

IN BRIEF

Talking About Race and Positionality in Psychology: Asians as Tangata Tiriti

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As a discipline that is predominantly taught from Western, educated, industrialised, rich and democratic (WEIRD) perspectives, psychology in Aotearoa New Zealand favours knowledge that is objective, generalisable and replicable (Groot et al., 2018; Pomare et al., 2021). WEIRD psychology has engendered a racial hierarchy of the type of knowledge that is valued and considered valid, with Indigenous and culturally diverse epistemologies consigned to the bottom of the ladder. The reliance on a positivist paradigm to explain human phenomena means that psychology students have few opportunities to examine their identity, positionality and cultural worldview. Against a backdrop of the dominance of a monocultural curriculum in psychological training programmes and the low number of non-Pākehā (non-New Zealand European) psychologists in Aotearoa, there are increasing calls to create an inclusive environment for minoritised individuals (including Asians) to engage in psychology (Groot et al., 2018; Liu, 2019; Pomare et al., 2021).

In Aotearoa, naming ‘race’ by referring to Pākehā, Māori, Pacific peoples and Asians may appear to disrupt the seemingly harmonious notion of ‘Kiwi’ or ‘one New Zealand’, even though these notions only advantage those who benefit from settler colonialism (Mok, 2022). Evidence exists in Aotearoa on the negative ramifications of colonisation on social and health outcomes for Indigenous Māori and racism regarding the accessibility of services for Māori, Pacific peoples, Asians and racialised migrants and refugees. However, Indigenous and culturally diverse ways of addressing these inequities frequently appear as an afterthought in psychology, if acknowledged at all (Groot et al., 2018; Liu, 2019). Below, I propose two perspectives of how Asian psychologists can advance our position as a racialised group that respects the bicultural context of Aotearoa.

1. Understanding Asians as a Racialised Group

The 2018 Census identified Asians as the third-largest ethnic group in Aotearoa (15.1%). Asians in Aotearoa are incredibly diverse in terms of nationality, length of residence, religion, culture and language. Despite often

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being lumped into a single category for the purpose of political solidarity, there is a continuum of superiority-inferiority that privileges Asians from East Asian countries, middle-class backgrounds and who are ‘successfully’ assimilated into the Pākehā settler expectations (Mok, 2022). ‘Asian’ as a broad group may have a ‘shared but different’ experience of racism, degree of acculturation and learning of our role as an ally to Māori. As psychologists, we need to acknowledge the heterogeneity within Asians, as we may be working with Asian clients with vastly different upbringings in Asian cultures, connectedness with Asian communities and expectations to acculturate.

The ‘Asian’ notion is sometimes used as a wedge to marginalise the political interest of Māori, as multicultural goals are prioritised over efforts to decolonise the institutions (Dam, 2022; Mok, 2022). This has resulted in lateral violence wherein members of minoritised groups ostracise each other rather than challenging institutional racism that upholds the authority of the oppressors. Lateral violence exemplifies the ‘divide and conquer’ effect wherein unfair resource distribution is used as a tactic to hinder solidarity building and collective action for change. In 2022, the New Zealand Government established a new health entity, Health New Zealand (HNZ), as a Crown agent to work in partnership with an independent Māori Health Authority. Despite Asians facing specific barriers to accessing equitable and culturally safe services (Chiang et al., 2022), the health restructure did not include an Asian health strategy or Asian leadership. This has led to a sense of exclusion among some Asians, particularly new migrants who have minimal understanding of the colonial history of Aotearoa, because of ‘privileging’ Māori in the health restructure. This is an example of how Asians are racially triangulated vis-à-vis the racial position of Pākehā and Māori, where Asians are ascribed subordinating values and labelled as immutably foreign to be excluded from civic membership (C. J. Kim, 1999).

‘Asianisations’ refer to particular forms of racialisation and racial marginalisation experienced by Asians (J. Kim & Hsieh, 2022). Asianisations in Aotearoa are reflected through: the construction of ‘model minority’ (a stereotype assigned to Asians to be more successful than other minoritised groups); yellow peril (Asians are cast as a threatening group for the ‘Kiwi’ way of living); perpetual foreigner (the perception that all Asians are migrants and unfamiliar with Aotearoa cultures); and ‘grateful migrant/refugee’ (the white saviour narrative that imposes the burden for (im)migrants and refugees to express gratitude for the resources received) to assert Pākehā dominance (Dam, 2022; Mok, 2022).

2. Positionality as Tangata Tiriti (People of the Treaty)

He Whakaputanga (Declaration of the Independence 1835) asserts Māori sovereignty in Aotearoa. The relationship of kāwanatanga (the Crown’s governance over British citizens) and tino rangatiratanga (Māori self-

determination and autonomy) was later reaffirmed by Te Tiriti o Waitangi, which was signed by representatives of the British Crown and Māori chiefs (Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016). There has been discussion about whether Te Tiriti embraces those who are neither Pākehā nor Māori. The Independent Working Group on Constitutional Transformation (Matike Mai Aotearoa, 2016) shed some light on this issue, stating ‘All immigrants (non-Māori) still come here because of Te Tiriti and therefore have a Tiriti relationship with Māori. Te Tiriti is their immigration visa...[and] while respecting Māori as tangata whenua (people of the land) tikanga (Māori protocol) also required that all tangata Tiriti should be able to maintain their culture and to learn and continue the ways of their tīpuna (ancestors)’. Indeed, Asians in Aotearoa are tangata Tiriti (Dam, 2022) and this identity afford us possibilities to foster unique partnership and allyship with Māori while preserving our Asian identity and values.

In Article 3 of Te Tiriti (mana ōrite or equality), Asians have equal rights and privileges as Pākehā and Māori. However, Asians also have the responsibilities to implement Tiriti principles (outlined in the Wai2575 Hauora report) of partnership (form a relationship that does not subordinate Māori rights), active protection (empower Māori self-determination), equity (guarantees Māori freedom from discrimination), and options (provides opportunities for Māori to select preferred social paths) to address Māori inequities. As Asian psychologists, we can undertake our roles as tangata Tiriti in various capacities; for example, learning about Māori health models (e.g., Whiti te rā and Meihana model) and culturally safe care for Māori clients, avoiding burdening our Māori colleagues with cultural labour and collaborating with and empowering Māori leadership in psychological research.

As psychologists, we have the privilege to influence the access and outcome of care received by our clients. Crawford and Langridge (2022) put together a framework for tangata Tiriti working in Māori health to reflect on our positionality (consciousness of biases and identities), power (structures that perpetuate injustices) and paralysis (fragility that originates from fear of doing wrong and reluctance to be uncomfortable). This framework has applicability for Asian psychologists to recognise our racialised experiences (within the psychology discipline as well as the larger society) and navigate through injustices that regularly silence Indigenous and minoritised groups, while also acknowledging the history of this country.

Similar to other countries with a colonial background, Aotearoa is not excluded from the manifestation of institutional racism through the ongoing prioritisation of Pākehā ways of knowing in the teaching of psychology, training of psychologists and delivery of psychological services. These points raised here constitute initial conversations for Asian psychologists to understand the process of Asian racialisation and challenge the dominance of WEIRD psychology that mutes conversation around race, cultural diversity

and racial justice. The wero (challenge) has been put forward for us as Asian psychologists to reflect on ways to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi. We can be allies in the pathway to decolonise psychology that will not only see the flourishing of Kaupapa Māori psychology but also creating platforms for us to expand on culturally informed practices that draw on the richness of Asian cultures.

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