# A Letter

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Dear friends,

I'm writing to put an idea before you. It is not the stuff of an article - I don't prove anything or give arguments for and against a thesis. I write to you as friends, peers and professionals to ask you to consider these thoughts, many of which were first suggested by people around me.

As some of you know, I trained in social and community psychology, spent years as an alcohol and drug counsellor and now do research, staff training and anti-racism work. I belong to Project Waitangi Tamaki Makaurau, a group of Treaty educators.

I've always held dearly the concepts of justice and fairness, and I take pride in the fact that community psychology is the one branch of psychology that has an explicit value base - namely, "the equitable distribution of society's resources".

One of the tools used to achieve this is empowerment - working with people and groups to enable them to gain mastery over their lives and environments. Having worked on empowering communities, as many of you who are counsellors work on empowering individuals, I now question my motives, my awareness and my analysis.

Empowerment work is like teaching women self defense instead of tackling male violence and male beliefs about supremacy. It helps, but in the end, the victim is still left fighting an aggressor.

**The idea I want to put before you is that we need to study power and depowerment, not empowerment.**

In Treaty work it has been established (mostly through Maori challenges) that Pakeha work with Pakeha, so there we have been brought face to face with the need to depower Pakeha rather than the need to empower Maori.

Karen Kendrick, co-ordinator of Network Waitangi, said she believed that while Maori needed to learn more about Treaty issues, Pakeha needed to learn how to deal with their power and control issues so that they stop blocking Maori initiatives.(1)

The notion of focussing on depowering our present system fits with an emerging awareness among Treaty and anti-racism workers about "kawanatanga" - the "governorship" obligation taken on by the settlers in signing the Treaty of Waitangi. Moana Jackson has verbally challenged Pakeha who say "we support tino rangatiratanga", explaining that we can't support Maori self-determination. Instead we should concentrate on dealing with Pakeha structures and the present outcomes of 150 years of "kawanatanga"(2).

Other Pakeha workers such as Katherine Peet, Network Waitangi, Christchurch and the Network Waitangi AGM in 1991 have also been focussing attention on Pakeha obligation to review kawanatanga, or self-governorship - to "keep our side in order" as one might put it.

In considering other examples of institutionalised oppression - sexism, heterosexism, monoculturalism - there is the same choice - to empower the oppressed, or victim, or to depower the perpetrators and passive supporters of an oppressive system.

The same question arises when reflecting on the outcomes of sexism and sexist structures - are we focussing sufficiently on depowering male supremacy? After all, these are two of our most critical domestic relationships - between women and men, and Maori and settlers.

This is not the simple issue of "how to depower white males" as it may have been conceptualised in the '70s. It is a more complex question of how to shift a whole economic, social and domestic culture.

In her book The Chalice and The Blade, historian and archaeologist Riane Eisler (3)

describes our present culture as a "dominator" one. Her thesis is that dominator systems, characterised by hierarchical organisation and the admiration and use of economic force and physical strength to control others, have come to power in many human societies. The alternative is a "partnership" system, still exemplified by some indigenous peoples and taken up by some contemporary minority communities. Partnership systems are characterised by lateral partnership organisation, or parallel autonomy among social groups, the admiration of nurturing and life affirming behaviours, and a fostering of diversity. Eisler believes that a core feature of partnership models is that men and women must have equal status, and that this in-group, or domestic equality is reflected in relations between groups.

She explains that there is nothing instinctive or intrinsically logical about a domination system. It could even be considered an aberration in human evolution. It is a cultural inheritance, nothing more - and nothing less. As with all culture, it is an extremely powerful inheritance already being learned by another generation by the time each of us is old enough to question it.

By definition, a dominator society does not encourage diversity or autonomy. In fact, it punishes rebels or radicals either directly by, for example, imprisonment, or indirectly by withholding economic resources. A partnership society, in contrast, actually fosters, or at least allows diversity. Domination systems seem to achieve control by being willing to use force to establish themselves, and then by starving out any alternative systems.

Colonization is just such a process - the speculators and settlers who colonized this country had enough belief in white supremacy and "might is right" to justify the cheating, manipulation and injustice done to the indigenous tribes.

But which of us psychologists now believe in white supremacy and that "might is right"? Few of us would say so, and our profession's values and research have taught us otherwise.

So why is this system still in place? Because other people who don't hold our values control it? Because we gain enough advantages from it that these outweigh our desire to change it? Because it feels risky to object? Because we feel powerless to change it, so we go along with it?

These are all things many of us ponder on and struggle with personally, but what about professionally? What does the discipline of psychology have to say about depowering a system based on might?

**I now believe that the work of Pakeha psychologists is to study how to depower a "dominator" society.**

We know virtually nothing as a profession about how power collapses - our belief from history is probably that a hero power from elsewhere beats the tyrant, and saves the world from Nazism or Communism. The questions this raises, such as:

Under what conditions do people voluntarily move to egalitarian power sharing?
Which types of people are most likely to?
Is there any evidence that new knowledge and changed attitude lead to action in power sharing?
What are the effects of power sharing on self-esteem, self-concept, locus of control, etc for people brought up in hierarchical societies?

are extremely basic questions to a psychologist - and yet, on this critical topic, probably crucial to our survival as a species, we know nothing and we are putting no research projects in place.

The only work by psychologists on power that I'm aware of was by Stanley Milgram and colleagues in the 1950s(4). Interest was high after the Second World War in how could people do that to each other? How could the Nazis gas the Jews? How could the engine driver keep driving the trains when he knew the passengers were going to be killed?

When Milgram and his colleagues found that ordinary Americans could do cruel things to others because they were told to, just like the Nazis, his audience was shocked and embarrassed. As far as I'm aware, the whole line of enquiry was subsequently not encouraged in

psychology departments around the world. And yet the issue of power is critical. Not so much why people comply - we have learned about authority, roles, norms and fear of punishment - but how to change such behaviour.

How can an individual resolve the paralysis between seemingly conflicting beliefs, e.g. "I know this exploitation is wrong" and "I feel too small to do anything".

**Psychology has a huge contribution to make to this critical area, situated as it is at the intersection of personal beliefs, actions and social imperatives.**

Our discipline needs to seek answers to such questions as:

Which New Zealanders have made a shift to non-racist atitudes and actions?

What personal and social characteristics does it take?

Which New Zealanders in influential positions have made shifts?

What are the discrepancies between private beliefs about justice and professional actions and assertions?

Under which conditions do people resist commands or norms that ask them to exploit, denigrate or harm someone else?

Indeed, these questions are extremely urgent in Aotearoa/New Zealand today.

We have a phenomenon in the present privatisation of service organisations where professionals who prided themselves on their liberal philosophies about social justice and empowerment of the disadvantaged, have gained positions where they are now complying with management policies and organisational goals that are causing serious social distress. Any of us can find ourselves supporting oppressive structures and most of us are in this situation right now.

How precisely do we rationalise and justify these shifts to ourselves? What does it take to encourage us to act in accordance with past philosophies or principles?

We may not see ourselves as political activists, but we can nevertheless take up these issues as subjects of study, debate, and teaching.

You may not believe that it is a psychologist's role to use professional expertise to work towards social goals, but remember that research alone can give enormous support to a social movement.

The work of Masters and Johnson and Kinsey was a major contribution to the "sexual revolution" of the 60s. So you could do your research on power - and keep your nose clean!

We know from the statistics (and in this discipline we believe statistics!) that the relationship between Maori and settlers is unequal. Most of us agree it's not right. Maori are focussing on empowering themselves. Our task and subject of study is depowerment.

So, as a profession, let's get moving!

All the best in your efforts,
Keep in touch,

**Ingrid Huygens**

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**REFERENCES**

1. Karen Kendrick, p3, The Networking, Aug, 1992.

2. Personal communication, Moana Jackson speaking at Anti-racism Workers Gathering, Waikanae, April 1992.

3. Riane Eisler (1990). The Chalice and the Blade: Our History, Our Future. Unwin Paperbacks.

4. Stanley Milgram (1974). Obedience to Authority, London: Tavistock.