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## From Policy to Practice: Reflections on working across cultural borders in tertiary education



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### Abstract

*This paper describes the processes and challenges presented when Pakeha lecturers supervised a research project undertaken by Maori and Pacific nursing students in a New Zealand Bachelor of Nursing programme. It reflects on the reality of translating institutional policies from paper to practice and is situated in the framework of the Treaty of Waitangi and cultural safety. Cultural safety is a nursing concept that focuses on power in health-care relationships. People involved in the project experienced degrees of vulnerability in different cultural contexts, in terms of cultural identity, personal, professional and cultural values and beliefs, nursing and psychology knowledge and academic and institutional policies and practices. Culture is used in a broad sense and not confined to ethnicity. Various issues encountered during the project are identified, and examples of difficult experiences discussed. The paper concludes that working across broad cultural borders requires working with the complexities of multiple realities and discourses.*

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This paper describes a research project carried out within a framework of the Tiriti of Waitangi and cultural safety and then reflects on some critical aspects of this research and the experience of two lecturers, one a psychology lecturer, the other a nursing lecturer. The psychology lecturer was the research group supervisor. The project was undertaken by a group of Maori and Pacific nursing students and involved carrying out a qualitative health research project with Maori and Pacific people as the participants. The students named their project the Hauora Pacific Smokefree Project. The group amalgamated assessments in nursing professional practice, health promotion, and psychology courses in the final semester of a Bachelor of Nursing degree and formed part of a student assessment project.

Issues in day to day work with students from Maori and Pacific cultures and lecturers from Pakeha culture of European heritage will be discussed from a cultural safety perspective. In reflecting on this process, it seemed that the work was not “cross cultural” but rather work at, or just over, the borders of cultures. Culture in this sense draws on notions of culture other than those

as defined in anthropological frameworks and focuses on power relations. Culture in cultural safety is used in a broad sense and applies to any person who may differ from the nurse because of socio-economic, status, age gender sexual orientation migrant/refugee status, religious belief or disability (New Zealand Nursing Council Guidelines for Cultural Safety, the Treaty of Waitangi, and Maori Health in Nursing and Midwifery Practice, 2002; Ramsden, 1997; Lynam & Young, 2000). Thus working at the borders of cultures has more to do with understanding power relationships in a socio-political context rather than understanding cultural practices of others. Some Maori students while they identified as Maori, their life experience did not necessarily mean they experienced being Maori in the context of being part of a cultural system of shared beliefs and practices. Maori and Pacific students involved in the project “self identified”, but they were also representative of other cultural differences as defined by the above.

Cultural safety was developed primarily by Maori nurse educators and Maori nurses (Hill, 1991; Ramsden 1990, 2001, 2002). The need for cultural safety came from concerns that in New Zealand both the education system and the health system were failing to meet the educational needs of Maori nursing students, and the needs of Maori who were using health services. Over time the notion of cultural safety has been further developed to embrace the need for nurses to deliver culturally safe care for all New Zealanders (Nursing Council of New Zealand, 1996, 2002).

Current dimensions of cultural safety are derived from and informed by the work of Irihapeti Ramsden, a key Maori nurse activist and educator responsible for the continued development of cultural safety concepts. There are three dimensions to cultural safety. First, is a preparedness by health professionals to examine their own cultural values and attitudes, and in particular how these may affect the relationship between people in a health care setting. Second, is an understanding of the impact on the social and economic lives of Maori people, of the Treaty of Waitangi and its associated, historical, political and social processes, and the third is demonstrable flexibility in helping relationships between culturally different people (Ramsden, 2002; Nursing Council of New Zealand, 2002).

Cultural safety addresses power in the context of unequal relationships, especially when nurses are working with people who are marginalised within an institution because of race, gender, class or ability. Cultural safety is said to be operating when the person receiving health care feels themselves to be receiving culturally appropriate care: they feel culturally safe (Ramsden, 2002). In this study the cultural safety principle of care being delivered in a way identified as culturally appropriate was applied to the student /teacher research relationship.

Power in the context of health care and in this case the student/lecturer research relationship operates at a personal, professional and institutional level. Foucault (1980) identifies power as being addressed at the point of interaction between people rather than at an institutional level. Allen (1996) identifies power as also operating at a macro level, and suggests that power needs to be viewed with a focus on the background - on relational power: “cultural meanings, practices and larger structures of domination that make up the context within which a particular power relation is able to emerge’ (p.267).

Whilst cultural safety makes power visible at an interpersonal level primarily, (the nurse/student/lecturer as agents exercising power), structures of domination are also considered, for it is within structures (in this case, a tertiary educational institution) that interpersonal and interprofessional networks of power are made visible.

In the research project, cultural safety concepts were familiar to the study group, and it was expected that issues of power would emerge and become visible. By undertaking the research project, students and lecturers were faced with managing their own personal and professional knowledge about power in the context of cultural safety. As well as this, the supervising lecturer

had to manage working in an institutional environment with little support for carrying out such a project with a student group. The project involved working with multiple realities and experiences where personal, cultural and professional discourses came into dialogue with one another. At times these were contradictory and the supervising lecturer had to trust and assist the group with working through these contradictions and complexities. Popkewitz and Brennan (1998) suggest that in a critical teaching environment, different realities compete for validation and resist negation. Dialogues around these realities shape, alter, and transform the lecturer-student relationships as well as the student-student relationship. The Hauora Pacific smokefree project brought into focus various points of power and different realities in the research process and raised opportunities for conflict between agency (lecturers and research students) and structure (institutional gate keeping policies) in trying to achieve a positive outcome for all concerned.

Since the late nineteen eighties educational institutions in New Zealand have been required to demonstrate how they meet a commitment giving effect to government designed principles inherent in the articles of the Tiriti o Waitangi. Implicit in the Tiriti of Waitangi are concepts of equity and partnership (Ministry of Health, 1995). The articles set up a framework for partnership in the following ways. Article one allowed for the setting up of British Government to allow settlement of British immigrants. Article two guarantees Maori authority over Maori resources and Article three ensures state protection and citizenship for Maori.

In 1999 Wellington Polytechnic, now Massey University had policies in place identifying ways the institution was to implement the articles of the Tiriti of Waitangi. However putting those policies into practice at the workplace level was not a simple matter, as this paper shows. It is important to note that for policy development in tertiary institutions today, it is more common to implement Tiriti of Waitangi policy by applying Tiriti of Waitangi principles rather than the Articles. The Hauora Pacific smokefree project was carried out in the context of the policy as it related to the Tiriti of Waitangi articles one, two and three and in terms of partnership, protection and participation as defined by the Royal Commission on Social Policy (1988).

The group was a self-selected group of Maori and Pacific students, thus another point of complexity. Article two of the Tiriti of Waitangi addresses issues of self determination for Maori thus the inclusion of Pacific students in such a project would seem to be incongruent within the framework of the Tiriti of Waitangi. However, within a broader framework of partnership, protection and participation, the inclusion of Pacific students could be seen as consistent and in harmony with the Tiriti of Waitangi. The principles draw attention to the need for all New Zealanders, in this case Pakeha lecturers and Pacific students to be able to work in partnership and express their citizenship moderated by article two. This raises the question of how culturally mixed research groups are managed without one group feeling marginalised. In this group there seemed to be enough shared experience of marginalisation from mainstream structures to create a climate of understanding between students. The coming together of both Maori and Pacific students was partly shaped by time and programme constraints. Both groups of students found they could work with each other in a way that was compatible with their understanding of the Tiriti of Waitangi and their research goals. It could be argued that by focusing on Maori and Pacific students, the Pakeha lecturers were racialising the project by excluding Pakeha students. Could a similar project have been carried out with Maori and Pakeha students? Probably not, because of the power imbalances inherent in the historical relationship between Maori and Pakeha. Some Pakeha students felt that the project privileged Maori and Pacific students over other 'cultural groups', that is, theirs. This could have been interpreted as backlash. However as part of cultural safety education nursing students are assisted in developing an awareness of the need for self-determination within identified groups. Whilst this may be understood at an intellectual and academic level, personal feelings of exclusion and privileging are inevitable.

As the project evolved it became clear that there were issues related to cultural-border work that

the institutional structure was not designed to deal with. These issues highlighted gaps between policy and practice. For example, there is a requirement for all grant money spent to have matching receipts. However with Maori, when money is gifted as “koha” to an individual or group who may be providing a service, it is entirely inappropriate to require a receipt. In addition, the Hauora Pacific study group meetings involved sharing food. These were mostly in timetabled lecture times and in classrooms. Two problems arose from that. First, the institution balked at contributing to what they saw as food for students, whereas the group saw this as an opportunity to interact as Pacific people would; and second, classrooms were designated “no food or drink” zones.

It is important to note that whilst many of the issues focused on concerns of Maori students, the Pacific students could mainly identify with them, keeping in mind that the Pacific students did not share a common culture. There were few Maori staff members to provide support for Maori students and no Pacific staff members at the time. Managing and working through issues such as these – some seemingly trivial and some with major consequences, brought into focus different realities and discourses shaping the process of the project. This resulted in all people involved in the process being vulnerable in different cultural contexts, personally, professionally, academically and institutionally.

The first problematic issue surfaced before the project really began. It was the issue of the recruitment of student-researchers for a project with Maori and Pacific focus and Pakeha supervision. Should all enrolled students be able to elect the project as their health promotion assignment, or only Maori and Pacific students? Coupled with this was the perennial challenge of how to identify who among a culturally and socially diverse student population is Maori or Pacific without resorting to a prejudicial stereotype such as skin colour, or physical features.

To resolve this we took a multiple route approach: an open invitation was issued to an information *hui* for Maori and Pacific students in lecture time; a Maori student who was a recognised student representative within a professional nursing body, was asked to spread the *hui* invitation within the Maori student network; lecturers mentioned the *hui* to students they “knew” to be Maori or Pacific people; and notices were placed on targeted student notice boards. This process worked well except for some brief resistance, as mentioned before, from some non - Maori who expressed concern unequal opportunities. However, in the context of cultural safety and power relations this is to be expected and this was managed in such a way that the resistant students’ voices were heard and concerns worked through with discussion and expression of feelings. At the preliminary meeting – oral information *hui* – more students than expected attended. They completed their own cultural identity “vetting” bringing to the fore that there were different realities and discourses on culture. For example for some Maori students this was their first contact with exploring their own cultural identity. For Pacific students, although they were from different Pacific backgrounds they were more ‘at home’ with their Pacific identities. It was also apparent that the supervisor’s role was going to be unpredictable and different in terms of power and control from usual lecturer / student stances. In reality, the students had differing levels of awareness of culture in terms of their own identity and there was no line that could be drawn to say who was or was not eligible to participate. In the end, the students talked and resolved that any of them could begin the project, on the understanding that they were not committed until a later point. While this put the supervisor in a tenuous position for conducting research (as there was a minimum number that would keep the project viable but no guarantee that number would stay) it was the only way forward for the students.

Control of the group process was problematic: the project was externally funded and was a student assessment. This meant the lecturing staff were accountable academically and fiscally. However the control of the group process needed to rest with the students if the *kawa* and *kaupapa* of the group was to stay “true”. Returning to cultural safety concepts, cultural safety is

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said to be happening when the person receives care which they determine as being culturally safe (Ramsden, 2002). To know when to hand over power, take power and share power with students, who were naïve researchers, meant that the supervisor had to walk a fine line between trusting the group to do what they needed to do and at the same time follow ethical guidelines for research *and* provide a safe learning environment. There were few guidelines or policies about how to handle this in reality and it was another “power point” to be challenged in the negotiating of the supervising lecturer / student working relationship for the project.

Lecture times became shared kai sessions, with karakia and waiata in any of four languages. Sometimes little observable progress was made in proposal writing and the ethics application, as whole sessions were spent on naming the group or a *powhiri* for the project’s funders. This was handing over power rather than power sharing, and to trust in both the people and their developing processes, made for a vulnerable position with potentially serious consequences for both lecturers and students. Again, without the process occurring in the group’s time frame there would have been no project. The supervising lecturer had to demonstrate flexibility around power sharing and power taking. Without a high level of professional accountability on the part of the supervising lecturer and her own cultural awareness of power, this flexibility would not have been possible.

What both lecturers could not know from their cultural stand-point, was the importance to the group of having time to establish their Hauora Pacific identity; and the importance of the funding organisation demonstrating its accountability at a *powhiri*, for the potential “gifts” of data. The time frame of the project was to fit the semester calendar, not to develop relationships. The subsequent commitment of the students to this new family of Hauora Pacific, that included the lecturers, was possibly what made the project most successful.

Once the ethics application was prepared, Hauora Pacific found that the committee assessing their proposal had no Maori or Pacific representatives. The issue now was that the Ethics Committee had the power to question, modify or stop the project, but Hauora Pacific claimed the power to not recognize their authority based on the absence of Maori or Pacific Island membership on the ethics committee membership, an example of providing a climate where students could take control of the situation and have the confidence to challenge powerful institutional structures.

It was to both groups credit that an open dialogue, not a power clash ensued. A special session of the Ethics Committee was convened with Hauora Pacific. The Chair set out the institution’s responsibilities; Hauora Pacific set out their objections rationally and passionately. There was an acknowledgment of discomfort on both sides and a willingness to move forward. The resolution was not a compromise, nor an acquiescing by either group, but the surfacing of the complexity of the issues. Through meaningful power sharing and dialogue Hauora Pacific was able to accept the committee’s approval-power, while the Committee acknowledged they did not have the mana to assess the cultural components of Hauora Pacific’s research protocol. The project did have institutional approval; and the Committee gave an undertaking to resolve the composition of staff problem. What could have been a situation where the Pakeha supervisor took control by speaking for the students, instead of following a cultural safety concept of power sharing, the students were able to assert their collective power in such a way that they were able to challenge institutional power in a confident self-determining way.

In research terms, if the supervising lecturer did not have the confidence and knowledge to go down a research path normally not ventured down by Pakeha researchers, that is working with Maori and Pacific students focusing on Maori and Pacific population’s health needs, the project would not have happened. Tolich (2002) observes that with development of Maori Centered Research, Pakeha researchers are caught in what he calls, a ‘state of paralysis’ where Maori are being excluded from general population research samples. Rather than excluding Maori, this

study deliberately set out to include both Maori and Pacific students in a Maori and Pacific research project. However because it was headed by Pakeha lecturers, Tolich's notions of Pakeha paralysis has some relevance in relation to how Pakeha lecturers in general work with increasingly culturally self aware students groups, be they Maori, Pacific or other groups who, whilst part of the mainstream student population may also have specific research agendas they want to address in the context of their own identity and cultural or social marginalisation. If there is not a commitment to recruiting and supporting culturally and socially diverse staff cultures then there is a risk that student cultural research needs will be overlooked or channelled into less culturally challenging, or more mainstream focused learning/ research situations. The lecturers in this study, because of their own knowledge and understanding of their own culture, the Tiriti of Waitangi and cultural safety were able to stay open to processes rather than avoiding or giving up the project because it was 'culturally' complex at times.

Tolich (2002) in applying the New Zealand Nursing Council definition of cultural safety suggests that this framework might be applied to research ethics. His interpretation of cultural safety in a research context suggests, nursing students or researcher.

1. "Examine their own realities and attitudes they bring to each new person they encounter in their practice or in research (the research encounter).
2. Evaluate the impact that historical, political and social processes have on the health of all people (in terms of your research topic).
3. Demonstrate flexibility in their relationships with people who are different from themselves. (Tolich, 2002, p.174).

In undertaking this project the Pakeha lecturers involved in applying cultural safety principles in a research context were challenged on several levels. In the absence of committed institutional support all involved experienced being vulnerable and faced unexpected challenges.

Ratima et al.'s (1999) report on research undertaken with Maori people focusing on an asthma self-management program in a Maori community taking a partnership approach, illustrates how there can be a successful partnership approach where Maori community workers and other health professionals worked to develop a project with outcomes that would benefit Maori.

A key feature of this project was that control and decision making was shared equitably between all parties. The report affirms that such an approach is significant in terms of achieving appropriate health outcomes for the population studied, where Maori processes are appropriate and consistently followed throughout the research process. In the Hauora Pacific project, the lecturers were committed to power sharing, however, in the absence of full institutional support or the ability to establish a bicultural or multicultural research team in a short time frame, the project was highly stressful putting this power sharing at risk. The project was highly stressful requiring a succession of decisions for which there was no academic or cultural "right answers" or precedent. Emotional support came from Hauora Pacific rather than colleagues. For the supervising lecturer, it was a semester of standing alone, and on the margins of safe academic and safe research practice. If points of conflict and tension related to power had not been approached by a willingness to talk and negotiate, and the attention to the cultural safety concept requiring the questioning of personal value positions, the project would have floundered with a range of consequences for all concerned. These could have included the incomplete final semester assignment and hence failure for the students, the institution having financial and legal problems from an incomplete research contract, a negative performance review for the lecturers for not delivering a successful course, and as was the potential at one point, complaints to the funders or media by Maori cultural safety educators from outside the institution. The institutional powers would have had much less goodwill in dealing with staff if the worst case scenario had

eventuated.

The students of Hauora Pacific gave written feedback on the project, as they would on other courses. The feedback was not in the typical form of a survey but each student submitted a story of his or her “journey” through the project. There was no way at the outset that one could have predicted that as a successful project it would do more than address its objectives. Students reported having the most culturally rewarding learning experience in their three year course. For some it was the opportunity to “come out” as Maori, while for others it consolidated their place within their community as one sent off to gain a higher education, now putting something back. Reading the feedback, it was worth facing the challenges and stress.

At the end of the project the authors still reject that they did ‘cross cultural’ work, and that it is more appropriate to suggest that they worked at the borders of cultures, of which culture as in ethnicity was one of a number of cultural contexts. For Pakeha lecturers involved in this project, and especially the supervising lecturer, being able to work at these cultural borders meant having a preparedness to move out of our own cultural, professional and academic comfort zones whilst at the same time adhering to academic and institutional requirements for student achievement and lecturer accountability. If the rhetoric of cultural safety and empowerment is to be realised in educational practices as well as health practices, lecturers need institutional support and understanding at all levels of operations, from policy development and standing committees to day to day classroom interaction. Having knowledge about cultural safety does not guarantee safety but it does provide a framework where, in this case, students felt able to voice their concerns within a supportive environment.

In terms of outcomes, the project was successful in many ways. It was completed on time and within budget. The Hauora Pacific study group and their participant groups were pleased with the final report; all the students completed the BN programme and passed nursing “state finals”. Back in the College of Humanities and Social Science issues of lecturer and student vulnerability were never fully resolved, but the process did raise awareness of the multiple realities of working across the borders of cultures when translating Tiriti of Waitangi policy from policy to practice.

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