Inland Revenue
Te Tari Taake

Information-sharing between government agencies: Cultural perspectives

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Research discussion paper

Disclaimer

Acknowledgements

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Section 1.   Executive Summary

This discussion paper explores cultural perspectives on information-sharing by government departments.

Introduction

In line with the Government's aim of 'New Zealanders being able to complete their transactions with government easily in a digital environment' (Better Public Services; Result 10[1]), Inland Revenue (IR) is currently increasing its information-sharing with other government departments.

IR was aware that there would be sensitivities around information-sharing by government departments. As part of its policy development, IR began researching people's views on information-sharing (Lips, M., et al., 2010; Litmus, 2011; Inland Revenue & Litmus, 2012; Gregory, V., 2012; Inland Revenue & Research New Zealand, 2013; Bennett, A., 2013).

Methodology

This research project was conducted to explore the attitudinal differences for Maori and Pasifika peoples towards increased information-sharing between government agencies. In accordance with the Treaty of Waitangi, this study had particular emphasis on the views of Māori. Participants from the Asian community were also included as this is the other major non-European cultural group in New Zealand.

Qualitative interviews were carried out with ten community cultural representatives, 19 IR staff, and nine members of relevant government organisations on cultural perspectives regarding government agencies sharing information (see Appendix for details). Interviewing took place between February and April 2013, and was conducted by a senior researcher and a senior evaluator from IR's National Research & Evaluation Unit (R&E).

Our approach for researching cultural views

As preparation for this study, a literature review was conducted on cultural attitudes towards privacy, confidentiality and information. The review found very little in the prior research directly on cultural perspectives addressing privacy and information-sharing. However, the literature on broader 'cultural attitudes' did give us an understanding of the vast scope involved when researching 'culture' (Durie, 1998; Keown, et al, 2005). This is particularly true when multiple cultures are grouped together under broad headings such as 'Pasifika' and 'Asian'.

The review also emphasised the value of allowing participants to decide how they would like to be included in any research. One example of this was the choice of the Kaitakawaenga Māori staff to invite us to a hui, rather than having individual interviews. (Ministry of Social Development, 2008; The Putaiora Writing Group, Undated).

The literature noted that people of the same cultural group do not necessarily share the same cultural views, or put their views into practice in the same way (Webster, 2001). This is expressed by Wong (cited in Ip, 1996, p.161) as:

'No one ever asks for the "Pakeha view" but they expect one single Chinese view or one single Māori view. It's total rubbish, as if we all need to think the same.'

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[1] Result 10 is part of Better Public Services, see www.dia.govt.nz/Better-Public-Services-Measuring-Result-10

People also have different views about what they include in the term 'culture'. We have left it as a fairly loosely defined concept encompassing 'race and ethnicity'.

The interviews we conducted for this study are not intended to fully represent the Māori, Pasifika and Asian cultures. Rather, the aim was to gather a range of informed opinions from people who are experienced in considering cultural perspectives as starting points for discussion. The views stated in this paper can only be taken as being 'indicative' for the three cultural groups included in this study.

Main research findings

The participants in this research project had similar views about the benefits of government information-sharing. They see it as potentially beneficial but also needing strong protocols for privacy, data quality, transparency, and consent.

However, our indicative findings are that Māori and Pasifika participants are less comfortable than Asian participants with government information-sharing.

Reactions to the concept of information-sharing

Participants from all three of the cultural groups we covered generally believed that 'limited' information-sharing is beneficial in such things as improving government agency efficiency and streamlining government services for customers

One concern about information-sharing is that the recent cases of privacy breaches by various New Zealand government departments mean that people doubt the ability of government agencies to promise information privacy.

Another concern is that government agencies may hold inaccurate information, and sharing this information would exacerbate the situation.

Māori

Māori participants talked about information being a part of themselves. It is important for Māori to be able to trust that their information will be treated with care and used as intended. However, Māori fear that information may be shared in ways that may seem well-intentioned but are, nevertheless, detrimental and 'disempowering' for Māori.

Pasifika

Pasifika participants were also rather uncomfortable with information-sharing, and this is seen as strongly due to being generally unfamiliar with the systems and processes of the various government agencies. A particular area of concern for Pasifika participants was immigration. Another concern is how information-sharing might impact people on low incomes who supplement their income via illegitimate means.

Asian

Asian participants were easily the most positive group about the perceived benefits of information-sharing. This positivity seemed partly due to a strong sense of trust in New Zealand government agencies.

Nevertheless, Asian participants were still keen on having legislation to limit the extent of information-sharing to some degree.

Trust and transparency

Transparency and consent are two key factors that participants wished to see. That is, participants wanted to know how their information would be handled, and they wanted to be informed and, as much as possible, asked for consent before it is shared.

Cultural sensitivities and conventions

The research found there are a number of culturally-based sensitivities and preferences for how information should be gathered and managed. These ranged from treating hand-written information as taonga (Māori) to

having a wide range of potential naming conventions (Pasifika) and having sensitivities around asking direct questions (Asian).

Section 2.   Implications of this research

Before delving into the research findings, it is worth pausing to consider the significance of this research in the minds and hearts of the participants, and how the findings will be used to contribute to Result 10.

Reflections from the researchers

Given that 'information privacy' has been in the news so much recently, and how little idea we had about how people would respond 'culturally', we were interested to see how significant this topic would be for people. The answer is complex.

This is a topic that concerns the two-way trust relationship between people and the state. At an individual level, negative experiences with government agencies can make people distrust the state, and the conversations covered this. But we also talked about trust in a 'culture-wide' sense. That made the conversations both far-reaching (talking about hopes and fears of an entire cultural group) and deep (talking about people's identity).

It also meant that we were talking a lot about intangibles; people's hopes, concerns, and values. Additionally, there were many unknowns. People were very uncertain about what information is currently shared, and what positive and negative outcomes will actually happen if information-sharing increases. And, of course, government information-sharing happens beyond people's reach, inside government agencies, which is another source of uncertainty.

We are very grateful that people persevered in giving us their insights and helping us understand their points of view. We have used people's own words in the paper in an effort to convey the importance of this topic for them. This was a complex undertaking, and we trust this exploratory paper will create new lines of thought and better cultural understanding.

Section 3.   Benefits of information-sharing

Government information-sharing is seen as beneficial but fallible.

All cultures see positives in information-sharing

Our research incorporated interviews with community cultural representatives, IR staff and representatives from relevant government agencies (see Appendix for details). Everyone we talked to had both positive and negative reactions to the concept of government information-sharing.

On the positive side, participants from all three of the main cultural groups we covered generally believed that 'limited' information-sharing is beneficial in that it:

- Improves government agency efficiency
- Streamlines government services for customers
- Gives customers better access to entitlements
- Improves detection and enforcement of fraud and other crimes
- Makes government staff safer and better equipped to handle the situations they are dealing with
- Speeds up response times for people where urgent assistance is needed
- Avoids having to collect embarrassing information from people more than once.

> *"[Domestic violence] They found out there were many government agencies interacting with those families, and yet none of them shared enough information to see all the red flags. All they saw was one red flag that that this is a risk, but if they all knew there would have been about 20 red flags."*
>
> **IR staff (Māori)**

> *"Now we have this MSD information exchange it's a much smoother process for someone to come off their benefit and start Working for Families from IRD."*
>
> **IR staff (Tongan)**

Participants believe that information-sharing will suit younger people especially. They see youth as having less fear about having their personal information in the public arena, given that youth are seen to already be using social media in this manner.

Main concerns are privacy and accuracy

The recent cases of privacy breaches by various New Zealand government departments mean that all participants had doubts about government agencies being able to promise information privacy.

Interestingly, IR is seen as currently doing better than most government agencies regarding protection of people's personal information. Therefore, some participants see IR as having a lot to lose if privacy breaches occur through IR increasing its information-sharing.

> *"Inland Revenue is the last of the Mohicans that we can trust."*
>
> **Community representative (Māori)**

A second concern for all participants is that they do not believe the information held by government agencies is always correct. This concern is exacerbated by the prospect of government agencies increasing their information-sharing.

Section 4.   Trust in government

Government information-sharing raises deeper considerations such as trust in government. To create trust, information-sharing needs to be transparent and consent-based.

The preceding section on 'benefits of information-sharing' described how, for some participants, there will always be some trust-related concerns even though the purpose of the information-sharing is highly beneficial to the individual, e.g. 'improved public service'.

Unsurprisingly, these concerns are heightened when the information-sharing is for purposes that have no direct benefit (such as 'compiling statistics') or are negatives according to the individual (such as 'enforcement and compliance').

This section details the trust concerns described by the participants from each cultural group.

Māori concerns

Māori participants talked about information in a way that differed from the other cultural groups. That is, they described information as being a part of themselves.

> *"It's not only personal, it has a lot of weight. It's tapu, it's sacred, it has its own integrity, its own mana. For me it's very sensitive."*

> **IR staff (Māori)**

Flowing on from this perspective, Māori participants expressed a strong view that government agencies do not become owners of information given to them, rather, they are 'caretakers'.

> *"Government may consider it owns that information, but the people who provide that information consider they're sharing their historical family information, their whakapapa their mana. Sharing and allowing it to be cared for and stored by the government of New Zealand."*

> **IR staff (Māori)**

This view of information means that it is important for Māori to be able to trust that their information will be treated with care and used as intended. However, trust between Māori and the government is an ongoing issue in New Zealand.

> *"There's been a hundred years of mistrust. Sometimes it's not so much military activity taking place against you personally, as the fact you've been marginalised socially and economically."*

> **IR staff (Māori)**

> *"Some people also see it as a continuation of colonisation, the fact that the tax agency says you have to be identified via an IRD number, and MSD has its own identifier as well."*

> **IR staff (Māori)**

Arising from these trust concerns, some Māori participants also worry that government agencies will use information-sharing in ways that may seem well-intentioned but are, nevertheless, detrimental and 'disempowering' for Māori. For instance, they feared that information-sharing could lead to 'more negative statistics' about Māori that lack the full social context for these statistics and therefore result in negative outcomes.

> *"Māori are already highly watched and seem to be associated with negative statistics. This could be another process that criminalises Māori."*

Community representative (Māori)

> *"Information can be taken out of context and that becomes the truth."*

Community representative (Māori)

As a result of these trust issues, some Māori participants were not keen to see information-sharing increase. They felt there was 'enough' information-sharing at present.

> *"It [gangs and serious crime] can be stopped now…. government can already share information under the Terrorism Act."*

Community representative (Māori)

Pasifika concerns

Pasifika participants were also rather uncomfortable with information-sharing, and this is seen as strongly due to being generally unfamiliar with the systems and processes of the various government agencies.

> *"They [Samoans] are so frustrated, and I think live in fear because they have no idea of the system."*

Community representative (Samoan)

> *"Tongans come from a culture back in the islands…. the most important thing is to go out and work and get money to pay the bills and feed the family. I don't think they see tax as a priority."*

IR staff (Tongan)

The 'dawn raids' of the 1970s on Samoan illegal immigrants were also mentioned as contributing to this lack of trust.

> *"Culturally it's an insult for Pacific Islanders for Police to turn up at the door and handcuff a person and drag them out of the house and put him on the next plane to the islands…. There are other ways…. We can work it out."*

Community representative (Samoan)

As a result of these issues, immigration is a particularly sensitive trust issue for Pasifika participants.

> *"Trying to convince them to get an IRD number and not use anyone else's IRD numbers [for fruit picking]. I had all these hands up they were like are you sure you're not going to pass on this information to Immigration."*

IR staff (Tongan)

Another concern mentioned by Pasifika participants was the effect information-sharing would have on people on low incomes who supplement their income via illegitimate means. While they generally disagreed with illegitimate income, Pasifika participants in this research felt that there were sometimes more important social considerations.

> *"I know one or two in my church are collecting [scrap metal for hidden economy income]. I understand how important that thing is for him and his family …. they don't really understand what they're doing."*

Community representative (Tongan)

> *"Who's not paying their PAYE is information we don't want to share, which churches aren't complying with IRD."*

Community representative (Samoan)

And finally, one Pasifika participant believed that, as a whole, Pasifika people are less familiar with information technology, which means they are more wary of how it is used by others.

> *"I don't think that Tongans have actually grasped the concept of the internet…. You're talking to a 40-year-old or a 50-year-old who's just been in New Zealand for two years now and were talking to them about 'oh you can go online and you can go onto www.ird.govt and click on the booklet and download it and print it' and they're looking at you thinking what the hell are you talking about."*

IR staff (Tongan)

Asian participants are the keenest

Asian participants were easily the most positive group about the perceived benefits of information-sharing[2]. They were also keen to see information-sharing increase. This positivity seemed partly due to a strong sense of trust in New Zealand government agencies.

> *"New Zealand is one of the most trusted governments in the world. China use any of the information without letting you know, at least New Zealand government tell you."*

Community representative (Chinese)

> *"They [Chinese people] say New Zealand is a developed country and they expect information to be shared among government departments. They are actually happy about it, it's efficient."*

IR staff (Malaysian)

Nevertheless, Asian participants were still keen on having legislation to limit the extent of information-sharing to some degree.

> *"Most governments when they have the power they abuse the power."*

Community representative (Chinese)

And, as with Pasifika, Asian participants stated that there are those from the Asian community that are not at all familiar with New Zealand government agencies and systems.

> *"We've got customers who've been working all their life in New Zealand but still don't have the understanding of how the tax system operates."*

IR staff (Indian)

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[2] This is consistent with the previous study on 'Real Me' that found that Indian/Pakistani and Sri Lankan people were more likely to take up the Identity Verification Service.

Table 1. Trust factors

	Trust concerns	Positive factors
Māori	• Belief that information-sharing at the current level is adequate, and there is no need to increase it • Lack of trust that government agencies would use information-sharing in people's best interest (e.g. the perception is that, in order to save money, government departments could use the information to incorrectly remove people's entitlements) • Government agencies are seen as caretakers of people's information rather than owners	• Kaitakawaenga Māori are seen as creating a direct relationship between Māori and IR
Pasifika	• Past issues regarding how NZ authorities have dealt with illegal immigrants from the Pacific nations have left a strong resistance to interacting with government agencies, particularly if information is going to be passed to Immigration New Zealand • Minimal experience of information technology means it is difficult to relate to the concept of information-sharing to see the benefits	• IR's Community Compliance Officers are seen as enhancing the relationship between IR and the various cultural groups in the community
Asian	• Members of the Asian community who have English as a second language can misinterpret questions, and be misunderstood themselves, making information collection less reliable. Agencies that subsequently receive that information through information-sharing may incorrectly assume the information is accurate.	• Good understanding of information-sharing through experience in other countries where e-based government services and information-sharing are commonplace, particularly in Malaysia and South Korea • Trust NZ government to act in public interest

Table 1 summarises the various trust factors as mentioned by each cultural group in this research. Please note, Table 1 shows the issues that the participants we interviewed felt were related to their own culture. These perceptions are not necessarily widespread throughout these cultural groups, nor are they limited solely to people from the given cultural group.

Importance of cultural matching between customer and staff to gather information

Before any information-sharing takes place, information gathering must happen. Cultural matching between government agency staff and customers is suggested by participants as a means of improving the accuracy of the information gathered. That is, people meeting with people of their own culture, and speaking in their own language. This applies across all three cultural groups in this research.

"There's a degree of comfort for Māori giving that information to Māori….'I'm giving it to you and actually hold you accountable for making sure that it's looked after'."

IR staff (Māori)

Cultural matching also reduces people's fear of revealing they have not understood what's been said, or that they may have 'negative' answers to questions.

> *"They [Samoans] answer in a way that's the likable answer."*
>
> **IR staff (Samoan)**

> *"Whakama which is embarrassment and shame…. they will give you the answer that they think you want to hear but they will go away and say I haven't got a clue what that person said."*
>
> **IR staff (Māori)**

All groups felt that cultural matching improves understanding and builds trust at a subliminal level.

> *"Better to speak to one of their own and understand the issue better perhaps."*
>
> **Community representative (Tongan)**

> *"It helps to relieve the fear."*
>
> **IR staff (Samoan)**

In addition, some participants also noted that simply taking a less direct approach in conversation can be helpful.

> *"Korean, Japanese or Chinese don't like direct questions, do this, do this. They might hold back information. The appropriate approach would be to relax those Koreans who have to speak English, talk about their kids and their kids' education which is big concern for parents, or food, or Gangnam style, which Koreans are very proud of at the moment."*
>
> **IR staff (Korean)**

Importance of transparency and consent

The trust concerns mentioned here are greatly exacerbated by any sense of being coerced into providing information to government agencies, either to avoid prosecution or as a requirement for entitlements.

> *"If you don't give us this information you're not going to get your money or we're going to prosecute you…. That actually undermines their mana, it's a personal insult to them it feels like they're being violated."*
>
> **IR staff (Māori)**

Transparency and consent are two key factors that participants wish to see. In particular, participants suggested having public statements (e.g. online) about the information-sharing protocols, and systems to inform people about when their information was going to be shared.

> *"If it's going to be shared with another department even though it's under the umbrella of the government I think I have a right to know why."*
>
> **Community representative (Samoan)**

> *"Maybe something as simple as a statement on the website that says here's how we handle your information. If you get any concerns please contact us."*
>
> **IR staff (European)**

> *"The treaty principles…. participation, protection and partnership."*

IR staff (Māori)

However, some participants felt that they should be asked for their consent where possible, and particularly for more important matters.

> *"Don't just take it for granted."*

Community representative (Māori)

Section 5. Cultural sensitivities and conventions

Culturally-specific sensitivities and conventions

Participants in this research mentioned a number of culturally-based sensitivities and preferences for how information should be gathered and managed. These are listed in Table 2. Please note, Table 2 shows the topics and conventions that the participants we interviewed felt were important to their own culture.

These perceptions are not necessarily widespread throughout these cultural groups, nor are they limited solely to people from the given cultural group. There may also be other cultural issues that were not mentioned in this research.

Table 2. Culturally sensitive topics and conventions

	Culturally sensitive topics	Cultural conventions
Māori	- Historic records are part of mana - Hand-written information (e.g. can be taonga, particularly something like a deceased relative's handwriting) - Deceased persons' information - Split families'/child care information[3] - Parental/adoption information - Financial information, particularly if a person is financially struggling* - Property ownership - Information that links to other family members	- Naming conventions; - Shortened version of their name - English transliterations
Pasifika	- Split families'/child care information - Financial information, particularly if a person is financially struggling* - Having information requested by Police - Information that links to other family members	- Naming conventions; - Shortened version of their name - Use surname as first name - Use father's name as their name - Use an English name - Use a Noble name from their village - Use parents address - Women are dominant in Tongan culture, e.g. an aunt can take over the care of her brother's children, but this makes getting accurate child care information difficult

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[3] 'Split families/child care' was mentioned by all three cultural groups. It may well be that this is a universally sensitive topic.

	Culturally sensitive topics	Cultural conventions
Asian	❯ Personal definition of a 'dependent child' may include children of older than 18 ❯ Split families'/child care information ❯ Child support details ❯ Income details ❯ Asking direct questions (seems rude) ❯ Repeating questions (seems accusatory)	❯ Names can be given as surname first

*This sensitivity for Māori and Pasifika regarding financial information was also found by Lips *et al*[4].

A key feature in Table 2 is the number of cultural conventions that make it difficult to ensure even the most basic record such as someone's name is correct.

> *"There's times when they've completed a form for me and they've crossed out their [incorrect] name because they're so used to writing that name down…. and I'm like 'um you've written this name but on our records we've got this name' and they're like 'oh that's the name that everyone calls me, that's my name, that's my other name.'"*

> **IR staff (Tongan)**

Information valuable for Māori whakapapa

Māori in this research made a strong plea for more defined information storage and/or transferral protocols, particularly for information that has ceased being usable for government agencies but which is of significance to families and could potentially be lost or destroyed.

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[4] Lips, M, Eppel, E., Cunninghan, A., Hopkins-Burns, V. Public Attitudes to the Sharing of Personal Information in the Course of Online Public Service Provision. (2010)

Section 6.   Conclusions

This study has explored cultural viewpoints that can be used to inform IR's information-sharing policies, processes and communications.

Differences in cultural views

Each participant cultural group views information-sharing through a different lens. For Māori and Pasifika, government information-sharing is clearly less appealing. For instance, Māori participants consider;

- Personal information to be an extension of self and part of mana
- Government agencies may make decisions based on misleading, 'surface-level' information when people's situations are, in reality, more complex.

And Pasifika participants felt that some in their community;

- Do not have a good understanding of New Zealand government agency processes and therefore there is a sense of inequality
- Have little familiarity with information technology, therefore, increased use of technology can make them uneasy
- Feel any dispute with government agencies may threaten their immigration status (where applicable).

Participants from the Asian community seemed more comfortable with increased information-sharing, and;

- Are familiar with information technology and (if born overseas) may have experienced improved efficiencies from government agency information-sharing
- State that some overseas governments have abused the power of information-sharing, but they regard New Zealand government agencies as considerably more trustworthy, and they expect that strict protocols will be put in place.

Sensitive information

Amongst all the information types considered to be sensitive, financial information is problematic for all three participant cultural groups. Therefore, IR's customer information can be considered sensitive as it is gathered for financial/tax purposes.

This is compounded where the situation includes child care and support arrangements which are another highly sensitive matter regardless of cultural group.

We also found considerable concerns regarding information accuracy. For instance, a person may have a number of versions of their name arising from cultural conventions.

However, even though participants expressed a range of deep concerns, it seems that, if these concerns can be mitigated through transparency and customer consent, participants do see the potential for information-sharing to improve government agency efficiency and streamline services for customers.

Next steps

This small-scale exploratory research has provided a range of insights on cultural views of government information-sharing. As specific policies, processes and communications are developed, we recommend that cultural input continues to be included, particularly from Māori and Pasifika customers and stakeholders.

Section 7.   Appendix

Qualitative methodology

Qualitative interviews were carried out with community cultural representatives, IR staff, and members of relevant government agencies. They were conducted from February to April 2013 by a senior researcher and a senior evaluator from IR's National Research & Evaluation Unit.

The interviews we conducted for this study are not intended to fully represent the Māori, Pasifika and Asian cultures. Rather, the aim was to gather a range of informed opinions from people who are experienced in considering cultural perspectives as starting points for discussion.

Composition of the qualitative interviews

Community cultural representative interviews	
Māori	4 participants, Gisborne
Samoan	1 participant, Manukau
Tongan*	1 participant, Manukau
Indian**	2 participants, Manukau
Chinese	2 participants, Manukau

*This community representative held two roles, one with a community based organisation and one with the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs.
**The two participants of Indian ethnicity were IR call centre staff. They were interviewed in place of a community representative interview that was cancelled at short notice.

IR Staff interviews	
Māori*	13 staff from a range of North Island IR offices
Samoan	1 staff person, Manukau
Tongan	1 staff person, Manukau
Indian	1 staff person, Manukau
Korean	1 staff person, Manukau
Malaysian	1 staff person, Manukau
European**	1 staff person, Wellington

*Included a hui of central region Kaitakawaenga Maori.
**Included due to expertise in the area of cultural appropriateness in information handling.

Government agency interviews	
Te Puni Kōkiri	2 representatives, Wellington
Privacy Commission	3 representatives, Wellington
Ethnic Affairs	2 representatives, Wellington
Department of Internal Affairs	2 representatives, Wellington

Section 8.   References

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