NAVIGATING THE THRESHOLD BETWEEN WANTING AND NEEDING:

A Te Poutama o te Ora Perspective on Desire, Sufficiency, and Self-Determination

Submitted in partial fulfilment of academic requirements

Te Poutama o te Ora Wellness Research Series | 2025

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ABSTRACT

The distinction between wants and needs is a foundational yet under-theorised concept in wellness studies. While classical frameworks such as Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs and Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory offer valuable starting points, they remain largely embedded within Western individualist paradigms that fail to account for the relational, cultural, and spiritual dimensions of human wellbeing. This article examines the wants/needs distinction through the lens of Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO), an integrated Māori wellness framework that situates human flourishing within a web of relational obligations, cultural identity, and spiritual alignment. Drawing on indigenous epistemologies, consumer psychology, and critical wellness theory, this paper argues that clarity about one's genuine needs is not merely a personal skill but a decolonial act — a form of sovereignty over one's own life trajectory. The article further proposes that the 'hidden needs beneath surface wants' phenomenon constitutes a diagnostic lens for practitioner-guided wellness work, and that the TPO framework offers culturally responsive tools for navigating this terrain.

Keywords: wants and needs, Te Poutama o te Ora, Self-Determination Theory, Māori wellness, decolonial wellbeing, consumer culture, sufficiency, taha hinengaro

1. INTRODUCTION

Language shapes reality. When a person declares 'I need this,' they invoke urgency, priority, and entitlement. When they say, 'I want this,' they enter the territory of preference, desire, and optionality. Yet in everyday discourse — and increasingly in wellness practice — these two categories collapse into one another, generating a pervasive confusion that has significant consequences for individual wellbeing, financial decision-making, relational health, and spiritual coherence.

The modern consumer economy has a vested interest in this confusion. Marketing machinery systematically converts wants into perceived needs, manufacturing a perpetual state of insufficiency that drives consumption (Bauman, 2007). The result is what Hamilton and Denniss (2005) term 'affluenza': a social condition in which the endless pursuit of more undermines genuine satisfaction and authentic living. Wellness frameworks that fail to address this structural dynamic risk becoming tools of accommodation rather than transformation.

Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) — a comprehensive Māori-grounded wellness framework — takes a different stance. Rather than treating the wants/needs distinction as merely a budgeting concern or a cognitive skill, TPO situates it within a broader understanding of Whakaoranga (restoration to wellness) and Mana Motuhake (self-determination). In the TPO model, understanding what one genuinely needs is an act of knowing oneself deeply; confusing wants with needs is a form of disconnection from one's true nature and from the relational web that gives life meaning.

This article proceeds in four sections. First, it reviews existing theoretical frameworks for understanding wants and needs, noting both contributions and limitations. Second, it introduces the TPO perspective, drawing on Māori epistemological concepts to extend and critique existing frameworks. Third, it examines the clinical and educational implications, particularly the 'hidden needs' diagnostic model and its application in practitioner-guided wellness work. Finally, it offers reflections on the decolonial dimensions of this work and directions for future studies.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS: WANTS, NEEDS, AND WELLBEING

2.1 Maslow and the Hierarchy of Needs

Abraham Maslow's (1943) hierarchical model of human motivation remains the most widely cited framework for distinguishing needs from other forms of desire. Maslow proposed that human needs can be ordered from physiological survival (food, water, shelter, sleep) through safety, belonging and love, esteem, and ultimately self-actualisation — the realisation of one's full potential. Needs lower in the hierarchy, Maslow argued, must be substantially met before higher-order needs become motivationally salient.

While influential, the hierarchy has attracted sustained critique. Cross-cultural research has consistently challenged the universality of Maslow's ordering (Wahba & Bridwell, 1976; Tay & Diener, 2011). In many collectivist and indigenous cultures, belonging and relational integrity are not third-level luxuries but foundational prerequisites for survival itself — both psychological and sometimes physical. Further, the pinnacle construct of 'self-actualisation' has been critiqued as reflecting a distinctly Western, individualist ideology of the autonomous self-striving toward personal excellence (Gambrel & Cianci, 2003).

2.2 Self-Determination Theory

Deci and Ryan's (2000) Self-Determination Theory (SDT) offers a more nuanced account. SDT proposes three universal psychological needs: autonomy (the experience of volition and self-endorsement of one's actions), competence (the experience of effectiveness in the environment), and relatedness (the experience of meaningful connection with others). These needs are distinguished from wants by their universality and by the fact that their frustration, not merely their absence, produces psychological harm.

Importantly for wellness practice, SDT distinguishes between intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation — acting from genuine interest, values, and psychological need satisfaction — is associated with greater wellbeing, vitality, and sustained engagement. Extrinsic motivation — acting to obtain rewards, avoid punishment, or maintain social approval — tends to undermine intrinsic motivation and is associated with lower wellbeing over time (Ryan & Deci, 2017). This distinction maps directly onto the wants/need's terrain: much of what we 'want' is conditioned by extrinsic pressures, while genuine needs are more closely aligned with intrinsic sources of motivation.

2.3 Critical Limitations of Western Frameworks

Despite their contributions, both Maslow and SDT share a common epistemological limitation: they locate needs primarily within the individual psychological subject. Needs are things the individual has; satisfying them is the individual's responsibility; wellbeing is essentially a personal state. This framing, while not entirely incorrect, obscures the ways in which needs — and the capacity to meet them — are shaped by structural, cultural, and spiritual forces that exceed the individual.

For indigenous peoples, in particular, this individualist framing is insufficient and, at times, actively harmful. When Māori scholars describe the harm of cultural disconnection, they are not describing a preference frustrated but a fundamental need violated — one whose satisfaction requires not individual self-improvement but collective restoration and systemic change (Durie, 1994; Pihama, 2001). Frameworks that cannot account for this distinction risk misdiagnosing the wound.

3. TE POUTAMA O TE ORA: A RELATIONAL AND CULTURAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Foundations of the Framework

Te Poutama o te Ora (TPO) is an integrative wellness framework grounded in Māori epistemology and developed through four generations of healing practice. The framework organises wellbeing across nine interconnected dimensions (taha/dimensions) that span the physical, psychological, social, spiritual, environmental, digital, financial, nutritional, and cultural domains of human life. Critically, TPO does not treat these dimensions as separable modules but as an integrated web of relations — disruption in one dimension affects all others, and restoration in any dimension ripples through the whole.

The framework draws explicitly on the Māori concept of whakapapa (genealogy and relational lineage) to understand both the origins of wellness challenges and the pathways to restoration. Wellness, in this view, is not a state of optimal individual functioning but a state of right relationship — with oneself, with whānau (family), with hapū (community), with whenua (land), with Tīpuna (ancestors), and with Atua (the divine).

3.2 Needs as Relational Obligations

Within the TPO framework, genuine needs are understood not only as individual requirements but as relational obligations. To have a need is to participate in a network of reciprocal care: one has a need, and within a healthy relational system, others have a corresponding responsibility to help meet it. This understanding — expressed in concepts such as Manaaki (the enhancement and protection of others' mana) and utu (reciprocal exchange and balance) — transforms the experience of having needs from a source of shame to a form of participation in community life.

This stands in sharp contrast to the dominant cultural narrative around needs, in which having needs is frequently framed as weakness or deficiency, and independence

(having no needs that others must meet) as the pinnacle of maturity. TPO challenges this narrative directly: to deny one's needs is not strength but disconnection; to acknowledge and seek to meet them is an act of honesty and relational integrity.

3.3 Whakapapa of Wants: The Cultural Construction of Desire

TPO also offers a framework for understanding how wants are constructed. The concept of whakapapa — tracing the genealogy or origins of something — can be applied to desire itself. Where did this want to come from? What are its origins? Is it rooted in a genuine need seeking expression, or in an externally imposed narrative about what one must have to be adequate, successful, or worthy?

The TPO perspective holds that many persistent wants are, in fact, colonised desires: longings shaped by cultural exposure to consumerism, social comparison, and internalised deficit narratives. These desires do not reflect the individual's authentic relationship with themselves or their world; they reflect the internalisation of external standards. Recognising and naming this genealogy is, in TPO terms, an act of whakaoranga — restoration to one's original, uncolonised state of knowing.

3.4 The Māori Framework of Cultural Need

The TPO framework extends the concept of need to include what might be termed cultural needs — those requirements for wellbeing that are specific to one's cultural identity and context. For Māori, these include connection to whakapapa, relationship with whenua, participation in tikanga Māori, access to te Reo Māori, and spiritual relationship with Atua and Tīpuna. Durie's (1994) Te Whare Tapa Whā model similarly positions taha wairua (spiritual dimension) and taha whānau (family dimension) as foundational requirements for health, not optional enhancements.

Western frameworks that categorise these as 'cultural preferences' commit a form of epistemological violence: they apply a universalist standard that privileges Western, secular, individualist conceptions of need while delegitimising alternative frameworks. TPO explicitly counters this by treating cultural belonging, spiritual connection, and ancestral relationship as genuine needs whose violation produces genuine harm.

4. THE HIDDEN NEEDS MODEL: A DIAGNOSTIC LENS FOR WELLNESS PRACTICE

4.1 Surface Wants and Underlying Needs

One of the most practically significant insights in the TPO approach to wants and needs is the recognition that persistent or compulsive wanting frequently signals an unmet underlying need. This is not a novel observation — psychodynamic theory has long noted the symbolic nature of desire — but the TPO framework offers a structured way to work with this phenomenon within a Māori-informed wellness context.

The pattern is consistent: a person pursues a want with unusual intensity or persistence; wants, once obtained, provides temporary relief but not lasting satisfaction; the wanting returns, often escalating; and beneath the surface, a genuine need remains unmet. Common examples include:

> *The person who persistently wants status symbols — new cars, designer clothing, visible markers of success — and beneath this want discovers an unmet need for belonging, recognition, or the experience of being enough.*
>
> *The person who wants constant busyness, an overloaded calendar, and the identity of being perpetually needed — and beneath this discovers an unmet need for purpose, or a fear of encountering grief or emptiness in stillness.*
>
> *The person who wants physical transformation — the 'perfect body' — and beneath this discovers an unmet need for safety, control, self-acceptance, or repair from experiences of bodily violation.*

In each case, the surface want is not irrational or trivial; it is a genuine attempt to meet a genuine need. The problem is not the wanting but the indirectness of the pathway — the attempt to meet a relational, spiritual, or psychological need through a material or behavioural solution.

4.2 Practitioner Application

For wellness practitioners working within the TPO framework, the hidden needs model provides a structured diagnostic and therapeutic approach. Rather than immediately challenging or redirecting a client's stated wants, the practitioner first seeks to understand the function of the want: what is it trying to do? What need is it attempting to meet?

This enquiry is conducted with the same spirit of Manaaki that characterises all TPO practice: with genuine respect for the client's intelligence and resilience, curiosity rather than judgment, and confidence that the want — however indirect — represents the person's best current attempt to care for themselves. The goal is not to eliminate the want but to trace its whakapapa and, in doing so, open more direct pathways to the underlying need.

The three diagnostic questions that guide this process within the TPO framework are: What consequences do I experience in the absence of this? (the Consequence Test); Would any version satisfy me, or only a specific version? (the Upgrade Test); and is this pressing, or can it wait? (the Timing Test). These questions, applied reflectively, help both practitioner and client distinguish genuine need from conditioned desire.

4.3 Collective and Systemic Dimensions

The TPO framework insists that the hidden needs model must not be applied reductively to the individual alone. Many of the 'wants' that individuals present in wellness contexts are themselves responses to systemic unmet needs: communities that have been stripped of cultural resources, land, language, and relational networks by colonisation; individuals whose basic needs for safety and belonging have never been reliably met due to poverty, violence, or systemic marginalisation.

In these contexts, the appropriate response is not only to help individuals develop greater clarity about their personal wants and needs, but to name and address the structural conditions that generate need deprivation in the first place. Wellness work that focuses exclusively on individual insight without addressing collective conditions risks

becoming a tool of accommodation to unjust systems rather than transformation of them (Cooke & Salinas, 2003; Walker et al., 2008).

5. DECOLONIAL DIMENSIONS: CLARITY AS SOVEREIGNTY

The TPO framework positions the cultivation of clarity about one's genuine needs as an inherently political act — particularly for Māori and other indigenous peoples whose access to need satisfaction has been systematically undermined by colonial processes. To know what one truly needs, and to take that need seriously, is to exercise sovereignty over one's own life: to refuse the colonially imposed narrative of deficit, dependency, or inadequacy.

This connects to the broader TPO emphasis on Mana Motuhake (self-determination) as both a personal and collective value. Mana Motuhake is not the Western liberal concept of individual autonomy — the right to be left alone to pursue one's preferences. It is the capacity to live in accordance with one's values, to govern oneself according to one's own wisdom traditions, and to participate fully in the relational networks that give life meaning. Genuine clarity about wants and needs is a prerequisite for this kind of self-determination.

The concept of Maramataka — the Māori lunar calendar that guides decisions about planting, harvesting, fishing, and other activities in alignment with natural rhythms — offers a useful analogy here. Maramataka is, among other things, a tool for discerning right timing: when to act and when to wait, when to plant and when to rest, when to gather and when to release. Applied to the wants/need's domain, this concept suggests that clarity about genuine needs enables one to live in alignment with one's actual rhythms and requirements — rather than in perpetual response to the artificial urgencies manufactured by consumer culture.

In this sense, what the source document calls 'an act of resistance' — reclaiming one's life from manufactured dissatisfaction — is, within the TPO framework, also an act of cultural restoration: a return to modes of knowing and relating that predate and persist beyond the colonising project of consumer capitalism.

6. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The analysis developed in this article has several implications for wellness theory and practice. First, it suggests that existing frameworks for understanding wants and needs — however valuable — require supplementation by relational, cultural, and structural perspectives if they are to serve diverse populations equally. The TPO framework offers one such supplementation, rooted in Māori epistemology and responsive to the specific wellness challenges of indigenous and colonised communities.

Second, the hidden needs model suggests a reorientation of wellness practice: from symptom management (addressing the presenting want or behaviour) to root-cause enquiry (understanding the underlying need the want is attempting to meet). This requires practitioners who can work with depth, holding complexity, and maintaining a non-judgmental orientation toward patterns of behaviour that may initially seem irrational or counterproductive.

Third, the decolonial framing of clarity as sovereignty suggests that wellness education — helping people understand the difference between wants and needs — is not merely a psychoeducational exercise but a political one. When communities develop the capacity to discern their genuine needs and to meet those needs through culturally grounded pathways, they become less vulnerable to the manufactured desires that serve commercial interests and more capable of the kind of collective self-determination that sustains long-term flourishing.

Finally, the TPO framework's insistence on abundance as the proper context for wants deserves emphasis. The goal of clarifying needs is not self-denial but liberation: when genuine needs are reliably met, wants can be enjoyed as genuine enrichments of life rather than pursued as desperate attempts to fill an unnamed void. This is the wellness aspiration at the heart of TPO — not a spartan sufficiency but a flourishing abundance rooted in clarity, connection, and cultural integrity.

7. CONCLUSION

The distinction between wants and needs is, at first glance, a simple one. On closer examination, it opens onto profound questions about selfhood, culture, sovereignty, and the conditions of genuine flourishing. This article has argued that the TPO framework — with its relational understanding of needs, its genealogical approach to desire, its hidden needs diagnostic model, and its decolonial positioning of clarity as sovereignty — offers a significant contribution to wellness scholarship and practice.

In a cultural moment characterised by manufactured insufficiency, compulsive consumption, and chronic disconnection from one's own genuine requirements for wellbeing, this contribution is urgently needed. To know what one truly needs — and to take that knowing seriously — is among the most transformative practices available to individuals and communities alike. Te Poutama o te Ora provides both the conceptual framework and the practical tools to support this knowing, within a tradition of care that honours both the wisdom of Tīpuna and the challenges of the present moment.

Future research might examine the application of the TPO hidden needs model in specific clinical and community contexts; explore the relationship between cultural reconnection and the clarification of genuine needs; and investigate the ways in which Maramataka-informed timing practices support sustainable need satisfaction. This work is both scholarly and, in the fullest sense, healing work.

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