

# Bicultural Issues

*The National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues provides regular commentary on bicultural issues. It aims to explain their implications for the activities of psychologists, and for the practices and policies of the Society.*

NSCBI Publications Facilitator: Ray

## Reflections on Pakeha Identity

A follow-up process to the settler caucus at the  
6<sup>th</sup> Australia-Aotearoa/New Zealand Community Psychology  
Conference in Hamilton in 1998 <sup>1</sup>.

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What do you feel, as a descendant of white settlers in a colony, when indigenous people express their anger at your role in colonisation?

During the 1998 Australia-Aotearoa/New Zealand community psychology conference a group of Pakeha community psychologists acknowledged that our primary response to indigenous anger was grief about our Pakeha identity. Ten of us spent the following six weeks exploring how our cultural identity was shaped during our lifetimes in Aotearoa New Zealand. We hope that our halting steps of exploration will inspire further journeys of reflection on coloniser identities, and how these can be turned toward non-racist relationships with indigenous peoples.

### Background

During the settler caucus (for all non-indigenous participants) at the 1998 Australia-Aotearoa/New Zealand Community Psychology conference, a small group had identified that their main response to indigenous anger was grief, coupled with guilt. Discussion revealed that the sources of these feelings were our questions about our identity as Pakeha (non-indigenous) members of New Zealand society. We decided to meet after the conference to explore these issues of grief, responsibility and identity. We wanted to take some practical steps to share tentative beginnings of decolonisation work with other non-indigenous psychologists.

### Group and process

In August 1998, an invitation was sent to all non-indigenous participants who had attended the

conference to join a discussion group in Hamilton, New Zealand, to explore Pakeha identity. Seven to ten participants attended six meetings with shared lunch in the home of one of the participants (Rose). Community psychology staff, students and practitioners were represented from Auckland, Tauranga and Hamilton. All members except one came from families with more than one generation of settler history in Aotearoa New Zealand. One member was a New Zealand born child of Dutch immigrants.

We agreed that we would set a topic to think about each week, but would be open to any other reflections on the general theme of Pakeha identity as they arose for individuals. Two of the group members (Ingrid and Rose) recorded the discussion from memory in the fifth week. The authors presented the material as a poster at the 2002 Trans-Tasman Community Psychology conference in Perth, including an update of current reflections by the authors.

### Our explorations

Even though we chose topics for the week ahead, an unexpected process emerged – we found ourselves sharing experiences initially from our childhoods, then our teenage years and finally our adult lives. As we looked back over our discussions, there was a sense of unfolding layers of identity throughout our life spans. The core seemed to be our early experiences of family and childhood. From there we moved to stories of school days, family life and interactions with community and church. Then we talked about leaving our home bases, and finding our way in the world. For many of us it was not until we travelled overseas or moved into adult status in our families that we began to reflect on what it meant to be Pakeha and the questions this raised about our place and role in Aotearoa New Zealand. Our discussions finished at the point of reflecting on our Pakeha identity and considering questions of

responsibilities and actions. We considered the question "where to from here?" for how a coloniser group can reflect on their cultural identity. We closed with our desire to claim being Pakeha as a definite (and, in time, positive) identity.

In keeping with the lifespan pattern which emerged as we discussed identity, we have created relevant headings for the record of each meeting. The first part of each heading indicates our previously agreed topic, while the second part describes the discussion which emerged.

**MEETING 1: Individualism versus collectivism - our early childhood learnings.**

Intending to discuss Pakeha values, we found ourselves speaking about our early childhoods, and the values our families displayed or taught in dealing with difference. Many participants described how they had felt different within their families, which we saw as a way that Pakeha families teach individualism. There was also the experience that the whole family had been seen as different (as immigrants). In this situation there was a strong sense of collectivism within the family and the minority culture, with less emphasis on individualism.

**MEETING 2: Our first awareness of 'culture' or 'group identities' - moving outside the family to schools, neighbourhoods and communities.**

Most of us spoke of early school days or experiences in our neighbourhoods, with church groups, immigrant communities, gender-favoured activities, and so on. For all of us it was at this stage that we began to notice some aspects of social groupings. However, gender, social class and religion were more prominent than culture or ethnicity for all except the child of immigrants. For some, there were the early signs that we might be considered 'bright' and educable; for others, early signs that we would be given second chance access to resources, especially as girls. We each had stories of how we learned about these group identities and assignments, and how these have

shaped our personalities and life directions. For several of us, it was at this point that we came into contact with Maori people. The child of Dutch migrants noticed the prejudice against both Maori and Dutch people in her rural area.

At this age, a number of us vividly remembered playing a game as children called "bullrush". The game of bullrush involved running across a space and trying to get to the other side without being caught by a line of catchers. We remembered it as both thrilling and frightening. For the girls, this game had some risks - there was always the danger of being tackled and caught very roughly, which often resulted in the boys handling our bodies, seeing our underwear, and suchlike. One person recalled that this was one of the few games she had played physically with boys.

**MEETING 3: How did we learn that we were not Maori? Being teenagers, leaving home.**

As we considered this topic, most of us talked about our first years away from home, in our late teens or early 20's. For many of us going to university and participating in social action brought us face to face with the fact that we were white and had access to more privilege and opportunities than Maori because of this. We were also seeing for the first time the societal structure in Aotearoa, and the place of Maori in that society. Those of us with Maori members of the extended family spoke of our learnings about family dynamics in these situations.

**MEETING 4: What does it mean to be Pakeha? Being adults, leaving Aotearoa/New Zealand.**

By now, most of us were talking about our present identity, shaped in a complex way through realising how New Zealand's social structures worked, and our efforts to create a comfortable (or uncomfortable!) place within it. Some of us were made aware of ourselves as uniquely colonial (non-indigenous) New Zealanders when overseas. An experience shared by several members was the strong emotion, sometimes tears, sometimes

joy, felt at meeting a Maori person overseas and realising that we had a relationship with them as Maori, whether we knew them personally or not. A similar experience was finding ourselves presenting or teaching waiata or haka when asked to share New Zealand culture. It was at this moment that we became aware of the vacuum of specifically Pakeha forms of entertainment, for example, stories, poems, songs and dances.

Others spoke of the racially mixed networks that had developed around their siblings, children and in-laws as a key factor in presenting to them their identity as uniquely related to Maori in this country. Others again found that their social awareness was at odds with bigoted families, and that this highlighted to them their own progress towards an identity built on non-racist ideals for Aotearoa.

**MEETING 5: Action steps**

It was difficult to develop clear action steps around issues of Pakeha identity, and instead the group discussed current issues concerning the kaupapa Maori position in the Psychology Department - about the community psychology programme, the department and institutional constraints. At this point, we agreed to write down reflections on our group discussion (but only two people did), and to reconvene to finalise our next steps.

**MEETING 6: Reflections about Pakeha identity**

We discussed our overall reflections about Pakeha identity, and our difficulty with acknowledging that we share an identity. The discussion ranged around present realities and experiences and the need to locate current understandings of cultural identity in historical perspectives. We asked questions such as:

- Who have been the colonisers?
- What is the role of violence in colonisation in the past and today?
- What bits of Pakeha identity do we accept or choose to take on board?

We considered how identities can be stereotyped and used in judgmental ways. This led on to conceding that stereotypes are nevertheless summaries



of reality (minus the moral judgements) and that 'not owning our own group stereotype' was probably a privilege known only to members of a dominant group. Members of a non-dominant group generally have no choice but to own all ascribed aspects of their identity. It was suggested that up to 80% of our Pakeha identity might consist of commonalities that we could not see, due to our 'cultural blindness' as members of a culture-defining group (see Tyler, 1992).

So we explored what might be the commonalities of Pakeha identity across individuals, or in other words the common aspects of Pakeha culture, and came up with Individualism! Back where we had started 6 weeks ago! Brilliant - we decided we must be on the right track. But we agreed it was important not to see individualism as necessarily a bad thing, so we had a burst of creative thought on how our present habits of thinking were formed about status, position and possessions, as well as patriarchal hierarchies, power and control. We came up with:

- Duality and dualism, and the notion that someone must always win in a dyad or dialogue, something must always be right, or there must be a certain solution. We contrasted this with the older notions of holism, triangularity and cyclic positions in life and thought, and the certainty of eternal change from old European cultures and spiritualities.
- Scientific thought vs. spiritual forms of knowledge, and the historical process whereby the spiritual was downgraded in European culture.
- Finally, we discussed the role of Christianity and later the Renaissance and Reformation in suppressing these habits of thinking.

### Reflections - Looking back four years later

When the authors met four years later to prepare our poster, we became aware that our reflections had been ongoing since those meetings. We enjoyed some stimulating further discussions and decided to record our present reflections

below. We have also provided references to further personal writing about exploring Pakeha identity and culture.

#### Heather

For me, the process of reflecting on my identity as a Pakeha New Zealander began in early adulthood and is ongoing. The series of meetings described above has been an important part of that ongoing process.

A big issue for me has been the lack of "belongingness" I feel when in groups of Pakeha. Some of this no doubt comes from a reluctance to accept a dominant group identity, and resistance to being stereotyped. Learning more about my place within my own family has helped me to deal with my feelings of grief, and some of the feeling of not belonging. This learning has included actively seeking information from family members about family stories, learning more about my family tree and visiting several places in Scotland where my family had lived before emigrating to New Zealand.

This was the first group of Pakeha people in which I felt entirely comfortable talking about Pakeha identity and owning that I am Pakeha. As I have continued to struggle with what it means to be a Pakeha New Zealander in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, I have been constantly reminded of the privilege associated with being white, as this privilege is often invisible to me. I have considered this alongside of my concern about the ways in which I have been at times disadvantaged as a girl. The stories told in the group, for example the discussion about the bullrush game, described experiences of disadvantage. I think that we were learning about the restrictions that came from being girls at the same time as we were blind to privileges we had from being white. I remember thinking at the time we were meeting how many of the group's stories included both privilege and oppression, and how important our various social contexts and particular experiences were in shaping our ideas about ourselves and others.

My process of developing a Pakeha

identity continues. My motivation to engage in continued social action to eliminate racism and support Maori initiatives towards self determination comes from a strong sense of the importance of social justice. I believe that a "positive" Pakeha identity will only be possible when such goals have been achieved, and when we are able to "own" and make visible our common Pakeha culture.

#### Ingrid

As a child of immigrants, I reflected that our community was marginalised by English-speaking white New Zealanders and that we were not in the cultural "in" group. I remember learning to present myself as strong and outgoing to avoid being isolated or victimised. It was very sad for me to hear during our discussions that some of the in-group members had felt isolated and as though they didn't belong. I wonder now whether the games of bullrush at my rural primary school were teaching all of us about fear, violence and victimisation. Reflecting upon isolation within Pakeha families, together with prejudice towards difference and these games of fear and violence, I now believe that as well as teaching individualism Pakeha culture also teaches victimisation. So our grief about our identity may stem from quite personal memories of being isolated, marginalised or victimised within or by Pakeha culture.

In relation to our feelings of guilt and responsibility, I wonder whether we take steps (consciously or unconsciously) in our teenage years to move away from isolating, marginalising or victimising aspects of our lives, and choose new social settings. Continuing into our adult lives, we try to move on by creating a life, a family and a community to which we are happy to belong. However, our problem is that as Pakeha (with values of individual responsibility and autonomy) we view this as a personal task rather than a collective one. The Pakeha focus on individual responsibility masks the collective responsibility for cultural learning. We are blind to the pervasive



cultural elements that continue through generations. We do not see that our personal experiences of isolation, marginalisation or victimisation indicate a need for cultural change. When we receive responses such as anger from indigenous people, we have a sense of helpless guilt and bewilderment about who, how and what to change.

For me, the process of reflecting together on our identity and cultural values has been a groping step in a collective task of beginning to name, claim as our own and change those aspects of our colonial culture which continue to dispossess indigenous peoples.

### Rose

As I look back on the experience of coming together over six weeks, probably in the manner of the consciousness raising groups of the 1970's and 80's, to explore and share our understandings of "Being Pakeha" I realise that the time we spent together did shift some of the burden of both individual and collective guilt that I carry.

Another aspect of the group process was the growing awareness of a shared identity – we did have things in common! This sense of shared identity flies in the face of a strong feeling experienced by myself and many other Pakeha of having no sense of belonging to a cultural group, or at times any group or even family. We relocate in order to 'exonerate' ourselves from our own groups – we leave home and family to leave behind the responsibility for change together with our group. We refer to this process as gaining independence and autonomy.

We also consider indigenous people separately from their group and hold them temporarily in our group while they are useful to us. I acknowledge that these ideas are entirely contradictory, because I know full well that, for example, Maori certainly see us a unified cultural group, drawing on an enormous body of shared assumptions, norms, processes, etc. We are in the habit of naming who is *not* in our group, but leave unnamed who the

members of the group are – they are just there, part of the invisible fabric of the society we have created.

The challenge is to be able to value and honour the relationships, based on justice and equity, we have with tangata whenua (people of this land) and to name ourselves as Pakeha so that we can take part in singing the songs and telling the stories of this land along with those our forebears have brought from their places of origin.

### Tentative Conclusions from a work in progress

There were commonalities in the process of bringing to awareness our identity as white settlers in a colonised land. We now present those commonalities as the following tentative themes:

- Our childhood experiences in our families have a major influence on what we are able to see about society.
- Our personal experiences of marginalisation and discrimination (e.g. as girls or as immigrants) create various pathways to awareness of our culture and social structures.
- Going into 'society', and overseas can create definite shifts in awareness of our cultural identity.
- We may not see our culture until we are away from it – by moving outside the home or outside the country. Alternatively, we may not see our Pakeha cultural identity until there are Maori members in our families, work or social circles.
- Trying to bring our culture up to consciousness, we learned .....

IT WAS VERY HARD WORK,  
LIKE PULLING TEETH.  
WE REALLY STRUGGLED,  
WE FELT THAT WE WERE  
SWIMMING UNDERWATER  
AT NIGHT.

IT IS INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT  
FOR US AS PAKEHA  
TO 'SEE' OR 'FEEL'  
OUR CULTURE AT ALL.

Nevertheless, we believe that continuing to work on describing our non-indigenous identities and naming

our culture is an important task. We are also convinced that it is a legitimate task within an agenda for social justice. Each of us, in the intervening years, has experienced requests from Maori to describe our culture and name our identity, and have understood that these are important contributions to a more just relationship with them as indigenous peoples.

So we encourage other psychologists in colonial settings to explore questions of culture and identity in a context of acknowledging the injustice of suppressing indigenous cultures and world views.

### Further reading

- Black, R. (1997). *Beyond the pale: an exploration of Pakeha cultural awareness*. Unpublished Master's Thesis, Psychology Department, University of Waikato, Hamilton
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- Huygens, I. (2000). Feminist Power Sharing: Lessons for Community Psychology. In A. Mulvey, M. Terenzio, J. Hill, M. Bond, I. Huygens, H.R. Hamerton, and S. Cahill (Eds). *Stories of Relative Privilege: Power and Social Change in Feminist Community Psychology*. *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 28(6), pp. 883-911.
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### Note

1. An early version of this paper was presented as a poster at the 8th Trans-Tasman Community Psychology Conference in Perth, June, 2002, with Chris Ansley as co-author.

