

## Different Coloured Tears: Bicultural Bereavement- A study

Kiri Edge

Māori and Psychology Research Unit, The University of Waikato



Kiri Edge is of Ngati Maniapoto and Scottish descent. She is mother to Matai (5) and is a doctoral candidate and student of the community psychology programme in the School of Psychology at the University of Waikato. Her current research focuses on bicultural processes surrounding Tangihanga.

Although whānau/families that are configured by both Māori and Pākehā identities number significantly in New Zealand/Aotearoa, there has been little scholarly attention paid to the ways in which these identities influence bereavement processes that will impact on the lives of bicultural whānau/families. As part of the Tangi Research Programme, based at the University of Waikato, a doctoral study is currently exploring the pathways that Māori and Pākehā bicultural whānau establish in mourning, grieving and moving on through life. Of specific interest are the processes of negotiation, conflict and resolution that occur across these cultural worlds whilst deciding on, organising and enacting

funeral/tangi rituals for a significant loved one. The intent of the research is to contribute understandings that inform processes, policy and practice to support bicultural whānau through bereavement and beyond.

The grief that accompanies the death of a significant loved one is experienced by people all around the world; it is a human experience. The death of a loved friend, family member or significant other is a major, critical event which causes profound and lasting disruption for those left behind (Valentine 2006). Despite the universality of death, it does not necessarily provoke the same responses and accompanying expressions across both individuals and cultures (Stroebe, Gergen et al. 1992; Hayslip and Peveto 2005). Some research within this area has conceptualised grief as a social construction, the differences within which are relative to the differences across societies or cultures (Laurie and Neimeyer 2008). Death and bereavement do not occur in a vacuum, but are located within specific societal and cultural contexts (Tedeschi and Calhoun 2008). Culture is particularly influential, as it informs the meanings that are assigned to death and provides a guide for what constitutes an appropriate response to such critical events (Hayslip and Peveto 2005). The interaction between death, grief and culture has drawn some attention internationally, but has been relatively unexplored in the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand (Nikora and Te Awakotuku 2013).

The current study is concerned with what occurs when different cultural identities are located in one

bereavement event. Increased mobility in the modern age has and continues to bring different cultures into contact. Through the history of New Zealand/Aotearoa, we see how such engagements have shaped the cultural face of a country. Inter-marriage between Māori, the indigenous peoples of New Zealand/Aotearoa, and people of other ethnicities has been on-going since the first vessels of exploration and trade encountered these isles in the 18th century (Harré 1966). The traders and explorers brought new economic potentialities of considerable interest to Māori, yet relations between Māori and Pākehā were far from congenial (Walker 1990). The colonisation of New Zealand/Aotearoa injected foreign values, systems and authority into New Zealand/Aotearoa, systematically undermining those of the Māori peoples (Spoonley 1993). Māori suffered significant economic, social and cultural costs as a direct result of colonisation and assimilation, the effects of which are pervasive and on-going (Durie 2005). Following World War II, large numbers of Māori moved to urban centres, leaving their traditional lands and communal based societies (Durie 1989). The urban shift provided opportunities for Māori and Pākehā to meet in ways not previously experienced (Durie 2005). Inter-group tensions and conflicts were apparent, influenced by cultural differences but also the broader socio-political structures that afforded preferential status, authority and opportunities for Pākehā (Walker 1990; King 2003).

Despite cross-cultural tensions, contact between Māori and Pākehā resulted in the formation of intimate

relationships for some. Māori and Pākehā intermarriage has remained an enduring feature of the New Zealand/Aotearoa population landscape. As the 2006 census noted 42% (or approximately 237,438) of Māori also identify with British/European ethnic groups (Statistics New Zealand 2007). Within bicultural whānau/families, different life ways have been explored and negotiated bringing new meaning to daily life and the living through of relationships, that is, intimate relationships, familial relationships, and those that extend into work, recreation and friendship networks as well as whānau, hapū, marae and iwi networks.

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Research amongst the progeny of Māori and Pākehā intermarriage indicates that for some, their values and perceptions are impacted by two cultural identities that do not always sit comfortably together (Moeke-Maxwell 2003). Although dated, Harré's (1966) study of Māori and Pākehā intercultural relationships provides an insightful analysis of these unions. The participants in Harré's study noted a range of cultural differences they encountered. Obvious differences included language and food preferences. Less tangible but equally important differences related to Māori traditional values surrounding kinship solidarity and obligations, particularly evident in Māori responses to, and the ritualization of death.

Inevitably, death intrudes upon and disrupts life, love, and relationships, those left behind may call upon culturally embedded systems of knowledge in the search for meaning and order. Although each individual

tangi or funeral will be unique and complex, stepping back from the detail of specific accounts enables general patterns to form. Dansey (1995) picks up on these patterns really well and describes some of the distinct ways in which Māori and Pākehā respond to death and grief. The Māori world answers the rupturing and disruption caused by death through the process of tangi, described by Nikora and Te Awekotuku (2013) as "...the complex of culturally defined mourning practices and rituals through which Māori respond to death" (p.170). Tangihanga is the traditional Māori process whereby whānau community come together to grieve the death of a loved one. Similarly, Sinclair (1990) notes that tangi are a vehicle through which unity, interpersonal relationships and connectedness are displayed and enacted. Despite colonisation, criticism and opposition for over a century (Dansey 1995); tangi has been a persistent institution and one that has undoubtedly contributed to mourning processes in the Pākehā world (Nikora and Te Awekotuku 2013).

There is a relative scarcity of literature that specifically examines bereavement processes in the Pākehā world. Although predominantly of British or European descent, as immigrants to New Zealand/Aotearoa, Pākehā brought with them a range of ethnic, cultural and religious backgrounds. Such diversity creates difficulties in ascertaining specific responses to death within Pākehā culture. Schwass's (2005) compilation of approaches to death in New Zealand/Aotearoa is indicative of this point, being devoid of any specific commentary on Pākehā responses to death. Hera (1996) provides further explanation, noting that industrialization has eradicated traditional knowledge surrounding death in Pākehā culture, creating

a gap which has been filled by the funeral industry. Schafer (2007) asserts the legitimate role of the funeral industry within Pākehā death rituals, congratulating their continued effects towards personalisation of services, professionalism and promoting a social construction of grief that is both innate and natural. However, the engagement between funerary professionals and bereavement is of a commercial and financial nature, regardless of the level of care or breadth of services offered.

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Although differences between Māori and Pākehā bereavement pathways can be discussed generally, for bicultural whānau/families, these are experienced in a more immediate and personal sense. Within bicultural bereavement events, distinct cultural worlds may come to the fore within the critical processes that accompany death. Theoretically, bicultural whānau/families may enjoy the resources of two cultural communities which afford choices of rituals from two cultural worlds. However, the potential for misunderstanding, tension and conflict cannot be ignored. Cultural differences may overlay complexity upon an already difficult and emotive time. With such aspects in mind, the current study is critically focussed upon processes of negotiation, conflict and resolution that potentially manifest in Māori and Pākehā bicultural bereavement events.

The understandings of conflict and its potential resolution have largely been dominated by western conceptual frameworks (Groepel-Klein, Germelmann et al. 2010). Within these frameworks, cultural difference

is constructed as an inevitable cause of conflict, rather than a potential resource (Brigg and Bleiker 2011).

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Furthermore, such models of resolution favour an individualized, predictable and linear process that excludes emotion, relationships, social ties and spiritual or ritual dimensions (Demoulin and de Dreu 2010; Brigg and Bleiker 2011). The cultural specificity of such models limits their ability to understand and address conflict stemming from cultural difference (Groepel-Klein, Germelmann et al. 2010). These points have important implications for the current topic of interest. To be of benefit to bicultural whānau, conflict resolution processes must have the capacity to address cultural difference. Such strategies must also be cognizant of the ways in which conflict is understood and remedied within Māori and Pākehā cultures respectively. These dimensions are foundational to the topic of interest.

While many death rituals for a loved one are relatively private and well-negotiated affairs, sometimes conflict does arise. High profile cases of conflict have been thrust into the public arena by the media, notably that of Billy T James (The Evening Post 1997), and more recently, James Takamore (NZPA 2008). The media is a powerful transmitter of information; the dissemination of which may privilege the views of some whilst ignoring others, shaping what information is conveyed to its readers (Pietkaninen 2003). In a cursory examination of media reporting of bicultural bereavement conflict, some fail to present a balanced outline of the issues and

perspectives involved. Indeed, some reports are illustrative of culturally divisive and sensationalistic reporting. This warrants further examination, particularly in relation to underlying socio-cultural processes, relationships and the social positioning of certain groups (Loto, Hodgetts et al. 2006). Such media portrayals limit public understandings of these situations, and impact negatively on whānau/family members directly involved. In one such case, a family member laid a formal allegation of defamation against a national newspaper, for labelling the complainant as the “body-snatching uncle” (The Evening Post 1997).

Investigating the experiences and perspectives of this cohort will expand the range of perspectives and generate a multi-level understanding of issues and processes that manifest for Māori and Pākehā bicultural whānau/families through bereavement processes.

The current study will be conducted across two research phases. The first phase has explored and documented the bereavement experiences of five individuals from four different Māori and Pākehā bicultural whānau. In each instance, individuals in expert and/or professional roles were indicated variously as supportive or prohibitive factors. As such, the body of knowledge from the personal case studies gives rise to an examination of expert and/or professional perspectives from those who engage in bicultural tangi/funeral processes. Accordingly, the second research phase seeks to explore the perspectives of expert and/or professionals who facilitate, mediate and/or enact bicultural bereavement processes. Marae representatives, ritual experts, funeral directors, religious ministers, and in some cases, coroners, assume important roles in mediating bereavement processes. Investigating the experiences and perspectives of this cohort will expand the range of perspectives and generate a multi-level understanding of issues and processes

that manifest for Māori and Pākehā bicultural whānau/families through bereavement processes. Specifically, this line of enquiry seeks to identify issues relating to constraints, resources, and legalities from a range of individual and institutional viewpoints. Through the analysis of media portrayals, consideration will also be given to the broader socio-cultural and political contexts in which bicultural bereavement processes are situated.

Media coverage of bicultural bereavement conflict has called for legislative amendment to address

the issues. However, caution must be applied as further research is required to inform and support any legislative changes. With the limited understandings that are currently available, there is a clear need for further research to be conducted on bicultural bereavement processes and the issues that arise for Māori and Pākehā bicultural whānau.

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