

# **A Maori and Psychology Research Unit**

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## **Overview**

Little psychological information and few applications have been informed by Maori centred research. The psychological research base available to support prevention or change strategies aimed at Maori is almost non-existent. Most information and applications are imported from outside of Aotearoa/New Zealand and are seldom subjected to vetting procedures to ensure adequacy and appropriateness. Even though numbers have changed slightly in the last 10 years, there are still too few Maori in the professional ranks of psychology, both as practitioners, teachers and researchers. More of everything is needed, and it was needed yesterday. At the University of Waikato, staff of the Psychology Department have recognised the need to support positive changes to rectify that situation described above.

This paper describes the fledgling development of a Maori and Psychology Research Unit and how it is intended to promote Maori centred-research, Maori-partnership research, and the scholarly development of Maori professionals. The first section deals with issues and challenges the MPRU expects to face in its development and is written by the first author. The second section describes the nature of learning and support that the MPRU will afford to a new generation of Maori researchers and scholars within the discipline of psychology. This section is written by the second author.

## **Introduction**

Psychology as a discipline is interested in human behaviour. Psychologists are interested in how people think, what people believe, value and how they behave. How humans interact with those environments in which they are embedded are also of interest. The information gained from this area of inquiry is often used to theorise and predict future behaviour or develop interventions to bring about changes in negative behaviour. Psychologists are often understood to work with people who are afflicted with a mental health illness or with those who have some behavioural problem. These psychologists are commonly known as 'clinical psychologists' and can be found working in mental

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health institutions or within the justice system as well as other settings. There are also many other types of psychologists and forms of psychology that are less well known. These include community psychology, industrial and organisational psychology; cross-cultural psychology; counselling psychology; experimental psychology and a developing form known as Kaupapa Maori Psychology.

If one conducted a review (cf Stewart, 1997) of those studies on or about Maori completed within the discipline of psychology, two striking patterns are evident. Putting aside the issue of much of the research being conducted by non-Maori who draw on very narrow methodologies and often employ ethnocentric analyses, the first striking but not surprising find is the glaring absence of research specifically about issues of interest to Maori that in turn might support Maori well-being and development. This absence has a number of flow on effects. Some of these are:

- ÿ Researchers have scant information upon which to base research initiatives other than beginning from offshore literature.
- ÿ The incorporation of Maori material within courses offered in psychology is an extreme challenge to teaching staff.
- ÿ Teaching staff are likely to have not had exposure to Maori research literature or experience in conducting appropriate research with Maori.
- ÿ Maori students continue through the academy with little exposure to information and positive models of research apart from the odd course that is usually not part of their core programme of study.

The other finding deserving of celebration, is that in the past 10 years Maori students of psychology have begun the hard work of expanding the useable research base. They have also been active and vocal in challenging the nature of psychology including its methods and analyses. This is primarily in their research work as graduate and post-graduate thesis students and through their presence and constant questioning within psychology courses. This too has had flow on effects. For example, the increasing presence of Maori people interested in training in psychology attracts other interested Maori. So too does the employment of Maori staff in university psychology departments and the offering of Maori-centred courses. At the University of Waikato, the intake of Maori students in most under-graduate and graduate courses in psychology exceed 20% of the overall intake!

Maori students come to psychology with many aspirations, one being to simply obtain a qualification that will make them more competitive in the employment market place. Others see psychology as a pathway to better understand themselves and the world around them. A large majority however, see training in psychology as a way of arming themselves with the skills and qualifications to allow them to make a meaningful contribution to their whanau, hapu and iwi, and to positive Maori development. It is incumbent upon psychological teaching institutions to respond to this aspiration.

## **Initiating a Maori and Psychology Research Unit at the University of Waikato**

Given these aspirations, along with the benefits that will accrue to teaching, research and community service, the psychology department at the University of Waikato has initiated the development of a Maori and Psychology Research Unit (MPRU). What we have in mind is not another 'Te Pumanawa Hauora'. Our development is fairly modest in comparison. Rather, the unit is designed to provide a catalyst and support network for enhancing psychological research with a Maori kaupapa, which has at its centre the psychological needs, aspirations, and priorities of Maori people. It is one that brings together activities that have been ongoing. It is also an attempt to make a coordinated and positive response to the need for high quality research and research scholars in the Maori world. This will require close working relationships with a diversity of interest groups as well as the addressing of some very fundamental issues for the unit to prosper and achieve its goals. These issues are yet to be discussed in detail by those involved in the development of MPRU and may not be solved very easily. The answers to these issues may indeed require the discourse and perspective's of those who are not embedded in the psychology discipline. Irrespective of likely difficulties, these challenges will need to be faced if the MPRU initiative is going to be true to its mission and purpose. In the following sections, these challenges are outlined.

### **Maori and Non-Maori participation**

The MPRU involves the coming together of both Maori and non-Maori staff and students of the psychology department. Both of these groups are diverse in their technical training, ethnicity, knowledge and experience of the Maori world. This diversity will provide a richness that will allow multiple perspectives to be focussed on MPRU research projects and a pool of resources to draw from. Care must be taken to ensure that the Maori view and voice is not lost in this diversity or dominated by traditional psychological thinking or methods that suffocate the development of those that are more appropriate and productive. In relation to this, 'starting points' must be clearly examined. For example, to assume that the administration of a psychological scale is a basic starting point for the investigation of say 'acculturation' is to pre-empt the possibility that there may be other starting points. Another example is that the involvement of only one Maori person in the development of a research project will not necessarily result in a Maori-centred approach to research. Much more needs to happen.

### **Pure versus Applied Research?**

Psychology prides itself as being a science. However, there is one significant characteristic that sets it apart from the pure sciences such as physics, biology and chemistry. Unlike these fields where theories can be developed with some certainty and hold true, the creative, inventive and adaptive nature of humans and the impact of different environments will always challenge the rule makers and theorists. The application of theories with surety requires consideration of two important issues. First, if the rules and theories have been developed with peoples other than Maori, then they cannot be said to

apply to Maori unless they have been vetted and tested and found to still hold true. Secondly, if a rule or theory about Maori is developed then the question of whether there is adequate research to support this position needs to be asked. Without extensive, well-constructed research with and about Maori the extent to which generalisations and theories can be developed is limited. So too is the contribution that can be made to social policy making and the development of interventions.

Given this, it seems important to discuss the role of 'pure' research in contrast to 'applied' research in relation to the MPRU. Do psychological scales and tests have a place? Do laboratory based experiments have a place? What about the computerised experiment? Furthermore, what of the research with animals that our psychology department has a research centre devoted to? For those raised outside the discipline of psychology (and even for some within!) the role of these forms of research may seem totally removed and irrelevant to Maori development. Some of it is. But some of it isn't. One of the issues here, that applies equally to applied research is determining what is of relevance to Maori and what isn't also bearing in mind that what might not be of particular interest or relevance today, may be of vital interest in the future. Who would have guessed that DNA testing could save the lives of many whanau members dying of stomach and bowel cancer?

### **Determining research priorities**

Given the dearth of psychological studies on issues important to Maori the major priority for the MPRU is to get established and to develop an integrated research programme to start generating appropriate knowledge. But what should guide the development of that programme and the establishing of priorities? How does one juggle the competing interests of academics, students, iwi and Maori community groups, and funding agencies who have priorities of their own? How does one insure that a kaupapa Maori agenda is maintained in the work engaged in by the MPRU?

Having listened to the address by Chief Judge Eddie Durie earlier in this Conference, we were heartened to hear him mention the terms 'psychology' and 'psychological' more than once! It reinforces a place and role for psychological research in Maori development. More importantly, his comments direct research towards an examination of Maori values, beliefs and behaviours as they were traditionally, and how they are played out in the present time.

One way of moving towards resolving the issue of prioritising a research agenda, is to stipulate a base line requirement of any research endeavour. That being to require of all research inquiry carried out by the MPRU, the examination of the place and function of Maori values, beliefs and behaviours in the area that is being investigated. This base line requirement can be easily met in most areas of applied research involving Maori or inquiring into issues of concern to Maori without detracting from other research priorities. For example, in an investigation of conflict resolution styles in the work place the researchers will be directed to consider Maori forms of resolving conflict by focussing on Maori values, beliefs and behaviours. In an investigation of factors impacting on safety in bush gangs, an examination of relatedness and kinship obligations would be in order.

Such a base line requirement will also be instructive when tendering for research contracts, or submitting for research grants. Contracting or funding organisations do not necessarily require a focus on Maori values, beliefs and behaviour patterns. However, if the MPRU included such a focus it is more than likely to make the proposal or application more exciting and competitive. It also forces the funding agency to reconsider the way in which it conceptualises problems.

Baseline requirements aside, there is still a need to further refine the unit's research priorities so that they are in line with community needs and complementing rather than conflicting with the endeavours of other research groups.

### **Funded versus Non-Funded Research**

The availability of funds for research has increased dramatically over the past 5-7 years. This has allowed financial support to students and for support for staff to 'buy' themselves out of teaching time to engage more fully in research. But funding and grant agencies are often quite specific about the nature of research and area of inquiry that they will fund. It is expected that it will be difficult to find funding to support fundamental research desperately required to advance the development of knowledge necessary for other lines of inquiry to take place or the development of useful interventions. One fear is that the MPRU will become caught up in the rush to secure contract or grant funds. The effect is that the MPRU research agenda will in turn be defined by the funding agencies. The form of research that suffers in this rush is that which is unlikely to be funded yet vitally important. An example of this type of research is the study of the value position of manaakitanga.

In the event of sponsorship of fundamental research areas being slow in coming, the approach of 'robbing Peter to pay Paul' will serve to advance this research at a slow pace. Savings from contract research funds will be well spent in this direction.

### **The participation of Maori in the MPRU**

Maori staff are a minority within the Psychology Department yet most are directly involved with the MPRU initiative. The ability of Maori staff to act as principal researchers, research partners or even consultants to research projects initiated or associated with the MPRU is limited given teaching commitments and other duties that are just as important. To offset this and as a necessary resource, an experienced Maori researcher has been appointed as research coordinator for the unit. To advance the building of an adequate and useful research base at a speed that will make an impact in the immediate future, more people and strategies are required. One possible way of negotiating around this issue is through initiating partnership research. This might be achieved through responding to requests from iwi/Maori, or establishing a research relationship with iwi/Maori or other Maori research units (eg., Centre for Maori Studies and Research at the University of Waikato). This will require ongoing networking and interaction to establish genuine relationships and realistic expectations with respect to the resources and energies that each party can bring to the research endeavour.

### **The Maori Community**

The most important stakeholder in this endeavour is the Maori community. The unit, its mission and goals has as an over-arching objective the desire to make a difference in the lives of Maori people, be they students, staff, prison inmates, children with disabilities, whanau who are brain damaged or mentally ill, Maori health promotion workers, Maori communities seeking to prevent the occurrence of youth suicides, iwi and hapu who are seeking ways to protect their cultural property, or simply Maori

individuals seeking to improve the nature of their relationships with their partners and children. To make a meaningful difference in the lives of Maori the MPRU must proceed in close working relationship with those communities that it wishes to make a difference to. Time must be spent inviting and initiating research relationships within the Maori world. This includes communities such as iwi and hapu groups, Maori community groups, taurahere groups, and specific Maori interest groups (eg., Maori Mental Health consumer and advocacy groups). Networking with other Maori involved in research activity is vitally important not just for sharing information and ideas but to be open to having what we do actively scrutinised and criticised.

It is incumbent upon those involved in the MPRU development to be aware of the inadequacies of the discipline and difficulties inherent in having such a venture based within the confines of an academic institution. Yet in some ways the positioning of the unit within a University affords protection, resources and support for a fledgling initiative that would otherwise be very difficult to initiate elsewhere.

### **Developing a New Generation of Researchers**

Teaching the content of psychology as a discipline, and teaching a range of methodological principles, does not, we believe, shape the critical skills of being an active researcher. This is particularly true for those graduate students who going to catch the excitement, enthusiasm, and energy of choosing a career in psychological research. There are a number of elements in training researchers that we hope the MPRU will be able to provide. We will briefly suggest what these are, not in any order of importance.

#### **Mentoring**

Almost all of us can point to someone in our lives who served as a mentor during a critical time of our academic or professional development. Mentors are not just lecturers or teachers or supervisors. Mentors share their own experiences, provide inside knowledge, show you the ropes, and help guide one in a variety of intangible skills related to academic activities. However in a department like Psychology at the University of Waikato, it is often very demanding for a relatively small number of Maori staff to provide this sort of mentoring. By having a research unit where a number of people who might be involved in projects (some on "soft money" from grants or contracts) come together, then the task of mentoring is distributed more equitably. Also, if the unit becomes the focus of doctoral research, then undergraduate students can gain the experience of being mentored by graduate students.

#### **Role models**

There is a great deal of research in social psychology which indicates that good role models are extremely important for the development of students. This is especially true for young people who might be in a minority, coming up through a traditional system. For a while this was true for women students, now it is particularly pertinent for Maori students. Maori staff in the Department serve as role models, but it is hoped that the Unit would be able to invite high-level visiting speakers and groups of scholars working on specific projects. Distinguished visitors to the Department quite often come

from overseas, and indeed we have School of Social Sciences funds to encourage just such visits. But it is necessary to encourage Maori scholars and practitioners to visit the Department, perhaps give a seminar or present a workshop, or merely meet with students. In this way they can provide inspiration and encouragement to students; some students really need to see that it can be done.

### **The "lab" concept**

Modern scientific research is no longer conducted by isolated bald male boffins working in remote labs. It is done by teams of individuals, collaborating and working together on some common issue or project. Often, in the natural sciences, and to some extent in psychology, these teams work in a specific laboratory that has a general direction.

Labs such as this have a number of functions. First the research is programmatic. That is to say the research builds systematically on the insights or findings of others who have been or are working on the same general problem. Unfortunately our current system of students picking Master's thesis topics means that students often have to start from scratch, work out new methods, and so on. As a result. Master's thesis research is often more of a pilot or preliminary nature, as students have to learn the hard way how to deal with practical problems and barriers. In programmatic research it is much more likely that the project will have significance and value because many of the problems in design and method will have already been worked out in the lab.

A second major function of the lab is that people working in it can share insights, practical knowledge about how to run a particular statistical programme, where to get supplies, how to track down articles on inter-library loan, or pass on a really useful article someone came across serendipitously. This kind of information can save individual students an enormous amount of time and save them from reinventing the wheel for each new project.

The third and perhaps most important function of a lab is social. It is a place where students can come and hang out, grab a cup of coffee, support a friend who is about to go off for an oral defence, hear about how an ethics proposal got returned, ventilate about the frustrations of dealing with the University bureaucracy. It is strongly hoped that the Unit will be able to serve these functions until such time as there are enough senior Maori researchers and academics in the Department to be running their own labs.

Dissemination: Journals. It might be noticed from the list of interesting research project mentioned, that the great majority of them are theses rather than publications in refereed journals. In any science it is the academic journals that serve as the gatekeepers of formal knowledge. Research is not really finished until it has been published in a form that is easily accessible to other researchers. There is increasing interest in Maori research from outside Aotearoa, and it is really only through journal publication that the work we do can be widely disseminated.

Increasingly Universities make decisions about promotion, work-loads, permanent employment, and a variety of other perks, on the basis of staff productivity, which is typically defined as articles in peer-reviewed journals. Yet we also know that rejection rate in top journals is high, and there is a great deal of additional know-how required in order to be able to get manuscripts published. A research Unit will hopefully be able to encourage publication in a variety of ways, from providing feedback on drafts of papers, to technical help with style and presentation, to the stimulus from more senior colleagues that publication is expected.

## **Dissemination - Conferences, Workshops, and the Web**

Although universities' research output may determine future funding, we all know that journal articles or book chapters do not represent the be-all and end-all of research dissemination. Conference presentations are particularly valuable, since one is then presenting to an audience directly, which is more comfortable for many people, and posters are a good vehicle for those who are a bit more shy. Conferences are a great place to learn about what others are doing, for networking, for making useful professional contacts, and so on. Conferences are a heady experience for a young researcher, and it will be priority of the MPRU to try to ensure that funds and resources are available for students to participate in professional level conferences--such as this one!

Exactly the same kind of personal dissemination can be achieved by the use of electronic communication. Many journals are now available electronically, and bulletin boards and chat groups are a valuable vehicle for students to find out critical information.

## **User-friendly knowledge**

As we have stressed elsewhere in this paper, knowledge that is not eventually used by someone is not of much value. It is particularly imperative, for reasons given, that Maori communities get the direct benefits of research outputs, even when the research is being done as part of the career development of a rising Maori researcher. Publishing one's work in technical journals, or going to professional conferences, are not good ways of getting knowledge back to ordinary people. Thus a focus of the Unit will be to encourage Maori students to disseminate their research findings in ways that can be truly valuable to potential users. This might mean popular magazines, workshops for community groups, serving as a consultant, helping some community programme evaluate the success of their project, and so on. These are all skills that Maori researchers in particular are going to need.

## **Getting Funded**

Our final category is to emphasise that many projects require outside funding for their successful completion. Thus writing grant proposals and obtaining financial support for one's research has become a really critical professional skill. As explained, it is hoped that the MPRU will be a centre that can attract such funding. This might mean in terms of support and help with applications, being able to put groups of scholars together, perhaps collaborating with non-Maori researchers in the Department, and being able to bid for research contracts, the tenders for which often have short turn-around times.

As mentioned already, we do not expect the MPRU simply to be devoted to trying to obtain money. However grants can provide valuable support. They can fund summer research assistantships for undergraduates, who then gain experience in one's lab. They can help buy special methodological or statistical expertise. They can provide appropriate reimbursement for people who might be supporting the project, such as cultural consultants. Thus gaining and managing outside funding for research projects is a critical professional skill that the new generation of Maori researchers is going to need.

These are for us some of the central elements of research training that can hopefully be stimulated by the MPRU. It is a tallish order and we have to be careful not to expect too much. But we think that the sort of excitement in meaningful research that we are trying to generate has its best chance of emerging in an organised, somewhat structured setting, where strong values related to a Maori kaupapa can form the foundation for increasingly sophisticated research training for students at a variety of different levels.

### References

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## Appendix 1: Maori and Psychology Research Unit Information sheet

The Maori and Psychology Research Unit situated within the Psychology Department at the University of Waikato is in the process of being established to provide a catalyst and support network for enhancing psychological research with a Maori kaupapa, and which has at its centre the psychological needs, aspirations, and priorities of Maori people. This is a relatively small, but new initiative. It is one that brings together activities that have been ongoing as well as an attempt to make a coordinated and positive response to the need for high quality research and research scholars in the Maori world. This will require close working relationships with a diversity of interest groups as well as the addressing of detail to ensure that the unit will prosper in the future.

### Rationale

- Within the Department of Psychology's strategy plan, one of the primary goals is to make us the "department of choice" for Maori wishing to study psychology. A dedicated research unit provides a clear focus for such efforts and provides a tangible example of the Department's and University's commitment.
- There has been an explosion of interest in developing Maori scholars skilled in social and behavioural scientific research, both as a national resource and to support the aspirations of Maori and iwi groups. With this recognition of the need has come the opportunity for practical financial support of research training for Maori social scientists.
- Maori staff and associated colleagues have recently been successful in obtaining external funding for research that has a clear Maori focus or direction. Additional research funding is now more readily available than ever in the past, but Maori staff and other interested academics are often too over-committed to pursue these funding opportunities.
- The Department now boasts a significant group of Maori students, research supervisors, and scholars interested in advanced degrees and research careers. There is thus the potential to bring together a large and active group of Maori social/behavioural scientists.

- The Psychology Department has historically had a distinct tradition of cross cultural and social psychological research related to cultural issues. With recent retirements and resignations, there is a risk of losing this unique focus. In the past, too, the research "agenda" related to culture has been set by Pakeha academics. A Maori-directed research unit assists in continuing work of cultural and ethnic significance, but with a direction and focus influenced by Maori scholars.
- As a centre of excellence, a Maori research unit in psychology would be able to give the Department and School a unique visibility complementary to other Maori research initiatives within and outside of the University.

The goals of the Unit are as follows:

1. To provide a support structure which encourages Maori research in psychology
2. To serve as a scholarly resource to support Maori research projects and to promote new research initiatives among undergraduate and graduate psychology students
3. To seek out new sources of research funding, respond to RFPs and tenders relevant to Maori issues, and to obtain continued external funding for psychological research for and by Maori
4. To promote the professional development of Maori researchers and to continue to develop the future leaders in Maori psychology
5. To serve as an academic and scientific resource for the Psychology Department by developing and maintaining materials and other resources that can be used by all Departmental staff (and graduate students) in ensuring greater degrees of bicultural content in their classes, research activities, and seminars
6. To facilitate outside lectures, and research seminars that will support the development of new projects and disseminate the work of scholars in the Unit
7. To demonstrate that the Psychology Department has a visible and meaningful commitment to Maori scholarship so that the Department is seen as supportive of Maori students interested in psychology and in applying psychological knowledge

*Inquires about the unit should be made to:*

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