

What does a collective identity mean from a Maori point of view?

How would the collective identity fit with a Maori worldview and the realities of Maori health promotion?

There are many forms of collectivism in political reality, such as tribalism, communism, socialism, communalism, fascism, authoritarianism, totalitarianism and forms of trade unionism including those relating to some types of industrial groupings. A doctrine in political philosophy (and sometimes ethics) holds that individuals' actions should benefit not the individual but some kind of collective organisation¹ (such as a tribe, community, profession, or state). The collective identity sought by the Health Promotion Forum represents a form of professional collective (a collective of organisations and individuals with a common interest in health promotion) necessary for the advancement of the health promotion sector and in particular, workforce development initiatives. These professional collectives/associations are common mechanisms that provide leadership and facilitate action on behalf of their membership.

One of the key differences between Maori and non Maori (pakeha/western) society is the Maori emphasis on the well-being of the group, as opposed to the western focus on the individual. Maori society is predicated on the social units of *whanau*, *hapu* and *iwi* (descended from a common ancestor) and individual identity and individual rights are derived from membership of those groups. Colonisation brought with it the notion that individuals were autonomous, rational and self determining and established this form of individualism as a central feature of the political and legal systems of New Zealand². The state has persistently attempted to impose liberal individualism on Maori, particularly in the ownership and management of property. Government land policy was aimed at undermining the collective authority of tribes in order that collectively held Maori land could be transferred into individual title, and then into pakeha hands.

For most of the one hundred and sixty years since the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, government policy has persistently sought to destroy the Maori collectivistic system (Walker, 1990; Ward, 1999; Williams, 1999). Although the Treaty clearly recognised and promised to protect Maori (collective rights), (both in the English and Maori texts), government policy

¹ <http://www.ismbook.com/collectivism.html>

² Cheyne, C; O'Brien, M; Belgrave, M; (2005), *Social Policy in Aotearoa-New Zealand – A Critical Introduction, Third Edition*. Oxford University Press. (p 140).

towards Maori has continuously aimed at extinguishing these rights and replacing them with individual rights as they are understood in European legal and social-policy terms. And while most Maori grievances against the Crown stem from this denial of group constitutional and property rights, the attempts to settle these grievances have continued the process of individualisation.

The neo-liberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s were driven by a particularly aggressive form of competitive individualism, underpinned by a belief that the state should withdraw from supporting people in need and that the marketplace should be the ultimate arbiter of all things. This was in stark contrast to the Maori emphasis on co-operation, on supporting the whanau, hapu and iwi and on maintaining the rights promised under the Treaty of Waitangi. Maori resisted the reforms under the banner of *tino rangatiratanga* and fought for the right to assert Maori autonomy and restore Maori cultural and resource rights. This resolve, and the demand for Maori control over Maori matters, continues as a feature of the contemporary position of Maori in Aotearoa – New Zealand today.

The chart below is adapted from “Families with Latino roots” and compares elements of Maori culture with western culture³. It adequately captures some of the essential and sometimes subtle differences between Maori and western culture. For the purposes of clarity, the differences are presented as polar opposites but in real life, they are often less clear. However, the sum total of the elements presents an interesting picture of two different worldviews and helps to explain the inherent tensions between the two.

Maori Culture	Western Culture
Collective orientation	Individual Orientation
Interdependence	Independence
Collective, group identity	Individual identity
Co-operation	Competition
Indirect Communication	Being direct
Emphasis on inter-personal relationships	Emphasis on task orientation
Spiritual orientation	Rational/empirical belief orientation
Tendency toward more patriarchal family structure	Tendency toward more democratic family structure
More overt respect for the elderly	Less value/respect for the elderly
Extended family system more pronounced	Nuclear family more pronounced

³ <http://www.casadeesperanza.org/en/philosophy2.html>

It has been difficult to accommodate a Maori collectivistic orientation within a society predicated on a western form of individualistic capitalism. Maori have consistently fought for the right to be Maori, including the right to Maori institutions and social structures, land and language, resources and cultural practices. Maori groups that have engaged most with the competitive environment for social/health services will have a good appreciation of the dynamics (often invisible) that are at play, and have probably been the most successful at working their way through these matters. But at best, the Maori position is a compromised one, struggling as it does to assert a position that is often diametrically opposed to the dominant worldview. The capricious-ness of the political environment and the present backsliding on Maori issues, including the Treaty of Waitangi, serves to reinforce Maori cynicism about their relationship with the Crown and those agencies that pertain to the Crown.

So, what does a collective identity mean from a Maori point of view? For many Maori, the collective identity is a lived experience based upon deeply held values that are reflected in attitudes, behaviours and lifestyles. There are genealogical, land, history and spiritual ties that bind groups. Contemporarily, the reclamation and assertion of Maori-ness serves to heighten and amplify the sense of collective identity and this is further reinforced by way of contrast with the dominant individualistic paradigm. The tensions at the interface of these two worldviews must be constantly mediated by Maori in particular, and this requires a confidence and resilience that is not always in attendance. Nonetheless, the impetus and conviction to be self determining and the complete rejection of any notion of assimilation is now firmly embedded as part of the Maori psyche.

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The health promotion sector is exploring the notion of a collective identity /professional association as a unification mechanism through which to enable purposeful action and progress (particularly in respect of workforce and other health promotion developmental aspirations and obligations). This should fit easily with Maori understandings and experiences of collectivity, but **only insofar as Maori aspirations for self determination and control of Maori things** can be realised. Some Maori would argue that it is not possible to accommodate the Maori perspective within the confines of a mainstream structure, for the

values are fundamentally different and often irreconcilable. However, Maori experience with the Health Promotion Forum over a period of twenty years, gives some cause for optimism. The Health Promotion Forum has consistently tried to support Maori aspirations and the assertion of Maori cultural and Treaty rights. From its birth to the present time, the Forum has worked hard to implement a partnership relationship with Maori, as envisaged under the Treaty of Waitangi. This has been manifest over time through the governance of the organisation, its staffing and membership make up, and particularly through its policies and practices. But the real proof has been in the strong support of the Health Promotion Forum by Maori people themselves, over time and to this day. Therefore, despite inherent tensions, and different worldviews, these matters have been actively mediated through the exercise of tolerance and understanding, respect and goodwill. Maori are finding some space within which to express and realise Maori realities and this is essential if Maori are to effectively contribute to improving their health and position in society.

In summary then, Maori are likely to support a collective identity/association for health promotion, if that entity enables Maori to be Maori, and to realise Maori aspirations for self determination and control over Maori matters. The level of Maori support will be directly correlated to the relevance of the organisation to Maori needs. As already indicated by Helen Rance in her discussion paper (A Collective Identity for Health Promotion in Aotearoa-New Zealand), the consultation, mandate and process issues will be critical to the establishment of such a body. The Health Promotion Forum has access to a number of experienced and competent Maori professionals who can assist in this regard.

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