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STRATEGIC BICULTURALISM WORKS (AT WORK): MICRO IMPLICATIONS OF BICULTURAL POLITICS

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Profile: Carla Houkamau joined the Auckland University Department of Management and Employment Relations (MER) as a Post Doctoral Research Fellow earlier this year. She has a PhD in Psychology and a Bachelor of Commerce in MER (from Auckland) as well as eight years experience as a teacher and researcher in the social sciences. Her Post Doctoral projects aim to locate synergies between her psychology and management interests. Her current writing and research coheres around micro (psychological/interpersonal) implications of macro ideologies, diversity management, the relationship between personal and collective (ethnic, cultural, national) identities as well as the processes underpinning the construction of a ‘New Zealand’ collective identity.
ABSTRACT Despite increasing multiculturalism bicultural ideologies remain central to understanding inter-ethnic dynamics in New Zealand organisations. Many organisations remain legally bound, to adhere to bicultural principles and, given the projected growth of the Māori population, finding ways to appropriately implement ‘bicultural’ ideologies remain a relevant managerial concern. This paper considers micro-implications of bicultural politics within contemporary New Zealand organisations. Data is taken from a qualitative study of identity differentiation among Māori (indigenous) women and highlights a range of cross cultural competencies within this group currently obscured by the homogenising bicultural label. Techniques used by Māori to manage their interactions with Pākehā in the workplace are discussed. Implications for further research and managing biculturalism in the work place are reviewed.

Keywords: indigenous employees, valuing diversity, cross-cultural behaviour
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Introduction: Socio historical context, Biculturalism and the Treaty of Waitangi.

Despite an increasing multicultural presence the Māori – Pākehā\(^1\) dichotomy remains the starting point for understanding inter-ethnic dynamics in New Zealand organisations. To gain an appreciation of the relevance of biculturalism in this context a basic understanding of Māori – Pākehā history is necessary. Combined Māori and Pākehā comprise approximately 95% of the New Zealand population (at 15 and 80 percent respectively). By and large they are socially integrated - sharing education, health, welfare and justice systems as well as communities and workplaces. Moreover, there is a high level of intermarriage and biological integration between the groups - to the extent that some Māori are culturally and physically indistinguishable from Pākehā (Callister, 2004; Meredith, 2000). This close association was entrenched in 1840 through the Treaty of Waitangi (between Māori Chiefs and the British Government) which opened the door for British colonisation of a then Māori controlled country (King, 2003). The Treaty guaranteed Māori would retain their lands and other natural resources (and some argue their right to self-government) however these promises were routinely disregarded by the Government during the years of Pākehā settlement that followed (Orange, 1992; 2004). The ethnic balance of power shifted during the 1860s and, as the Pākehā population grew, Māori were forced to change their way of life profoundly and eventually ‘assimilate’ to Pākehā culture (Durie, 1994).

After 100 years of protest, Māori political resistance became increasingly strategic from the late 1960s (Walker, 1990). A diverse range of activities including land occupations and regular protests at Waitangi were adopted as Māori pressured the Government to ‘honour the Treaty’ (Hazlehurst, 1993; Walker, 1990, 1996). As a corollary, the Treaty of Waitangi was given greater recognition after 1975 with the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal (a forum where Māori could make claims for compensation for breaches of their Treaty rights). In the
mid-1980s the Government extended the jurisdiction of the Tribunal to examine Māori grievances retrospective to 1840. This was a major accomplishment for Māori as it enabled them to make claims to the Government for historical injustices against their ancestors (Lashley, 1996; van-Meijl, 1995).

In terms of ideological transformation, in the 1970s Māori leaders and activists became increasingly concerned with reversing the effects of assimilation by advocating Māori return to their own cultural roots (Greenland, 1991; Poata-Smith, 1997; 2004, Webster, 1998). Awatere (1984) captured the essence of this approach when she proposed that Pākehā had tried to eradicate Māori through generations of ‘forced assimilation’ which denied Māori their culture and their ‘identity’ as a people. In response a ‘bicultural’ ideology was adopted throughout the New Zealand public service during the 1980s (see Hanson, 1989; King, 1998; 1999, Levine, 1999; Sissons, 1993). Biculturalism recognised Māori had unique cultural practices and beliefs that needed to be understood by Pākehā in order for a true ‘partnership’ to succeed. The procedural manifestation of biculturalism played out through affirmative action practices such as recruitment of Māori into key Government roles, the development of Māori Perspective Units to cater for Māori interests and a range of bi-cultural policies throughout the public sector (including ‘Treaty’ education initiatives and Māori cultural ‘experiences’) to help Pākehā understand Māori and respect their cultural differences (see Sissons, 1993).

The bicultural paradigm and associated procedural implementations have been politically unpopular among many Pākehā and strongly criticized from various quarters. Some commentators have argued that biculturalism is unfair because it singles out Māori and gives them special rights in a multicultural society. Māori argue that to describe New Zealand as

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1 The term Māori refers to anyone who claims descent from the indigenous peoples of New Zealand (or Aotearoa). Pākehā refers to settlers mainly of British descent who arrived here to settle from the early 1800s.
‘multicultural’ denies their rights as ‘tangata whenua’ (indigenous to the land) (Docker & Fischer, 2000). Others argue that the tendency for biculturalism to categorise Māori and Pākehā as ‘binary’ opposites is inaccurate, promotes inter-group rivalry, and needs to be revised. For example, Meredith (1998) posits biculturalism creates “adversarial polarities premised on exclusion and purity” (p.1) and argues for a “reconceptualisation of bicultural politics in Aotearoa/New Zealand that draws on an inclusionary and multifaceted identity politics” (Meredith, 1998, p.1). Over the last ten years these arguments have worked to undermine biculturalism throughout New Zealand society and, in the private sector the vocabulary of multi-culturalism and ‘diversity management’ has become increasingly prevalent (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2005).

**Micro implications of biculturalism for Māori and Pākehā**

The focus on this paper is not the ideological validity of biculturalism per se rather the micro level impact of biculturalism upon Māori in their personal dealings with Pākehā in organisations. Three factors are considered relevant to this discussion. First, ‘race relations’ in New Zealand remain fraught with tension. As Pearson (1990) explains, New Zealand was annexed at a time when it was generally accepted by Europeans that their race was superior to Māori and, despite cohabitation for over 150 years, a significant body of research indicates Māori still face considerable prejudice from Pākehā in their routine interpersonal dealings (Bayard, Holmes & Murachver, 2001; Cram & McCleanor, 1993; Cram, Smith & Johnstone, 2003; Taylor & Wetherell, 1995; Liu, Wilson, McClure & Higgins, 1999).

Secondly, it should be emphasised that biculturalism entered public discourse and policy at time when New Zealanders, on the whole, knew very little of the Treaty of Waitangi (Booth & Hunn, 1962; Hohepa, 1978; Hunn, 1960). Biculturalism came as a shock to many Pākehā who knew very little of the basis of Māori grievances (King, 1988). Studies of Pākehā attitudes, to Māori consistently reveal that many Pākehā are threatened by biculturalism, resent being
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‘blamed’ for Māori problems and feel they should not have to ‘turn back the clock’ and take responsibility for things that had happened in the past (see Kirkwood, Liu & Wetherell, 2005, McCreanor, 1995, 1997; Nairn & McCreanor, 1990, 1991, 1997; Wetherell & Potter, 1992; Sibley & Liu, 2004). In testimony to the relevance of such attitudes to New Zealand workplaces a recent survey of 3605 organisations employing 331,676 New Zealanders found that Pākehā employees saw Māori getting ‘special treatment’ as a barrier to harmonious workplace relations (Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, 2005).

The implications of Pākehā reluctance to support biculturalism needs to be considered in relation to a third factor. Although Māori performance in education and business is certainly improving (Te Puni Kokiri, 2000) Māori remain concentrated in lower paid and primary skilled occupations in which they are likely to defer to Pākehā employers. Against this backdrop it seems fair to suggest that conflict over what Pākehā see as ‘special treatment for Māori’ has the potential to emerge on a daily basis (King, 1988, 1999; Pearson, 1990); particularly when issues around biculturalism and Māori rights are pushed to the fore.

This paper briefly considers these factors and how they impact Māori within contemporary New Zealand organisations. To do this I relate findings from a study in which I compared the life-stories of 35 women from three different age groups to clarify how Māori identity has changed over an 80 year period (Houkamau, 2006). I worked from a social identity paradigm which sees personal identity as shaped by factors at the macro level which profoundly influence personal experience (Howard, 2000). Following this and propositions from Barth (1969) and Billig (1995) I adopted a symbolic interactionist stance which sees identities (both personal and collective) as constructed through the processes of everyday social interactions (also see Bechhofer, Mccrone & Stewart, 1999). Māori identity was defined as the self-descriptions women gave in their life stories (specifically the descriptions, evaluations, meanings and associated behaviours women claimed to ‘have’ or ‘do’ because they were
Māori). To link Māori identity to macro socio-historical conditions I examined how women’s self-descriptions were shaped by three socio-historical processes: the mass migration of Māori from rural to urban locations after the 1950s, the drive towards Māori assimilation which underpinned Government policy until the late 1960s, and the Māori political and cultural renaissance which stimulated biculturalism from the 1970s.

**Participants**

All women who participated in the research identified as Māori and were recruited either through the University of Auckland or an Auckland based Māori Social Services organisation that supported the study. Nineteen were aged between 60 and 75, eight between 35 and 60 and eight between 18 and 35. The women worked in a variety of occupations. Five were social workers, one a tertiary teacher, one a researcher, one a Clinical Psychologist, two were self-employed and one woman worked in local Government. The remaining participants were students, retired or occupied on a part-time basis in unpaid work. Fifteen participants (all in the individual interviews) had at least some formal tertiary education (eight of these women were University students at the time of participating in the study). The remaining three participants in the individual interviews had been schooled to secondary level. Data regarding education was not gathered from women aged over 60; however, none mentioned tertiary education as part of their life-stories. Because it is so uncommon for Māori women in this age group to have had any tertiary education one would expect them to mention it if they had.

**Data collection and analysis**

Using grounded theory (Glaser, 1978; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) as my basic methodological foundation and data analytic rationale I recorded life stories using open-ended interviews augmented by specific questions (Anastas, 1999; Patton, 1980; Houkamau, 2006). Life stories were analysed in three stages. First content analysis was used to identify all the descriptions, evaluations, meanings and associated behaviours women recounted they ‘had’ or ‘did’
because they were Māori. Constant comparison analysis was used (a process of comparing each statement with the next until all have been categorised into key common categories) to reveal the features of personal contexts (formative conditions and significant experiences) that shaped Māori identity for each woman interviewed. In the final stage, I compared the data of women from different age groups. I attended particularly to the ways in which women’s formative conditions and significant experiences were linked to the socio-historical environments in which they were born and came to age. This enabled me to link micro experiences with macro level influences and pin-point specific ways in which personal identity for each woman was a reflection of their socio-historical context.

Limitations

A key limitation of this research relates to the composition of the sample. Four issues are important to acknowledge in this respect. One, only women participated in the research, so the findings are not applicable to Māori men. In addition, as all the women in this study lived in Auckland, the data reflects the attitudes and behaviours of people who live on or near Auckland — and may not represent the views of rural dwelling Māori (or those from tribal backgrounds not included in the research). While a similar study carried out with a rural dwelling population may yield different results, the 1996 New Zealand census found most Māori (87.5%) actually live in either Auckland, Waikato or the Bay of Plenty regional council areas which implies that the views expressed by the women who participated in this research are not atypical of Māori women as a group. It should also be noted that a third of the sample comprised women who were in tertiary education, or had completed tertiary education. This is disproportionate to the Māori population as a whole. In addition, nearly half the sample was over 60 years old which is not representative of the Māori population. Younger women who lacked social support and education were therefore not included in this study — an important omission given that the majority of Māori women are under the age of 40 years old and Māori
women comprise the lowest socio-economic group in New Zealand (New Zealand Department of Statistics, 2000).

**Findings**

All women, regardless of age, reported they believed that Māori and Pākehā were culturally ‘different’ and all reported being aware that prejudice exists against Māori in New Zealand. Despite these shared experiences there were marked differences in Māori identity between women from different age groups. Cohort one were raised in Māori rural communities before the 1950s when Māori were geographically separate from Pākehā. They drew their own self descriptions and meanings from their exposure to Māori culture, language and community life (which was communal and based around collective work for collective gain). Compared to the younger women the older group were the most enculturated, tended not to discuss colonisation as a phenomenon and did not see Pākehā as particularly important in the way they saw their own Māori identities (this is important because these ideas were expressed repeatedly by women in the next two cohorts). Cohort two who were in their 30s and 40s at the time they interviewed. This group were raised in urban environments among Pākehā when it was still common place for Māori to ‘assimilate’. Many women reported being aware of the negative connotations of being Māori from a young age, were not taught the Māori culture or language at home or at school and many said they lacked the ‘cultural skills’ to express themselves ‘properly’ as Māori. Several said, because they had never been encouraged to learn how to ‘be Māori’ they had some quite distinctively ‘Pākehā’ traits and struggled to feel positive about being Māori during their adolescent years through to young adulthood. Some of these women spoke about ‘hiding’ the fact that they were Māori in predominantly Pākehā social contexts and feeling uncomfortable and inferior around Pākehā at certain times in their lives.

Cohort three, the youngest group, were socialised in similar communities as the previous cohort (multi-cultural and urban) but these women benefited from the cultural and political
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renaissance and many had formal education on the Treaty of Waitangi and Māori language and culture at school. Because of their experiences younger women initiated much more discussion on New Zealand history than the previous two cohorts and spoke openly about the obligations Pākehā have towards Māori as Treaty partners. Younger women also seemed less tolerant of racism against Māori than older women. All recounted times in their lives when they ‘spoke out’ when they felt Māori rights were being ignored. Women’s knowledge of Māori history combined with their own positive views of being Māori meant that this group tended to be quite critical of stereotypes held against Māori by ‘society’ and refuted negative views attached to Māori people. In testimony to this, several women recounted instances when they had defended Māori as a group whilst around Pākehā who were ‘putting Māori down’ or were treating Māori unfairly.

Despite their confidence and pride in being Māori many had ‘mixed ethnic affiliations’ as well as partners, parents, friends and work colleagues that were Pākehā (or non-Māori). As such, several reported a strong affinity with Pākehā and an ability to see ‘both sides of the story’. All spoke of managing their identities contextually with the people they socialised and worked with. This was important to them as they wanted to succeed professionally. For example, seven commented that when they wanted to align themselves with Pākehā friends or colleagues they would simply emphasise what they had in common with Pākehā. Younger women spoke of believing they had a lot in common with Pākehā friends in many contexts (sports, leisure and work place commitments were mentioned). Drawing from these commonalities young participants said that if they needed to collaborate with Pākehā at work (or Pākehā friends socially) they had a repertoire of techniques for finding common ground with them based upon shared experiences and interests. Humour was often used to diffuse difficult situations – and if this was not appropriate, women reported they believed there was a willingness on the part of many Pākehā to find convergence in other ways. Often this was out of necessity because collaboration was much more functional than discord. In doing so these
younger participants showed an intuitive tolerance for various cultural perspectives, the ability
to validate different points of view, as well as an acute sensitivity to the complex historical
relationship between Māori and Pākehā. Consider these comments from one of the younger
participants:

One of the things which I think is good now is that Māori have gone out
there and demanded their rights. I mean, if I want to answer the phone
and say ‘Kia Ora’ at work I can – I will too if I want to. That’s the
difference. When my parents were my age Māori had to apologise for that
– but we don’t have to anymore. In saying that, there are a lot of different
cultures at my work. I work in South Auckland and there, I mean to be
realistic, you have to accept all kinds of people and if you don’t you just
get left out of the loop. We joke about each others cultures – but you
can’t cross the line. (Rangimarie, 30).

I guess you can’t blame Pākehā sometimes because there is all this
negative stuff on TV about Māori … I can think of one time, when I was
on reception, one of the Pākehā girls said something pretty negative
about Māori. But I could see that she felt embarrassed because she
realised that I heard …I didn’t really feel that bad because I don’t take
things like that personally. So later I said to her, this is a way of kind of
getting past that uncomfortable thing, that I would help her with her mail
outs. (Rangimarie, 30)

You know, I would never deny who I am as Māori - but that is something
that is a part of me…it doesn’t mean that I have to be not cool with
Pākehā. You know I can fit in wherever I like – I think that you can do
that without even thinking about it really. (Q: How do you do that?), Well when I am with Māori I am Māori, act Māori, speak Māori. When I am with Pākehā, at work or what have you, I do the Pākehā thing —you know, speak like them, share their sense of humour. (Rangimarie, 30)

Discussion and implications

As noted earlier, the bicultural ideology has been criticised for perpetuating Māori/Pākehā discord while obscuring intra-group and inter-group diversity. Although this study has limitations it reveals two micro level implications of bicultural ideologies important not to overlook in light of these views.

One, this study demonstrates how biculturalism is being constructively ‘handled’ at a micro level through the shared understandings Māori draw from (socially and professionally) to facilitate their dealings with Pākehā on a day to day basis. By recognising and respecting Māori and Pākehā and other non Māori views younger women in this research exemplified what Dubois (1970) referred to as a form of cross-cultural competency or ‘double-consciousness.’ In his view, people who exercise double-consciousness have learnt two ways of coping with the tasks, expectations and requirements of their society. They know how to respond to their ‘own people’, as well as other cultural groups.

Interestingly, the most culturally competent women seemed to be those who were the most politically educated and informed about the ideological and historical underpinnings of biculturalism (8 younger participants had had formal tertiary education on these issues). Reflecting this, younger women were recognised there was a difference between ideology and reality, that Māori and Pākehā were not binary opposites in ‘real life’. At the same time they were able to ‘borrow’ from the ideological essence of biculturalism to negotiate personal rights to
equality more effectively than women who were not as politically educated (that is women in cohort two). In this sense, biculturalism was a psychological resource for younger women in terms of negotiating their personal rights constructively. Such a belief of entitlement seems an important tool for personal empowerment given prejudice against Māori remains a reality and suggests that ‘biculturalism’ may be more important for those without alternative ways of seeing Māori as ‘equal but different’.

As biculturalism falls increasingly out of vogue politically and increased discourse around managing New Zealand’s ethnic relations turns to embracing multiculturalism and diversity, Māori need to find new ways of preserving that sense of equality in their personal dealings with non Māori. At the present time, interventions which promote personal coping strategies to promote Māori sense of pride and self worth tend to cohere around the promotion of Māori culture and language and celebrating Māori uniqueness and value (Te Puni Kokiri, 2000). However, as women in this study reported, while they valued Māori cultural uniqueness, they needed to be able to find ways of connecting with all ethnic groups – not just their own. In most cases this was seen as a professional necessity. At the level of the individual, one way to support Māori professional development in this regard is, not only to educate them about their collective right to equality but also focus on providing Māori with a range of skills which enable them to be accepted, not just by other Māori people, but by other cultural groups as such competencies are important for upward social and economic mobility. Another specific intervention for Māori at work may aim to provide socio political education alongside specific skills and strategies for understanding and dealing with discrimination or evaluating it objectively should it be encountered.

Given the cultural diversity of many areas of contemporary New Zealand society urban Māori, in particular, increasingly require these kinds of social skills. The findings of this research indicate promising developments in this regard because they suggest that many Māori already
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have a rich array of techniques which enable them to interact effectively and amicably with Māori and non-Māori alike. In this respect, biculturalism remains relevant to work place interactions between Pākehā and Māori although it is being continually reworked at the micro level. Māori can use bicultural ideological understandings as a personal coping strategy for negotiating their rights to equality constructively however also required are cultural competencies which allow Māori to find commonalities with Pākehā and other non Māori. Further research could focus on identifying specific ways in which Māori and Pākehā are negotiating differences and finding commonalities in the work place and what kinds of work places exemplify adaptive practices in this regard. Possible research questions may include: Who is able to focus on the positive strengths of other ethnic groups while not forfeiting their integrity as a Māori/Pākehā? Better understanding of how some Māori and Māori typify these micro level relationships and find a way to accept different viewpoints in the work place may shed light not only on how biculturalism may be more effectively managed but also how New Zealand’s wider social fabric is continually transforming.
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