At war with the warrior gene controversy

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Abstract: Professor Gary Raumati Hook's (2009) provocative paper outlines the controversy surrounding the MAO gene and Māori. This peer commentary continues Hook's discussion concerning how Māori culture is vulnerable to different interpretations at the risk of being misrepresented. However, New Zealand is a bicultural society and not all perspectives of Māori and the warrior are negative. The paper discusses bicultural perspectives and concludes with 3 counter stories which oppose how the warrior gene controversy has represented the Māori warrior.

Keywords: bicultural studies; ethnicity; Māori warrior

Ethnic minorities such as indigenous populations are a repository of untapped knowledge and a fresh frontier for researchers. Once aboriginal ways of knowing and understanding the world were consigned to the margins of society. Now ancient knowledge, life philosophies and even genetic makeup is sought out, collected and labeled in the research laboratory. One of the challenges indigenous populations contest is the right to name and define who they are to the rest of the world (Smith, 2005). The right to identity yourself and describe your individual qualities is something many people may accept as normal. For Māori, the right to name personal individuality as well as the collective qualities that are unique to whānau (family), iwi (tribe) and culture is desired, rarely taken for granted and often involves struggle.

The opposition Māori face in the struggle for cultural legimation is illustrated in the warrior gene controversy by how they are predominantly portrayed from one particular perspective. Hook (2009) highlights this point with reference to the media misrepresentation of Māori as being violent. The negative public perception of Māori was abetted by the media releasing news of the warrior gene at the same time the Kahui twin court case was happening (du Chateau, Cleave, Taylor, & Johnston, 2006). The unfortunate timing implied a tacit association between domestic violence and Māori and perpetuated the perception that Māori are inherently violent thus lending support to the negative racial stereotypes already existent (Chant, 2009). This example depicts the power of the media to represent ethnic minorities in ways that disadvantage them. Yet not all images of Māori in our society are negative and while Hook does not examine this aspect of the warrior gene discussion it is raised here.

As depicted by Hook (2009) the struggle for cultural sovereignty is challenging yet it also contains respites that affirm that positive intercultural convergence is possible. The intercultural exchanges this discussion references are independent of a research project or laboratory. Rather they are part of everyday life and are inculcated in the national identity many New Zealanders are familiar with and accept as part of their heritage. As a bicultural nation New Zealand is comprised of positive cross-cultural exchanges which provide frames of reference which query the negative representation of Māori culture and highlight the imbalanced representation Maori have experienced in the warrior gene controversy. These frames of reference are powerful because they are cross-pollinated by Māori and non-Māori alike. Such perspectives are pertinent counter stories which relay significant information about the nations perception, acceptance and incorporation of Māori culture in everyday life. Due to the extensive nature of Māori culture this discussion focuses mainly on the Māori warrior and provides three succinct counter stories which illustrate positive intercultural convergence and represent how Māori culture contributes to our bicultural society.

The first salient counter story of the warrior is discussed in reference to the haka which is the generic name for all Māori dance (Karetu, 1993). It is difficult to name every situation where the haka is utilised. In the context of our contemporary society it is performed at both ceremonial and impromptu occasions by Māori and non-Māori according to the people and tipuna (ancestors) that are present and the wairua (spirit) of the gathering. However, as a bicultural nation New Zealand is most familiar with the 'Ka mate' haka and the way national sports teams use it to re-enact ancient Māori warrior preparation for warfare. New Zealand's national rugby union team known as the 'All Blacks' incorporate this particular haka into their pre-match rituals to indicate warrior prowess and to intimidate their opponents (Jackson & Hokowhitu, 2002). In international competitions the All Blacks perform the haka immediately after the national anthems of both teams are sung. It has become a significant element in setting the atmosphere for the supportive spectators and the competitive play for the team members throughout the game. For many rugby spectators the haka is a patriotic ritual that is observed with as much respect as the national anthem. The performing of the haka immediately after the national anthems places Māori culture and the warrior in a highly visible position to the match spectators all over the world. Thus the Māori warrior has become a highly publicised icon which the world associates with our nation (Walker, 1996).

The second counter story which reiterates the nation incorporating the Māori warrior into our bicultural society occurs with the pōwhiri (welcome ceremony). The pōwhiri involves a warrior armed with war weaponry such as the taiaha (spear) and patu (club) greeting the manuhiri (visitors). As with the warriors that are involved in the haka, this warrior is also disciplined and highly skilled in the art of warfare and martial arts. His skill is exhibited in the pōwhiri as he executes precise combat movements as a challenge to manuhiri to discover whether they are a friend or a foe. In this context, the warrior is a protector for his whanau (family) and tangata whenua (indigenous people of the land). Their lives depend on his strategic thinking and combat ability and therefore, his role is held in the highest regard. New Zealanders are accepting of the warrior to the extent that the state deems it appropriate to use the pōwhiri as part of the national welcome that is extended to international dignitaries such as European royalty and influential political leaders. In the context of the pōwhiri the warrior is the champion of the tangata whenua and he risks his life to guard those he is responsible for. Of significance is how the traditional warrior is the antithesis of the violent criminal associated with the MAO gene discussion and the negative stereotypes purported by the media.

The third and final counter story highlights how our bicultural society honours the warrior with reference to those soldiers who served the nation in the past and recent wars. In Māori mythology the Māori warrior is a hero and is personified by the mythological being endowed with supernatural powers known as Māui. Māui is skilled with athletic ability, leadership strategy and warfare knowledge. These skills are also found in the Māori warriors of today. A recent example is Corporal Willy Apiata who was awarded the Victoria Cross for his courageous service to his fellowmen and country (Anonymous, 2007). Alongside this warrior are many other Maori that fought in wars including the unforgettable Māori battalion of the 2nd World War (Soutar, 2003). As much as science draws from reductionist viewpoints to understand the unknown one way Māori make sense of the world is to draw from the collective relationships we share. In making sense of how the Māori warrior has been misrepresented in the warrior gene controversy I return to my community and reflect on the Māori warriors I know. My Grandfather, Great Uncles and Father served this country as soldiers and after the war became political leaders in our whānau (family) and the wider community. Similar to the warrior in the pōwhiri these men are perceived by our whanau and community as protectors and champions. In tribute to these warriors our community joins with the Nation to commemorate their sacrifice in the annual ANZAC (Australian and New Zealand Army Corps) dawn parade on April the 25th. ANZAC Day is named such in honour of the New Zealand and Australian troops that fought alongside each other in the First World War on the Gallipoli peninsula in Turkey and established an enduring bond. The nation

honours these soldiers and all others with an annual dawn parade on the same date as the first landing at Gallipoli in 1915.

On every April the 25th, my community meets at our marae (Māori meeting house) which is on top of cliffs and overlooks the sea. We lay a wreath at the foot of the statue cast in the figure of a soldier dressed in combat attire. This statue commemorates the warriors from our community who died or served in battle. We huddle against each other in the dark chilly morning and as the dawn appears the gun salute is given. We stand together, watch the light streak the dark sky with dim colour and repeat the war memorial. The sacrifice of our warrior forefathers becomes an indelible imprint on who we are and what we have inherited, and affirm my understanding of the Māori warrior. Lest we forget.

Summary

In summary, this commentary has responded to Hook's target article by raising cultural understandings surrounding the MAO gene and misrepresentation of the Māori warrior. The discussion has contended that within a bicultural society intercultural sharing between Māori and non-Māori occurs which emphasises that national and indigenous identity are dynamic and can shape each other in positive ways. This is illustrated by three counter stories which provide the discussion with a whakapapa (genealogy) of the Māori warrior. The first counter story discusses how the warrior is represented at a national level and connects Māori culture and the warrior with our countries global and national identity. The next counter story and whakapapa link portrays the warrior in a cultural role which also makes a significant contribution to the national identity and tangata whenua. The final counter story traces the whakapapa of the warrior home to the Māori community and combines community practises with the nations acknowledgement of wartime service. By portraying the warrior in these different contexts the discussion has highlighted how indigenous knowledge and practices challenge racial stereotypes and are no longer situated on the social margins but are part of our bicultural society and embedded in everyday life. Cross-cultural convergences such as those discussed refute the misrepresentation surrounding Māori and contend that despite negative publicity the Māori warrior is an ingrained part of our bicultural society which is accepted by many New Zealanders as part of their national identity.

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