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# Äta as an innovative method and practice tool in supervision

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## Abstract

Building on the social work practice model of Pohatu (2004), who outlines a behavioural and theoretical strategy named Äta, this article discusses the method and introduces a reflective tool that supervisors are able to utilise in order to invoke reflection and self-assessment through a Mäori lens at both a personal and professional level. Äta is then discussed as it relates to elements of supervision being taught at a postgraduate level which include reflection, acknowledgement of the process of supervision and learning styles.

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## Introduction

As supervisors we are the main tool in supervision. How we act, behave, the value we place on supervision and our own congruency within the supervisory relationship will influence the supervision we provide (Weld, 2012, p. 28).

The idea that supervisors are the main tools within the supervisory relationship invites supervisors to consider different innovative tools to add to the supervisory kete (basket) in order to build relationships with self and others.

Äta is underpinned by whakapapa (genealogy), waiata (song), whanau (family), wairuatanga (spirituality) and tradition which lends itself to stories. More than being able to just connect with Äta as a model of practice, one is able to externalise their stories to uncover uniqueness and write alternative narratives with which to grow and live (Connolly & Harms, 2012). This article will invite supervisors to examine how respectful relationships are actioned in supervision and in everyday life situations through the process of reflective checks (Zorga, 2002). Personal examples, an overview of Äta, a reflective tool and practice examples are offered here as a koha (contribution) to supervisors and supervisees.

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## Äta – Locating myself

When I am in contact with the things I value and the attitudes that matter to me, and I bring them into the session, then the contact in supervision has the chance to be of such a nature that his spirit and mine hold an honoured place (Maclean, 2002, p. 54).

The values and attitudes learned as part of my upbringing form part of my worldview and the way that I engage with others. My upbringing was informed by Māori principles, Māori ways of being and Māori rationales. These areas were particularly noticeable on the marae, in the home or at specific events like tangi (funerals). Another of these forums was the whānau hui or family gathering. In my whānau the hui was a forum specifically used for dealing with any tensions or conflict inherent in the family.

My Kuia, the matriarch of the family, usually initiated and facilitated these hui. Children were privy to the tensions within our hui but importantly, they were privy also to the way that tensions were sorted through and the resolutions that were sought. The hui would start in much the same way every time we met. Firstly, karakia (prayer) by our Kuia, then a mihi (informal greeting) regarding the reason we were all there, then each person (including children) would be given the opportunity to speak, moving in the direction of the next person to the left. Finally, after everyone in the family had spoken and resolutions obtained, a karakia and mihi to end the hui would be carried out before proceeding to share in a meal.

Inevitably however, the hui would take a considerable amount of time, sometimes crossing into two days. During the hui, voices would be raised, comments would be made, crying was inevitable and emotions ran high. In these moments my Kuia often used cultural skills and techniques to guide the hui while gently reminding the family about behaviour and engaging respectfully with one another. This is where I first heard Äta phrases. My Kuia would stand and in te reo Māori discuss the family's ability to äta whakaaro – or think clearly and think deliberately. She would use the term äta körero – the ability to watch tone, speak with clarity and speak in a manner which conveyed respect. In these moments, the atmosphere calmed and the reflection this prompted was evident. Äta, in this example, is not considered a directive or an order, but an invitation to exchange viewpoints openly in a considered manner that respects the integrity of the other. Äta, meaning carefully or deliberately, guides behaviour by ensuring respectful relationships are the central focus.

## Äta – An overview

Äta, initially formulated as a social work practice model by Pohatu (2004), focuses on respectful relationships, negotiating boundaries and creating ähurutanga (safety of space). Supervisory relationships are focused on these areas too and the way a supervisor practises has a lot to do with the way that they have lived life, the relationships they have formed along the way and the values and beliefs that they carry (Maclean, 2002). Pohatu (2004) explains that Äta is an applied principle and that it was developed from phrases, songs, chants and conversational Māori. Some Äta are well known in the Māori language and in the everyday activities of Māori communities, for example äta titiro, äta körero and äta haere, but many different Äta can be used in different contexts.

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There are 13 original *Äta* phrases described by Pohatu (2004); definitions for these are below:

**Takepu/Principles**

**He whakamaramatanga: Definitions**

Äta haere	Be intentional, deliberate and approach reflectively, moving with respect and integrity. It signals the act of moving with an awareness of relationships, their significance and requirements.
Äta whakarongo	To listen with reflective deliberation. This requires patience and tolerance, giving space to listen and communicate to the heart, mind and soul of the speaker, context and environment. It requires the conscious participation of all senses, the natural inclusion of the values of trust, integrity and respectfulness.
Äta körero	To communicate and speak with clarity, requiring quality preparation and a deliberate gathering of what is to be communicated. This is to ensure a quality of presentation ( <i>kia marama ki te kaupapa</i> ), to speak with conviction ( <i>kia pūmau ki te kaupapa</i> ), to be focused ( <i>kia hāngai ki te kaupapa</i> ).
Äta tuhi	To communicate and write with deliberation needing to be constantly reflective, knowing the purpose for writing. Consistently monitoring and measuring quality is implicit.
Äta mahi	To work diligently, with the conviction that what is being done is correct and appropriate to the tasks undertaken.
Äta noho	Giving quality time to be with people and their issues, with an open and respectful mind, heart and soul. This signals the level of integrity required in relationships.
Äta whakaaro	To think with deliberation, allowing space for creativity, openness and reflection. The consequence is that action is undertaken to the best of one's ability.
Äta whakaako	To deliberately instil knowledge and understanding. There are clear reasons why knowledge is shared: to the appropriate participants, in the required manner, time and place.
Äta tohutohu	To deliberately instruct, monitor and correct. Spoken knowledge is a constant and valued companion. Cultural markers such as <i>kaitiakitanga</i> come forward to guide when appropriate, how it should be formed, applied and why.
Äta kinaki	To be deliberate and clear in the choice of appropriate supports to enhance positions taken.
Äta hoki mārire	To return with respectful acknowledgement of possible consequences.
Äta titiro	To study kaupapa with reflective deliberation
Äta whakamārama	To inform with reflective deliberation, ensuring that the channels of communication at the spiritual, emotional and intellectual levels of the receiver are respected, understood and valued.

(Pohatu, 2004, pp. 5,6.)

The word *Äta* enables viewpoints to be openly exchanged while acknowledging the integrity of the other in a respectful way. Importantly, this practice serves as a way for Maori thinking and rationale to be validated and could also become a 'template of preferred ways for others to engage with Māori' (Pohatu, 2004, p. 1). In this way and with guidance, *Äta* becomes accessible to non-Māori supervisors to enhance their bicultural practice. The most important aspect of *Äta* is that it should be practised and strengthened in a personal sense

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before incorporating it into the professional and that this takes an awareness of all your senses in a holistic way.

It is important to note that *Äta* is not just about trying to make a Mäori worldview fit the context of supervision. *Äta* has been incorporated into contexts similar to supervision over generations. It is a considered form of observation, of listening, of thinking before you speak which establishes the nature of the fundamental relationship, hopefully avoids conflict, but also helps to address conflict if it arises. In addition, just like the practice of social work, *Äta* asks people to examine their humanity. Pohatu (2004) poses several questions using *Äta* that asks people to examine what their future relationships might look like if they treated each other with respect and integrity. He asks, 'How do we make long established practices relevant for this time?' and in respect of our mokopuna (grandchildren) 'what will his/her time be like? How will he/she live in his time? What must we do?' (p. 9). These questions then expand on the idea that *Äta* needs to be a pattern that starts within the home which is then a naturally occurring part of our daily lives. Pohatu appears to challenge us to consider *Äta* beyond a skill or a practice that we utilise at work, to be a behaviour that has relevance both now and in the future.

I have found myself utilising *Äta* in many different ways including as a mother and as a supervisor by creating a reflective tool. For example, as a mother I have had to challenge the way I practise *äta whakarongo* especially when a teenage daughter reminds me that she has told me something several times before! To practise *äta whakarongo* as a mother means giving time to my children, checking what I hear, listening for themes, for feelings, to tone, listening out for our own reactions or triggers and monitoring them as needed. These areas of *äta whakarongo* are not so different to the way we practise as a supervisee or supervisor.

## ***Äta* – The tool**

As a supervisor (mainly educative/supportive) I have designed a reflective tool utilising *Äta* to highlight areas of practice that needed to be strengthened and checked on and this tool has been written with *koha* (valued contributions) from colleagues, family and self. *Äta* therefore, has become a *hoa haere* (valued companion) (Pohatu, 2004) not limited to supervision itself. The tool does not necessarily need to be followed step by step, or by 'recipe following' (Taylor, 1999, p. 175) whereby reflection is on demand and any of the *Äta* could be concentrated on as its own unique body of knowledge. For example, it could be that the supervisor/supervisee felt that *äta whakarongo* did not play out particularly well during a session and that *Äta* could be worked on alone. *Äta whakarongo* describes the requirements needed when listening to all the senses as opposed to only hearing and that this requires patience, tolerance, heart, mind and soul. Were there uncomfortable silences? Did I listen for themes and check or unpack some of those themes? Did I listen with intention and deliberation allowing for silent moments or moments of reflection? Supervision and *Äta* looks to improve the quality of the relationships we have with other human beings and to consistently strive to work to the best of our capability.

The reflective tool below has been designed from a reflective/theorist perspective in a fashion that allows time to analyse and ponder (Honey & Mumford, 1992). Although it is acknowledged that the form will not suit all supervisors/supervisees, the key to continuing

to engage in reflective techniques and therefore professional development lies in being able to commit to regular reflection within supervision (Morrell, 2003). Keeping this in mind, the tool could be re-worked and re-designed to suit individuals, groups or workplaces. Further, the reflective checks in the second column could look completely different for each individual and could just as easily be designed to meet personal learning styles. The tool is being constantly added to as new learning occurs.

Äta: Reflective signposts

Äta Statement	Reflective Checks	Action
<i>Äta haere:</i>		
Approaching relationships with integrity and respect	I am positive in my relationships	Y/N Needs work
	I help to maintain a positive environment	Y/N Needs work
	I am respectful to positions/ views of my supervisor and others	Y/N Needs work
	I use reflective skills to check the way I interact with others	Y/N Needs work
<i>Äta whakamärama:</i>		
To inform with respect ensuring the spiritual, emotional and intellectual levels of the receiver are respected, understood and valued	I maintain my personal physical, mental and emotional wellbeing	Y/N Needs work
	I consciously recognise the needs of others	Y/N Needs work
	I use attending skills and verbal skills to show respect and understanding	Y/N Needs work
<i>Äta kinaki:</i> Providing appropriate supports to enhance positions taken		
	I respond to any tensions in a constructive and useful way	Y/N Needs work
	I acknowledge any tensions in kaupapa and relationships	Y/N Needs work
	I provide support and acknowledgement when needed in a collaborative and strength-based way	Y/N Needs work
<i>Äta korero:</i> Communicating with respect and clarity.		
	I respond respectfully towards the personal and professional positions of others	Y/N Needs work
	I engage in discussion and debate respectfully	
	I behave in a manner consistent with personal and professional standards	Y/N Needs work
	My tone and choice of words is consistent with professional behaviour	Y/N Needs work

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	I shape and propose ideas when invited and actively engage in discussions	Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta noho:</i> Giving quality time to people	I am considerate to others who need to speak with me	Y/N	Needs work
	I consistently give quality time to others	Y/N	Needs work
	I respond in a respectful way when I am unable to give quality time to others	Y/N	Needs work
	I work in a collaborative way	Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta tohutohu:</i> To deliberately instruct, monitor and correct	I give/receive instruction in a respectful way that acknowledges the integrity of the other	Y/N	Needs work
	I am able to provide accurate information providing supporting evidence and experience	Y/N	Needs work
	I am able to follow up any areas necessary	Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta whakaako:</i> To deliberately instil knowledge and understanding	I engage in reflective techniques	Y/N	Needs work
	I monitor the progress made and the commitment to the shared vision	Y/N	Needs work
	I deliberately contribute ideas		
	I check my thoughts to decide on benefits and consequences	Y/N	Needs work
	I am an active explorer of positive pathways	Y/N	Needs work
	I engage emotions within my thought processes	Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta whakarongo:</i> Consciously listening with all the senses	I listen for feelings	Y/N	Needs work
	I listen for themes	Y/N	Needs work
	I check statements to acknowledge and understand	Y/N	Needs work
	I help to unpack statements	Y/N	Needs work
	I check for expressions	Y/N	Needs work
	I check for my own triggers	Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta tuhi:</i> Writing with deliberation while monitoring and measuring the quality of the written work	Am I confident in my writing ability?	Y/N	Needs work
	Is my written work organised?	Y/N	Needs work
	Have I consulted with others to check my written work?	Y/N	Needs work
	Have I considered benefits and consequences?	Y/N	Needs work

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<i>Āta mahi</i> : To work diligently. To be correct and appropriate	Do I work within the guidelines of workplace?	Y/N	Needs work
	Do I work within the guidelines of my own tikanga?	Y/N	Needs work
	Six p's – prior preparation and planning prevents poor performance	Y/N	Needs work
	I am inclusive in my approaches within the workplace	Y/N	Needs work
	I am transparent in my work and relationships	Y/N	Needs work
	I value others in my approach in my work environment	Y/N	Needs work
	I show positive leadership	Y/N	Needs work
	<i>Āta whakaaro</i> : To give time to thought. Space to be creative, innovative and reflective.	I have courage to stand by the choices I make	Y/N
I reflect on the fight or flight reflex when engaged in thought		Y/N	Needs work
I give time to who might benefit from my thinking		Y/N	Needs work
I give time to what the consequences might be from my thinking		Y/N	Needs work
I make room for reflection daily		Y/N	Needs work
I engage emotions when in thought		Y/N	Needs work
I think about the right people, right place and right time for thought		Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta hoki Marire</i> : To return respectful acknowledgement.		I engage the takepū koha, acknowledging contributions made	Y/N
	I give compliments where due and receive compliments respectfully	Y/N	Needs work
	I acknowledge those around me who make positive differences and those who provide challenges	Y/N	Needs work
<i>Āta titiro</i> : To study issues with reflective deliberation	Have I been consistently using this reflective tool to acknowledge areas of reflection?	Y/N	Needs work

## Āta – Practice examples

Three elements of supervision that are currently being taught within postgraduate programmes are reflection, learning which occurs through the process of supervision and learning styles. These three elements have been chosen to further example Āta as they relate to the above tool and supervisory relationships.

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## Reflection

Dewey, when examining the concept of reflection writes that reflection is about 'transforming a situation in which there is experienced obscurity, doubt, conflict, disturbance of some sort, into a situation that is clear, settled, harmonious' (Redmond, 2004). Äta, if practised with integrity, attempts to pinpoint those areas where there has been some conflict or tension and work through them to create wellness.

Prior to engaging with Äta it would be fair to say that reflection was left to chance or instinct. Within supervision however, the above tool has been used before and after supervisory sessions to deliberately pre-empt and invoke reflection rather than leaving reflection to chance or instinct. After a session for example, as either a supervisor or supervisee, I would work my way through the reflective tool ticking or crossing as necessary. After carrying out this part of the tool, I could assess what went well and what areas I could perhaps work on, all at a glance. Previous results that the tool has highlighted include: äta whakāmarama – that I may not have recognised the emotional needs of the supervisee in a particular context, and perhaps did not use attending skills to show respect or understanding, äta noho – that I have not always worked collaboratively. which is good to pick up on given that my learning style includes being instructional. To be successful in creating positive rewarding relationships, learning is key and should occur as a continuous process within the supervisory relationship.

Certainly Äta has provided the space to evaluate the areas that myself and others have identified over the years because 'it is only when we bring our ideas to our consciousness that we can evaluate them and begin to make choices about what we will and will not do' (Boud, Reogh, & Walker, 1985, p. 19). The tool has been designed to instantly activate reflection and then think about any changes that need to occur.

## Allowing learning to occur through acknowledging the process

When Äta is engaged as a reflective tool for supervision the process is the centre rather than an issue. When supervision is regarded in this way, the supervisor moves from being the expert to the facilitator and co-exploration is promoted (Beddoe & Davys, 2012). Äta provides a landscape where learning can take place in many different ways and it moves through barriers to connect with the heart, mind and soul of those we are in relationships with. As a supervisor I have left sessions feeling like I had been constantly trying to put out fires and had been trying to find solutions. Äta increases awareness of the process itself and allows one to be more settled knowing that the role of a supervisor is to be present rather than reactive and overwhelmed (Taibbi, 2013). For example, äta hoki marire signals a supervisor to acknowledge contributions made, to make contributions of consequence, to acknowledge positive differences and to acknowledge challenges. Here, the supervisory conversations are concentrated around the ability to say what it is that is going well and if requested or needed, the ability to be able to make contributions of consequence which can lead to increased confidence. Adults learn in many different ways, so it is very important to ascertain the differences inherent in the supervisory relationship. One of the ways this could occur is through examining each other's learning styles (Thomlinson, Rogers, & Collins, 1996).

## Learning styles

Understanding learning styles could help to identify any strengths and weaknesses within supervisory relationships. By examining learning styles supervisors and supervisees will be



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able to refine, develop, discard or make changes which will therefore positively influence any learning relationship (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). The outcomes should then lead to 'new understandings and appreciations' (Boud, et al., 1985, p. 19). Supervisors and supervisees might be matched in age, in intelligence, in need and even exposed to the same learning opportunities, but as discussed by Honey and Mumford (1992) this may still mean that they learn in completely different ways and react to learning very differently too. Like *Äta*, learning styles can determine the different attitudes and behaviours one has toward learning. Before engaging with *Äta* it would be fair to say that my learning style and supervisory style included being prescribed, instructional, organised, questioning and having a low tolerance to ambiguity – and perhaps this is still accurate. However, what has altered is the idea that others will respond and work in the same manner as me. *Äta* noho would invite a supervisor with this learning style to be consistent, collaborative and considerate. Learning styles are 'how' people prefer to learn, *Äta* becomes the 'how' we treat people respectfully because even though we may know how another learns this does not necessarily mean we act in a way that is polite, humble or courteous. Having a tool like *Äta* becomes a quick check about how it is that I treat people. *Äta* and other techniques, including getting to know my own learning style and the learning styles of those who I supervise, add such essence to supervisory relationships because they allow for difference to be respected.

## Conclusion

Supervision has been described as 'ongoing learning, learning as a way of life and learning how to learn' (Carroll, 2001). Supervision is a place where giving and receiving can occur, where strengths are acknowledged, where there is self-realisation and where energies are regathered. This is how *Äta* is relevant to supervision. *Äta* creates a space where reflection, acknowledgement of the process and acknowledgement of relationships are activated.

Engaging in the domain of self-knowledge has been said to be emancipatory (Redmond, 2004). It is the supervisor who constantly and aggressively strives to improve his/her professional skills and understanding that will ultimately grow and develop successfully (Zorga, 2002). Critically examining our own interpretations, experiences and stories are pivotal for a successful supervisory relationship.

There is an opportunity when using *Äta* within the supervisory context to improve, grow, understand and find our blind spots (Shohet, 2008). The most important part of *Äta* is being able to then convert supervisory experiences and thoughts into positive outcomes which lead to being able to cope more with the tensions that are inherent in life and to be able to treat others respectfully. In other words, the ability to construct, deconstruct and reconstruct. The *Äta* method was not written by one author but many, the *Äta* tool was not written by me alone but by many. To utilise *Äta* to its fullest potential within the supervisory process there needs to be dialogue and collaboration. It is in the sharing of information that possibilities are created because in the words of Carroll, 'my own work and experience have taught me that I cannot learn some things on my own. I need others' (Carroll, 2009). This article has discussed *Äta* as an innovative method of reflection within supervision however; the rangahau (research) for the writer is really only in its development stages regarding the potential of *Äta*. The process of learning more about its potential within supervision is ongoing as all learning should be.

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