

Cultural Relativism and Academic Freedom within the Universities of New Zealand

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Abstract: This paper is an examination of cultural relativism and ethnocentrism and their significance for Māori. It is not a defence of cultural relativism nor an attack, but a critical look at what passes for academic freedom within our universities. It also examines what academic freedom has achieved for Māori culture, and poses questions about where it might be directed in the future. Recently, academic cultural relativists have been called to account for their apparent protectionistic tendencies towards Māori culture. It has been suggested that the academic freedoms of the universities in New Zealand are being constrained by Māori protectionism and political agendas and that “only science has a place in the work of a university”. From a Māori perspective, the arguments for cultural relativism and its opposite ethnocentrism, seem somewhat specious since both “isms” arise from the analytical approach of scientific reductionism. The holistic approach of Māori points to the theory of emergence to explain behaviours that arise from the fundamental principles of Māori society, and that neither cultural relativism nor ethnocentrism are sufficient to account for the complexities and realities of indigenous societies in the world today. Failure of some academics to understand the fundamental nature of Māori society has laid foundations of mistrust that are sometimes difficult to overcome in spite of recent improvements in sociological understanding and methodologies.

Keywords: cultural relativism; ethnocentrism; Māori society

Introduction

A recent article published in the Auckland University alumni magazine calls to question the significance of cultural relativism in the universities of New Zealand (Rata, 2007). In addition, comments were made regarding the presence of non-scientific activities in the life or business of the university “...But only science has a place in the work of a university” (Rata, 2007, p. 38). This is concerning because the words were written by a member of the teaching staff of the university itself. Some of the questions raised by Rata are worth asking, because by implication they question the place of Māori within the Universities of New Zealand. Rata went on to claim that cultural ideology within the universities was affecting, in her words, “critical inquiry and intellectual risk-taking” (Rata, 2007, p. 38). These are serious charges that need to be responded to, because of the influences that racial biases could have on succeeding generations of students. Are the charges justified, or is it simply Western ethnocentrism creeping into the hallowed halls of academia? Is the academic freedom of the universities in this country somehow being constrained by Māori protectionism or political agendas?

Although Rata’s article served as a stimulus for this essay, in all fairness, Rata’s article was an opinion piece and not founded on evidences provided for scholarly examination and certainly, there is a place within the universities for opinion. It is not, therefore, the intention of this essay to hold Rata under the microscope to determine the validity of her claims. What has been done is to take the questions she has raised and examine them in a more general way, hopefully providing a Māori perspective for some of her concerns.

In this essay I have examined what cultural relativism and ethnocentrism means in terms of both Pākehā and Māori perspectives, and what these concepts might mean to the

anthropological and sociological relationships that exist between Māori and academia. Māori have been accused of being precious about their society in such a way as to suggest that this trend or attitude, if true, is unscientific, but then again maybe its just a matter of perspective.

Cultural Relativism and Ethnocentrism

“Cultural relativism is the principle that an individual human’s beliefs and activities should be interpreted in terms of his or her own culture” (Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cultural_relativism). The tenets of cultural relativism are not new, but were established through the work of Franz Boas and his students during the first half of the last century. Boas’ students consist of many of the most famous anthropologists of the day including names such as Melville Herskovits, Ruth Benedict, Robert Lowie, Alfred Kroeber, Margaret Mead, Paul Radin, and many others. Their work practically defined the field of modern anthropology.

Essentially, cultural relativism was a reaction to the ethnocentric universalism of 19th century social evolutionists. According to Herskovits, “Judgments are based on experience, and experience is interpreted by each individual in terms of his own enculturation” (Herskovits, 1958). In Māori terms, the way in which Māori experience the world may be different from the way in which Pākehā see and interpret that experience.

Ethnocentrism is the opposite of cultural relativism. Ethnocentrism is the way people look at the world from the perspective of their own culture, and it is from that perspective that all things are judged. Ethnocentrism often entails the belief that one’s own culture is superior to others. Ethnocentrism in its extreme form has been a root cause of conflict and genocide such as experienced in Nazi Germany and Rwanda during the last century. Cultural relativism is an answer to ethnocentrism because it is based on the insight that many of the things we believe, and the things we do, are really only products of our upbringing and culture. However, as reasonable as cultural relativism sounds it has its limits because in its extreme form it basically says that moral judgments are also relative and that there are no absolutes. The “everything goes” attitude of moral relativism logically leads to moral nihilism; however, advocates of the extreme forms of ethnocentricity and cultural relativism are unpopular and rarely found especially within the cloisters of the liberal Universities.

Rata’s claim that only science has a place in the university appears naïve and ethnocentric insofar as there is an inherent assumption that the values of Pākehā society are universal. While the universalizing principle of Western culture has been one of its great strengths, the assertion of universality fails to recognize that freedom and in particular academic freedom is subject to interpretation and various degrees of inflection. Academic freedom is the watch word of universities throughout the world; however, degrees of freedom vary considerably from society to society. Only in the Western world would an academic freely bite the hand that feeds it, and the constraints imposed under more authoritarian governments are all too real. It is also naïve to believe that science is the only source of “truth” in the world. While science has been extremely successful in helping mankind understand the natural world, it fails miserably when asked to provide foundations for areas such as moral responsibility, ethical judgments, human rights, and religion.

With regard to the belief in science expressed by Rata and its place in the universities, her overstatement fails to take into account the subtle relationship between science and Western ethnocentrism. Todorov (see Strenski, 1995) considers this belief in science to be one of the most effective tools of Western cultural insinuation because of its wide acceptability; belief in a scientific philosophy is acceptable whereas professing to ethnocentricity is not. Although Rata has some definite opinions regarding the place of science in the universities, to accuse her of scientific ethnocentricity might be overly strong. The complaints of Rata concerning, the restraining of “critical inquiry and intellectual risk-taking” (Rata, 2007, p. 38) in the

university by cultural relativists seems hardly credible. It appears that cultural relativism, a principle demanding tolerance, has the power to invoke intolerance.

A Māori Perspective

Pākehā culture is full of “isms”. There seems to be an “ism” for every nuance and every inflection of human behaviour ever observed. Between cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, scientism, nihilism, social Darwinism and so on, the “isms” sometimes obscure the original problems such categorizations were intended to clarify. In the context of this essay, an “ism” defines a group behaviour that is motivated by a set of common beliefs. Take cultural relativism for example, the beliefs are that “individual human’s beliefs and activities should be interpreted in terms of his or her own culture” (Wikipedia). All those who embrace this ideal might identify themselves as cultural relativists. However, the implications of such a set of beliefs go far beyond just cultural peculiarities.

Cultural relativism has implications for basic human rights, individual freedoms, and the relationships between states and indigenous people, etc. The reduction of individual and group behaviour to “isms” helps Pākehā recognize and understand goals, attitudes, shared beliefs, motivations, and ultimately risks associated with group activity. In order to understand cultural differences the approach is to observe from within the culture itself and not to sit on the outside looking in. However, the reductionistic analytical approach may not capture the underlying motivational principles that lead to emergent behaviours.

Reductionism and its limitations are illustrated in the following somewhat exaggerated analogy that nevertheless points out the inherent weaknesses in the reductionistic approach to understanding human behaviour. The reductionistic approach is rather like a giant who looking down on a court house, for example, and seeing people moving in and moving out of the structure decides to try and understand what is going on inside. He wants to know what the building is being used for and so he uses his reductionistic booted foot crushing the building and its human contents. He now proceeds to sift through the rubble, very carefully, one broken piece at a time. From the size and shape of the many pieces and parts he tries to reassemble and understand. The point is that no matter what he manages to reassemble and ultimately he might even succeed in reassembling the building itself, he will never understand the business of the law or concepts of justice nor will he reproduce the pain and anguish of the people who passed through those doors. Justice, for example, is an emergent property that arises from human behaviours and relationships. This analogy basically illustrates the limitations and deficiencies of scientific reductionism. Reductionistic methodology is severely limited and limiting especially when it comes to understanding emergent behaviours within the context of social anthropology.

For Māori, reductionism is sometimes difficult to appreciate because it happens to be the exact opposite of the way most indigenous cultures see the world. Māori society, like many others, is holistic and built on fundamental principles that serve to govern behaviour within that society. Individuals are steeped in those principles and taught primarily by example. The principles provide the foundations for emergent behaviours expected of Māori within Māori society (Hook, Waaka, & Raumati, 2007). Consider for example, the principle of *manaakitanga* (caring) which requires the application of *mana*-enhancing behaviour towards all people. Care must be taken not to devalue the *mana* of one’s fellow and in Māoridom practically every cultural event is oriented towards that outcome. *Mana* is defined as integrity, prestige, power, authority, attributes that speak to the personal standing of an individual in the community. Thus, once the principle is established, there follows certain expected behaviours.

Within the university setting, for Māori, there is an expectation that his/her *mana* will not be threatened and that appropriate ceremony will be recognized for its preservation.

Unfortunately, within the Pākehā world little attention is given to such things. There are many basic principles for the governing of Māori behaviour and *manaakitanga* is but one. Principles such as *whakapapa* (genealogy, cultural identity), *ngāwaritanga* (patience, lenience, flexibility), *kotahitanga* (unity, soildarity), *wairuatanga* (spirit), *utu* (reciprocity, balance), *māhakitanga* (humility), *rangatiratanga* (leadership, sovereignty), and *kaitiakitanga* (guardianship) speak to the most basic and fundamentally important way in which the world is understood, all of which embraces and supports the holistic approach to life of Māori. The Māori approach, in scientific terminology, embraces complexity theory and the phenomenon of emergence. In Māori terms all elements of the world are related and it is upon those relationships that survival depends.

These two world views, epitomised by reductionism on the one hand and emergence on the other, are about as far apart as any two world views can get. Is there a common ground? For Māori engaging in employment or study in a mainstream university there are numerous compromises necessary in order to succeed. First of all a student recognizes that the mainstream university is not a Māori place and will often take on the guise of brown Pākehā; there is no other way. And so, for a time the concepts and tasks required to succeed will be absorbed and performed as expected. This does not mean that Māori have “seen the light” and now embrace all that Pākehā hold near and dear. Within the university setting the struggle to interweave two world views is sometimes difficult and underpins some of the struggle. The point is that Māori have to absorb two world views, but Pākehā have only to absorb one. Unfortunately, attempts by ethnocentric Pākehā to impose their world view, and who at times behave as if theirs is the only valid perspective, sometimes leads to misunderstandings and strife even within the university arena of enlightened expectations and academic freedoms. The common ground seems to entail the willingness of Māori to learn and understand the Pākehā point of view; perhaps a greater understanding of Māori perspectives might also be of value.

While Rata’s paper was the stimulus for this essay, the real question was how exactly does cultural relativism relate to Māori? This is not an easy question since human behaviours regardless of world view are complex and difficult at best to understand. Cultural relativism, for Māori speaks primarily to the principles of *manaakitanga*, *wairuatanga*, *aroha*, *ngāwaritanga*, and *rangatiratanga*. In the investigation of any indigenous people the most important is the preservation of *mana*, both theirs and yours. Any act that diminishes a person is inappropriate. Under the aegis of cultural relativism the idea of inculcating oneself into an indigenous society as a guest for the purpose of revelation and exposure based on limited experiences within that culture is totally unacceptable. Cultural relativism makes sense only under the auspices of Western reductionism. Under Māori *tikanga* any breach in protocols resulting in the diminishment of the *mana* of one’s host could result in the application of *utu*; not in the sense of revenge, but in the sense of balance. Upsetting the balance between host and guest will result in the destruction of the relationship to a degree that any hope for study may become impossible, even to the extent of being fed false information.

Within the Māori world, all things derive from *wairua* (spirit); the spirit is first and foremost and it is therefore necessary for this acknowledgement to be made and sustained (Marsden, 2003). If *wairua* is absent or negatively disturbed then hopes for a good outcome will be diminished. It is also important that the *rangatiratanga* of indigenous peoples be recognized. The qualities of the *rangatira* include humility, leadership, diplomacy, generosity, integrity and honesty (Hook, Waaka, & Raumati, 2007). For those engaged in indigenous studies one of the most important principles that should be adhered to is that of *māhakitanga*. *Māhakitanga* (humility) is the mark of the *rangatira* (chief). While *māhakitanga* resides properly beneath *rangatiratanga* its significance in the workplace requires that it be given full recognition as an important Māori cultural trait. Humility is not something one usually sees within a mainstream context, but within a Māori context it is considered highly desirable. In the context of the study, humility is not ramming one’s opinions down the throats of others, or

taking the achievements of others for one's own. Recently, the significance of humility was summarized in a dedication to the late King of Samoa, Malietoa Tanumafili II, the observation was made that "humility is the substance that nurtures unity, respect and natural justice." (Misa, 2007).

The origin of cultural relativism is clearly Western in thought and principle, and the underlying assumption is that it is universal and significant; unfortunately, within a Māori paradigm much of that significance may be lost. The question concerning its relationship to Māori people is important because from the seemingly mild principles of cultural relativism arise much more hard hitting questions concerning human rights, claims for indigenous autonomy, the rights of the United Nations to interfere with perceived human rights abuses, and the rights of indigenous peoples to develop an autonomous presence in the world. The Western approach to understanding indigenous peoples has faced difficulties especially within the United Nations. Many of those difficulties may have arisen from the application of reductionistic methodologies to the understanding of human cultures. Perhaps a more holistic or Māori approach might have greater appeal and greater success in dealing with problems of culture.

Māori Protectionism

One of the charges placed by Rata implies that Māori are protective of their culture. In her words, "These interest groups claim a degree of 'cultural sacredness' – that is, a right not to be offended by critical inquiry, especially from those not of their ethnicity or religion." (Rata, 2007, p. 38). The truth of this assertion has yet to be determined; however, taking the assertion at face value, one wonders whether Māori in general are indeed sensitive to cultural inquiry. Certainly, in view of some of the things that have been written about their culture over the past 100 years, the development of a sensitivity might be understandable. History shows us that Māori have always welcomed Pākehā into their midst, after all most Māori today have Pākehā ancestors. It seems unlikely that Māori in general have become more exclusive and suggest that perhaps Māori have just become more selective in whom they allow in for the purpose of study.

Many scholarly treatises have been written by Pākehā about Māori culture and unfortunately some have been far from flattering; not to suggest that flattery is a prerequisite of scholarship. However, the negative impressions that remain have helped shape Pākehā attitudes towards Māori even today. Early portrayals were basically of two varieties, on the one hand there is the noble savage who with the help of the Christian God might be saved, and on the other hand there are the wretched, half-starved, ignorant savages who were short-lived and violent, but who again clearly needed to be saved.

Undoubtedly Elsdon Best was a great scholar and his studies of Māori culture were seminal in establishing Māori as being a people worthy of study. His writings helped preserve much of the culture at a time when it was disappearing. At times he was reverential and at others judgmental and disparaging. His Eurocentric sense of superiority never abandoned him and much of his work is coloured by his biases. He moved amongst Māori easily and well and to those with whom he studied he often expressed his profound respect. For example, in his monograph on the Māori School of learning (1923), an outstanding and valued description of the Whare Wānanga, he expresses reverential awe at the navigational achievements of Māori and their spiritual and mental concepts. However, his Eurocentrism by today's standards seem quaint to say the least. "The barbaric Māori, the heathen of the ages, had his questing hand ever on the pulse of nature." (Best, 1923 p. 30). On the one hand his assessments are often judgmental and on the other often admiring and full of praise even to the extent of placing Māori knowledge and achievement above those of his own people, e.g., "The derelict neolith before you was lifting a well defined trail when we were blazing our first rude path; he was

ranging the vast ocean spaces when we, with anxious hearts, poled a rude dug-out across the raging Thames.” (Best, 1923, p. 29). Best’s admiration for the Polynesian navigator is nicely recorded in his monograph on the Polynesian voyagers (Best, 1954a). However, his contempt for Māori is borne out in other writings such as his monograph on Māori Myth and Religion (1954b, p. 6) where he refers to “The crude superstitions of the low-type savage, the voluminous ritual and mythopoetic imagery of barbaric peoples, the more refined concepts and ceremonial of civilized nations, ...” and goes on to say,

The rude savage makes simple offerings to dimly conceived supernatural beings; the barbaric Polynesian intones archaic ritual formulae in order to influence, indirectly, his departmental gods; civilized man craves the help and mercy of his God by direct appeal; and all are prompted by the same instincts, by similar feelings. (Best, 1954b, p. 6)

Although Best clearly viewed Māori religion as superstition and beneath the religions of “civilized” man he was a step up the scale insofar as he viewed their religious rites and leanings with a degree of respect and one worthy of study. Elsdon Best was simply a man of his times and to take his writings out of that context might be considered a bit unfair; however, Māori have had to live for many years with such comments even through to today, because once spoken such comments take on a life of their own.

Considering the work of a more recent academic, Professor J.E. Ritchie’s book (Ritchie, 1963) was a good-natured attempt to bring attention to the plight of Māori. Speculations about personal issues involving gonorrhoeal infections, spontaneous abortions, and illegitimate children did not however, bring popularity with Māori, even when such investigations are done with the best intentions and sympathetic attitudes. Invariably facts give way to suppositions and speculations in order to dramatise the work, as is the case in the following passage:

One of the consequences of crowding of bedrooms is that children regulate their own sleeping hours without much parental supervision. Parents send children off to bed but are not concerned whether they go straight to sleep. In some houses the uproar from the bedroom at night would, on occasion, become so great that the children would get “a growling” but such reprimands are unusual unless the noise interferes with the activities of the parents. (Ritchie, 1963, p.13)

This descent to gossip reflects more the level of scholarship than the identification of important cultural issues. Families who hosted the Ritchie expeditions must have been surprised to see their laundry waving in the breeze of tabloid journalism. The ultimate arrogance committed by Ritchie however, was his attempt to define “Māoriness”. In Table II on page 39 of his book, Ritchie, a Pākehā, had the audacity to construct a measure of what he considered “Māoriness”. His “Māoriness” scale contained items such as the amount of “Māori blood”, how often the subject visited the marae, whether the subject used a Māori name, and their ability to name their tribal affiliations. Such academic insensitivity and arrogance could contribute to reluctance on the part of some Māori to cooperate with Pākehā when it comes to such case studies.

Some of the claptrap of early writers still finds its way into the writings of modern authors even when evidence from their own investigations seems to deny the assertions made. For example, Murdoch in his important study of Māori healing practices, stated that the “average Māori then had a short, harsh life (to about 30 years of age)” (Murdoch, 1994, p. 8), but then went on to declare that Māori had to contend with few diseases. He further asserted that “The usual Māori diet of vegetables, with only a light garnish of fish or bird, would have ensured a healthy life,” but then almost in the same breath declares that “a lack of nutritious food, because of crop failure in the fields or forests, as well as hard winters, must have taken its toll.” Murdoch cannot have it both ways. It seems strange to have so few diseases and such a

healthy life style but then declare Māori short lived. Perhaps such healthy people then simply died out in their wars? This kind of scholarship is questionable especially when there is no evidence to support such assertions where on the one hand Māori are supposed to have died young but on the other hand they had a healthy diet and few diseases.

Of course there have been many outstanding Pākehā scholars who have contributed greatly to the understanding of Māori culture. Brilliant modern scholars of the like of Anne Salmond and Joan Metge for example, have been made welcome within Māoridom and will continue to be so. Unfortunately, today there seems to be a trend towards the romanticisation of Māori by some social scientists. Some of today's mysticism concerning Māori finds its origin in the writings of Elsdon Best, for example:

The mentality of the Māori is of a very strange quality. He is not of us, nor yet of our time; he is the Oriental mystic; he is a survival from a past age. Like the moa of his own land, he is passing away; he has fulfilled his task in forming the mysterious chain of progress of which no man may count the links. (Best, 1923, p.30)

This conception of Māori probably reflected more the personal romanticism of the author than the reality of Māori in their world. However, the romanticization of Māori and other indigenous peoples around the world by social scientists continues even today. The current idea that Māori are not a "quantitative" people, for example, suggesting that Māori are deficient in analytical reasoning powers is a trend that needs to be looked at very carefully (Barnes, 2006). Ultimately, the points being made are that there are good Pākehā scholars and there are bad, and academic freedoms do not necessarily result in good outcomes for the object of their studies.

Summary and Conclusions

Academic freedom is an ideal that is achievable only incrementally. Academic freedom is not the freedom to do whatever one wants whenever one wants. It is not the freedom to behave insensitively towards those that extend kindness and *aroha*. The suspicions, if indeed they exist, directed at academics by Māori may have grown out of past abuses to basic Māori principles of behaviour. Within a Pākehā setting, the laws of society demand that certain behaviours be maintained. Within a Māori setting, the demand is that the principles of Māori society be acknowledged and adhered to. Unfortunately, it is those principles that have often been ignored in the past either out of ignorance, or perhaps deliberately, or because of irrelevance within a Pākehā setting. Too often Pākehā have come to Māori bearing gifts that ultimately resulted in embarrassment or diminishment of Māori people. Access to Māori culture requires an understanding of their principles and rules of behaviour.

Culture is an adaptation of society to environment and therefore any changes to external environment will be reflected in internal changes to the culture. The external environment for Māori has changed markedly over these last 150 years and so too has Māori culture. The influence of Pākehā has been enormous; however, in spite of that the culture remains Māori and the fascination of Māori culture for academics continues unabated. The idea that Māori have become precious about their culture is not proven, but could be expected when one considers the damage it has sustained over a hundred years of Pākehā academic prying. The prying may have had some benefits for Māori by bringing attention to the plight of Māori in a country that once claimed racial equality although the truth was far from it. There is a remarkable body of work by some outstanding Pākehā scholars who have revealed the richness of Māori culture and to them Māori will remain forever grateful.

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