

Putangitangi: A Model for Understanding the Implications of Maori Intra-Cultural Differences for Helping Strategies

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Abstract

Recent literature on counselling minority culture clients has advocated culturally appropriate strategies and has seemed to assume intra-cultural homogeneity. This article puts forward a model, based on a Maori metaphor, to assist understanding of differences in ethnic identification among Maori and looks at the implications for helping strategies.

Prior to the arrival of the Pakeha, the meanings Maori made of life events were uncomplicated by issues of ethnic identity. Understandings of difference were constructed in relation to iwi. Since colonisation cultural meanings cannot be considered without taking into account the relationships between cultures which have been forged in the fires of colonialism and post-colonial European domination of indigenous cultures. For contemporary Maori (as for any other group, including Pakeha) the formation of cultural identity has to be accomplished in this context. But despite a pattern of cultural domination which is common to all inhabitants of Aotearoa, there exists a range of positions in which people may find themselves in relation to this pattern as a result of different life experiences. Specifically cultural meanings may vary as a result of differences in the patterns of identification with the indigenous and the dominant culture. Putangitangi as a waka can help us here.

Putangitangi is a colourful duck which is indigenous to Aotearoa. Its natural habitat may

include four distinct domains: the sky, the sea, the land and the rivers of Aotearoa. At any one time Putangitangi may inhabit any one of these domains but as a bird it may move with ease from one habitat to another. Its natural characteristics as a species grant it the flexibility to traverse with comfort the boundaries between sky, sea, land and river. At any one time we may observe Putangitangi and see it busy living out its destiny in one habitat, without conceiving of the whole range of its habitat possibilities or of how these might fit together in a life. These characteristics make Putangitangi useful as a metaphor of our understanding of Maori world views.

Let us conceive of a circle divided into four quadrants (see Figure 1, after Lee, 1992). Let each quadrant represent a different habitat in which Putangitangi may be found. Let the vertical axis represent the influences of the dominant culture on a person's thinking about themselves. And let the horizontal axis represent the strength of their ethnic identity on their thinking about themselves.

In the top right hand quadrant we have those upon whom the dominant culture has had an extensive influence. Their traditional cultural background has been marginal to their identity formation. Those in this quadrant form their identity from the strength of the sky.

In the bottom left-hand quadrant, we have those upon whom the dominant culture has had little influence in their identity formation. They stand clearly on the ground of their traditional culture. They form their identity from the strength of the land.

In the top left-hand quadrant we have those upon whom the dominant culture has had a distinct influence. They also identify strongly

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with their traditional cultural meanings. They move from one to the other, from the land to the water, and form their identity from both. The habitat that suits them is the river.

In the bottom right-hand quadrant we have those upon whom the dominant culture has had little effect except to disqualify their experience. But neither do they have strong ties to their traditional culture. Who they are has been formed by marginal influences from both cultures. They are adrift on the sea and open to many influences that might offer some assistance in defining an identity, from popular culture to criminal activity, from the dole queue to the McDonald's advertisement. They may not have decided whether to build their identity in the dominant culture or in their traditional culture or they may have rejected both cultures or fear rejection from both directions.

Putangitangi moves from one source of strength to another. During the daytime it may explore the sky, the river, the sea. At night-time it returns to the land. The sky enables Putangitangi to expand into broad unlimited vistas. The sea stretches out to distant horizons and has no boundaries, but it does have currents and storms and dangerous waves. The river is defined. It follows a course, and flows sometimes swiftly and sometimes slowly. The land is constant. It provides opportunity for nesting. It nourishes plants that would establish strong roots. It receives the dead.

Support for the existence of divergence of cultural identity among Maori can be found in the 1991 New Zealand Census (Te Puni Kokiri, 1993). In response to census questions people identified themselves as Maori in three different ways. Some said that they had some "Maori ancestry" (511,947). A smaller number identified themselves as belonging to the "NZ Maori" ethnic group and/or also to another ethnic group (433,080). Those who identified themselves as belonging solely to the NZ Maori ethnic group were a smaller number again (321,396). The difference between these figures is enough to suggest that there is variation in ethnic identification. There are some who acknowledge Maori ancestry, for example, but who do not identify themselves as Maori. Some

have dual ethnic identification. And no doubt there are some who might have Maori ancestry but either did not acknowledge it or did not know about it.

If these concepts have use to the way people in New Zealand think about cultural identity, then it may be useful to apply them to a particular area of investigation, namely that of helpseeking behaviour and models for helping persons in distress. Support for Putangitangi can be found here too, in the literature on ethnicity and counselling.

Cultural appropriateness of helping styles is an issue in the counselling literature both in New Zealand (Durie, 1989; Barrett-Aranui, 1988; Smith, 1989) and overseas (Sue, 1988; Nwachuku and Ivey, 1991; Tomlinson-Clarke and Cheatham, 1993; etc). There has been a tendency to assume that all Maori should be lumped together and included in the same "culturally appropriate" basket when considering helping styles to meet counselling needs. However with Putangitangi's assistance we can start to see that this might lead to inappropriate assumptions about optimal strategies for counselling provision. Assumptions that a Western model of counselling is inappropriate for Maori or assumptions that a traditional Maori helping model is the only way to meet Maori needs for counselling both seem to ignore the complexity of cultural identification indicated by Putangitangi.

Sue (1988) has shown that there are problems with understanding the issue of ethnic match and its value to the helping relationship. A simplistic attribution of ethnic identification and a matching of counsellor and client on this basis has not proved very useful to an understanding of the outcomes of a counselling experience (at least in the largely American evidence his review draws from). Although this is a counter-intuitive finding, Sue suggests that it can be explained by noting that there are too many complicating factors for a clear picture to emerge. Some of these factors are described as individual differences and some as intra-group divergence of experience of ethnic issues. Sue's conclusion is that ethnic match of client and counsellor is a "distal" variable and that far more "proximal" is

the area of "cultural meanings." Such meanings may be both discovered in and continually created by ways of behaving, values expressed and in experiences. He warns that it is presumptuous to assume that any one aspect of cultural meaning is present in a counsellor or a client as a result of their ethnic identification. He calls for research that addresses the issue of the relationship of cultural meanings and cross-cultural understandings, rather than straight ethnicity, to therapeutic outcomes. Similar conclusions were drawn by recent researchers into the judgments counsellors make about clients in relation to ethnic bias (Tomlinson-Clarke and Cheatham, 1993.) After failing to detect ethnic bias they concluded that simple designations of ethnicity were not enough and they urged researchers in future to focus on:

". . . Identifying and incorporating into the research design cultural and psychosocial factors that influence sociocultural distance between counsellor and client. . . such as counsellor and client ethnicity and gender-related attitudes, levels of racial awareness/consciousness, racial/ethnic identity. . ."

For Maori, Putangitangi can make possible new understandings in this area. It can serve as a conceptual basis for the research Sue is calling for. A case example may help to illustrate this point. Graham (not his real name) comes to see a counsellor because he "needs to talk to somebody." A friend who was staying with him has become involved in an affair with his wife. He found out and became very angry with his friend leading to a fistfight on the street. His wife was witness to this fight. Then he threatened to abuse his wahine-hoa and was astonished when she left with her children for a women's refuge centre. He decides to seek out the help of a counsellor.

The counsellor, who is Maori, begins working with him out of a Western model which involves asking Graham to look at the rational basis of the thoughts which are producing the rage that he is experiencing, along the lines of Rational Emotive Therapy (Ellis, 1987). Graham is not enthusiastic. He talks about wanting to kill his former friend. Eventually he shakes his head and tries to close the conversation, "No

more talk. The time for talking is past. It's time for action."

The counsellor at this point realises that what he has been trying to do is not working. He decides to shift to using traditional concepts. He is aware that Graham has good command of the reo and his conversation so far has indicated an easy familiarity with Maori values and concepts. He seems to identify most with Putangitangi living on the land.

The counsellor, in search of unique outcomes (White, 1991) asks Graham how he has dealt with violence in the past. Specifically, does he hit his wife?

"No," says Graham.

"So your wife is tapu as whare tangata. Well how do you get around angry feelings without hitting her?"

"I recite a karakia." And he recites the karakia for the counsellor. He reports how the ritual helps the anger to subside and makes him noa again.

The counsellor asks him to apply this process to the man he is angry with. He starts to swallow hard. He finds it difficult. He enters a state of some confusion rather than the certainty about action that he felt a few minutes earlier. At the end of the counselling session he comments that the korero has helped to take the sting out of the anger. He still needs to talk further and accepts a referral to a Maori men's group which seeks to tautoko people like Graham who are working through the influence of violence in their lives.

What has happened is that the counsellor has found access to some personal meanings that have enough cultural resonance with him to help him start the process of reconstructing his thinking in ways that might be less dangerous for his partner, his former friend and himself.

However, for other Maori without his background, the concepts of tapu and noa and the karakia might not have resonated so strongly. For them approaches grounded in Western models might have had more impact (see Figure 2). Putangitangi encourages counsellors to affirm people wherever they are, whatever habitat is home for them right now. It also may offer people choices about which direction to move.

Understanding this, a helper can use this model in several ways. Putangitangi may be used

as an assessment aid to assist the helper in understanding the context of a problem. For example, as the counsellor did with Graham, the helper can take some time to think about where Putangitangi is currently dwelling: land, sea, sky or river. For Graham Putangitangi was clearly on the land and the counsellor was able to shift strategies in response.

Putangitangi may be useful in identifying sources of support in finding solutions. Graham's counsellor was able to use the words tapu and noa to access his client's "indigenous knowledge" (White, 1991) which in turn makes available additional resources for addressing the problem.

Putangitangi may be used as an aid to understand the counselling process. Graham's counsellor was able to stop and think about the lack of connection between the counselling approach and the client's present position and to shift strategies. Putangitangi can be thought of in this sense as enhancing cultural empathy. A supervisor may use Putangitangi to help a counsellor broaden their range of options in working with a particular client.

Putangitangi does not need to exist as a model solely for the counsellor to refer to. It may be offered as a "take" by the helper for the client to consider in order to understand some internal conflicts. It may be introduced as a visual aid to assist the client to find available sources of strength and support.

There are some cautions however for counsellors attempting to use Putangitangi in a counselling context. Firstly they must be aware of their own cultural identity and be conversant with others, if they are not to continue blindly the process of colonisation.

Secondly they must accurately assess their client's cultural "habitat". However we do not advocate an assessment process that places the counsellor in the position of expert making judgments about the client. We prefer a much more collaborative assessment in which the counsellor and the client both participate. Thirdly the counsellor needs to have a working familiarity with indigenous and western models to draw from in the healing process. In saying this we are aware of the gaps in the availability of some of the indigenous healing models and the need for

research in this area.

Fourthly, we recognise that Putangitangi allows people an element of choice about their cultural identification. But we do not want to imply, or to encourage counsellors to imply to their clients, that such choice is unlimited and that everyone can make a distinctively individual decision about their ethnic identity. Each individual cannot create their own distinctive culture. Such a suggestion would cloud understandings of bi-culturalism and break cultures up into fragments. Alba (1990) has warned about the dangers of implying that ethnic identification is an individual choice. He says that this idea can weaken ethnic solidarity and group formation.

Rather we would suggest that there are a limited number of cultural patterns and we have some choice about how we position ourselves in relation to them. In this way we can create personal meanings with reference to culturally ascribed meanings. Cultural traditions influence us and so do the patterns of post-colonial cultural dominance. Putangitangi seeks to explain some of the differences that result.

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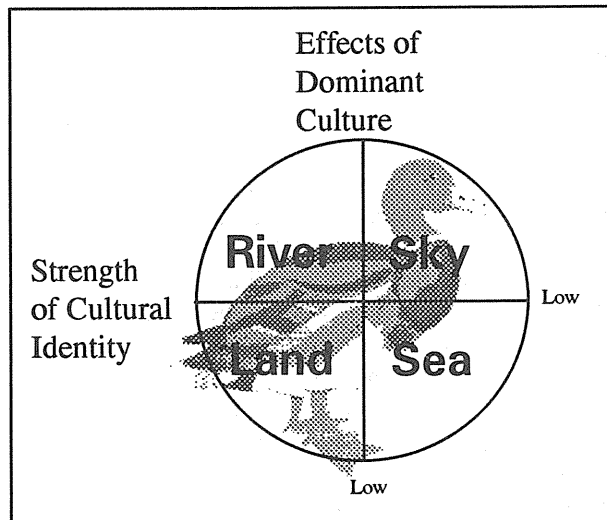


Figure 1. Putangitangi and its habitat

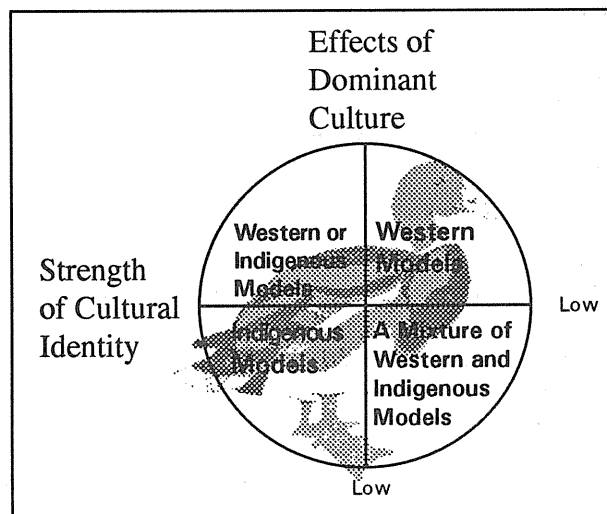


Figure 2. Putangitangi and Helping Models