

# Who might work with whom? Deconstructing restraints of gender and culture.

Alastair Crocket

Principal Academic Staff Member, School of Social Development, Waikato Institute of Technology

EdD student, University of Waikato

## **Abstract**

*A research project founded in social constructionist and post-colonial theorising investigated the discursive positioning of Pakeha counsellors who acknowledge membership of the dominant cultural group in Aotearoa New Zealand and the possibilities for them to work against potential limitations on their practice effectiveness which may arise from this membership.*

*The theoretical concepts of discourse, positioning theory, deconstruction and intersectionality inform an analysis which both facilitated and made possible a description of a transformational development in one participant's practice which happened while she was participating in the research project. Discussion of this development offers support for an argument that a focus on the discursive context of counselling practice by a counsellor offers benefits for counsellor and client.*

## **Introduction**

How are we to understand the workings of discourse in relation to our practice? How does discourse simultaneously enable and restrain us as practitioners? How do the post-colonial politics of Aotearoa impact on our practice? How do the politics of gender intersect with postcolonial politics?

In this paper I illustrate how a school counsellor's careful reflexivity enabled her to challenge discursive restraints; restraints which produced an ambivalence about working with young Māori males - a significant portion of her potential clientele. Through a process of challenging these restraints she enabled a transformational development of her practice to occur. At the centre in this paper are these reflections by a counsellor who I call Ann. Ann is a graduate of the Waikato Master's in Counselling. I was privileged that Ann shared these reflections within the data generation phases of my doctoral research project.

I'll be drawing on four concepts or theories and I will introduce these here. These are:

- a. Discourse
- b. Positioning Theory
- c. Deconstruction
- d. Intersectionality

### **a Discourse**

I try to understand discourse in Foucault's terms.

From Foucault (1977, 1988, 2001, 2002) and Parker (1994) I understand that human subjectivity is produced by discourse; Foucault's later work emphasized the agency that can be exercised to make ethical choices in the production of a desired subjectivity. Foucault's reading of discourse enables us to see that we are produced moment by moment by discourse(s). These Foucauldian ideas have been introduced to the counselling profession by the development of Narrative approaches to counselling (White & Epston 1990; White, 2007). In the context of this paper we might consider the discourses of colonisation, which produce

both Māori and Pākehā identities, and then postcolonial discourses, which have been produced by Māori resistance to the discourses of colonisation. These discourses will also be seen intersecting with discourses of gender.

## **b Positioning theory**

Positioning Theory (Davies & Harre, 1990; Davies, 1999; Harre & Van Langenhoven, 1991) offers a way of understanding the working of discourse in conversational contexts. The concept of the position call (Burr, 2003; Drewery & Winslade, 1997) has been developed from Positioning Theory. In each moment we are subject to a myriad of position calls. What I am seeking to show here is how a reflexive focus on position calls can help make visible the moment by moment effects of discourse on persons. Some calls restrain us, others offer us an agentive position. Burr suggests that positions can be offered, accepted or resisted (Burr, 2003, p.115), but it can be difficult to decline the calls which restrain us. Of course in this paper I am interested in the colonising and postcolonising discourses and the conflicting calls that these offered Ann as a Pākehā woman in relation to the possibility of working with young Māori males

## **c Deconstruction**

Deconstruction will also be familiar to those who have read Michael White's writing (White & Epston 1990; White, 2007). It derives from the work of Derrida (1997). Sampson writes: "To deconstruct is to undo, not to destroy" (1989, p. 7)

This represents the central purpose of deconstruction: the challenging of a broad group of received and commonsense understandings about the world we live in. Deconstruction implies a challenge to the apparent permanence of institutions, structures and texts through examining and identifying the unacknowledged effects of powerful discourses on both groups and individuals.

In this paper I use deconstruction when I refer to Ann's reflexivity about restraints she experienced in relation to her practice with young Māori males; restraints which she did not experience when working with young Māori females.

## **d Intersectionality**

Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 2001) has a particular place in this practice story. It offers us a nuanced reading of identity, which might contribute to a more nuanced reflexivity. According to Crenshaw intersectionality is:

... what occurs when a woman from a minority group ... tries to navigate the main crossing in the city... . The main highway is 'Racism Road'. One cross street can be Colonialism, then Patriarchy Street. ... She has to deal not only with one form of oppression but with all forms, those named as road signs, which link together to make a double, a triple, multiple, a many layered blanket of oppression. (Crenshaw, 2001, cited in Yuval-Davis, 2006, p. 196)

While Crenshaw is speaking here about a multi-layered blanket of oppression, Ann also speaks of her identity in terms consistent with intersectionality when she says:

*For me it's not just about being Pākehā ... its also about being middle class Pākehā, and educated Pākehā and being a woman and I don't know how you can separate them out.*

In this context I am interested in the intersection of identities – a female counsellor and her potential young Māori male clients- and underlying and producing these identities, the discourses of gender and colonization and postcolonisation.

## ***Background to the study***

My project emerged from the challenges of supporting students in counsellor and social work education programmes to begin to frame their emerging practice in terms of the Treaty of Waitangi over most of a decade. Over that time I became concerned that many conceptualisations of appropriate practice were often built on a Maori-Pākehā binary that increasingly excluded many clients and students. (As one example: when Treaty issues were discussed in terms of Maori and Pakeha my Chinese, or Indian students might well feel marginalised.)

## ***Interpretations***

### **a Ann's Pakeha identity.**

Ann identifies as Pakeha. She had practiced as a counsellor for ten years and had worked as a teacher prior to that.

She traces the process of taking on a Pakeha identity as something that has been ongoing throughout her life.

She has developed a significant level of cultural competence in two decades living and working in a rural centre where there are high numbers of Maori. As a teacher and later as a counsellor she has lived alongside Maori and has developed significant professional links in the Maori community.

She concluded her comments about the significance of being a Pakeha saying:

*And so to be, for me to be a Pakeha New Zealander has been a quite a learning process as to what that actually means and .. I am really proud to say that I am.*

Ann, was relatively recently appointed to a counselling position in a secondary school after working in a community agency where there had been significant emphasis on addressing cultural needs. This was less evident in the school. She spoke of a recurring issue which challenged her.

*I really struggle in my work with young Maori males. Because .. I have this fear that I can't meet their need and part of me says well actually .. that's not necessarily true, and part of me thinks, that they need strong role models. You know that, that whole discourse about strong Maori role models rather than having the opportunity to have a conversation (Ann first meeting transcript; 2<sup>ND</sup> question)*

Ann was not indifferent to the issues that young Maori males faced; she experienced discursive restraints on her being able to access her cultural competence when working with them.

This discourse which I am naming as 'young Maori males need strong Maori role models' has a genealogy that can be traced to the assertion of Maori Rangatiratanga which became prominent from the 1970s. Rangatiratanga is a word that was developed for the Maori version of the Treaty of Waitangi and literally refers to the rights of chieftainship and is sometimes translated as sovereignty.

In the social service there has been an ongoing call for Maori to work with Maori and also recognition that there is not always a Maori worker available. Other participants in this project also spoke of the choice that some Maori made to work with Pakeha because of the absence of whanau (family) links which may be seen as problematic by them.

In her work Ann was expected to see Maori clients and she viewed working with young Maori males with ambivalence. This young Maori males need strong Maori role models discourse offered her a non-agentive position of being the inappropriate worker for such a client were she to proceed to act as counsellor. This discourse had the effect of positioning her without agency in relation to young Maori males because it 'said' her gender and ethnicity were not appropriate. This school did not have a Maori male counsellor although there was a part-time female Maori counsellor. If Ann were not to work with young Maori males then counselling within the school might not be available for this section of the school population.

On the other hand the transcript excerpt quoted above shows that this young Maori male discourse was not the only discourse which influenced her work with young Maori male students; there was a counter position – indicated when she said: 'part of me says well actually .. you know that's not necessarily true' - but the young Maori male discourse was dominant at this time.

In terms of narrative counselling theory (White, 2007) Ann has developed her practice identity in the same way she understands her life which is in the terms of a story which draws together experiences in a consistent manner but which does not include all of her experience. If her practice identity story includes some problematic interactions with young male Maori then she is perhaps more likely to experience the young Maori male discourse as dominant. It is equally possible that in her significant professional experience Ann may have had successful outcomes working with Maori males. However, until she engaged in this research project she had not been able to counter that part of her practice identity story that was dominated by the young Maori male discourse.

## **b Ann reflects on discourse**

Ann's thinking about her practice with young Maori males began to shift as she accepted the invitation to reflect on the discursive context of the contribution to the first meeting discussed above.

*[I] have had a few more thoughts on discourses and positionings that I am experiencing.*

*In the context of working with young Maori men, I think there has been for me a very strong "culturally appropriate" discourse operating ... This discourse assumes that "like working with like" is more equitable... (Ann first online reflection)*

Ann is connecting the 'young Maori male' discourse with those dominant counselling discourses which support the ideal of reducing power imbalances and then considers the genealogy of the young Maori male discourse in her life as she considered her early experiences as a teacher. While the discourse developed in the broader society, as she later says, it had discursive 'allies' and some of these were active in her early teaching experience

*The "counsellor" discourse has been supported in my thinking about my early experiences teaching, where I have struggled to connect with some young Maori men. At the time I thought "They don't respect Pakeha women", now I'm more likely to think that there was something in my approach that didn't connect with them - hence leading to blocks in respect going both ways in the relationship. (Ann first online reflection)*

The potential for a shift is emerging as Ann considers other factors in her professional history as she says: "now I'm more likely to think that there was something in my approach that didn't connect with them".

As Ann continues to reflect she identifies more 'allies' to the 'young Maori male' discourse and starts to critique the binary represented here.

*Another discourse also supporting this .. has its basis somewhere in gender/psychology/education thinking - that boys like to be active and do things, rather than sit around. I have interpreted this as 'an adventure therapy - type hands on approach' is more appropriate with young men. However, on thinking about this further, perhaps a 'both/and' approach is more useful. Adventure therapy/hands on may be appropriate for some people in some contexts, and so also may sitting in a counselling room having a conversation. (Ann first online reflection)*

“Both/and” is an analysis of the limiting effects of a discursive position that she had been subjected by and this analysis offers her agency in a way that “an adventure therapy - type hands on approach” discourse does not.

### **c A shift in practice emerges**

Ann’s next contribution came when she spoke with enthusiasm about a meeting she had with a year nine student.

*I had a really interesting conversation with a year nine boy who had been sent... I was asked to see [him] because he’s so naughty and he’s you know heading up there as one of the ones ... He’s about this high. You know this little kid. (Ann second meeting transcript; discussion)*

After Ann’s earlier statement I might have expected that meeting with a young male Maori student would be a challenging experience. However now Ann would be able to resist the positioning that the ‘young Maori male’ discourse offered her.

*So I thought to have a conversation with him about .. what’s it been like to come to this school? What’s it been like for you to come in here with the other kids? What are the kind of things that the other kids have been saying to you? (Ann second meeting transcript; discussion)*

Ann began to invite the student to share his experience as a young Maori male moving in to this secondary school. Clearly she is acting from an agentive position. She continued:

*And so that’s important with.. position calls for him as a Maori. (Ann second meeting transcript; discussion)*

She analyses his work with her discursively and the student is able to name where the position calls are coming for him as he enters secondary schooling.

*Because .. we talked about [what it is] to be a young Maori boy. The other kids. There’s a lot of gang influences and they get called into that. They get called into being staunch and being tough and having to do things.*

*So I said: ‘Well do you notice that with the Pakeha kids?’*

*He said ‘no’.*

*‘Do you notice it with the girls?’*

*‘A little bit, but not so much. It’s different for the girls’. (Ann second meeting transcript; discussion)*

Ann was enthusiastic about this development and the possibilities that seemed to be opening up. Her client was also engaged in the conversation. This practice did not reflect the earlier comments about struggles when working with Maori males.

### **d Ann’s reflections on this shift in positioning**

In a later reflection Ann identified the ways in which her earlier reflections on the discursive contexts of her work had enabled her to take up agency in relation to working with young Maori males.

She described her intentions this way.

*.... I wanted to offer him space to explore what it is like for him at the school. To identify some of the influences/discourses that might be impacting on him and others that students experience and teachers may not see. In identifying these discourses he would then be able to move into a more agentive position in response to them. The strong discourse that has come through for him, has been*

*having to "prove myself" to his peers - and how that has been limited to practices of violence, rather than proving himself in other ways. (Ann second online reflection)*

Again here Ann describes practice where she is agentic, and she is foregrounding the agency she wants to support for her client.

Next Ann described how she created space to take up an agentic position by reflecting on various discourses that came into her counselling room. She decided that the young Maori male discourse brought 'allies' with it. By reflecting on this allied group of discourses she was able to resist non-agentic positions for herself and – at least within the counseling room - for her client.

*"Males need strong role models" - Is also associated with one of "young male Maori need male Maori to work with them", and "boys need active, adventure type therapy -not sitting talking". When I think of the first discourse, it immediately conjurs up the second two as well. I think on looking at them, the "not" phrase in the last discourse listed brings into relief the implicit "not" in the other two. I.e.:*

*"Males need strong role modes NOT soft women"*

*"Young male Maori need male Maori to work with them NOT middle-aged Pakeha women"*

*"Boys need active, adventure type therapy NOT sitting talking [like I offer]"*

*I have commented on the allies to this discourse first, because it brings the others with it, and they all offered me positions which I chose not to take up at that time, but have been invited into in the past. At the time I talked about in our meeting, I was able to decline a non-agentic positioning by broadening the scope of the discourse from a purely binary positioning (either/or) to a both/and discourse. So for example:*

*"Males need strong role models AND women can show strength AND males also need softer role models AND role models are found in many places which counselling can identify ..."*

*"Young male Maori need male Maori to work with them AND middle-aged Pakeha women can also offer something as well"*

*"Boys need active, adventure type therapy AND talking therapy can also be helpful AND both kinds of therapy have their place".*

*So the way of declining limiting positions in this instance was not so much to argue against them and try to negate those positions, but to accept that the discourses may have a partial validity and then add to them by noticing other positions that may offered (I'm sure if I thought longer and harder I'd be able to come up with some more). (Ann second online reflection)*

By the end of her reflections, Ann had created discursive space for herself as a practitioner and was able to resist position calls that had previously restricted her practice options through the operation of narrowly restrictive binaries.

As I followed these contributions in the meetings and the online reflections, which followed them, I realized I was privileged to be observing transformational developments in professional practice which came about as a result of the opportunities offered to Ann in the research process.

## **Conclusion**

The student whose story is central to this selection from my research data was receiving and acting on calls 'to prove himself'. he was accepting positions calls which encouraged him to take up a 'violent Maori male' identity. As he acted within the terms of that discourse he also had a developing identity as a problem student at the time he was referred to Ann. One outcome of the work that Ann undertook with him may have been that other identities were potentially opening up to him than those which involved 'practices of violence'.

As a result of the transformational developments described above Ann was able to utilize her cultural competence with this young student. What she earlier described as a struggle was now satisfying practice.

Neither I nor Ann would suggest that Maori clients should be referred to a Pakeha counsellor rather than a Maori counsellor. Many Maori clients would prefer to work with a Maori and this can be regarded as supported by the Treaty of Waitangi.

I argue that discursively aware counseling practices such as I have indicated here offer potential for a broader space for clients' identities to develop beyond that narrow space described by Brendan Hokowhitu. If the shifts in practice identity available to Ann as a result of this research project became available to other Pakeha who work as counsellors with Maori clients then the quality of counselling experience available to Maori might more closely match Hokowhitu's call.

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