

Thinking about difference across and within mentoring

Matiu Ratima and Barbara Grant

Abstract: This commentary brings together two different but complementary responses to the target article by Gary Hook, Tu Waaka and Parehaereone Raumati (2007) on workplace mentoring of Māori employees within a Pākehā framework. First, Matiu Ratima engages with the aspects of the argument that stand out for him as key points of difference between Māori and Pākehā worldviews with respect to mentoring. Then, Barbara Grant draws on her experience with mentoring programmes at the University of Auckland to offer a different view of Pākehā mentoring from that emphasised in the article. Both respondents are united in their acknowledgement of the importance of critical work that seeks to throw lines of understanding between Māori and Pākehā worldviews.

Keywords: Māori mentoring, mentee, biculturalism, cross cultural mentoring

Matiu's commentary

Mentoring Māori within a Pākehā framework by Gary Hook and his colleagues is a significant contribution to an emerging body of scholarship that is engaging the Pākehā academy across a range of disciplines. This scholarship provides a critique based on the principles of kaupapa Māori – the shared values, beliefs and philosophies of Māori communities (Bishop & Glynn, 1999; Pihama, Cram & Walker, 2002; Robust, 2006; Smith, 1999). Hook and colleagues' line of argument is that, although the apparent and superficial goals of the mentoring process might be the same for Māori and Pākehā, the way to achieve these goals could be substantially different. The application of a Pākehā approach to mentoring a Māori mentee, which is no doubt the status quo in many a New Zealand workplace, would therefore be problematic, particularly for the mentee.

Although the authors have tended to oversimplify Māori and Pākehā approaches to the mentor/mentee relationship, this drawing out of stark contrasts is necessary to understanding and articulating the idealistic foundations upon which Māori and Pākehā world views are premised. We would rightly expect the reality of how the principles of mentoring or āwhinatanga actually played out in the workplace to be a little messier. However, this does not detract from the usefulness of deepening our understanding of some basic philosophical differences between Māori and Pākehā cultural approaches. Hook et al. (2007) state that the mentoring concept of “someone with more experience helping someone with less” (p.2) is common ground between Māori and Pākehā. They go on to highlight a number of differences based on cultural values and I have selected a few which stand out as key points of difference.

Whakapapa (genealogy), a foundational concept in Māori culture and identity, is offered as a crucial consideration for the mentoring process. The authors argue that in Māori circles it may not be appropriate to be mentored by a stranger and that if a mentor is of the same iwi or waka as the mentee this could be advantageous. While I concur with the importance of considering the impact of whakapapa on the relationship, I would hasten to add that in some cases having a close whakapapa connection might also turn out to be a disadvantage. It is not unusual for kinsfolk mentors to have unrealistic expectations of their mentee (and vice versa). So although the point is a valid one, where there is evidence or suspicion of a problematic relationship history between a potential mentor and mentee, one should proceed with caution.

Whanaungatanga (relationship/togetherness/collectivity) is interpreted by Hook et al. (2007) as being the opposite to Pākehā individualism. It is first about one's relationship with one's own whānau, and in a broader sense it emphasises one's connection to all peoples and all things in the natural world. Hook has argued elsewhere (Hook, 2007) that there is a fundamental difference between Māori and Pākehā concepts of individuality. Māori individuality is based on connectivity and affiliation to past, present, and future generations, whereas Pākehā individuality is based on autonomy, freedom, and self-interest. If we accept these contrasts, there are some key implications for our mentoring practice. We must consider alternative approaches to mentoring, like group mentoring and whānau mentoring that move us beyond orthodox 'pākehā' one-on-one models. Mentors must also play a role in turning whānau obligations, sometimes seen as a burden on work commitment, into an advantage. After all, a stronger Māori individual is a stronger employee, and effective institutions require strong individuals who can understand and rely on one another.

The use of the Māori language (te reo) in a Māori framework is considered the ideal by Hook, because it is the vehicle through which Māori concepts and world views are best expressed. I suggest the implication here is that mentor and mentee have an obligation to use te reo whenever and if ever possible if a genuine Māori mentoring approach is to be entered into. At the very least, an ongoing commitment to learning te reo should be part of every Māori-friendly mentor/mentee professional development agenda.

The authors make the point that the preservation of mana through manaakitanga (generosity), utu (reciprocity) and aroha (love) are crucial to the way the mentor and mentee must behave toward one another and that in Māoridom every event is geared towards the preservation and the uplifting of the mana of participants. I concur, and would add that this does not mean no constructive criticisms can be made. What it means is that criticism must be balanced with open acknowledgement of the strengths and redeeming qualities of all parties. Thus when criticism is made, it is given under a spirit of trust and will be much more readily accepted by the mentee.

Closely associated with mana is māhakitanga which the writers explain as humility within the workplace. They argue it is a quality rarely seen in a mainstream work environment, but a quality held in high regard in Māori settings. Whether we accept this or not, I think the more important point is that there are a number of identifiable procedures and Pākehā workplace cultural expectations that Māori often view as arrogant and self-promoting. One example is the procedure for applying for a job or a promotion. The expectation that one's ability to 'sing one's own praises' actually correlates reasonably closely with actual ability to do the job might be subject to challenge from a cultural viewpoint that emphasises humility and the need to let others sing your praise. For example, 'kāore te kūmara i te kōrero' is a popular Māori saying that encourages people not to "showboat". The obvious implication then for the mentor and the mentee is to strike a balance between what people say about themselves with what others say about them.

Wairuatanga is possibly the key crucial difference in approaching the mentor/mentee relationship (and in all forms of Māori/Pākehā interactions). In this context Hook and colleagues see wairuatanga as a recognition that there is a physical and a spiritual side to the workplace and that Māori have a spiritual connection to their maunga, awa, and moana. It follows then that the nourishment of the wairua is important and Māori must "periodically reconnect with those aspects of space and time" that rejuvenate the wairua (p.8). There are two key implications here. First, that mentors and mentees be encouraged and supported to make that periodic reconnection for the benefit of their spiritual well-being. Second, connection on a spiritual level needs to be an accepted part of a Māori-friendly workplace. This might include karakia, waiata, or open and trusting mentoring support of a spiritual nature. This more than any other will probably provide the greatest challenge in Pākehā workplaces that in the modern age are almost completely secular environments.

The authors have offered some useful conceptual frameworks for accommodating Māori approaches within a Pākehā work environment. There are two key points: one is that Māori cultural aspirations can be accommodated in a Pākehā work space where there is a will to do so and the other is that the success of any attempt to provide Māori-friendly mentoring will depend on a balance between a top-down and bottom-up approach. In other words, employees or mentees need to participate in the design of the mentoring process and have their thoughts incorporated into the process so that it will not be viewed as an imposition from above.

In summary, Hook and colleagues' ultimate conclusion is that the Pākehā workplace must come to understand Māori perspectives in order to properly support Māori employees to reach their potential as Māori rather than to try and force them to achieve success by becoming brown Pākehā. This is an important point and one that all New Zealanders ought to consider and engage in together, if cultural harmony is to be treated as a goal worthy of pursuit.

Barbara's commentary

Work which addresses the gaps and continuities between Māori and Pākehā worldviews where they intersect in public spaces (like workplaces) is to be welcomed. Such work offers resources that support a richer dialogue between us over issues that matter to all. In the first part of this commentary, my colleague Matiu Ratima has addressed the contribution made by Hook and his co-writers by elaborating on aspects of the work that speak particularly strongly to him. Coming from another standpoint, I would like to take up some of the issues that arise for me when reading these ideas. Like Matiu, I work as an academic at the University of Auckland – an institution that employs Māori staff and that, from time to time, shows interest in what mentoring might offer its employees. However, unlike Matiu, I am a Pākehā feminist who has worked (as part of a group) for several years on a programme within the University that includes mentoring as a central component (and that won the Manāki Tangata Innovation award from the Equal Employment Opportunities Trust, NZ). Indeed, from the feedback of the academic and general staff women who attend our Women in Leadership programme at the rate of 25 per year, we know that the mentoring is the most valued component in an otherwise well-rated programme. However, while mentoring is a particularly potent form of staff development (because of its one-to-one nature), it is not a panacea to all the problems that plague organisations, and may even entail risks to mentors and mentees (Margolis & Romero, 2001).

When planning the Women in Leadership programme, my colleague Kim Hope and I read the literature on mentoring of staff within universities. There is a lot of it – mentoring *programmes* have been going on for some years now in higher education, especially in North America where they have been directed at a wide range of groups. Such programmes are in contrast to widespread practices of informal mentoring which have a long tradition and which often function to conserve the interests of privileged groups. In particular, these programmes have targeted early-career (or 'junior') academic staff, often women, and members of 'minority groups' (in North American terminology). In this sense, mentoring in universities has often been seen as a mechanism to support the retention and progression of groups that have not been, and are still not well represented at the higher levels of university hierarchies.

In the literature that Kim and I read (and summarised in a short working paper), mentoring looked somewhat different to the stereotype of "Pākehā mentoring" described by Hook and his colleagues. In the remainder of this commentary, I want to critically engage with this issue. At the same time, I acknowledge the real and important differences between Māori and Pākehā worldviews, and the value of the general recommendations the authors make in the final section of the target paper. As someone who works with and for Māori staff at different

times, I find the list (on p.12) a useful reminder of the steps that Pākehā organisations need to attend when establishing mentoring programmes that either focus on, or include, Māori staff.

One point that I want to respond to is the authors' claim that "mentoring within a Pākehā framework is all about outcomes" (p.3). Here I both agree and disagree. I agree that usually there is some kind of purpose or goal for forming the mentoring relationship. At the same time, this may not be in the nature of a clear outcome – it may be something along the lines of "coming to understand better what it means to be a good researcher" or "learning how to work effectively within the University's decision-making structures". (These are the kinds of goals for mentoring that we find in the Women in Leadership programme.) Indeed at the end of the section on mentoring within a Pākehā framework (p.4), the authors do acknowledge that mentoring is about more than just outputs or outcomes when they suggest that it meets needs and expectations as well.

The authors also suggest that, in a Pākehā framework, mentors *evaluate* their mentees. This role is one that the literature by and large does not support – mentoring is usually seen to be a relationship that ought not intersect with line management or performance accountability but rather stand on "personal commitment and trust" (Ladd, 1998, p.241). Likewise, the claim that mentoring for Pākehā is "basically a reductionist approach to human development" (p.9) seems overly strong. While I think it *is* the case that the Pākehā worldview tends to focus on the individual at the expense of her or his networks and community obligations, in many instances of mentoring a more holistic approach is taken up and indeed seen to be the best kind of mentoring. For instance, Cedric Hall (1995) argues the key roles of the academic mentor (one variation of mentors in general) are five: academic adviser, career guide, facilitator, confidante and cultural adviser. Thus careful personal matching is often cited as important alongside the matching of mentee goals with mentor strengths.

I have recognised these dissonances between the view of Pākehā mentoring expressed by Hook and his colleagues and my experience of it for a couple of reasons. One is to argue that within the Pākehā framework there is a great diversity of modes and purposes for mentoring, some of which may have strong values-based connections with what is here described as mentoring within a Māori framework. This is not to claim that any of these various modes are the same as Māori mentoring. For example, I agree that the secularisation of Pākehā life (such that spiritual matters have been almost entirely relegated to the private sphere of the home) means that a whole level of human connection and exchange is not usually available within mentoring – and that this may mean a significantly different landscape than that of Māori mentoring. But returning to consider the different modes within the Pākehā framework, it seems that it would be worthwhile to look at these different modes when thinking through the issues that are presented here – although maybe the idea of 'feminist mentoring' will be as difficult for the Pākehā mainstream as the idea of 'Māori mentoring'. (The article has no referencing for the Pākehā framework part of the argument which suggests that the authors are relying mainly on experience.)

Another reason for making my points is to guess that the many different Māori staff in large institutions such as government agencies and corporations may well require and want diverse modes of mentoring, either between them as people or for the same person over time. Gary Hook and his colleagues, and Matiu too have echoed this point and have made a strong case for the need for mentoring from within a Māori worldview for Māori staff. However, I would say mentoring for a Māori person from within a Pākehā worldview can sometimes be of high value too. Needless to say, when such cross-cultural mentoring comes from a person who has some understanding of the issues their Māori mentee might be facing, it will likely be more useful and nourishing. Therefore, the value of cross-cultural mentoring goes both ways: as a Pākehā who has experienced much-needed mentoring from Māori colleagues at times, I can vouch for that.

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