NGĀ KANOHI HOU - IDENTIFYING AND EXPLORING THE ISSUES:
Experiences of an Intern

Bridgette Masters

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A Paper delivered to the Māori and Psychology Research Unit Student Symposium, 26th *August 1999, Waikato University*

Abstract

The current paper reflects upon the discovery of an intern from the post graduate diploma in community psychology programme (PGDipPsych (Com). The PGDipPsych (Com) is currently facilitated through the University of Waikato School of Arts and Social Sciences, Psychology Department. This journey of discovery is presented from the perspective of a Māori student who is employed in a mainstream public health organisation. The perspective of a person who is new to the workforce, and the "real world," who views the surrounding environment with a pair of fresh eyes.

This paper highlights the importance of the internship period as it supports the student who moves from a structured environment with a strong emphasis on theory, towards a competitive, semi structured environment that is driven by deadlines, budgets and contracts.

Factors identified are the demands of Māori communities on Māori health researchers, supportive versus competitive environments, the benefits and drawbacks of being based in a mainstream health organisation, and the future direction of Māori health research.

It is hoped that the current paper will encourage further discussion about the future direction of a diploma programme such as the PGDipPsychCom for Māori graduates of a New Zealand tertiary institution.

1.0 Background – where have I been?

My internship journey began one year ago. Looking back, it is clear, the journey has been a bumpy one. However, if the internship is viewed as small part of my life, this is really just the early stages. Bearing this in mind as you read this whole report, you will recognise that there are still many more journeys to be made. My internship journey began as any travel would – with planning.

1.1 Planning

Before embarking on the internship I had to plan. There were a number of issues to consider; where do I want to work, who do I want to work with, and for whom, will my partner be able to find employment in the same region, will the people I work for have similar or complimentary values to mine, does it really matter, or would I rather they had a different set of values, will the organisation allow me to undertake my internship while working?

Another issue I had to consider was my sense of worth. Within this was, how much of a contribution I thought I could make, what level of experience I had, what salary other interns in the same situation as me asked for. All the aforementioned considerations were factored in the negotiations of my salary,

contract and internship with potential employers.

Once the initial questions had been considered, I then had to reflect back upon them each time I applied for employment with an organisation. As planning was considered and decisions discussed and finalised, the journey of my internship began.

1.2 The journey

The first six months of my internship was with a market research company which proved to be a very bumpy ride for me and all the passengers I brought on board (my partner, whanau, peers and internship supervisor). When I reflect back upon this time, I feel as though a lot of learning was done by both the company and myself. It was a hard journey, but one I've survived and can remember as I move on.

2.0 Introduction – where am I now?

So far there have been numerous hurdles, on this journey. Many have been overcome. Others have not been so easy to overcome, however these have been identified as personal

development issues and stored as a point of reference for future endeavours.

The past three months has seen me complete the third quarter of my internship in a different organisation, a Māori health research group, and begin the journey home. Now that I am on the home straight the end is in sight. The end of what you wonder? My learning possibly? No. The end of my attachments to the University? No. I see this time of my life as the end of one short trip on the long journey of my life. This means that there is still plenty of time for more trips and learning experiences.

My work in a Mäori health research group has seen me develop my ideas and recognise my potential as a Mäori health researcher. There have been some minor challenges, however, none so bad as to push the boundaries of my identity. Challenges I face in my current job are time management, networking and negotiation. While already having these skills my current job has provided me with an opportunity to further develop these. At times I have been thankful that my organisational skills have allowed me some flexibility when unexpected events (eg. hui, teaching sessions, consultations) have arisen. Further the experiences I have gained undertaking

graduate study towards my masters degree (particularly my thesis year) has provided me with skills to effectively plan my time.

3.0   Method: the internship process

I have often wondered over the past year, what value the internship has had for me. Is this a means for monetary gain? I guess in a way I believe there is an indirect link to monetary reward. The internship leads to eligibility for registration as a psychologist. My assumption is that a registered psychologist would be viewed more favourably than a person who is not, hence increase job opportunties. However this is not the reason I joined the diploma programme, or why I decided to do the internship. I joined the diploma programme to up-skill myself, gain experience while continuing to have access to university supervisors, and because of my intention to establish a Māori research unit.

Some of the benefits I have found while undertaking the internship have been:

- recognising the value of reflection – such as the importance of taking the time to examine my surroundings, history of the organisation I work with, future aims, the political environment, the systems I operate in

- knowledge of the support of internship supervisors, other diploma students
- ability to access support from university lecturers, associates, resources, and
- the importance of recognising own value systems and how these factors influence my decisions in the workplace.

If I had not been enrolled in the diploma programme, I wonder whether I would have taken the time to reflect on my feelings and perceptions in such depth as I have when writing my internship reports (the bane of my life for the past year). I doubt that I would have considered in detail my own goals, or the organisation's structure, goals and history.

When I think about some of the scenarios described by health promotion workers, who have attended the evaluation workshops, I feel encouraged by my decision to enroll in the diploma programme. People I have spoken to, tell me stories of having to constantly try to "catch" up to funding organisation's requirements and expectations. Which means they do not have time to stop, plan and think about programme effectiveness because they are too busy trying to meet outputs set by funders. I have the impression that workers are constantly running to catch up, get on with the job, and not think about programme participants. They do not feel they have the time to reflect upon whether they are effective or efficient when implementing their programmes.

From my observations of other people in the workforce, there is a tendency amongst workers to delve into their jobs to complete the tasks at hand. Sometimes they forget to poke their heads up now and again to look around at what is happening around them. People then tend to find when they do look around that there have been a lot of changes which they are unprepared for.

Although I referred to the internship as an annoyance in my life, I do recognise the worth it has towards my professional development. Undertaking an internship demands a high level of resources such as; commitment, time, energy and finances. Not only must an intern undertake daily tasks in their chosen work environment, but then they have to commit all of the above resources outside of their normal work hours as well. Occasionally I have been lucky enough to have a few spare moments in my work to put some energy into my internship reports. Unfortunately, this

has not been as frequently as would have liked in recent months.

Given all the benefits I have noted about the internship process, it is difficult for me to note any drawbacks, or non-benefits. Within the process itself, there are sound theories and ideals as to how a supervisor could best support an intern. From my observations and understanding of the internship process, supervisors are available to provide a link into the university facilities and support services. However for each intern, I expect that the level of support needed varies at any given time (not only between interns, but also by each intern). Considering the amount of money that goes towards tuition fees, I believe this practice needs to be evaluated for its effectiveness for all internship students and especially its effectiveness for Māori. I understand Māori students enrolled in graduate courses have increased. So too, have the applications by Māori students enrolling in the diploma programme.

However, I believe that one full-time Māori staff member to provide support, guidance and experience to Māori diploma interns can be difficult when unexpected problems such as illness or bereavement occur, thus making it hard to access the appropriate level of support

from within the university. Something needs to be done to address this gap.

On a more positive note, technological advances have allowed for on-going contact in many ways. Access to telephones, email, faxes and standard mail are a great assistance, and range of options, for students wanting to access and locate university support.

While I acknowledge that the process is important, the execution could benefit from being examined and reviewed. This leads to the question "why am I doing this?" Although now might be the appropriate time to specifically answer this question, I think this report in it's entirety really answers it. However, to sum the answer in one sentence; to up-skill myself and because I recognise the potential that the internship, and the diploma, can provide for graduate students, in particular Māori students.

4.0 Issues: how do I deal with my work?

There have been both "upsides" and "downsides" to being employed in a Māori health research unit working within a mainstream organisation. The following section of the report shall explore both sides from the perspective

of a Māori woman, and that of a community psychologist trainee.

4.1 Entering the workplace

When I joined the Māori health research group there were areas of learning that I had not considered a high priority for my professional development. It was not until I was embedded in the current environment that included; a political environment, a health research – funding organisations, research groups environment, and a Māori health research center environment that I began to recognise these professional development prioritise.

I believe that each of the three environmental areas are inter-linked. For example, with health policy in general, focus/direction and priority are determined by health research and to a lesser extent funding organisations. Research funders determine their focus areas from the political environment and the findings of research previously conducted. Māori research centers are influential in terms of providing research direction and context around Māori health issues.

My introduction to these three environmental areas of health have been developed since joining Whāriki (the Māori health research unit). My level of awareness in these areas was minimal beforehand because I did not recognise how each influenced health research. My thesis, contracts undertaken after graduate study, and my work in the market research field, did not focus on health influences, but rather on specific communities of interest and their issues, rather than their reflection of a system.

Advantages

In this section I shall describe some of the areas that I see are advantages of being based in a mainstream organisation as a Mäori health researcher:

- *the systems in place*: Administration staff have experience in dealing with staff support and the university's administration system. The number of administrative staff (secretaries, librarian, accounts clerk) has been a real treat, because there is generally someone who is available to help in cases or urgency. Compared to when I was doing independent research, the support systems in place are a luxury for me.

- *the development of a cohesive unit*: Over the years the unit has become a team. While the unit has grown and staff have changed. The majority of staff has generally remained the same. Only recently (the last year) have people moved on from the organisation. My perception is that if people stay in an organisation for more than five years, they must really enjoy their job and the work environment. But I'm sure that at the same time they have become stagnant in their positions (in more than one way).

- *independence of the unit*: While the unit is based within the university, we are not dependent on the university for funding or resources. A unit that generates its own income and therefore does not come under threat when university 'cutbacks' are being discussed. This has allowed unit staff a level of security and certainty that some other university staff do not feel.

- *established reputation*: With such a long history of research in the field of alcohol, comes an established reputation. The Unit, and recently the Māori health research group have become known amongst other organisations as people to call for inquiries about research in the alcohol, evaluation and public health areas. Funding organisations refer providers to our office and people we have worked with in the past refer people to us.

- *supportive team*: that is experienced in the field, is visible as a unit, has established reputation. In comparison to being a Māori researcher on my own, I believe the positive aspects out-weigh the negative ones.

Drawbacks

There is one area I feel other organisations believe the Māori health research group is disadvantaged because of the partnership with a mainstream organisation. I refer to the drawback as "Uncle Tom syndrome." This syndrome involves;

- *a lack of confidence*: in us as Māori researchers purely because we are based in a Pākēhā organisation and work from an evaluation/community action "Pākēhā" perspective.

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♦ *jealousy and envy:* of the mahi we do and the networks we have. Some people would prefer to push us away rather than work with us. This is a rare occurrence, and probably involves dynamics/context I am not yet to fully informed of, but it does happen.

♦ *a derogatory opinion*: I have heard other Mäori people refer to us in a negative manner because of who we are and where we are based. While similar to the previous point, is slightly different in that, the opinion may not be based on jealously but on incorrect or bias information that has been passed on from others.

♦ *seen as "sell outs:"* People may consider us to be sellouts, because we do not have a strong tikanga focus and none of us are native speakers of the reo. While two of us did our bachelors degrees in Mäori, we do not consider our reo skills as terribly high. We no longer have a male member who is strong in tikanga and the reo.

Some organisations choose to view the above points as negative aspects of our group and as 'justifiable' reasons for not working with us. While I personally do not feel these are issues for me, I have identified them as drawbacks for the environment that I work in.

The structure of the Unit is that everyone works on their own projects. This can become frustrating and people become isolated from each other although they are in the same office. Currently, we have no strong, Māori male voice. This can be a factor for some Māori organisations. One of the difficulties we have tried to deal with has been the need to conduct interviews with Mäori males. For these, we have had to draw on past networks, it is not always easy to access people, because they often have their own work to get on with and have no time. There is a conscious drive to recruit other Māori researchers however, there is a no large pool to select from.

While many Mäori health providers recognise the skills and experience we can offer, others feel threatened by us because we work from what they see as a Pākēhā perspective. These groups turn towards other Mäori groups to evaluate their programmes. I do not have a problem with people having a right to choose who they work with. What I do have a problem with, is people referring to Māori health research groups as Uncle Toms because the central focus in our work is not 'tikanga' based.

Health research is a competitive environment, but I feel there is a point that I would not cross. Making another group sound bad to make our group look better is one of those points. We have offered to work alongside those groups who are tikanga focused, but some people have not yet taken up the opportunity.

Mäori organisations can be difficult towards us if they think we are a "sell-out" because we work from a Pākēhā perspective. Although many Mäori organisations recognise that funding agencies want programmes evaluated, and we can help them, there still seems to be a stigma attached. Consequently, sometimes (but not very often) I feel as though I do not fit in either world.

5.0   Discussion: Where is this leading me?

There is one vital question I ask myself. Can I be a culturally safe, professional and effective community psychologist?

I can. Being an effective community psychologist for me is about balance and growth. These are just the two aspects I have considered in my career and will discuss here. Not only do I want to see balance in my professional goals, but in my personal goals and between the

professional and personal as well. As I mentioned earlier, it is difficult for me to separate the two. So for me, it is essential that I find a balance and not become overwhelmed or over-committed in either aspect which could in turn cause health difficulties (i.e. stress, strain, burnout).

Balance involves recognising the "scale" that is operating. That there are power imbalances, and in giving more power to the less powerful, does that mean taking power away from the powerful? Or can it be purely an increase for one side. What I am trying to describe in a general sense here is about keeping an eye on the bigger picture, and recognising that changes can tip the scale of balance. In making change, I believe there is a need to consider the implications and effects change can bring about.

In terms of growth, I shall continue to develop my skills, knowledge, understanding, experience and networks so that I am better able to make informed decisions in my work. I do not think it is not necessary for me to develop all of the weaknesses I have identified in this paper immediately. The main area of concern for now, is that I identify my strengths and weaknesses and recognise why they are in place. The next step is for me to understand how

these effect me and what symptoms I exhibit as a result. Thus minimising negative effects. This means being able to accept/adapt to change. Because I feel, growth often means change. So, in terms of my short term development goals towards ensuring I am an effective community psychologist and an Māori community psychologist, I believe there is always room for growth.