

ON BEING CULTURALLY SENSITIVE: The art of gathering and eating
kina without pricking yourself on the finger

I'm not sure how many of you know much about the kina or sea egg other than it is a creature from the sea. And even if you did know something about it, such as what its natural habitat is, who its significant friends or enemies are or how it reproduces it would not necessarily make you a connoisseur of the kina. There is no guarantee that your knowledge about this creature will help you to locate the parts which are sweet or to remove them in one piece or to savour the flavour (especially after it has been left to mature for three to four days). Nor is there any guarantee that you would be able to locate the fine art of gathering and eating kina into a wider context which includes notions of manaaki (the sharing of food and hospitality), of conservation (through carefully mediated practices for gathering and eating eg. they are eaten away from the shoreline), of tapu and noa (they are stored in food-related cloths or buckets not body-related items such as beach towels or clothes buckets) or of koha (the system of exchange and reciprocity). It would be difficult to see any relationship between such an ugly-looking creature as a kina with a wider system of peoples' values and social and political relations.

I happen to love eating kina, I salivate at the memories I have of gorging myself on kina at various Marae functions, or in the backyards, out of sugar bags or milk cans, of numerous Aunties, Uncles and cousins homes, or behind tents by the beach or more latterly out of plastic containers bought from a fish market! In reality the kina is a rare kind of food I have no desire to explain to anyone. I would hate to think that I had converted a hundred or so people to eating such a delicacy. I would be fearful that conversion would result in a rare resource becoming even more scarce as the demand grows for it to be harvested, farmed, canned, frozen, frittered, jellied, turned into quiche, mashed into soup or redefined as a dessert. So for those of you who came expecting some handy hints on how to gather, open or eat kina, you will be disappointed. Instead what I intend to do today is to discuss some of the concerns I have as people and professional groups move

towards developing a set of special skills called cultural sensitivities. It is not my intention to rubbish the good intentions of people who have embarked on this path, nor is it my intention to say, "Hey, Pakeha, you've got it wrong again!" Rather, I would like to use an occasion such as this conference as a time-out, a time to reflect, analyse, and evaluate our practice to date so that the 'good intentions' people have can be reflected in good practice and not just good rhetoric.

Historically, we can draw upon many examples or interpretations of what being culturally sensitive has frequently meant in the New Zealand context. For example, early missionaries worked hard to gain proficiency in the language and an understanding of the cosmological view of the Maori. Maori as a language was quickly turned into a written language, the Bible was translated into Maori and was instrumental in the rapid rise of literacy among Maori people. Maori grammars and dictionaries were also produced. The missionaries were interested in schooling insofar as it could produce good Christian behaviours and had a particular interest in educating the 'girls' as well as the 'boys'. At the time this was a fairly progressive notion but of course at the time Maori females were fairly progressive people! The over-riding purpose of missionary interest and their efforts to be seen as being culturally sensitive was about the capture of souls. This meant in practice the subtle and often not so subtle redefinitions of cultural beliefs and practices. The notions of there being one God (Io Matua) was used as the basis for teaching about another one God, the Christian one. However the notion that there were other beings who were responsible for domains such as the sky, the earth, the winds, the sea, the underworld were carefully marginalised to the realm of myth and legend or of idolatry and paganism. The idea of the underworld being in the domain of a woman, Hine nui te po was reconstructed so that the underworld became a place of evil, a hell, and that woman was the embodiment of evil and temptations. The apparent sexual liberation of Maori women, their freedom to select and reject husbands, their highly political role in tribal affairs came to be attributed to Christian notions of the fallen woman, without morals or work befitting a domesticated creature.

Hence, while on the one hand we can describe the apparent benefits of people who developed skills which helped them communicate with, live with and work with another culture we also need to be mindful of the fact that the over-riding intention of those skills was to change the people concerned, and to change them in quite fundamental ways. There is a well known Maori reference to the effectiveness of the missionaries in teaching us to look up to heaven so that we wouldn't see them taking the land beneath our feet!

It is worthwhile pondering the reasons for which many professional groups seek to develop culturally sensitive understandings and skills. Are those reasons driven by an unstated or taken for granted need or desire to change the people who are the 'target' of such sensitivities? In a society in which power plays a significant role in determining the nature of relationships between Maori and Pakeha, is that agenda for change up for negotiation or is it hidden behind carefully defined notions of progress, equity or partnership?

It is not about asking just whether individual psychologists are culturally sensitive but more importantly about whether psychology is culturally sensitive. Can a discipline which has been conceptualised, defined and controlled by a Western tradition work within another culture such as mine without redefining that culture, locating aspects of it in alien contexts, marginalising the parts which are perceived as inappropriate or irrelevant by ignoring them or divorcing them from our cultural links, creating new views of the world by distorting old views of the world? I am sure that you are more familiar with your discipline than I and would therefore be able to answer those questions. I would expect that there is a body of opinion which has sought to make the field of psychology more culturally mobile but I would also suspect that the space available in teaching and clinical settings for people working at this interface would be limited.

There are wider issues such as these which need to be addressed at

a collegial level because they have implications for the way people are taught, credentialed and evaluated. It is not enough for isolated individuals to struggle with the possible solutions if in fact the whole discipline is regarded by, for example many Maori people, as being fundamentally antagonistic to non-Western cultures and more specifically to Maori culture. This regard is based not just on isolated incidents but on a legacy of experiences and research which have entrapped us within the perceptions of a wider society as a people who are overflowing with culturally determined deficiencies. In 1968 one Maori academic expressed his frustration in this way:

"I am sick and tired of hearing my people blamed for their educational and social shortcomings, their limitations highlighted and their obvious strengths of being privileged New Zealanders in being bilingual and bicultural ignored". (Koro Dewes).

In the more recent past there has been much greater discussion and willingness shown by various groups and individuals particularly those in the social services towards developing strategies because they will be ones which I'm sure many of you will have considered and even attempted.

The first strategy in the search for being culturally sensitive is the strategy of avoidance. I hear quite frequently the statement by individuals that they and their organisations do not deal with Maori clients specifically, that they have no expertise in that area or that they do not feel it is appropriate to do so. It is a statement which always catches my attention, not because I think the person concerned is necessarily a positive example of cultural sensitivity but because I am usually thinking about the options available to the Maori client if this particular one is not available. Is there an alternative agency which is not only staffed by Maori but which has access to the resources and networks available to this agency? Are the Maori staff given the same status, legitimacy and acknowledgement for their skill as their counterparts in the other agency? For example are their views considered seriously by agencies such as the police or social

workers or are their views filtered through the parent agency? I know that in some cases the relationship between agencies which have decided to focus on a different structure for handling Maori clients appear to be working well. I know of other example where the relationship is awkward and uneasy. I find it more difficult to sympathise with a large agency such as a hospital or Government department which chooses the strategy of avoidance because I feel that they are obliged to find ways of working with Maori clients. I am also watchful of the tendency of other community based groups which take this line without developing or supporting an alternative organisation to which Maori clients can be referred and from which they will be helped.

Probably the most common strategy used at present is the development of personal knowledge about another culture. I have met many people who have taken classes on Maori language and culture, gone on field trips to Marae and read extensively. This strategy is like knowing all about knowing all about the habitat of the kina, on its own it is not quite enough to gain access or to find your way around the inside of the culture concerned. Those who have have frequently had the help of a sponsor or informant. In fact this has been the standard practice for many anthropologists and researchers.

Often with the assistance of a sponsor people have gone for the full immersion experience, living in a community and being a part of its day to day existence. This has not necessarily meant that people have not taken with them their own cultural baggage or spectacles through which they can interpret their experiences. Nor is it a process which is readily available to all those who may wish to undertake such a course.

Increasingly people are using consultants or advisors. I am frequently contracted for advice or asked to act as a consultant for a project or an individual. I am also learning that while it may be efficient in the sense of time management it is a difficult position to be in when your advice is not heeded but your name is still used to get access to other Maori resources. Consultants are

frequently used for specific issues and have very little say over wider issues unless that is specified. At present, under the restructuring of everything the Government owns, there are a number of Maori consultancies being created as private businesses and it will be interesting to monitor the tasks they perform as consultants.

Probably the most difficult strategy used more recently by organisations has been to create space and positions for Maori people within their own structures. This process has usually taken a long time and has frequently been fraught with difficulties and resistances as individuals within the organisation concerned have had to confront issues related to status, resources, notions of fairness or equality, and the nature of change. A structural change of this kind is often the only way of influencing the way decisions are made which affect people further down the ladder. However it frequently doesn't work. It is often assumed that having a Maori within the structure will change the structure. That has not always happened, in order to function effectively the individual has to learn and play by the rules of the organisational culture they have joined. Unless there is significant support and monitoring that individual can be rendered totally ineffectual.

At the structural level the Treaty of Waitangi is now often cited as being the basis for making some fundamental changes in the way social services are structured and the processes by which they deliver service.

The Treaty is used to provide the rationale for change and although I would expect this to allow for new developments and initiatives the pattern which is emerging is not yet radically different. As institutions such as schools and universities confront the implications of the Treaty of Waitangi being in their charters we may see changes which are new and interesting. It would be disappointing but perhaps 'par for the course' if the Treaty simply appears in the charters in the same way as it was hung on the walls of all schools, neglected and meaningless.

One last strategy I would like to refer to is the antiracism programme. As Pakeha people have taken on some of the responsibility for ensuring that the wider Pakeha public are aware of our history and of our existing power relationships. I know little about the details of some of the antiracism courses which have been organised. I have had feedback from a range of people who have attended such courses

and this feedback ranges from being positive about the course to being hostile and rabidly racist as a consequence of such a course. I personally find that guilt is an immobilising state, which individualises a problem and renders some people totally useless. Dealing with someone who out of a sense of guilt is ready to hand over anything I ask for is not helpful or even realistic. I don't want to be laden with the responsibility for taking from someone who is overcome with such a crippling emotion. It is not guilt that we need. I know of course that not all antiracism programmes work at the level of personal guilt. Some groups have taken on a stronger advocacy role and have shared their joint skills with Maori people, for example groups I am a member of have used lawyers to assist us in our work. There are also people we can use to get access to larger organisations, information or ideas. It is a strategy which I have found to be particularly useful because it engages people in joint planning, negotiation and responsibility. It also leaves the group concerned with knowledge which is useful.

All the strategies mentioned are strategies which are used at an individual level and at a structural level. They are strategies which have been used with varying consequences for Maori people. If the deeper issues are not addressed then many of these skills become simply manipulative devices which perpetuate racism rather than destroy it and which maintain present power relations rather than shift them. Underlying any desire to become more culturally sensitive there has to be an understanding that this will be a process of change not just for the target culture but you as well. You being your beliefs, your theories, your practice.

Most of this change will occur in your domain because we as a

people are struggling to maintain our authenticity as a culture and are not in a position to negotiate the little that is left. That does not mean that we remain staunch and fixed but that the changes we make are changes which have arisen from our needs not anyone else's. The time when we could be persuaded to look upwards and ignore what was happening below has gone, the time when we could willingly share what we have without seeing what you have first is also passing.

Being culturally sensitive must also mean being politically astute. Power also plays a major role in determining who makes decisions on whose behalf. To be naive about the power which backs up your theory and practice (ie. the validity of your theories, your credentials, your status, your wealth, etc.) and to be unaware of the power which has brought disempowered clients to your attention is to be grossly insensitive.

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