANGA OF WANT

Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999), in her landmark text *Decolonizing Methodologies*, argues that colonisation operated not only at the level of land and governance but at the level of knowledge — what counts as truth, who counts as a knower, what stories are told about who we are and what we need. The colonisation of desire operates at precisely this level. It is an epistemic intrusion into the inner life.

Rangi Mātāmua (2017) and others working in kaupapa Māori frameworks have noted that one of the most enduring effects of colonisation is the disruption of Māori relationships with te ao tūroa — the natural world — including the natural rhythms of need, reciprocity, and sufficiency that characterised pre-colonial Māori economic and social life. The shift from economies of reciprocity to economies of accumulation is, in part, a story of colonised desire.

Reclaiming the whakapapa of desire is therefore a political act, not only a personal one. It is an assertion of tino rangatiratanga — self-determination — over one's own inner life. When we refuse to be governed by manufactured wants, when we trace our longings back to their origins and choose which ones to honour, we are practicing sovereignty.

This framing is consistent with the work of Ngāti Kahungunu scholar and practitioner Leonie Pihama and colleagues (2014), who identify decolonisation as necessarily internal as well as external — a process of healing the psyche, restoring identity, and reclaiming the capacity to know what we truly value.

6. SITUATING THE WHAKAPAPA OF DESIRE IN EXISTING FRAMEWORKS

Te Poutama o te Ora builds upon and extends the foundational work of Sir Mason Durie (1994), whose Te Whare Tapa Whā model established the holistic, relational, and spiritual dimensions of Māori health and wellness. The whakapapa of desire is consistent with Durie's emphasis on understanding health not as the absence of disease but as the flourishing of all dimensions of the self within relationships of belonging and meaning.

Rose Pere's Te Wheke model (1991) similarly foregrounds the interconnectedness of all aspects of wellbeing, including wairuatanga (spiritual connection) and whatumanawa (the emotional heart). The whakapapa of desire draws on this interconnected understanding, recognising that the places from which our longings emerge are never entirely separate from our spiritual condition, our relationships, and our ancestral histories.

The concept also connects to kaupapa Māori theory (Smith, 1999; Bishop, 1999) in its insistence that healing and transformation must begin from within indigenous frameworks of knowledge and value — not from imposed external models, however well-intentioned.

7. PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR WELLNESS EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS

The whakapapa of desire has direct implications for wellness practice across multiple TPO dimensions. For practitioners working in taha pūtea (financial wellness), understanding that many financial difficulties are rooted in colonised desire — buying to belong, spending to cope, consuming to feel adequate — reframes the intervention. The problem is not primarily budgeting; it is the restoration of an authentic relationship with want and need.

In taha kai (food sovereignty and wellness), the same insight applies. Many disordered relationships with food can be traced to colonised desire — eating for emotional regulation, for identity, for social belonging, for the simulation of comfort.

Tracing the whakapapa of those food-related longings opens the possibility of addressing root causes rather than symptoms.

In taha matihiko (digital wellness), the whakapapa of desire is particularly urgent. Social media platforms are explicitly designed to generate social comparison and manufactured desire. Understanding the origins of digital longing — the desire for validation, the fear of missing out, the hunger for belonging — is foundational to developing a healthy relationship with digital life.

For educators, the whakapapa of desire can be taught as a reflective practice through journaling, group dialogue, and the use of oral storytelling traditions. The inquiries outlined in Section 4.3 can be adapted for individual coaching, group programmes, or classroom settings.

8. LIMITATIONS AND AREAS FOR FURTHER DEVELOPMENT

This article presents the whakapapa of desire as a theoretical and practical concept within the emerging TPO framework. As with any framework in development, several areas require further work. The concept has not yet been subjected to formal empirical evaluation, and future research should explore its application across different population groups and wellness contexts.

It is also important to acknowledge that desire is a complex and contested concept across philosophical, psychological, and indigenous traditions. The framing offered here is not intended to resolve that complexity but to offer a culturally grounded starting point. Further dialogue with kaumātua, community practitioners, and academic colleagues will strengthen and nuance the framework.

9. CONCLUSION

The whakapapa of desire invites us to become archaeologists of our own longing. In a world that has invested enormously in convincing us what to want, the act of tracing our desires to their origins is both deeply personal and profoundly political. It is personal because it asks us to sit with the inner landscape of our own lives — to distinguish between what genuinely feeds us and what merely offers the appearance

of nourishment. It is political because manufactured desire is not neutral: it serves systems that profit from our perpetual sense of lack.

Within Te Poutama o te Ora, tracing the whakapapa of desire is part of a larger project of restoration — restoring tino rangatiratanga over our inner lives, restoring connection to what is genuinely life-giving, and restoring the capacity to live from a place of enough rather than endless not-yet.

This is, at its heart, a form of healing. And like all healing in te ao Māori, it is not undertaken alone but in relationship — with our ancestors, our communities, our bodies, and the natural world that has always known something about the art of taking only what one needs.

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