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# Challenging issues: doctoral supervision in post-colonial sites

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The supervision of indigenous doctoral students in Aotearoa/New Zealand occurs in a post-colonial context marked by ongoing struggles over identity and belonging. In addition to stories concerning the pleasures taken in this relation, students and supervisors recount the challenges they experience. While some challenges are normal in any doctoral supervision, others are distinctively connected to the identities of the students as indigenous (Māori) and supervisors as settlers (non-Māori). Such challenges not only reveal unfinished tensions that structure settler-indigene (or coloniser-colonised) relations, but also raise questions concerning the implication of doctoral education in identity formation. This article draws on recent interviews with Māori doctoral students and their supervisors to identify several “challenging matters” and to explore their significance for supervision in post-colonial sites.

## Uitdagende kwessies: doktorsleiding in post-koloniale omgewings

Die studieleiding van inheemse doktorsleudente in Aotearoa/Nieu-Seeland gebeur in 'n postkoloniale konteks wat steeds met identiteitskwessies worstel. Studente en studieleiers beskryf die vreugde en die uitdagings wat hierdie verhouding meebring. Sommige hiervan is in enige doktorsleiding te wagte, maar ander hou uitdruklik verband met die identiteit van die studente as inheems (Māori) en die studieleiers as setlaars (nie-Māori). Sulke uitdagings belig die onvoltooidespanninge inherent aan verhoudings tussen setlaars en inheemse mense (koloniseerders-gekoloniseerdes) en opper vrae oor die implikasie van doktorsleiding opvoeding in die vorming van identiteit. Hierdie artikel poog om deur onlangse onderhoude met Māori doktorsleudente en hul studieleiers verskeie “sake wat uitdagings bied” te identifiseer en hul betekenis vir studieleiding in postkoloniale omgewings te verken.

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Doctoral supervision often raises challenges for both supervisors and students.<sup>1</sup> Some challenges are ordinary and predictable. They are structured into the doctoral experience by its institutional framing and its demanding functions of sustained training, testing and uncertainty. Consider, for example, the long time-frame, the high stakes, the intimacy of supervision and its troubling asymmetries of power, the disciplining nature of academic formations, the unpredictable nuances of feedback interactions, the bureaucratic requirements, the financial cost, the adult status of students, the loneliness, and so on. Other challenges, however, are more specific to the circumstances in which supervision takes place.

This article explores the challenges that can arise in the supervision of indigenous (Māori) doctoral students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. Some of these challenges are faced by the students themselves and/or all who supervise them: for example, negotiating between institutional (academic and bureaucratic) requirements and cultural obligations (research-related and beyond), or negotiating between what it means to become an academic scholar and what it means to become, or even simply live as, Māori. However, there are often more particular challenges, such as those connected to supervising Māori students as a non-Māori and settler<sup>2</sup> supervisor. This article focuses on these issues.

Although the research that informs this article was undertaken in New Zealand, with its particular colonial history and present, aspects of the argument will be recognisable to supervisors and students in other places (cf, for example, Rhea & Rigney's (2002) advice

1 This article was first presented as a keynote address to the Postgraduate Supervision: Research and Practice Conference at Stellenbosch University on 29 April 2009. This article draws upon the *Teaching and learning in the supervision of Māori doctoral students* research project undertaken by Elizabeth McKinley and Barbara Grant (The University of Auckland, Principal Investigators), Sue Middleton (University of Waikato), Kathie Irwin (formerly Te Whare Wānanga o Awanuiarangi) and Les Williams (Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga), and funded in 2007-2008 by the Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (project no 9250; <<http://www.tlri.org.Aotearoa/NewZealand>>)

2 The use of the word 'settler' marks a legacy of unease that yet haunts the descendants of the not-so-distant British colonisers.

for the supervision of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander students in Australia). Following the presentation of this work at the Postgraduate Supervision: Research and Practice Conference at Stellenbosch University in April 2009, many conference participants pointed to its relevance to their experience of doctoral education. Similarly, a presentation by Dr Dinah Magano about the experiences of female black postgraduate students suggested that some difficult dynamics occur in cross-cultural supervision. That this might be the case is not surprising. Both Aotearoa/New Zealand and South Africa live with the painful legacies of colonialism, a socio-historical formation that deeply shapes and entangles the lives of coloniser and colonised, and seeps into educational interactions such as supervision.<sup>3</sup>

This article describes the author's understanding of supervision and a possible post-colonial critique thereof. The research project is located within Aotearoa/New Zealand's specific context. Data from this project reflect an array of pleasures and challenges related to supervision as described by Māori doctoral students and non-Māori supervisors. This article aims to show how doctoral supervision in Aotearoa/New Zealand is infused by the uncertain and demanding conditions of settler-indigene (or coloniser-colonised) relations.

## 1. The dynamic pedagogy of supervision

Supervision is a complex and unstable activity, involving both academic and personal issues. While governments and institutions might want to emphasise the “research training” dimension of supervision, the latter functions as training in a deeper sense than merely teaching research technique. This training reproduces certain kinds of disciplined subjects: scholars, researchers, academics, advanced specialist thinkers in particular fields and subfields (or even crossfields) of established academic knowledge. The training is concerned with the cultivation of personal dispositions – integrity,

3 Released on 1 May 2009, the Crain Soudien (2009: 7) described higher education in South Africa as a troubled site of racial (and sexual) discrimination, characterised by a “disjunction [...] between institutional policies and the real-life experiences of staff and students”.

diligence, persistence, willingness to tolerate uncertainty and disappointment, a love of knowledge “work” – and with skills or ways of doing that work. Such dispositions and capacities are not easily won: typically they are the result of “psycho-social dynamics of struggle, submission and subjectification” (Green 2005: 151). In addition to reproducing academic subjects in the sense of people, doctoral education is also intimately involved with reproducing and producing academic subjects in the sense of disciplines or knowledge – this is, in particular, the case in work at doctoral level because of the non-negotiable criterion that it will produce original work.

Entangled with this personal and academic “training” is the tricky business of face-to-face relations between people who are enmeshed in institutionally determined but asymmetrical power relations (Grant 2003). Despite those different positionings, supervisor/s and student/s both contribute to supervision’s dynamic pedagogy: they must work together, communicate over matters marked by abstractness and ambiguity, high investment and desire. Judgment, compassion, and the willingness to challenge and support are required. Loyalty must be given not only to the individuals involved but also to the discipline, its standards and expectations. For all these and more reasons, supervision is a demanding task, even as it is rewarding. It will be unpredictably inflected by differences in different local contexts: to some extent by the characteristics of different national-cultural locations and their histories but also by disciplinary differences – for example supervision in the sciences is often nested within a strong group-based culture while that within the humanities is typically more isolated.

## 2. Post-colonial work in higher education

Being a colonizer was not always a morally doubtful occupation. [... In the mid-twentieth century,] empire and direct political colonization fell from favour globally. In addition, the concept of race itself was discredited and racism became a target of human rights discourse and sanction (Bell 2006: 255-56).

Using the descriptor “post-colonial” marks a present in which the descendants of colonising peoples, such as Pākehā New Zealanders,

live in consciousness of the problematic effects of colonisation on their sense of themselves and their relations with the subordinated others. They are no longer able to think of colonisation as bringing light to the heathens or civilisation to the savages. Anne McClintock suggests that post-colonialism is an uneasy term for two reasons: it “heralds the end of a world era, but within the same trope of linear progress that animated that era”, and it somehow elides the distinction between coloniser and colonised because it “does not distinguish between the beneficiaries and the casualties of colonialism” (McClintock 1994: 254). While noting these dangers, it appears that uneasiness is a potentially constructive aspect of post-colonialism because “uncertainty offers an opportunity for self-reflection” on the part of settlers (Bell 2006: 253).

In any particular post-colonial site, various endemic elements may be identified, often associated with local events, broken promises, unresolved grievances, distinctive and different cultural beliefs, and so on. Pākehā theorists such as Avril Bell (2004), Alison Jones (1999) and Betsann Martin (2000) have explored the nature of the post-colonial conditions in New Zealand, in particular settler (Pākehā) responses to those conditions. Their work has drawn attention to complex and contradictory currents of longing, ignorance, grief, hostility, envy, misrecognition, unease, inability to hear, and denial (to name a few) expressed by Pākehā in relation to Māori desires to be recognised and engaged with “as Māori” within Aotearoa/New Zealand society. Their work has also challenged Pākehā in specific ways. Bell, for example, challenges Pākehā to attend to history in order to learn more about who they are as the doubled subjects of colonialism (colonised and colonising, settlers and invaders) and to take uncertainty about identity as an opportunity for productive self-reflection (Bell 2006). Jones challenges them to take seriously their inability to hear (as the dominant group) the voice of the marginalised and “to embrace positively a ‘politics of disappointment’ that includes a productive acceptance of the ignorance of the other” and a “gracious acceptance of not *having* to know the other” (Jones 1999: 315-6). She acknowledges that this may be particularly difficult for scholars accustomed to knowing and having access to knowledge. Martin (2001: 89),

citing Levinas, suggests that Pākehā put into abeyance their taken-for-granted autonomy and freedom of the self (characteristic of western ontology) in favour of an ethical relation that foregrounds hospitality and responsibility for the other, that signals a willingness to be taught by the other and that opens the self to the discomfort of receiving “more than I can contain”. Jones states (2000: 90): “Face-to-face encounters across cultural differences require a willingness to be taught – because those culturally different exceed ‘my’ knowledge of them”.

A post-colonial critique of supervision attends to the effects of colonial history on social structures and power relations as they play out between supervisors and students in the present. Weighted with tradition and disciplinarity, universities are post-colonial structures of power *par excellence*, but they are contradictory sites, providing rich opportunities for pleasurable exchanges of mutual learning and interest as well as those that are painful reflections or repetitions of past and present grievances, misunderstandings, injustices and inequalities. This present discussion attends to how the currents described by Bell, Jones and Martin might be playing out in the accounts of Māori doctoral students and non-Māori supervisors. To date literature has paid little attention to the supervision of indigenous students other than anecdotal accounts (cf, for example, Kidman 2007, Morgan 2008, Rhea & Rigney 2002). A small body of work engages in a critical examination of the complexities of other kinds of cross-cultural supervision (cf, for example, Bullen & Kenway 2003, Manathunga 2007, Singh 2009).

### 3. Māori and settler (Western) education

This research project took place in Aotearoa/New Zealand. This small group of beautiful islands on the edge of the Pacific was first inhabited approximately 1 000 years ago by related groups of Polynesian people. In waves of settlement, the people now known as Māori navigated their great waka (canoes) across wide seas to “the land of the long white cloud”. During the nineteenth century, the islands were “settled” by missionaries and colonists from the north. Most settlers came

from Britain, the nation that formally took possession of Aotearoa by treaty in 1840, renaming it “New Zealand”.<sup>4</sup> The colonial history of Aotearoa/New Zealand, like most other such histories, is a troubled one, marked by among other things a vigorous mix of Victorian supremacy, greed (especially for land) and theft, good intentions and misunderstandings, intermarriage and friendship, violence and oppression. Modern-day New Zealanders (Māori, settlers and more recent immigrants) live with the unsettled legacy of their post-colonial past: enduring inequalities of many kinds and ongoing struggles over identity and belonging. In these restless conditions, Māori doctoral students and their often non-Māori<sup>5</sup> supervisors work together.

Ironically, given current statistics, the historical record suggests that Māori actively desired Western education in the earliest years of settler contact (Jones & Jenkins 2008). However, that same record also shows that, early on, state-funded Māori education became captured by narrow views of the place of Māori in the new society (as farm labourers and domestic workers) and instigated punishment for the use of Māori language. Struggles over retention and success for Māori children within this system have been a cause for ongoing concern to community leaders and contributed to the Māori renaissance that began in the 1970s. Significant Māori-controlled educational initiatives emerged during this period, beginning with Kohanga Reo or language nests for pre-school children, then widening to include Kura Kaupapa schools for primary-level children, Kura Tuarua for secondary-level, and Wānanga for tertiary-level students.

Contemporary Māori leaders are clear about their expectations of the education system, arguing that Aotearoa/New Zealand needs

4 The event that allowed this to happen was the Treaty of Waitangi, signed by the British Crown and many Māori chiefs in 1840.

5 None of the usual descriptors – non-Māori, settler, colonist, Pākehā – means the same thing. Pākehā (like settler) remains a “controversial identity label” that is equally “embraced and rejected by the dominant group” (Bell 2006: 264). While the majority of the non-Māori supervisors were born in New Zealand and would have described themselves as Pākehā, one refused the term because she was not born in New Zealand. Hence the use of the term non-Māori to describe the supervisors collectively.

to provide educational environments that address Māori children and adults “*as Māori*”:

In 2026 [...] it is highly likely that Māori students will want to be Māori. They will expect to be able to enter te ao Māori [the Māori worldview] with ease, converse in te reo Māori [the Māori language], use Māori imagery and idiom, and employ Māori reference points in the learning process (Durie 2006: 11).

Māori leaders have contributed to the development of government policy. More recently, attention has focused on the highest levels of education, partly because of a view that research can play an important role in economic advantage and cultural renewal. A leading Māori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith, argues that research is “a means to reclaim language, histories, and knowledge, to find solutions to the negative impact of colonialism and to give voice to an alternative way of knowing and being” (Smith 2005: 91). As the primary vehicle for research training in our society, doctoral education has become an aspirational focus.

The past 15 years have shown a dramatic increase in the number of Māori doctoral registrations across the country – from 77 in 1994 to 275 in 2005 (Ministry of Education 2007). The current cohort has a distinctive demographic profile: Māori women participate in doctoral studies at a significantly higher rate than men; approximately 40% are aged over 40; Māori have slightly higher first-year attrition rates, overall similar retention rates but notably longer completion rates than non-Māori, particularly among students over 24 years (Ministry of Education 2006).

#### 4. The research project

In this context, the need for a research project emerged. Emeritus Professor Les Williams leads a national capability-building programme<sup>6</sup> for Māori doctoral students and, through contact with them, he was aware of anecdotal accounts of problems with supervision. He

6 MAI Te Kupenga, the capability programme, is supported by Ngā Pae o te Māramatanga (NPOTM), one of seven publicly funded national centres of research excellence.



wanted to find out what the issues were. As there were no extant studies, he summoned a team of two Pakeha academics with expertise in researching supervision and two Māori academics with expertise in researching higher education in order to plan and carry out the project.

In undertaking the enquiry, 38 Māori doctoral students and 20 Māori and non-Māori supervisors (11 and 9, respectively) of these students were interviewed. The aim was to find out about how they worked together, what particular issues emerged as a function of the students being Māori, what issues were considered to be important in terms of promoting or hindering their progress, and so on. The outcome of the project was to contribute to the scarce national and international literature on this topic. Another aim was to offer insights and practical suggestions to current and future Māori doctoral students and their supervisors (Māori and non-Māori).

The following exploration of supervision as a site of post-colonial relations focuses on half of the interviews: ten student interviews were conducted by the researcher<sup>7</sup> and nine interviews were conducted by the research team with non-Māori supervisors. As one of the Pākehā researchers, the interpretations of the students' and supervisors' words offered in this instance are the researcher's, although the research team as a whole consented to undertake this work.

## 5. Pleasures in accounts of supervision

The pleasures in doctoral supervision/education described by students and supervisors are highlighted. While non-Māori supervisors share some of their pleasures with their Māori counterparts, the focus

7 The ten students had the following characteristics (and this profile is fairly indicative of the 38): 9 women and 1 man tracing ancestry to over a dozen distinctive Māori tribes from across Aotearoa/New Zealand, almost always to more than one tribe and often including non-Māori ancestry. Five were aged between 30-39, four between 40-49, and one between 50-59. They were studying in a range of disciplines: one in Arts/Humanities, one in Business & Economics, four in Education, one in Health, one in Information Technology, and two in Science. In Aotearoa/New Zealand, doctoral students are usually required to have two supervisors: two students had Māori supervisors only while the other eight had a mix of Māori & non-Māori supervisors.

is on those connected to being non-Māori. The pleasures taken in supervision offer an important counter-narrative to what has been a dominant story of indigenous struggle and failure in settler education systems. Such narratives are valued by Māori and non-Māori for the potential to fuel their desire to engage in this demanding work, despite fears and uncertainties. For Māori, doctoral education is an important site for acquiring some of the skills and knowledge needed to address the effects of colonialism. A doctoral degree also brings reputation and status to the holder not only within the national and international communities but also within one's own family and tribe. For non-Māori supervisors, perhaps Pākehā, in particular, doctoral education is a site in which they might respond constructively "to Māori attempts to recover from the harms inflicted on them by our/Pākehā political ancestors and continued within contemporary Māori-Pakehā relations" (Bell 2004: 236).

### 5.1 The students' pleasures

I loved working with [my two supervisors], I just loved it. It was just wonderful because I was lucky enough to have supervisors who suited me so that I didn't have to grow into them and accept this is the way their personality works. They actually suited me so that I could grow alongside them. That would have to be the best thing (Anahera, Māori doctoral student).

The students described various pleasures taken in supervision. For example, being chosen by a supervisor or, conversely, getting supervisors who could contribute what the student thought they needed or who were international leaders in their field. Within the dynamics of supervision, students took pleasure in being able to exercise their own independence, but also in the supervisors' responsiveness to their needs. They enjoyed being mentored – for example when supervisors prepared and/or accompanied students to international conferences or when they felt as if they were "growing alongside" their supervisors. The majority of the students also liked the reciprocity of a pedagogical exchange where they not only learned essential knowledge and skills from their supervisors but also taught them things of value:

I really liked the fact that [my non-Māori supervisor] got excited about my work and so excited in fact that he delivered a couple of papers on Māori [works]. You know he really got into New Zealand [material] so that was cool – and he asked me a couple of times to like write papers with him or deliver papers with him. I never took that opportunity [...] by that [time], when he started asking me, I'd kind of decided that this wasn't what I wanted to do (Tara, Māori doctoral student).

Students enjoyed sharing food during supervision meetings and valued the active strategies often used by supervisors to help them resolve challenging problems. They took pleasure in any signs of their supervisor's belief in them and/or the value of their work. Few students described their pleasure in the emergence or strengthening of their identity as Māori through interacting with their supervisors:

[My supervisor] asked me if I wanted to work in [the Māori mentoring programme] and I was like 'yeah' 'cause I think one of the things that bonded him to me, from his point of view, is that he didn't take off as a scientist until midway through his PhD. [...] And he saw me struggling in my BSc and saw how hard I was trying to work in my MSc and that inspired him and then he saw how I interacted with the under-grads [...] So that's why he called me into [mentoring] and I've really enjoyed it. [...] So he's had a huge positive effect on me. [...] I've come to see that being Māori is] not about your percentage, it's about your perception. First chance I get, if I head south, I'd like to go back to [my tribal area] (Hone, Māori doctoral student).

## 5.2 The supervisors' pleasures

Thrashing those sorts of things around, it's touching all the time on aspects of Māori culture. I've been involved with Māori language now for many years, and never once have I regretted getting involved in that because it's been a way into aspects of New Zealand that a lot of Pākehā don't get, and so I still find it endlessly fascinating (Robert, non-Māori supervisor).

Likewise, non-Māori supervisors described diverse pleasures specific to the experience of supervising *Māori* students. Some were seemingly intellectual – for example the pleasures found in discussing issues that were intimately rooted in real struggles on the part of Māori communities or in enacting the role of being a “good” gatekeeper to the academy, that is, one who maintains academic standards but in a

compassionate and fully engaged manner. Others were more political, for example the pleasures of being able to advance social justice or see oneself as an active Treaty partner:

I mean, there's the academic part, there's a person here who's a fine academic and becoming a colleague of importance – those are tremendous drivers and hugely affirming to your role as a supervisor. But I think there's an extra dimension to this, to me. It's almost a deliberate thought about perspective – that, of the various ways that one could contribute to a more equitable society, this is one way that one could do that, so I do it deliberately for that reason, so that's hugely enjoyable, in the sense of I feel I can make a difference (Fred, non-Māori supervisor).

Other pleasures taken were more psycho-social, such as feeling honoured in being asked to supervise when one does not have much expertise; feeling joy at the trust, respect and friendship offered by students, or at being included in the everyday “messiness” of Māori life (places, people, events, food) in ways that are not always easily available for non-Māori:

[T]here was a guy in Whakatane, this older guy, who just came up and said, 'Look I really want to do this work on this ancestor and I can't get access to it'. And he was sort of telling me quite personal things about his family and rows in the family that were quite ancient disputes and things like that. And I felt quite overwhelmed with pleasure that he had trusted me enough to tell me this thing, but also terrified about the responsibility he was putting on me to respond in some kind of meaningful way, you know. So I had these marvelous moments when I get access to this stuff that to me is really the basis of human life, you know? And I like that. It's really alive, there's nothing kind of superficial or “Oh, let's get this done 'cause it's just a thesis”. You know? You're right there in the heart of people's lives, and that's hugely stimulating (Ruth, non-Māori supervisor).

These different kinds of pleasures were often combined, as is evident in these descriptions.

## 6. Challenges in supervision

Students and supervisors also experienced challenges relating to the students' identity as Māori and the supervisors' identity as non-Māori. Such challenges are of particular interest when asking questions about the ongoing effects of post-colonial relations in doctoral supervision.

## 6.1 Challenges for the students: getting the supervision needed to do *mātauranga Māori* scholarship

I had to justify all the way what the PhD was about because, no matter who I talked to, they're saying, 'What's that [...]?' And I was saying, 'You're in Aotearoa. You know, can't I just be me, can't I live as Māori?' And every time I saw somebody they were all positivists so they had no idea about qualitative, let alone, they sort of go 'Oh, you're doing interpretive research?' And I said, 'No, I'm [doing] Kaupapa Māori research'. 'Oh, you're doing interpretive research, are you doing phenomenological, are you doing grounded research?' And I was going, 'Why do they keep boxing me like this?' Because they know nothing else (Ashley, Māori doctoral student).

Eight of the ten students were undertaking research that included *mātauranga Māori* (Māori knowledge and wisdom). Some students wanted to highlight and validate such knowledge; others (like Ashley above) were also using a Kaupapa Māori research methodology that was imbued to varying degrees with cultural practices, values and ethics. The majority of the students hoped to contribute to improved circumstances for their tribe or for the Māori community at large. While these dimensions motivated students, they also posed significant challenges. For example, tensions occurred between Western and Māori epistemologies in terms of access and commensurability. Complex accountabilities, not to mention competing allegiances, can arise within Kaupapa Māori research. Finding helpful Māori or non-Māori supervisors for this kind of work was not always easy:

[I]n terms of some of the theoretical directions that I wanted to take, I wanted a supervisor who I wouldn't have to argue with [...] 'cause I didn't have the time to do that, working fulltime. So it was really important for me to have a supervisor that I did not have to enter into a debate with about everything. [...] Later on defending some of the things that were coming out of the research [...] but not at the early stages where I was really exploring things. I didn't want to have to defend my complete and utter belief that Māori theory actually exists in whakatauki [proverbs] and what [other kinds of Māori knowledge]. I wanted somebody to say, 'That's quite a logical. Okay now, how are you going to [...] demonstrate that?' (Ngaio, Māori doctoral student).

In some disciplines or departments there might be only one academic, if any, with such background.

Moreover, because Western knowledge formations have consciously excluded many kinds of traditional knowledge as being beyond the pale (and only suitable as objects of study rather than as theory-making frameworks), supervisor resistance or refusal to such projects is always a possibility. From a Māori perspective, such resistance may be anticipated because it is likely that the students may have experienced this previously. The dominant group often finds it difficult to accept their ignorance of the other without feeling threatened or angry, as Jones (1999) has shown. Scholars from that group may find acceptance especially difficult because they are those “who know” and because of their role as disciplinary guardians.

Thus, this particular challenge has a deeper significance than “simply” for the dynamics of supervision: the dominance of Western disciplines and methodologies is being challenged as is the traditional academic landscape in which things and persons Māori have been objects for investigation rather than subjects who investigate.

## 6.2 Challenges for the students: being and becoming Māori

[My non-Māori supervisor] was highly offended that I insinuated that perhaps he might treat me like a token brownie – but I just had to put it out there in the open so that he was aware that obviously there was some cultural expectations on me, joining the group. But I also had some expectations of him. And that for me was a good place to start but quite hard because, you know, who am I, I’m a nobody (Rangimarie, Māori doctoral student).

The students took up their identity as Māori in different ways. Some, like Rangimarie, were confident in that identity and were able to draw strength from it in ways that supported their research. For others like Hone, “becoming Māori” was taking place at the same time as, and even through, their doctoral education and/or their relationship with their supervisor:

I do count myself as Māori but I count myself as a New Zealander as well – to me, my ethnicity, my main ethnicity, is Māori even though percentage-wise it is not. I’m a complete mongrel when it comes down to it. [...] But growing up, I really wasn’t identified as Māori in my schools. [...] This is mainly because I’m not that tanned for starters, I think my entire tribe’s pretty white. That was

one thing. The other thing is my grandfather who married my Māori grandmother is incredibly right wing and basically emotionally beat the Māori out of her. [...] And because I don't speak te reo [Māori language] and my pronunciation, probably because of my dyslexia, is not that crash hot, I do find it's very hard. Like sometimes I'm [seen as] an impostor [...] (Hone, Māori doctoral student).

Feeling uncertain of themselves as Māori posed challenges for them, especially if they were doing Māori knowledge-based work or if they were called on by their supervisors or department to act or speak on behalf of Māori or to other Māori. This happened reasonably often, partly because there are few Māori in universities and partly because there are many occasions on which the institution wants to engage with Māori (for example, to recruit more students, to receive Māori guests, to defend research proposals to a Māori community, or to connect with potential Māori research participants).

Being and becoming Māori also makes significant emotional and psychological demands on doctoral students. Melinda Webber (2009: 1) mentions the unhomely “discontinuities, contradictions and disruptions of identity that occur as an emerging Māori researcher in a mainstream university setting”. When students’ research came from the core of their lives, for example topics given to them by kin, the students’ identities “as Māori” were implicated and they were deeply attached to their projects. Managing that attachment and the academic demands of their respective disciplines (often more than one) posed significant challenges to some students (and to their supervisors). The effects of such multiple demands are diverse: from renewed determination to get the work done to withdrawal and writing blocks. The latter effects will likely be felt in supervision but may not be understood by a non-Māori supervisor: they might surface as an inexplicable resistance to requests, or a sudden lack of progress in the research plan, or an “inability” to handwriting in for feedback, or to find an (appropriately) authoritative voice, or even to write at all. The act of silence, or “resistance to speaking” (Jones 1999: 299), is a powerful response available to colonised peoples when faced with formidable, alienating and apparently unjust, structures of post-colonial power (such as universities and disciplines).

A more profound challenge is at work than that experienced by individual students. The diverse ways in which they talked about themselves as Māori challenge the very idea of Māori identity as something static and homogeneous, essential or accomplished. Instead there is an “identity” that is various, in process, sometimes a source of strength but often one of anxiety and insecurity.

### 6.3 Challenges for the students: the double work of becoming Māori and becoming an academic

The work of becoming a scholar/researcher that lies at the core of doctoral education is significant, perhaps more so in some disciplines than others. For all doctoral students, though, their education arguably involves learning how to navigate independent research: for example, learning how to define good research questions, critically engage with the literature, plan robust and practicable research processes, analyse and theorise data, write at a high level, and formulate an independent and robust argument or point of view. The students must also learn how to navigate the social milieu of the academic: how to engage with academic networks, present papers and respond to challenges to their work at conferences, write for publication and deal with journals and publishers including how to respond to and give peer review. These are challenging, high-order intellectual skills and complex practical knowledge.

For Māori students, this work is often uncomfortably overlaid or intersected by processes of becoming and/or being Māori:

[D]eepening my own understanding of my Māori identity in the process [...] that's just been one of the most profound parts of the experience ... And conversations with kaumatua [elders] and on a marae [traditional meeting place]. And I've learnt to be a lot more robust as well. I think I lacked a lot of confidence. And especially in the Marae setting, people were very blunt with me, about [my topic]. No holds barred. I've become a lot more robust in being able to just listen and not take it personally, hear it and see the responsibility I have to capture that and to present it, and make sure it has a voice (Susan, Māori doctoral student).

I'd already done Stage 1 Māori [language] years ago but I went back and studied again. And that took up a lot of my time because I went to a couple of wananga [advanced schools] as well [...] full immersion [...] I studied te reo Māori for two years but [...] still I



couldn't reach a level where I thought I can now read these [texts] and write about them. But I think it was a good thing that I did do that, at least that. It made me feel a bit more confident about those cultural things that people expected me to know (Tara, Māori doctoral student).

Identity-forming processes do not happen in isolation: they involve reciprocal rights and responsibilities which, in turn, make real demands on students' resources, especially their time, which is already under pressure from institutional demands for fast completions. Some examples of such reciprocal obligations include:

- The student (Susan above) who spent much time on her family marae (traditional meeting place) talking about her work and listening and learning from her elders.
- The student (Tara above) who undertook to study *te reo* so that she could be more confident when she met with Māori research participants.
- The student who paid for her (informal) Māori advisor to have some professional development in exchange for ongoing support and guidance of her work.
- The student who contributed significant time to supporting undergraduate Māori students in his department.
- The student who gave professional services to her participant organisation that involved travelling several hundred kilometres from the city where she lived and studied.

In this sense, Māori doctoral students carry a double burden of work in their doctoral process. Yet this load is usually invisible to the institutional bureaucracy which, after a certain date, only sees a late completer. It may also be invisible to the supervisor unless they are open to seeing.

Such practical and psychological challenges also direct one's attention to a deeper one: the Western archetype of the doctoral student as autonomous and primarily dedicated to the discipline is being challenged by doctoral students who insist on the importance of negotiating multiple allegiances because therein lies that very multiplicity of their maturity and credibility as *Māori* scholars and researchers.

#### 6.4 Challenges for the supervisors: being a settler supervisor

The supervisors touched upon one issue: what does it mean to supervise Māori doctoral students as a Pākehā implicated in a troubling colonial history. They were alert to how little they knew about things Māori and to the risks of being, or being seen to be, insensitive or disrespectful. Some experienced painful episodes, such as the supervisor who talks about acutely feeling her implication in the harm caused to Māori communities by the ongoing effects of colonisation, as evidenced in her student's research:

I do find it quite emotional, this work. A lot of it is to do with a sense of being descended from the colonizers. It's not exactly, it's not guilt, but it's being part of the problem. And I see it in terms of my own biases and assumptions with the way I engage, so I can be mindful some of the times, but I'm not other times, of course. So it's consciousness raising really too in a way – it's very rich, it's much more demanding and interesting work than supervising lots of other people (Ellen, non-Māori supervisor).

Another described the “devastation” she felt when she was accused of trampling on the mana (prestige) of a group of graduate students whom she had been teaching:

I tend to take the Gordon Ramsey approach. Which I hope I do with enough humour that it's hard-arsed but it's not insulting. But when I got the feedback, the written feedback, everybody really liked [the writing session] except one, who was quite a dominant older male, who just ripped into me and said how insulting I was about their writing and how I trampled on the mana of the students. And I felt really devastated by that because I partly agreed with him. I partly felt that I should have pulled my punches in a way that I don't in other Māori contexts. But I don't know, maybe they're just trained down there to not sit round and take stuff. Maybe they're more ready for that fight (Ruth, non-Māori supervisor).

Being Pākehā affected how the supervisors interacted with their Māori students: for example, at another point in her interview Ellen described being reluctant to be directive towards the student because it would have felt like yet another instance of the “colonial power imbalance” and then realising that this was not helping her students make progress with their research. Some regarded supervision as a space in which to enact the politics and obligations of Treaty

partnership as they understood them, unlike how their students understood them. In Bruce's case, this means to affirm Māori culture and values whenever possible:

Take every opportunity to affirm the culture and the values because you're a supervisor who is employed by the university. You're also a Treaty partner, so we're still a Treaty partner even to a student and the best thing I think a Treaty partner can do is to, wherever you're in a position to, affirm [Māori] culture in supervision or in talking. Because it's very fragile and it gets knocked all the time in the media and so, if you can take that opportunity, it will bring back a hundred-fold (Bruce, non-Māori supervisor).

One of the risks of the Māori-to-non-Māori interaction is that students consciously or unconsciously use the power imbalance to maintain a kind of moral authority over their supervisors, or supervisors cede that authority to students because of feelings of guilt or inadequacy. These dynamics can render supervision ineffectual. A Māori academic describes how she often has to rescue non-Māori supervisors and students from this dynamic:

[W]hat happens if the students' topics get too difficult or the student becomes too difficult, the [non-Māori] supervisor gets stuck, they don't know what to do. They don't know how to motivate the student or they let the student play games with them. Or the student doesn't produce any work but says, 'Oh, you know, because it's all in the language.' So when that student tells their supervisor that it's taking them a long time to do their work because, you know, they're translating their transcripts into Māori and the supervisor just accepts that and I'm thinking, "No you're not you're getting someone else to, and there's something else going on underneath." So I'll kind of intervene and, say for a year, take over that part of the process. I mean having said that those sorts of students are rare and are particularly slippery in all sorts of ways. They're not independent and they play little games and have always got excuses and they don't turn up with the work. On any measure, they're not good performing students but their supervisors get trapped by the Māori component and they're too chicken to actually get tough with them (Mere, Māori supervisor).

What is the deeper challenge emerging from these descriptions? The very self of the supervisor, his or her identity/skin as Pākehā and his/her right to *enjoy* that identity, is being challenged. This is a confronting challenge, one that takes some courage to face.

## 6.5 Challenges for the supervisors: going into another world

The risk is that, as the supervisor, I am too weak in my knowledge of Māori interests (Trevor, non-Māori supervisor).

A key challenge for non-Māori supervisors was that of being taken into the world of Māori families and communities, the “messy” and opaque world of *te reo Māori*, *tikanga Māori* (correct practice) and *mātauranga Māori*. The supervisors were aware that they had only limited insight into this world, and so the process of going onto marae, or into Māori homes, work spaces or knowledge spaces could be disorienting and uncomfortable, fraught with anxiety about how to conduct themselves and about their lack of knowledge of Māori interests, customs, protocols, politics and history.

Uncomfortable, even confronting, situations could arise upon entering that world. Ruth’s story of teaching students on their home ground describes her painful realisation that what had seemed to work well with other groups of Māori doctoral students had not worked in this particular instance: she was challenged for being rude and insensitive to the students’ dignity. Such experiences are unsettling reminders that Māori communities are not all the same, despite tendencies to the contrary. Webber (2009: 5) challenges non-Māori academics and institutions to “become more specific about seeing the differences among Māori peoples and their world-views” rather than insisting upon an essentialised and homogeneous ‘real Māori’. This is an important demand, despite the fact that outsiders often find it hard to observe such differences. Implicitly, it is a demand that non-Māori enter that world and come to understand it better.

In several interviews, the supervisors mentioned the *necessity* of going into the Māori world when supervising Māori doctoral students:

[F]or a Pākehā supervisor, there is a sense in which, in order to supervise, but then again I see it as part of almost an inevitability, you become part of the student’s world. My advice to other supervisors would be to look for that as something important to the process and to use it, not use it, to welcome it as a very significant resource within the supervisory process (Fred, non-Māori supervisor).

This necessity led some of them to conclude that not all Pākehā could supervise these students:

I will see the Māori students I've supervised in all kinds of contexts. I'll visit them, or I'll see them somewhere else, at a tangi or something like that or at a conference. And I go out of my way when I see a Māori person I know. Instead of just saying "giddy" in the street, I'll stop and talk, we might have a coffee or something. You sort of maintain, you have a relationship. And I think that for many Pākehā potential supervisors, that's the thing that's terrifies them. And also they don't like the politics. I got advised by a senior academic not to get involved with Māori things quite a few years ago. She said, 'It's because you can never be independent, and you have to be independent as an academic to be able to critique.' She said, 'Everything has to go through all the elders'. She had a very stereotyped view of it. But partly what she was saying was correct, that it's not simple. You can't just go in and pinch knowledge and go out. Or you can't just do this and go away. You do have to get involved. And it does change your life, it does slow things up, it does complicate things. And this academic said to me, 'It's just too much'. And 'cause, for her, she couldn't bear it. Whereas for me, it's the opposite, I like all the mess, I enjoy that engagement (Ruth, non-Māori supervisor).

This supervisor found that some of her colleagues did not want to enter a Māori student's world. Rather they wanted to draw a boundary between the academic and the personal that would preclude this. This boundary is familiar in western academic life where one is used to (often arbitrarily) splitting the academic and the personal in order to avoid the messiness of the latter. However, it is a problematic boundary for many Māori, perhaps especially so when their doctoral research projects originate from within their world (*te ao Māori*).

As Ruth well understands, the challenge to enter the Māori student's world is a significant one for supervisors. It involves opening oneself to an experience that may lead to feelings of disorientation and discomfort because of being a stranger in an unfamiliar cultural landscape. It is an experience of unpredictable demands which supervisors may not feel prepared to meet.

## 7. Supervisors engaging with the challenges

With Māori students, you do get taken into another world and there are things that are constantly outside your realm of experience and knowledge. It's a constant reminder that there are limits

and I find that refreshing, I find that such a challenge (Julia, non-Māori supervisor).

[Māori students' work is important] for our country. Without getting too grand about it, it really can affect the future of the way we work together (Ellen, non-Māori supervisor).

I think it's accepting that both the supervisor and the student are in potentially culturally unsafe places, and each of them is the cultural safety for the other. That [supervision] is a horizontal relationship and not a vertical one (Bruce, non-Māori supervisor).

Like other colonised peoples, Māori desire advanced education for many reasons. In addition to the access to authority, status and influence that doctoral credentials offer, Māori want to develop knowledge and skills that can be used to improve the future of their communities. Doctoral education poses challenges to all who undertake it, but it poses some particular ones for students who want to undertake research and scholarship “as Māori”, who want to draw upon *mātauranga Māori*, use Kaupapa Māori research methodologies, or do advanced academic work connected to their Māori identity. Such challenges will be both similar and different to those experienced by doctoral students from colonised groups in other post-colonial sites. Although Aotearoa/New Zealand cannot be said to be decolonised in the way that much of Africa has been (that is, political power in Aotearoa/New Zealand still resides in the hands of a settler-dominated government), dominant Western epistemologies and methodologies have been issued a severe challenge by Māori scholars, for example, Irwin 1991 or Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonising methodologies* (1999). The fact that so many of the students interviewed were undertaking research connecting *mātauranga Māori* and Western disciplines is evidence of the timeliness and fruitfulness of such a challenge.

As the number of Māori doctoral students in Aotearoa/New Zealand higher education continues to increase, more supervisors will be required. Across the academy at large, and especially in some disciplines, there are not enough Māori supervisors to supervise all the students and, even if there were, this would not necessarily always be the best arrangement. Therefore, non-Māori supervisors need to strengthen their supervision. In doing so, they may find themselves in supervision relations filled with multiple possibilities for pleasure

through feelings of friendship, doing good, being appreciated, and learning about *te ao Māori*. These pleasures are inextricably intertwined with the painful possibilities – feelings of disappointment, guilt, ignorance, misunderstanding, frustration – that arise when people undertake the “slow and careful labour of unlearning [their] privileges as [their] loss” (Spivak 1990: vii). The challenge is how to supervise effectively. The supervisors in this study showed that this challenge can and must be met. In extending the hospitality of supervision, they, in turn, were offered hospitality in the form of opportunities to understand another worldview, to participate in aspects of Aotearoa/New Zealand life hitherto inaccessible, to play a role in research that is attempting to redress the harms of colonisation, and to forge a different future for Māori and, by implication, also for non-Māori.

Following Smith (1999: 176-77), settler/coloniser supervisors have a range of options available to them when thinking about how to respond to this need. Each will bring different outcomes for supervisor and student. There is the “strategy of avoidance” (as described by Ruth’s colleague above) because supervising Māori doctoral students and/or *mātauranga Māori* projects seems too difficult, messy, or threatening. Or there is the “strategy of ‘personal development’” whereby the potential supervisor readies him-/herself by engaging in, for example, learning *te reo*, participating in the Māori world, and/or generally attempting to learn more about Māori history and current concerns. Or there is the “strategy of consultation with Māori” whereby non-Māori seek consent to undertake supervision from Māori colleagues and guidance during the supervision process. Some of the supervisors interviewed described this strategy which at times was robustly supported by a Māori co-supervisor. Or, lastly, there is the “strategy of ‘making space’” where supervisors as members of academic departments actively work to recruit and support Māori colleagues into their disciplines and departments – and into supervision as co-supervisors. While doctoral supervision itself is one of the crucial processes in which such recruitment occurs, often more direct interventions are also required.

In the post-colonial universities of Africa, many of the challenges will be different to those found in Aotearoa/New Zealand, such as the traumatic impact of AIDS on the lives of many students,

as discussed by Professor Joan Conolly at the April 2009 conference. But some challenges will likely be similar. This account of the work done in another post-colonial site is intended to hearten African scholars to think deeply about the supervision of doctoral students from formerly colonised groups and to undertake local enquiries that can contribute to our understanding of the contingencies and possibilities in the crucial domain of academic practice.



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