

A regular column prepared by the National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues, which aims to inform readers about bicultural issues, and explain their implications for the activities of psychologists, and for the practices and policies of the Society

CONFERENCE BEGINNINGS . . .

Committees organising conferences, in the Psychological Society as elsewhere, face many issues. In addition to finding a venue, gaining sufficient support to be functional, publicising the event and staying sane, they must address the issue of conference themes and/or flavours. One starting point is to ask "How will the conference reflect and be consistent with the Society's goals and the committee's hopes and plans?" When this question is asked the Society's commitment to bicultural practice becomes more apparent and, possibly, more intractable in terms of conference organisation.

To our minds conferences are analogous to a smorgasbord: The hosts arrange a variety of tempting offerings and display them in attractive ways. Participants sample these offerings, enjoying them on their own or sharing them with congenial others who happen to be nearby. In social psychological terms such an event is an aggregation of individuals who achieve their goals independently. To create a conference that is more than just an aggregate, that provides a sense of being members in conference together, has typically depended on the social programme. This dependence is increased by the unconstructive effect of tightly scheduled paper presentations that make it difficult to relate socially with other participants.

Over the years different committees have worked their own magic on this basic model, particularly around conference beginnings and scene-setting. It is within

this context that the question of "What opening ceremony is appropriate?" arises. While we would argue that a commitment to bicultural practice extends beyond an opening ceremony, such a ceremony is often the showcase for this commitment. Aside from this, and more importantly, it is essential to ensuring that Maori participants at conference feel welcome.

With a view to exploring this issue further we offer two examples of effective opening ceremonies that have been undertaken in our recent experience:

□ In 1995 at the Society's Annual Conference the NSCBI took the opportunity to hold a pre-conference workshop at Waipapa Marae at the University of Auckland. This marae is for all peoples who study and work at the University. As part of the coming together of manuhiri (ie. those from outside Auckland University and those who had not been welcomed onto the marae previously) and tangata whenua a powhiri was held before the workshop. This signalled our intention to come together in partnership for the time of this hui to contemplate issues that were of importance to all of us, namely cultural justice and ethics. This common identity allowed the business of the hui to proceed.

□ On Waitangi Day the service at St Matthews in Auckland began with a mihi from Henare Te Ua. He was then joined in a waiata by others who were to officiate in the service. Throughout the service

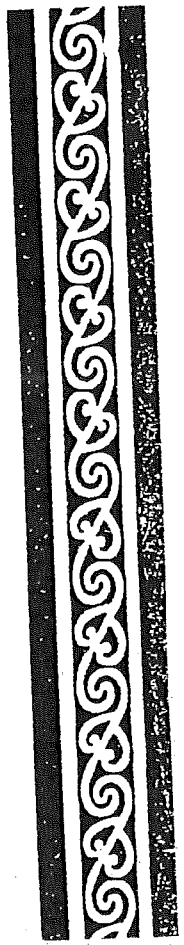
Henare provided continuity; he introduced speakers, marked transitions and informed participants of what was about to happen and how they were to participate. His continuing presence and his active role on the organising committee demonstrated an active partnership between Maori and Pakeha.

When deciding how a conference is to be opened an organising committee needs to consider the relationship between those attending the conference and the tangata whenua into whose area conference participants are entering. This should be discussed with representatives of the tangata whenua and the decision-making worked through collaboratively, in partnership. Conference organisers need to take part in this process by asking themselves what it is they are trying to achieve:

- What do we want to communicate?
 - How do we want Maori/Pakeha participants to experience the conference?
 - What are our aims/vision for the event?
- etc.

In this way tangata whenua know up front what the committee thinks and will therefore be able to make a more informed choice about their role (if they choose to have one).

The NSCBI does not have a right answer for conference organising committees. We would however encourage partnership, flexibility and choice. As a story, a conference opening ceremony is a beginning that should lead to a middle and an end. The 'middle' and 'end' are also issues for conference committees, as well as the Society as a whole in terms of its commitment to both Maori and bicultural development. We must ask ourselves the question of "What now?", now that the beginning is nearing completion. If we do not turn our attention to the middle and end goals then our commitment to biculturalism will appear like a ground-level facade that cannot hide the monocultural monolith rising up from behind it.



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