

MATAURANGA TUKU IHO TIKANGA RANGAHAU: TRADITIONAL KNOWLEDGE AND RESEARCH ETHICS CONFERENCE

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Throughout the world, indigenous communities are demanding more of a say in all aspects of research projects that involve them. This includes having a say over the design, implementation and evaluation of these projects. This approach is in marked contrast to research of indigenous peoples in the past, which typically studied and scrutinised indigenous peoples from paradigms that were foreign to the people being investigated. From the early days of colonisation and into the present, distorted views of Māori have been generated and disseminated by researchers who have come from outside the Māori community and brought western perspectives to the research process.

Most outside researchers do not consider the cultural practices or existing knowledge of indigenous communities and give little or nothing to indigenous communities in return for their contribution. Moreover, many make no effort to employ local people in any capacity, regardless of their abilities, or to compensate the individual participants, regardless of the risks or burdens associated with the research. There have been numerous cases where researchers have profited economically and professionally from research in indigenous communities but have treated the indigenous researchers as “informants” rather than as colleagues, allowing them to appropriate the work of the indigenous researchers as their own.

Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga, National Institute of Research Excellence for Māori Development and Advancement, is one of seven centres of research excellence in New Zealand, and thus has a major responsibility to provide a venue in which past research initiatives can be scrutinised with a view to finding solutions that are in keeping with the needs and priorities of indigenous peoples in contemporary times. With this in mind, Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga chose research ethics and traditional knowledge as the focal topics of their inaugural international conference, held at Te Papa Tongarewa in Wellington from 10–12 June 2004.¹

¹ Copies of the conference proceedings are available from Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga at the University of Auckland.

All too often, research with indigenous communities is conducted in a way that is unethical and that is, therefore, detrimental to the needs and wellbeing of indigenous communities. An international conference that focused on the needs and perspectives of indigenous peoples, as identified by indigenous peoples themselves, was considered to be entirely appropriate for this foundational event.

Accordingly, the conference addressed several strands of work, including research with socially excluded groups, bioethics, the challenges presented by the knowledge economy, tikanga Māori, matauranga and indigenous knowledge, and the rapid advances being made in new technologies.

The programme of the conference aimed at having these issues addressed and discussed with the maximum benefit to a wide range of stakeholders. One of the major organising themes of Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga is engagement with Māori communities. The conference involved, therefore, a high degree of community participation through a series of community dialogues that fed into the main conference at Te Papa. These dialogues were generated at a series of community workshops that took place throughout New Zealand in the days preceding the conference.

A complementary component of these community forums was attendance by international keynote speakers who visited each local community and then presented findings at the conference in Wellington. International speakers included Dr Stephen Sodeke (Nigeria/USA), Debra Harry (USA), Alejandro Argumendo (Peru), Lopeti Senituli (Tonga), Sally Riley (Australia), Professor Donna Dickenson (UK) and Professor Nancy King (USA). As well, a range of local keynote speakers, including Judge Edie Durie, Professor Hirini Mead, Professor Linda Smith and Associate Professor Michael Walker, provided a Māori perspective to complement issues raised by community representatives.

A wide range of concerns about research with Māori and indigenous communities were voiced by community representatives and other speakers. While individual concerns were expressed by each community, common themes came through clearly at the gathering in Wellington.

Dr Stephen Sodeke highlighted the need to work closely with indigenous communities, many of whom are particularly vulnerable to a range of social pressures and sometimes to the unethical practices of researchers. As he expressed it, research with indigenous communities should lead to human flourishing, a concept which he described as allowing individuals and communities to reach their fullest potential through active and consensual participation in all aspects of the research process:

We must not shy away from protecting vulnerable populations. Their vulnerability should not reduce their intrinsic worth as human beings... Social justice demands that everyone be assisted to flourish regardless of their state in life.

Other speakers, too, spoke of the need to deal with people in a respectful way so as to ensure the preservation of traditional knowledge in generations to come. Underlying this approach, however, must be a commitment to acknowledging our past so that we can understand where we have come from. Such an approach is particularly important as we endeavour to understand and apply tikanga in a contemporary context. As described by Sir Tipene O'Regan who participated in the community forum convened in Bluff, "Tikanga is applied morality, shifting through time".

One of the overwhelming messages of the conference was that delivered by Judge Durie, who identified trust as fundamental to all research relationships. This message was endorsed by a number of speakers who placed trust at the centre of good ethical research with indigenous communities.

This conference has identified a range of issues that have particular relevance for Māori and indigenous communities in the 21st century. Too often, external researchers move into communities without consultation, ask personal questions, draw conclusions that are not based on actual knowledge of community dynamics and then disappear, with the community never being informed of the results or conclusions of the research. Such an approach undermines community integrity and does nothing to meet the needs of indigenous communities. This does damage to the communities themselves and means that other people, such as policy makers, are hamstrung in their efforts to provide effective policy for indigenous peoples. It is hoped that this conference might go some way to setting new standards for research with indigenous communities, not only here in New Zealand, but throughout the world.

The conference was held in Wellington especially in the hope that many of the messages from the conference would be heard and taken up by Government policy makers. The next Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga conference will be held in two years' time and will pick up on the messages delivered at this conference with a view to advancing and developing ethical research with Māori and indigenous communities.