

## The Complexity of Developing a Global Definition of Competency

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## Abstract

In July, 2013 representatives of professional psychology organisations attended the International Congress on Licensure, Certification and Credentialing in Psychology in Stockholm, Sweden. The goal of the Congress was to work together to develop “a global agreement on identifying the benchmark competencies that define professional psychology”<sup>1</sup>. The National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues (NSCBI) sent two representatives to ensure that the voices and experiences of indigenous peoples were included in the process of developing benchmark competencies. In keeping with the principles of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, NSCBI considered it important to contribute to the benchmark competencies and definition of competence as the outcomes of the Congress will have ramifications for minority groups and indigenous peoples. This paper will describe the outcome of the Congress and the feedback by participants at the annual New Zealand Psychological Society conference held in September 2013. A common theme from the Congress was that standards of competency were variously defined and considerably more work was needed particularly in relation to the importance of culture and research. Back in Aotearoa, attendees at the psychology conference, unanimously endorsed the importance of the need to be explicit about culture in relation to the self and to the other.

## Introduction

The intention of this paper is to promote the the importance of including indigenous peoples

<sup>1</sup> All quoted sections directly referring to the Congress have been taken from the following website and associated links: <http://www.asppb.net/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageID=3602>

in discussions nationally and internationally about how psychology is regulated, accredited and practiced. Indigenous peoples throughout the world recognise that there are many different systems of knowledge and patterns of learning and behaviour that are not generally incorporated in or valued by some of the more recent development of Western psychology. Mason Durie (2001), for example, advocated for the need for inclusion of both te ao Māori and Western world views of human behaviour and understanding if health services, including psychology, in New Zealand was going to provide effective service to Māori clients.

The experience of NSCBI is that despite the intention to incorporate meaningful indigenous, Māori world views and perspectives into psychology, the profession is deeply attached to Western models of education, research and practice. A prevalent feature of psychology is to present Western science and knowledge in detail, as the ex-nominated or un-named normal cultural position, while consigning ‘other’ cultural scientific knowledge to the add-on position (Black & Huygens, 2007; McCreanor, 2005). Positioning cultural knowledge as an add-on preserves the view that Western psychological competence is more important than cultural competence, and that discussion about culture only occurs when the non-dominant culture is present. Western cultural underpinnings of psychology are usually left as invisible, normal and taken for granted (Macfarlane, 2012; Macfarlane, Blampied & Macfarlane, 2011; Waitoki, 2012). The lack of recognition of the culturally specific nature of Western psychological knowledge leads to indigenous views being overlooked and the continued privileging of one worldview over another (Nairn, Pehi, Black &

Waitoki, 2012; Nikora, 2007).

This paper follows on from an initial report published in *Connections* (Waitoki & Black, August, 2013). Since that report we have had the opportunity to discuss the goals of the Congress with delegates at the 2013 conference. NSCBI also felt that it would be useful, for historical purposes, to chart the progress of their involvement with the Congress. To recap, in April 2013, a call was sent to representatives of professional psychology organisations to attend the 5th International Congress on Licensure, Certification and Credentialing in Psychology (ICLCCP), to be held in Stockholm, Sweden in July. The goal of the Congress was to work together to develop “a global agreement on identifying the benchmark competencies that define professional psychology”.

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The theme developed by the Congress organising committee as they prepared for the 5th ICLCCP was *competence as a common language for professional identity and international recognition*. Earlier congress had fostered an appreciation of the global diversity in the ways that psychologists are educated and trained, and the impact of local and political contexts in which professional regulatory structures currently exist (5th ICLCCP Organising Committee, 2012).

## The local and political context in Aotearoa

Aotearoa/New Zealand has a unique and increasingly diverse cultural and ethnic population mix, that includes a resilient Māori (indigenous) presence in the face of nearly two centuries

of colonisation. Over that time, Māori and non-Māori have been actively addressing the deleterious psychological effects of colonisation through active engagement with psychological organisations, regulatory authorities, health providers and tertiary providers. However Māori continue to experience health disparities based on our status as indigenous (Anaya, 2004) colonised people (Nikora, Levy, Masters-Awatere & Waitoki, 2004) and the privileged status of Western psychology. The

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status of Māori as an indigenous, colonised people provides a necessary backdrop to any consideration of competence and what that means in our local context.

The importance of the cultural meaning of words cannot be overlooked. Western psychology is a privileged, professional discipline and is regarded as a desirable profession. However, not all peoples hold that status to be true. Western psychology and globalisation translates to assimilation and genocide in the experience of many indigenous peoples. Catherine Love, a highly regarded indigenous psychology academic argued,

*The imposition of a body of Western cultural practice, known as professional psychology, no matter how polite, sensitive or competent the imposition, is ultimately destructive and genocidal in its effect on indigenous peoples (Love, 2002, p. 15).*

The processes of legitimising and validating psychological practice, in this instance to produce a global

framework to enhance psychological practice as it applies to all peoples, runs the very serious risk of perpetuating the current status of psychology for Māori in Aotearoa/ New Zealand; which is to say “the profession of psychology as it currently stands has not managed to garner the trust or respect of many Māori” (Milne, 2005, p. 31). It is the view of NSCBI that the definition of competence and the criteria for assessing competent practice needs to incorporate multiple indigenous realities.

Culturally competent psychologists are needed to ensure the best outcomes for service users who are predominantly Māori. A particular concern is the low number of Māori psychologists compared to non-Māori. In the most recent 2009-10 workforce survey, of the 1225 registered psychologists who indicated active practice, only 65 were Māori; a figure that is in sharp contrast to the overrepresentation of Māori as service users (Cooper, Rickard, & Waitoki, 2011; New Zealand Health Information Service, 2009). Until the mechanisms for improving those figures are implemented (Levy, 2002) Māori as individuals and whānau are more likely to be assessed and treated by psychologists who have varied understandings of competence.

Te Tiriti o Waitangi/Treaty of Waitangi (Te Tiriti) provides a foundation for the Society and its members to extend and develop its commitment to address inequities that Māori experience (Durie, 2001; Baxter, 2008). Further guidance is found in the *Code of Ethics* (New Zealand Psychological Society, 2002) which specifies that Te Tiriti should be given expression through psychological practice. For example, Principle 2 of the Code: Responsible Caring, specifically identifies the need for psychologists to actively address issues

relating to social and institutional power. Principle 4: Social Justice and Responsibility to Society, requires psychologists to critically evaluate psychology and act to change practices that detract from beneficial societal changes.

The *Code of Ethics* and Te Tiriti provide guidelines on local social justice imperatives, however consideration must also be given to existing global standards. As such NSCBI is guided by the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2008) which sets out a universal framework for minimum standards for the survival, dignity, well-being and rights of the world's indigenous peoples. The Declaration promotes the full and effective participation of indigenous peoples in all matters that concern them. It also affirms their right to remain distinct and to pursue their priorities in economic, social and cultural development<sup>2</sup>.

The description of the Declaration provided by the Human Rights Commission complements our position that it is essential to include indigenous perspectives in all aspects of psychology. In 1986, the Special Rapporteur in his report on discrimination against indigenous peoples stated:

*Indigenous peoples, communities and nations are those which, having a historical continuity with pre-invasion and post-colonial societies that developed on their territories, consider themselves distinct from other sectors of societies now prevailing*

<sup>2</sup> This description is taken from Te Kāhui Tika Tangata/ Human Rights Commission: <http://www.hrc.co.nz/human-rights-and-the-treaty-of-waitangi/united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples>

*in those territories or part of them. They form at present non-dominant sectors of society and are determined to preserve, develop and transmit to future generations their ancestral territories, and their ethnic identity, as the basis of their continued existence as peoples, in accordance with their own cultural patterns, social institutions and legal system (Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 2004 pg. 4).*

*From NSCBI's perspective, the status of Māori as an indigenous, colonised people meant that we could not afford to pass up the opportunity to offer our contributions.*

On the basis of this definition Māori would be considered a disenfranchised people in their own country who are subject to the laws, policies and perspectives of the dominant culture. Our view relates to the inequities Māori experience as indigenous people and the need to address those differences through culturally-informed standards of psychological education, training and regulation. Discussion of a formal global competency framework without the involvement of indigenous peoples contravenes the Declaration and creates additional privileges for dominant groups. James Anaya, the Special Rapporteur, argued that,

*... the Declaration exists because Indigenous peoples have been denied equality, self-determination and related human rights. It does not create for them new substantive rights that others don't enjoy. Rather, it recognises for them rights that they should have enjoyed all along as part of the human family, contextualises those rights in light of their particular characteristics and circumstances and promotes measures to remedy the rights' historical and systemic violation (2009, p. 63).*

From NSCBI's perspective, the status of Māori as an indigenous, colonised people meant that we could not afford to pass up the opportunity to offer our contributions. We were also interested to know whether other indigenous groups would be represented at the Congress, in particular, the Sami from Norway, Finland, Denmark and Northern Russia. NSCBI was concerned that if the indigenous population of the host country was absent, what impact might that have for the development of global competencies. The Congress is charged with working together to investigate the utility of identifying a globally common set of professional competencies that could inform the basis for: promoting consistency in the quality of psychological services, promoting professional cohesion, promoting the profession to the public, facilitating mobility

across borders, and for promoting psychology's role in advancing, wellbeing and productivity<sup>3,4</sup>. A long-term goal is to establish common and consistent criteria for the accreditation, registration and regulation of psychology.

NSCBI comprise indigenous Māori and Pacific and Pakeha (non-indigenous) members who are experienced in psychology education, research, practice and regulation. Our practice experience covers clinical, critical psychology, indigenous psychology, community, health, organisational, education, forensic and neuropsychology. NSCBI has been involved in the development and implementation of key Acts, policies and Codes that have had a direct bearing on psychology in Aotearoa. The key focus areas for NSCBI are to:

- Increase and support Māori participation and development in all areas of psychology
- Support the recognition and development of psychologies relevant and applicable to Aotearoa
- Promote bicultural accountability and responsibility within psychology.

### Including culture on the agenda

Prior to attending the Congress and after several emails, it became apparent that notions of culture had various understandings. Our pre-Congress readings revealed that culture was relegated to 'the margins'. The placing of culture in the margins, appendix or its own box, typically means that culture is an afterthought; important enough to be on the page, but not as important as the ability to conduct psychometric tests, develop rapport, or to devise amazing, evidence-based interventions. The ability to do these things without recognising culture is one of the marvels of Western psychology.

A particular theme at the congress meeting was the way culture was viewed as a competency. Some attendees felt that it was unnecessary to use the term culture in definitions of competency as it was already implied in the term competence. For example, a tentative definition of competence was developed by one of the working groups:

*A psychologist observes, measures and understands the many factors that influence how people believe, think, feel and behave in their "cultural contexts". We facilitate change by engaging with and responding to the needs of individuals, groups, organizations and communities. We evaluate and*

<sup>3</sup> All quoted sections directly referring to the Congress have been taken from the following website and associated links: <http://www.asppb.net/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageID=3602>

<sup>4</sup> Foundational Document, p. 7, (2013). <http://www.asppb.net/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageID=3602>



*reflect on the impact of the changes we facilitate and use these to inform our work.*

After some debate, there was tacit agreement to the inclusion of cultural context in the definition. This pattern of debate about culture continued through each working party and required constant attention. A particularly interesting experience was when an attempt to include the term indigenous was met with the phrase “you mean including witch-doctors?” In our view, it was enough of a cognitive shift to include culture in the discussions and so we left the indigenous issue for another time.

On the last morning, the framing of culture as a ‘potential derailer’ in the development of a set of global competencies by Congress organisers, revealed the difficulty many people from dominant groups in society have when they attempt to incorporate notions of culture, even their own, in their thinking. This form of speaking about culture in the negative has the immediate impact of sending culture to the margins or even the ‘too hard basket’ to be dealt with at another time. We were able to suggest that culture be described as a complexity that needed to be included and considered at every step of the way if global competencies were going to have efficacy for all peoples who practice psychology and are served by psychologists.

Advocating for the use of “complexity” when referring to culture and research removed the notion of culture as problematic with negative connotations. Without the presence of NSCBI representatives to ask the critical questions that brought the role of culture into focus, it is likely that notions of culture would have remained in the margins. The outcome of those three days of hard

work was an agreement to progress the development of global standards of competency and to explore an international qualification to assist psychologists to travel across borders.

Our direct contribution to the Congress goals included: representatives were successful in getting the United Nations papers (2004, 2008) included in the working document for global competencies; provided a critique of culturally embedded notions of science, and the importance of culture into discussions and, obtained agreement on the importance of research skills as part of a psychologist’s repertoire of skills. These were great gains for indigenous psychologists. However more support is needed.

A working group has been established to continue the goals of the Congress committee consisting of: Amy Hilson, USA, Buxin Han, China, Dave Bartram, UK, Germán Gutiérrez, Colombia, Janel Gauthier, Canada, Steve DeMers, USA, Sverre L. Nielsen, Norway, Tholene Sodi, South Africa and Waikaremoana Waitoki, New Zealand. A title for the future work of the Congress committee is called the “International Project on Competence in Psychology” (IPCP). Supporting the working party is a reference group consisting of 30 members (Rose Black and Jhan Gavala were invited to participate).

### **Implications of the international project for indigenous peoples**

The Congress identified the need to establish common and consistent criteria for the accreditation of quality educational programmes and the regulation of professional psychologists<sup>5</sup>. There are complexities inherent in the way terms such

<sup>5</sup> For further information see the website: <http://www.asppb.net/i4a/pages/index.cfm?pageID=3602>

as common, quality, prepare, and professionals are used. These terms carry meanings that are generally interpreted by dominant members of societies and rarely include indigenous perspectives.

As the Congress moves forward in the task of developing a set of global competencies, it is worth being reminded about objective one produced in the Second International Decade of the World’s Indigenous People. This objective is: “Promoting non-discrimination and inclusion of indigenous peoples in the design, implementation and evaluation of international, regional and national processes regarding laws, policies, resources, programmes and projects” (United Nations, 2004 - A/RES/59/174). Adherence to this objective should encourage dominant Western psychology organisations to include contemporary indigenous realities and new approaches to research and practice in the development of standards of competency.

### **Group discussion at conference**

Prior to going to the Congress, Waikaremoana had the opportunity to speak to Moana Jackson who was the former chair of the United Nations Indigenous Forum and contributor to the Declaration on Indigenous Rights. When asked for his opinion about how to carefully represent indigenous issues at a global forum, Moana kindly offered three suggestions: (1) remember who I am; no-one can take that away from me; (2) always listen to the other person’s view and try and understand them, and (3) always bring back any decisions that need to be made to your people. In this respect, ‘my people’ include whānau, NSCBI, Māori communities, the Society’s Executive, members of the Society, students and workplace colleagues.

The goals of the Congress were discussed with the approximately 20 attendees of the *bicultural symposium* at the 2013 New Zealand Psychological Society Annual conference. Participants were encouraged to discuss their thoughts about the International Project. Their responses showed that more work is needed to actively incorporate understandings of cultural competency as a core component of accreditation, registration and ongoing professional development. While the intention for this to happen is stated in the Board's documentation (New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2011), participants felt that cultural competence is viewed as an optional extra that university programmes and practitioners can choose to include in teaching, research and practice. These concerns are echoed internationally as there is some concern amongst educators that multicultural guidelines are being implemented to satisfy accreditation requirements with little real attention given to satisfying standards of ethical best practice (Smith, Constantine, Dunn, Dinehart & Montoya, 2006).

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Trainee psychologists in the discussion group commented that in their institution (they asked for anonymity) when they asked for cultural competency as part of their learning experience they were advised to go to the University of Waikato where there are a number of Māori staff and an active Māori research unit (Māori and Psychology Research Unit). A focus on the excellent work carried out by MPRU is well deserved; however this does not necessarily mean that cultural

initiatives are infused throughout the entire school of psychology. These comments highlight that despite the requirement to offer quality programmes and to prepare students to work with diversity, a quick glance at the paper-offerings and the cultural/ethnic composition of academic staff and students across New Zealand psychology training programmes indicates that there is still room for improvement. There is also wide variability with regard to the quality and content of bicultural programmes in psychology (Barnett, 2004; Evans, & Fitzgerald, 2007; Skogstad, & Skogstad, & Britt, 2005).

With assistance from the related professional organisations and NSCBI, the New Zealand Psychologists Board has created registration, accreditation and regulation procedures that require culturally competent standards of teaching and practice (New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2006a; New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2006b) update). These procedures could be used to inform the international project. Over the last 30 plus years of cultural competency and cultural safety discourse a considerable body of research has been developed that could be used to inform standards of competency (Abbott & Durie, 1987; Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Campbell, 2005; Herbert, 2002; Huygens, 2007; McHoul & Rapley, 2001; Nairn & National Standing Committee on Bicultural Issues, 1997; Nairn, Black, Pehi & Waitoki, 2012; New Zealand Psychologists Board, 2011b; Nikora, 1993, 2012; Ramsden, 1990, Ritchie, 1992). The question really comes down to “why aren't they being used?”

The participants in the group discussion commented that it was vitally important for psychologists to recognise that competence (including cultural competence) is a life-long process requiring constant attention.

The need to strengthen cultural competency training remains a serious and significant concern to indigenous peoples, nationally and internationally (Cooper, Rickard & Waitoki, 2012; Gillies, 2013; Herbert & Morrison, 2007; Levy, 2007; Love & Waitoki, 2007; Nairn, Black, Pehi & Waitoki, 2012; Nikora, 2007; Smith, 1990, 1999). In conversations and research with NSCBI members over the last two decades, it is clear that cultural competence needs to be regarded as an on-going developmental process rather than a target credential with an endpoint.

### Conclusion

The NSCBI supports national and international guidelines that advocate for culturally competent practice (see also, American Psychological Association, 2003). The importance of a culturally-inclusive definition of competence is necessary as we attempt to come to a global agreement on the benchmark competencies that define professional psychology. The Congress committee recognised the multiple cultural variations that occur globally and that it is no easy task to develop an international standard of competent practice, or definition of competency. The view of NSCBI is that the mobile psychologist needs to have firm foundational cultural understandings of practice in their home country before they embark on their international sojourn. How might this translate to cultural competency in another setting? Until we are certain that an international qualification contains contextual understandings of culture from a myriad of views, extra training will be required so that mobile psychologists become familiar with the cultural contexts of the host country.

NSCBI recommends that all professional bodies involved in the registration, accreditation, and

professional practice and training of psychologists such as the Psychologists Board, the New Zealand Psychological Society, the College of Clinical Psychologists and Heads of Schools of psychology and professional training programmes support indigenous perspectives. That we encourage our global psychology colleagues to show their commitment to improving the health and wellbeing of indigenous peoples and promote social justice by embedding cultural relevance in core competency conversations for psychologists.

At the time of writing this paper, the report from the Congress has been released. There is a follow-up meeting in Kampala, Uganda in November this year and in Paris in 2014. This project has been three years in the making and may take many more. The Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples took 25 years of intense and heated discussion to come to an agreement that, even now, is still contentious. Through working collaboratively and sharing our expertise we will generate a more culturally and critically aware discipline of psychology.

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