

Counselling Māori:

Marae Encounters as a Basis for Understanding and Building Relationships

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Introduction

Counselling is largely about behaviour, patterns of thinking and emotional expression. While it has many more dimensions and is informed by several disciplines, the essential aim is to understand the human condition as it relates to relationship building, individuation, growth and development.

Since the modern study of psychology owes much to investigations by scientific researchers in western countries, many of the findings about behaviour, relationship building, cognition and affect are particularly germane to western cultures. However, they cannot necessarily be applied to all cultures. Assumptions about universality have long since given way to recognition of the impacts of ethnicity on patterns of behaviour, and there is an increasing realisation that the ways in which people think, feel and relate to each other are often a reflection of the culture within which they have been raised.

In contemporary times, most Māori participate in the prevailing New Zealand culture but also have links to Māori culture and its unique characteristics. Even if there has been a degree of cultural alienation, it is likely that wider family and whānau networks will have some ongoing engagement with Māori culture and Māori social networks. There is therefore some merit in asking whether Māori people have ways of thinking, feeling and behaving that derive from customary Māori world-views (M. Durie, 2001, pp. 69–94). Moreover, if that is the case, are there any implications for relationship counsellors?

In order to identify the attributes relevant to counselling that might be associated with Māori world-views, this paper analyses the encounters commonly entered into on a marae in modern times. It makes the assumption that those encounters point

toward Māori world-views as well as providing a basis for understanding distinctive ways of knowing, behaving and relating. The fact that most Māori are not regularly involved in marae activities may reduce the extent to which observations can be generalised and applied to all Māori. At the same time it is also likely that within the wider whānau other members of the family may be more regularly involved, so that the marae cultural ethos is not entirely removed from the conscious and unconscious minds of less involved relatives.

Marae encounters

Marae encounters can be conceptualised from several perspectives, including functional, structural and symbolic viewpoints. However, in this paper encounters are described as domains, broad conceptual zones within which distinctive psychological and behavioural activities occur (M. Durie, 1999). The contention is that marae encounters are primarily about negotiating relationships within a context of kawa, a way of doing things, that has both historic and contemporary significance.

Table 1: Marae encounters (source: M. Durie, 1999)

Elements of marae encounters	Domains
Te marae ātea	The domain of space
Ngā manu kōrero	The domain of time
Koha	The domain of the circle
Tangata whenua	Domains of mind and earth
Tapu, noa	The domain of safety
Whaikōrero	Metaphorical domains
Mana, manaakitanga	The domains of authority and generosity
Tauparapara, karakia	The domain of interconnectedness
Tūhonohono	The domain of synchronicity

Table 1 summarises a set of nine encounters and associated domains. While similar activities may be found in other settings, significance and understanding take on new forms when considered within the marae context. Of the several domains, the domains of space, time, boundaries, the land, tapu, metaphors and the circle are particularly relevant to counselling.

Te marae ātea: the domain of space

Essentially a marae is structured around an open space. At one end can be found the host group, at the other, the visitors. The physical space is necessary in order to explore

relationships and establish boundaries, usually through the process of *whaikōrero*. According to the convention adopted at a particular *marae*, a series of speakers will use the space to variously challenge, inquire, connect and inform. If all goes well and there is mutual acceptance of the terms laid down on the *marae*, the space will be crossed so that both parties can assume close physical proximity. In effect the space has been necessary to clarify the terms under which the parties will come together, and to identify both the differences and the similarities between the groups.

In modern times there is usually a convivial relationship between the parties even before the domain of space is encountered, but the rituals that occur nonetheless offer the opportunity to reiterate the distinctions and, if appropriate, to highlight the commonalities. The important point is that the use of space is a necessary accompaniment of encounters, providing not only physical territory but also the psychological space necessary to rehearse identity and to confirm the relationship between self and others.

Ngā manu kōrero: the domain of time

On a *marae*, the measurement of time depends less on being punctual and more on allocating time for necessary activities. Speakers on a *marae* epitomise this distinction. Regardless of any prearranged timeframe or schedule, they are inclined to use time to convey essential messages and they place considerable importance on speaking until they are satisfied that the right messages have been conveyed. While some might argue that there is a tendency to disregard time, the more obvious point is that time has been allowed to complete the necessary protocols to the required standard. Time is ordered according to the sequence of events, and speakers set the pace.

Sometimes the term ‘Māori time’ is used, disparagingly, to refer to people who are late. In that interpretation being on time is seen as more important than attending to first things first. In fact, however, ‘Māori time’ is more about prioritising time than being late.

Koha: the domain of the circle

Although the *marae* is more often rectangular than circular, the activities and symbolism reflect a circular pattern of exchanges. A good example can be found with the system of *koha*. While the practice of leaving a gift (in modern times usually money) on the *marae* tends to be associated with helping to cover expenses, it is more about relationships than costs incurred. There are two aspects to the *koha* practice. The first is the desire of a visiting group to present a gift that will encourage the development of a relationship with the hosts. The second aspect is the acceptance of the gift and by implication the confirmation of a relationship. Were the gift not accepted, or

if it were returned, it would be a clear sign that an ongoing relationship was not envisaged or desired. The notion of a circle is embodied in the koha, and it would be consistent with the symbolism for the koha – or its equivalence – to be returned when the two parties met again. In short, the nature of a gift, in Māori eyes, is less about the generosity of the donor than the obligations placed on the receiver (E.T. Durie, 1986).

Apart from the koha practice, other marae encounters also reflect the circle as a way of interacting. The order of speakers, for example, often proceeds in a circular fashion, encompassing the whole marae. Within the whare-nui itself there is often a circuitous route taken by speakers, especially when farewelling a deceased person.

Reciprocity is an integral part of Māori custom and philosophy that continues to guide thinking and interaction in contemporary times (Metge, 1976, pp. 68–70). A circular pattern is evident and the goal is to create wider ripples so that inclusiveness can be at least considered.

Tangata whenua: the domains of mind and earth

Critical to marae encounters is the notion of tangata whenua. Literally people (of the land, the term recognises a group who have peculiar rights and obligations on a particular marae. Sometimes tangata whenua is used as if it were synonymous with Māori people, but more accurately it refers to a group of Māori within a particular locality or region who, by reason of a continued presence over time, have acquired special status. While political and territorial rights form part of that status, of greater significance is the bond they have with their land and the wider natural environment.

The bond between people and earth features strongly in marae encounters and forms an important part of identity for individuals and groups. In this regard, a personal psychology is closely attuned to the land and the wider physical environment, and at a collective level a tribe is often referred to by a geographic feature within its terrain. Where there is landlessness, there may well be consequences that go beyond economic considerations to include psychological and emotional impacts.

Tapu, noa: the domains of safety

Although the custom of tapu and noa is no longer widely applied, it remains a powerful force in marae encounters. Essentially, any person, object or event that might possibly impose a risk is regarded as tapu until it is clear that the risk ceases to operate. Once any possibility of risk has been eliminated the situation becomes noa, safe. Largely as a result of missionary interpretations, tapu has been equated with sacredness, and its usefulness as a code for conduct has tended to be replaced by a fear of divine retribution. While there is a spiritual component to tapu the more practical

implications should not be overlooked. Te Rangi Hiroa drew a connection between the use of tapu and the prevention of accidents or calamities, implying that a dangerous activity or location would be declared tapu in order to prevent misfortune (Te Rangi Hiroa, 1954, pp. 358–9).

Marae visitors who are aware of the significance of tapu usually demonstrate a cautious attitude and are at pains to avoid any action or comment that could be misconstrued as an intended slight on their hosts. Built into their world-views is the notion that risks are high until otherwise proven. Efforts to move too closely or to be overly friendly before the terms of a relationship have been negotiated are not encouraged. Indeed, much of the marae protocol is aimed at determining whether there is risk and how risk might best be handled.

Whaikōrero: metaphorical domains

Central to a marae encounter is the rehearsal of whaikōrero by chosen orators. Speakers act on behalf of either hosts or visitors and have the unenviable task of ensuring that the group they represent is not disadvantaged. As often as not, the more practised orators deliver their addresses with a masterly mix of directness and metaphor (Mahuta, 1974, pp. 24–5). Metaphor allows for comparisons to be made, a wider context to be established and allusions to be suggested, avoiding a micro-focus and positioning the subject within a broader perspective.

In addition, it is now usual for whaikōrero to be followed by waiata, a song or chant that adds meaning to the address and further identifies the speaker or the speaker's group (Salmond, 1976, p. 175). Like aspects of whaikōrero, the waiata is rich in metaphor and contains numerous references to historical, geographical or literary associations. While at first glance there may be little direct link to the matter under discussion, the metaphorical dimension shifts the focus onto another plane. This is accompanied by a psychological shift so that meaning is transformed beyond the purely functional to acquire a broader philosophical connection.

A Māori counselling framework

Five recurring themes that have relevance to counselling can be identified in marae encounters. First, understanding comes from appreciating the relationship between the individual, the group and the wider environment. The direction of Māori thought and feeling attempts to find meaning in bigger pictures and higher-order relationships.

Second, although integration and association across wide-ranging spheres are important, boundaries also play a large part in psychological organisation. There are clear distinctions, for example, between tapu and noa, tangata whenua and manuhiri,

right and left, first and last, clean and unclean, food and water. Personal boundaries are also observed, so that despite physical closeness (as during the hongi) individual uniqueness is retained.

Third, marae encounters reflect an underlying orderliness. Order is apparent not only in physical arrangements but also in the sequence of proceedings, the progression of thoughts, and the way in which time is allocated. Often orderliness is equated with rigidity and a lack of innovative thinking. Although that can be the case, it is also clear from marae observation that it need not be. Patterns of thinking and behaviour provide a matrix within which there is room for elaboration and creativity, and at the same time orderliness reduces opportunities for misinterpretation (Mahuta, 1974, pp. 27–39).

A fourth theme concerns patterns of thought. Māori generally shun directness, preferring a type of communication that alludes to but does not necessarily focus on a detailed point. This seemingly peripheral approach can be confounding and is sometimes described as puzzling, especially if the central point cannot be deciphered. However, the clues to meaning are found less in an examination of component parts (of speech, behaviour) and more in imagery, higher-order comparisons and long memories. Psychological energy moves outwards; it is centrifugal rather than centripetal.

Identity is a fifth theme. Māori identity, at least within a marae setting, is linked not only to ancestral descent but also to the land, and to wider environments well beyond human influence. Individuation is not the sole task for establishing a secure identity; identity is also a function of conscious and unconscious connections with the environment, with the group, and with those departed.

Implications

The intention in this paper has been to raise the question of a distinctive Māori approach to relationships and the processes involved when relationships are negotiated. Counsellors do not often consider the significance of time, space, boundaries and circularity to the counselling process. But in so far as marae encounters provide a glimpse into Māori ways of thinking, feeling and behaving, and the ways in which relationships are negotiated and strengthened, there are some insights that might usefully be applied to counselling. Importantly, clients need space before they can have confidence in a counsellor. Cramped office conditions or physical closeness before the terms of the relationship have been established may lead to aborted engagement. Underlying the comfort of distance is the knowledge that retreat is possible if the encounter is unpleasant or unsafe.

An even greater challenge is to allocate time according to client needs rather than institutional timetables. Set timeframes (e.g. ‘the forty-minute hour’) assume that clients are ready and able to relate according to the clock even if the process of engagement has been inadequate. Marae sequences revolve around generosity with time and a readiness to abandon the agenda if more time is needed to make a point or endorse a sentiment.

Observing boundaries should be fundamental to the process of counselling for the protection of both parties. The boundary between counsellor and client is necessary for a good outcome and creates a measure of safety, especially for clients who might otherwise mistake friendliness for encroachment. Professional boundaries, inter-generational boundaries, gender boundaries and boundaries between the living and the dead enter into counselling processes and deserve respect. Efforts to overcome diffidence by being overly ready to embrace or diminish boundaries may well lead to withdrawal and a retreat into silence.

Further, although the language of counselling tends to be one of carefully chosen words and precise connotations, with attention to subtleties of meaning, there is another style of thinking that places less emphasis on precision and more on the pictures that words can create. Metaphorical language inhabits another space where meaning is derived from relationships between ideas, and the circumstances within which those ideas are elaborated. Indirectness may be seen as more expressive and more telling than the employment of directness and the labelling of emotions without consideration for the context of emotion. It may also account for some of the reasons why Māori are less inclined to pursue subjects where understanding is based on an analysis of smaller and smaller parts without a parallel opportunity for creating wider domains to contextualise the detail.

Finally, a lesson to be learned from marae encounters is that people who are entering into a relationship, or renegotiating a relationship, do not always distinguish themselves – or each other – from the groups they represent, or with whom they have close affinities. As often as not, regardless of who the faces of the day might be, wider group associations enter into the relationship so that people react as much to those who are not present (except in memories, past encounters) as to those who are visible. The opportunities, risks and responsibilities extend outwards, adding a dimension that can often seem to cloud a relationship. Nor in many situations can it simply be assumed that there is a prime or fundamental relationship which is necessarily the ‘most’ important. Unless those wider obligations are recognised and incorporated into discussion, the full nature of the relationship might never be understood.

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