

Family-centred practice

WHANAU

INTRODUCTION

Whanau is an activity which puts students in touch with the family dimension of social work practice, by looking at decision-making and power in their own families. The activity is inspired by Maori practices in New Zealand, where a radical approach to decision-making in the area of child welfare has put the wider family centre-stage. The approach is called *whanau*, from the Maori word for family.

Purpose

For good and bad, the family is a major influence on the lives of children and adults, and it is important to be able to work with the idea and the reality of family. This chapter aims to put students in touch with their own feelings about families and develops the theme of partnership in work with families.

Method

You need a blank sheet of paper on which to draw your family tree, starting with yourself towards the bottom of the page. Use the model in the *Whanau* activity, with the symbols described. Discuss your family as you draw it. Next, ask the student to go through the same process. (You need to check out beforehand that the student is comfortable with this request).

When you have both completed family trees and you have an idea of who is who, discuss the three questions (which follow the example in the *Whanau* activity below) about power and decision-making in your respective families.

Discuss your views of families - positive and negative responses - and the political context of 'the family'. Are the student's thoughts and feelings concerning families likely to prevent or help working in partnership with families? (Allow 30 - 60 minutes).

Variations

If *Whanau* is used with a small group, it is best for one of the group leaders to model the process on a flipchart and then ask the group to work in pairs, sharing as much as they wish with the large group. Professionals are often particularly hostile to the idea of their relatives having any say in their family's decisions. If they have 'escaped their background', they may stress friendships rather than kinships, but this may not reflect the values of the people they work with. When the chips are down, many people rely on the wider family in a crisis, and given the choice between decisions made by professionals and those made by the broader family, many - perhaps most - prefer the latter.

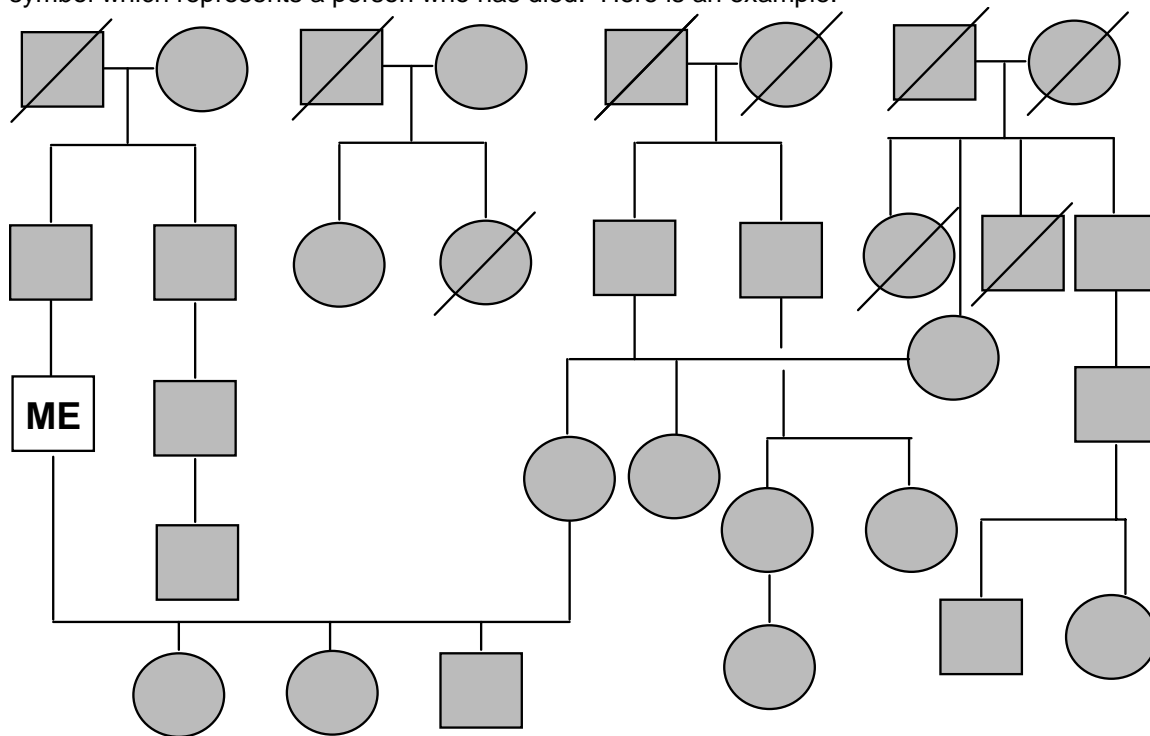
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WHANAU Activity

Whanau is the Maori word for family. The Maori perspective on family decision-making is having an impact on services to both Maori and Pakeha (white) populations in Aotearoa (New Zealand). The professionals act as facilitators to bring family members together to make a collective decision about the care and welfare of children in the family. (Decisions about prosecution in child protection cases are made by the courts). Relatives come from great distances, from overseas if necessary, to be included in the family decision-making meeting, which can sometimes take all day. See Wilcox, N. *et al*, (1991), *Family Decision Making: Family Group Conferences*, NZ: Practitioners' Publishing.

To begin to appreciate this perspective we need to understand our own families and understand how each family develops its own 'protocol', or ways of doing things.

Using symbols (circles for females and squares for males), draw a family tree going back as far as your grandparents, if you can. Make sure you include all the branches and off-shoots; cousins, step-aunts, and so on. If you have children you may wish to draw the tree from their point of view, to include their other parent's branch of the tree. Put a line through any symbol which represents a person who has died. Here is an example:



Consider these questions:

- *Who makes the decisions in your family and home?*
- *If there was a family conference whom would you want invited? whom not?*
- *Who is powerful in your family?*

Maori dissatisfaction with Pakeha (white European) ways of doing things led to a re-assertion of their idea of family decision-making. It is interesting that both Maori and Pakeha populations are now using the 'Whanau' system successfully.

(Special thanks to Larry Monu, Judy Moore, Maraea Ropata and Harry Walker.)