

The responsibility towards indigenous holism: Rethinking ethical research in the university

If there is one fundamental aspect of indigenous philosophy in much indigenous-related literature, it is that all things in the world are interconnected (see eg. Arola (2011); Mika (2017); Andreotti et al (2011)). The nature of this interconnection can only be speculated on (and there is undoubtedly room for more than one perspective on this). Moreover, how it could possibly take form in research, so that research is then ethical from that indigenous holistic perspective, is also at the theoretical stage, and awaits further development. In this presentation, I explore some of the exciting philosophical challenges that await the Maori theorist working in this area, including how any Maori representation about those challenges is itself constituted by all other things.

Assoc. Prof. Carl Mika (Tuhourangi/Ngati Whanaunga)
Te Whiringa School of Educational Leadership and Policy
Faculty of Education
University of Waikato
carl.mika@waikato.ac.nz

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If indigenous thought is to be truly represented ethically, then according to several indigenous writers the only way for that to occur is for a complete overhaul of even those assumptions we as indigenous peoples hold fast to. I have in mind here such writers as Vine Deloria Jr, Kincheloe, Brendan Hokowhitu, Georgina Stewart, Te Kawehau Hoskins, Garrick Cooper, to name a few. Along with these writers, I agree that we are at the beginning of that challenge in many ways, and that, as Arola notes, representing the world holistically is not simply an intellectual but an ethical maxim. This whole field is indeed a challenge because text is set up to make sure that ideas are as clear as possible. For some, this doesn't necessarily mean that an interconnected world cannot be represented, for others it does because overly rational thought means that things are immediately disconnected from each other in the world of perception.

It became clear to me from my teenage years onwards that Maori thought of the world as interconnected and that this fairly abstract, removed idea had to be given expression in what one does. In many respects, tikanga as it is often thought of, takes care of this at various levels – socially (with various ceremonies including pohiri), and spiritually (clearing of

houses where deaths occur) in particular. What struck me in those formative years, though, was that outside of ceremony, the notion of the interconnected world was difficult to sustain – in everyday and abstract thinking, for instance. I was thinking about that issue at that age because of an aunt of mine who would urge me to think what the consequences of a thought or an utterance would be for the unseen world – *te ao huna*, in other words. If we were talking about *whakapapa*, she would encourage me to think about the materiality of the names and their *maunga*, *awa* and *their* ancestors and so on, rather than just about genealogy as such. She had broadened *whakapapa* and other concepts out from their convenient Eurowestern equivalents and revealed a world of absence to my thinking. I call it ‘absence’ because what was not visible, tangible or stateable was equally as important as the thing before us.

I often recount that time – and I was taught by her for about 3 years, I would say nearly every day – because it shaped my thinking. It was a kind of thinking that I had been aware of even earlier, probably about when I was 9 or so, but this formalised it for me in a way. Subsequently, I have been considering where Maori can have that kind of thinking formalised for them in places of officialdom – such as the venerated university, which I have since come to realise prides itself on carrying out a kind of thinking that is the exact opposite of what I have talked about.

But to go back to the issue of interconnection: what does this mean? Many of us will have some idea of its referents, but haven’t perhaps given it much more thought than ‘indigenous peoples think holistically’ or ‘Maori believe that the world is interconnected’. Let me offer some theories on it, and focus on one specifically. There are two forms of interconnection that occur to me: the one (and perhaps more common one) that suggests that things are separate but connected through a sort of *mauri* or life-force; and the second, which argues that within any one thing (for instance, a tree), every other thing in the world resides in it. There is a third which sort of amalgamates the two in a way: Maori Marsden talks of ‘potential’, where a state of being always awaits within a current thing, but isn’t there yet. This last form has an emphasis on ‘becoming’. Thus, nothingness in Maori metaphysics has within it an embryonic thingness or lightness – *te ao marama*, the world of light. It’s the second possibility I want to focus on, because I think it’s the most challenging but it’s also the most representative of a Maori metaphysics in which time is collapsed. In other words, it’s the possibility that within the tree is the All, or what we might now call (and whether this is a traditional description or not, I’m not sure) ‘*te ao katoa*’ that fascinates me. It chimes with such *whakatauki* as ‘*ko au te awa, ko te awa ko au*’, or simply ‘one’s ancestors and those to come embody everyone currently here’. With that thinking, we then have to go back to a key aspect of a Maori philosophy of time – the collapse of different epochs.

It’s well-known through the literature that time in dominant western thought is linear. A Maori view of time, on the other hand, is the opposite: it collapses past present and future, so that all that is apparently in the past and all that will apparently come to pass is, in fact, always-already in the present. There is no delineation between past/present and future. All things are co-instantaneous. We see this in such common sayings as ‘**muri mua**’. This philosophy, like all metaphysics, has massive consequences for everything. For instance, it not only relates to time but space: space is also collapsed (and if we think of *wa* meaning time and space so that there is no difference between the two, this makes perfect sense). It also means that our ability to say ‘I did that’ is compromised. Humans are less the reason for things coming to pass: that is, we only have limited access to causing things to occur. ‘To cause’ in a broad sense sits at the base of science and rational argument but cannot be automatically assumed to be a priority if we take a collapse of time literally. In a highly

abstract reading of it, the preposition 'whaka' may not mean 'to cause' at all but 'the co-constitution of all things within a similarly co-constitutioning space and time'. This is admittedly my reading of that preposition, and people might take me to task for taking too much licence with it, but 'to cause', in an error of philosophical colonisation, is too conveniently Aristotelean for me!

To summarise all this: all things have always already existed within any one apparently separate thing in the world. What is quite hard to describe economically in English is simpler in Maori. The term 'whakapapa', for instance, automatically signals the all within one thing. Many of you will know it does share some vague similarities with genealogy – or perhaps it has been constructed to mean it – but they share little density or ontology with each other. 'Whakapapa' is also often referred back to a meaning of 'to layer', which is also true but most intriguing is the specific mention of something that Maori consider to be primordial, 'Papatuanuku'. Whenever 'Papa' is mentioned, it is an abbreviation for 'Papatuanuku', according to Royal. 'Whakapapa' signals the constitution of one thing by that primordial entity and hence all other things in the world because they, in turn, are constituted by that primordially. I suggest that within just that one term, 'whakapapa', lies this phenomenon that I would not so much call a process but a given. Other terms are 'whakaaro' (to think, or idea), 'mea' (to say), 'ira' ('essence' but here I use, yet repurpose, Heidegger's term 'to essence'), 'hei' (as), 'ako' (to teach/learn) among others.

Now I can give a tentative example here, by returning to my time spent with my aunt. If I were to focus on a name in the genealogy book we used to study, she would ensure I refer to it not in a detached sense, as if language were simply a way to transfer information. I had to treat the name with respect, not only as if it were part of me, but also as if I were part of it. To that extent, whakapapa seems to claim the attention of the self in a particular way, as if the self were always-already part of whatever was being discussed or studied. More than that, though, the name also claimed all those other things that sit outside of my awareness; it wasn't just a dual carriageway between me and the name. Whenever we discussed these things, or indeed anything, we had to be prepared for the contingent of all other things in the world and be aware that the primordially I mentioned earlier could unseat my or my aunt's certainty about a thing.

This leads me to the last point of this part of my discussion before I move onto the consequences of this for research. The contingent or primordial – whether this is termed Papatuanuku, kore, marama or whatever – does mystify things in the world. Papa is often taken to mean a 'base' or 'foundation', and I agree with that translation, but it is more correctly a sort of non-foundational foundation, in that we can't conceive of it in its entirety. Because it defies knowledge, then all things in the world that arise from it similarly cannot be known. Currently, there is a significant discourse on 'knowledge' which has been translated as 'matauranga'. The problem with that translation is that 'speculative thought' is not mentioned. 'Knowledge' refers to a type of certainty. It needn't refer to certainty, of course, because you can have such states of knowledge as 'intuitive' and so on, but the term 'knowledge' is significantly in a knowledge economy, so it is very rarely qualified with anything that tempers its discursive certainty. Perhaps I have been influenced by the philosopher Novalis whom I referred to in my PhD thesis; he argued that when we are certain we have reached a base of epistemic certainty or knowledge, then another contingent is revealed. At best we can only have a dim understanding of what he called the Absolute or Being and all things in the world that emerge from it. This view, of course, shares some similarities with Kant's notion of the thing in itself, although Novalis would argue that the

thing in itself has to be accounted for in expression because it is a material force within perception (where Kant's thing in itself was simply an initial stimulus for a conceptual framework).

The research part

This brings me to my final section, where I start to think about concrete ways in which researchers can access expressing themselves holistically in the academy. I do find it interesting, and indeed mind-blowing, that many Maori students have no problem understanding the idea that entire existence is immediately grafted onto any one thing. It's mind-blowing because it is a stark, tangible instance of where many Maori differ from a key maxim of the university – rationalism. Some of these students tend to move away from its abstract nature and give concrete examples from their own backgrounds; others like to stay with the abstract and think about it in terms of its further possibilities. Increasingly, we have PhD students coming through who want to move away from working on socially related research, including on interviews with their communities, and towards more speculative philosophy which seeks to keep its objects of thought together.

As you might imagine, there are some challenges that await us in teaching and supervising these students, who tend to be Maori but are not exclusively so. Some of them grapple with not having enough traditional knowledge or knowledge of te reo Maori. In response, we say that some knowledge is important but it's the paces you decide to put the knowledge through that matters here. Others think of it as not proper 'research' (many are constantly asked 'where's your data?'); some freak out at the thought of holding so many possibilities as they continue their writing.

Also, as researchers, all of us – not just students – who work in this area inevitably come up with a certain problem of thinking and language. What I mean here is that we tend to talk *about* holism rather than talking as if we, too, are caught up in its ethical cal. In other words, I can say quite simply 'the world is interconnected', but in doing so I have thrown interconnection 'over there', because I am making a statement *about* a state of affairs. In sheer terms of language, there is the word 'is' that we have to problematize, with the phrase 'the world *is* interconnected'. If there is one very subtle problem with language that springs from western metaphysics, it lies in the copula, or 'to be'. In Maori, there is no immediate signifier of 'to be' and hence there is no 'is', even though it has been widely imputed into our language. Still, as Derrida noted, it is a mistake to think that the problem starts with language; it doesn't, it starts much deeper, with the western insistence on finding out what a thing 'is', by ascertaining its properties so that one can be rational about it. The 'is' has simply been adapted to meet that deep request for certainty about a thing. I have to admit I'm not sure what can stand in for the 'is', so caught up in western metaphysics am I as well, but I'm quite keen to continue thinking of how the Maori language in fact gestures towards a thing without – from our perspective – freezing it for a clinical regard.

But the problem isn't isolated to the 'is'; it also lies in other calls for clarity. The 'is' is simply one example of possibly several instances of language that trap us within the problem of fragmented representation. Everyone will know that when we write something or even just communicate, we are only allowed to talk about things in sequence. At the end, you would have presented an entirety of something, such as an argument, but at any one point throughout the discussion, you are elucidating one thing at a time. This can be said to go back to what Fuchs calls that most classic of western metaphysics, the metaphysics of presence, in

which a thing has its positive qualities that are to be elucidated. In Maori thought, as we have seen, the exact opposite holds true. So what can be done about it: how can we heed the ethical request for holistic thinking in our work?

3 of us – Michelle Pidgeon from Simon Fraser University, Sarah Jane Tiakiwai from University of Waikato, and I - have been lucky to receive funding from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (an SSHRC), which will enable us to look at this very issue, among others. Michelle is leading the project, and Sarah Jane and I are what are called ‘collaborators’ (AIs in New Zealand language!) We will be interviewing indigenous people on the issue of what constitutes indigenous holistic ethics, and then we will be looking to the data to discern ways of analysing the data holistically. The project looks at ethics both narrowly (as in ethics committees) and broadly (as in, imperatives of ways of being). We will then devise some ways of holistic expression. The project is both policy related and philosophical; we will cross over, but generally my role will be to philosophise on various aspects of the project, and Michelle and Sarah Jane will be looking at the historical and political context of ethics in the universities.

In the meantime, I can suggest one or two ways that will destabilise certainty to allow a more obscure form of representation to take place. I have written elsewhere about language and how it can be surrounded by

Behind the perceived thing is the absent All – this is a Maori notion of materiality. Included in this absent All (among other things) is disposition, keenness to posit a particular view about the world, the view itself and so on.