



**Ririwai Fox**

**Karahipi Tumuaki Recipient 2021**

Ririwai is a PhD student at Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington. The present article is a summary of his research topic. For his thesis, he has introduced the concept of cultural embeddedness and plans to create a psychometric measurement tool to support quantitative research approaches that are theoretically grounded in indigenous Māori worldviews. Ririwai’s research interests are broadly in Māori cultural identity and its influence on wellbeing outcomes.

**Sense and sensibility: The ‘paradox’ of *being* Māori**

A paradox is where two things which are seemingly contradictory somehow co-exist. However, true paradoxes are rare. Most of the time they are either not truly contradictory or they equivocate on a concept. For example, the statement ‘less is more’ is seemingly contradictory. But what we usually mean by this statement is that things which are less complicated are more valuable. So, in fact, this statement is not paradoxical at all.

Another example of a perceived paradox is the idea that a person can *be* Māori without really *being* Māori. At least this is how Māori identity is sometimes discussed in its extremities. We saw this play out openly in 2018 when the National Party elected Simon Bridges and Paula Bennett as their leaders. The media firestorm that ensued has perpetuated this perceived paradox. On the one hand, both these individuals have whakapapa Māori and therefore have an irrefutable right to *be* Māori. On the other hand, neither of these individuals possess the values or portray the behaviours that are characteristic of *being* Māori. Hence the paradox.

Diffusing this paradox is an important endeavour because the narrative that there is some arbitrary criteria that constitutes being ‘Māori enough’ is unhelpful and doubly marginalising. That is, Māori are already a marginalised group and those Māori people who, through colonisation, have not had access to cultural learning opportunities are further marginalised.

But why do these contradictory narratives exist and persist?

***Sense: Being ‘more’ Māori***

*Sense (noun):*

“A feeling that something is the case”

If I asked you to evaluate who is ‘more Māori’ between Simon Bridges and Rawiri Waititi (Māori Party co-leader), common sense would suggest that Rawiri Waititi wins that one. But people seem to find it difficult to articulate precisely what factors contribute to this evaluation. One of the indicators that people tend to use in evaluating level of ‘Māoriness’ is an ability to speak te reo Māori. This seems like a reasonable approach, given that many Māori cultural practises and protocols such as whaikōrero, karanga, and karakia are expressed in te reo. Māori language fluency is also a readily available proxy to use as a heuristic.

The problem with heuristics is that they cut corners. Clearly there is much more to being Māori than having an ability to speak Māori. Language fluency supports engagement in cultural customs and

practises, however, of equal (or even greater) importance are the values and beliefs that underpin the practises. Unfortunately, there is no easy way to evaluate a person's values or belief systems, which leads to an over-prioritisation of cultural practises, and more specifically, of Māori language fluency.

There is something commonsensical about the concept of 'Māoriness' – especially when comparing Simon with Rawiri. It is especially tempting to fall into the trap of taking fluency in te reo Māori as an indicator of 'Māoriness'. But exactly what level of fluency meets the 'more Māori' threshold? And what happens when the comparison becomes less obvious? For instance, how would you compare Rawiri to his Māori Party co-leader Debbie Ngarewa-Packer? These examples show that, when we explore the idea of 'Māoriness' a little deeper, what made sense at first, quickly becomes nonsense.

Here is where the whakapapa approach to *being* Māori becomes a priority. Evaluating a person's level of 'Māoriness' is nonsense because everyone who has whakapapa Māori is irrefutably Māori. Narratives around degree of 'Māoriness' actually perpetuate colonising worldviews and approaches which have sought to fragment Māori identity, including through discriminating and assimilating policies based on 'blood quantum'.

### ***Sensibility: The painful myth of 'Māori enough'***

*Sensibility (noun):*

*"Awareness of and responsiveness toward something (such as emotion in another)"*

Not only is the 'Māoriness' concept nonsensical, it is also painful. There are many Māori who have, through the process of colonisation, lost access to their culture (including Simon Bridges). There are many who have worked their entire adult lives trying to reclaim their Māori identity, including some who have been on very lengthy journeys to learn te reo Māori. Unfortunately, for some people learning another language in their adult lives is much more difficult. So, suggestions that these individuals are somehow 'less Māori' than those who are privileged to speak their reo cut deep. Not only that, they become marginalised a second time for reasons beyond their control.

Once again, the whakapapa notion of *being* Māori reigns supreme. Having Māori whakapapa means that you are Māori enough, period. That is as true for Simon Bridges as it is for Rawiri Waititi.

### ***Diffusing the paradox: Ways to be Māori***

I started this article by writing about paradoxes. I mentioned that most perceived paradoxes are either not truly contradictory or they equivocate on a concept. In this case, the 'Māoriness' paradox equivocates on the concept of *being*.

I outlined this equivocation in the introductory paragraph, where both Simon Bridges and Paula Bennett had a right to *be* Māori through their whakapapa, but were critiqued for not possessing the values or portraying the behaviours that are characteristically Māori – or in other words, they weren't known for *being* Māori through their actions.

*Being* Māori through one's actions is also debatable. After all, precisely which actions do you evaluate as being Māori actions and which ones are not? Our rangatira in rangahau such as Tā Mason Durie have strongly denounced the idea that there is 'one way' to be Māori. We have always been a collection of peoples. Whānau, hapū, marae, iwi, rohe – each of these groupings have their own whakapapa and characteristics. What is seen as acceptable in one marae or hapū might be completely unacceptable in others. So, in some ways it is impossible to determine what is '*Māori behaviour*'.

But here is where things become worrying for me. If there is no *one* way to be Māori, does each person determine their own way of being Māori? If so, then by this line of reasoning, being Māori could be anything. And something that can be anything is nothing. Or, to put it differently, this individualised notion of identity implies (unintentionally) that there is nothing unique about being Māori. Now, I strongly doubt that anybody intends to argue that this is true. I am simply pointing out that individualistic notions of culture and identity do not provide a line of reasoning that is sound enough to tackle this issue.

#### *A way forward: Cultural Embeddedness*

To summarise, the complex question that we need to ask ourselves is how can we capture *ways of being Māori* without creating arbitrary homogenous criteria or perpetuating the *mamae* of colonisation through the ‘Māori enough’ fallacy?

Working backwards, we might start at identifying the things that make us uniquely and collectively Māori. There is no doubt that, in comparison to other cultures around the world, our cultural practises are unique to us. That includes our language, customs, and traditions. But, as I’ve already mentioned, we tend to over-value experience in cultural customs – when there are other deeper aspects of our culture that we should draw on, such as our value sets and belief systems. Manaakitanga, whanaungatanga, whakapapa, pūrākau, and wairuatanga are just a few examples of these important components of our Māori culture.

It is true that many values have universal properties. For example, the value of manaakitanga is akin to the concept of hospitality. But what makes manaakitanga unique is the way that we enact it through our practises and through the behaviours that we value. Cultural norms and practises are intended to give effect to underlying values and beliefs after all.

Cultural belief systems are also important. They capture the ways that our tūpuna made sense of the world. They also capture cultural worldviews. For instance, Māori belief systems are anchored on the concept of wairuatanga, in which the seen and unseen interact and influence each other. So, cultural beliefs are the eyes of our culture and they shape how the world is seen and interpreted. While it is also true that many Māori people have their own individualised belief systems (including atheism), it is important to remember that these are *cultural* beliefs – that is, they exist as a pool of knowledge that members of the cultural group can draw upon. They provide a shared way of seeing, understanding, and interpreting the world.

I have sought to bring these three facets of culture together into one concept: Cultural embeddedness. My definition of cultural embeddedness is: **the extent to which individuals have utilised opportunities to experience, engage with, and integrate the core values, beliefs, and practises of their culture.**

It is my firm belief that this definition is sensitive to varying levels of cultural learning opportunities and does not perpetuate exclusion criteria. It invites all people to reclaim their culture, where they are able, and identifies values, beliefs, and practises as key. It also recognises those critical aspects of culture that are shared between Māori – those things which make us collectively unique.

The concept of Māori cultural embeddedness can be summarised by the following statement:

***“Whakapapa opens the door to the marae,  
embeddedness is what happens while you’re there”***

*Positionality*

I want to make it clear that I was brought up through the movement of Kōhanga Reo, Kura Kaupapa Māori, and Wharekura. As such, I have not experienced the type of cultural exclusion and double marginalisation that I have outlined throughout this article. I recognise and appreciate the position of privilege that I write from. At times, this position causes me to overlook or under-appreciate the realities and the *mamae* of those who have been blocked from their culture. Make no mistake though, these people are my *whānau* – cousins, aunties, uncles, nannies – all cut off from the place where they should have been able to draw strength. Nonetheless, it is not my reality and I recognise that.

In summary, Māori identity is not a paradox. There is no such thing as *more* (or more importantly *less*) Māori. If you have *whakapapa* Māori, you are Māori enough. There is not one way to be Māori, there are many. But all these *ways of being Māori* should, in my view, be in line with the cultural values, beliefs, and practises that we hold dear. Because Māori *mā*, we are collectively unique. *Ko au ko koe, ko koe ko au, ko tāua, ko tātou*. Together, we are Māori.