

Race, Culture and Ethnicity

Organisation of Maori social groups

A working paper

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Three concepts have guided the conceptual orientation to studies of human groups within the social sciences. They are those concepts of race, culture, and ethnicity. These are discussed below with specific reference to Maori peoples and their development in Te Aohurihuri.

Race is a concept used to categorize people into different groups based on physical and biological characteristics. Although those familiar with Maori peoples might believe that there are characteristic phenotypes or 'looks' that distinguish Maori apart from other groups, generally, physical anthropologists have ceased using the term for two basic reasons. Firstly, very few human beings belong to pure racial groups. A phenotype said to characterize one group of people can more often than not, be found amongst other groups of people. For example, fair skin might be a characteristics of 'Pakeha' people, but some Maori people also have fair skin. This leads to the second reason being that most behavioral characteristics ascribed to race are more likely to be culturally determined rather than biologically or genetically determined. In addition, it is extremely difficult to predict that an individual will behave in a particular manner purely on the basis that they may be defined as fitting the characteristics of a particular racial group. For example, it would be unfounded to assert that those who have dark skin color will become criminals or are predisposed to acting violently. Hence, the move by social scientists, at least, to conceive of social issues as a product of 'culture' rather than 'race'. The following electronic message from a academic working in this area supports this point.

>>Dear Colleagues,

>>I have a superior grad student I'm working with. She is a Chamorro from what
>>we currently call "Guam." Our US census in its wisdom places Pacific Islanders
>>together with Asians. She is interested in >>demonstrating specific differences
>>between these two groups (Asians and Pacific Islanders), especially around
>>cultural identification. Later, she will likely move to differences and complexity
>>among >>varying island groups.

(Posted on electronic mail to SCRA-L@UICVM.UIC.EDU 24/5/95)

Indeed, if the truth were more widely known, Pacific Island peoples, including Maori were initially thought to be Asian!

Culture: The literature concerning culture is vast the result being that no one distinct definition for culture exists. There is however, general agreement regarding certain aspects of culture that form a starting point to begin examining cultural phenomenon.

Firstly, culture is not innate. It is not something that we are born with. Culture has to be learned. Of course, an individual may be born with one or two characteristics commonly found in a particular cultural group (e.g. skin color, hair texture), but these are not sufficient to guarantee the development of practices, beliefs and values of that cultural group. Socialization and enculturation are major processes instrumental in the individual's acquisition of culture, but does not exclude the possibility that an individual from some other cultural group might actively learn that of some other (i.e. a Maori learning French culture).

Secondly, no one individual can represent the patterns of meanings which are characteristic of a whole culture. An example of this is that often the cultural understandings of members are products of ascribed positions, gender being one. The cultural perspective of women will differ from that of men given that culture often prescribes different roles for each gender group in turn focusing the enculturation process on the acquisition of gender defined behaviors for each gender group respectively. Additionally, the enculturation process is also affected by the era into which an individual is born. A Maori child born in the present day is more likely to gain exposure to opportunities to learn Te Reo Maori, given the establishment of Kohanga Reo, than a Maori child born twenty years ago. A Maori child born in the 1920's was more likely, given the limited nature of urban migration at that time, to have been raised in a rural, marae based environment and have acquired cultural behaviors grounded in this experience. The Maori child born today is more likely to have cultural behaviors and a world view grounded within the urban experience of Maori people that in turn might be difficult for their parents or grandparents to relate to. Yet the Maori child of today does not come from a different cultural group, they just emerge from that group at a different place in time.

Thirdly, culture is a collective or group phenomenon, the collective being at least two people and broadening to larger groups such hapu, iwi, neighborhood communities, towns, cities, nations, or global communities. Drawing on points made above, two people who form a relationship build sets behavior and meanings that often are understood by them alone. A twitch of an eyebrow might mean intimacy, whereas a 'wink' might be a warning to the other that their behavior is irritating. The same might be said of the behavior of a hapu or iwi group and in turn, that of the pan-tribal group "Maori". The effect of building codes of behavior common to those within that culture group is that those behaviors often serve to mark out boundaries between culture groups. Boundary indicators are characteristics and behaviors such as language, dress, food, and rituals.

A final characteristic of culture is that the various facets of culture are interrelated. If one facet of culture is impacted on, so too are other facets. The introduction of the musket to Maori communities had a major affect on tribal warfare, and a devastating impact on survival chances in the warfare process. Tribal communities had no choice but to rapidly develop: words to describe this object; develop an understanding of how the musket operated; the implications of it's use and new behaviors and ways of interacting. The impact of immigrant culture on that of Maori has also been massive highlighting the need for effective adaption processes necessary to ensure survival.

In short, a general definition of culture is:

...the learned, socially acquired traditions and lifestyles of the members of a society, including their patterned, repetitive ways of thinking, felling and acting...(Harris, 1983, p.5.).

The drawbacks of using culture as an organizing and defining concept are that:

1. There is no generally agreed list of behaviors or material products taken to constitute the culture of a particular group;
2. Cultural characteristics of a group do not completely distinguish them apart from each other;
3. Culture does not deal well with notions such as individuals having the capacity to be bicultural or multicultural.

The drawbacks of the concept of culture have in turn motivated the development of the term ethnicity to better address and deal with understanding human groups (Thomas, 1994).

Ethnicity is essentially an identity that reflects the cultural experiences and feelings of a particular group. According to Spoonley (1993) an ethnic group may have:

- a) *a real or supposed common ancestry,*
- b) *memories of a shared historical past,*
- c) *a distinctive shared culture,*
- d) *a collective name,*
- e) *a sense of solidarity and an association with a specific territory*

Most of these characteristics of ethnicity are self-explanatory and will not be elaborated upon here. But a number of points are important to understand.

The concept of ethnicity acknowledges that individuals may have a primary culture that is distinctive to a particular ethnic group, but does not exclude the possibility that individuals within that group have the capacity to learn cultural behaviors of other groups. That Maori have had to reposition themselves as a non-dominant ethnic group has in turn impacted on the culture of Maori necessitating not only the adaptation of Maori culture, but the adaptation of individuals within that culture to that of the now dominant immigrant group. The impact of this has been progression by Maori over time towards three positions: a state of biculturalism; a state of assimilation into the dominant immigrant culture; or some state in between.

Although these progressions have occurred, Maori ethnicity retains one essential defining criteria that being 'real descent'. If an individual is able to establish their descent from an ancestor who was recognized as Maori, then their ethnicity as Maori is difficult to debate.

References:

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