

In defence of mātauranga Māori: a response to the ‘seven academics’

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On 28 July 2021, a group of academics from the University of Auckland published a letter in the *Listener*, a well-known, non-academic magazine. The letter writers expressed their moral outrage that the Government’s NCEA curriculum working group proposed that science would be taught to Māori students along with its colonising history. The writers were also concerned that mātauranga Māori would be taught to ensure parity with other bodies of knowledge. A central premise of the letter was a complete dismissal of the value of mātauranga Māori as a valid science, and a disregard for the importance of teaching students to think critically about their studies. The letter prompted a very public backlash, and interviews were held in print media and on television. The viewpoint letter was sent to members of the New Zealand Psychological Society (NZPsS) and is repeated below. This viewpoint letter offers a rebuttal to the letter for its lack of research or critical analysis. Using a discourse analysis to examine the arguments made, it is evident that rhetorical devices, racist tropes and invitations to moral panic were used to justify the writers’ conclusion that mātauranga Māori lacked scientific basis. Moving forward, the NZPsS has an obligation to consider its responsibility to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi and offer a mana-enhancing solution to resolve situations of this nature.

As the President of the New Zealand Psychological Society, I believe it is important that we express our disappointment at the 28 July 2021 letter to the *Listener*¹ written by professors of psychology, biological sciences and critical studies. As a Society, we also wish to express our support and aroha for those who were, and continue to be, negatively affected by the letters content. We note that the letter reflected an unchecked assumption about the current NCEA curriculum and its future intentions, and a disregard for the effects of dismissing the knowledge system of an entire culture. In reviewing the letter, it was readily apparent that racist tropes were used, alongside comments typical

of moral panic, to justify the exclusion of Māori knowledge as a legitimate science. Responses to selected portions of the letter are outlined below:

1. The writers are dismayed at the proposed changes to the NCEA curriculum which ensures mātauranga Māori has parity with other bodies of knowledge. They are also concerned at the proposal for a new course that aims to teach how science has been used to support the dominance of a Eurocentric view (along with its rationale for the colonisation of Māori and the suppression of Māori knowledge). The writers demonstrate a lack of understanding that the push for NCEA to reflect the worldviews of Māori, within the context of colonisation and epistemic racism, represents a move towards levelling the playing field. The originators of this change are young Māori students² from Otorohanga High School,³ Leah Bell, Waimarama Anderson and Tai Jones, who petitioned the Government to be told the truth about New Zealand history. That same desire exists with students across all disciplines who consistently ask to have their cultural worldviews made visible, respected, taught and valued.
2. The letter writers express their concern that science is being misunderstood at all levels of education and science funding. They further add that science itself does not colonise—while acknowledging that “it has been used to aid colonisation, as have literature and art”. This is similar to saying “Guns don’t kill people. People kill people”. Esteemed scholar, Professor Linda Tuhiwai Smith⁴ (and others), established that science has indeed been used, under the pretence of its own legitimacy, to colonise and commit genocide towards Māori and other Indigenous peoples. Science, in the hands of colonisers, is the figurative gun. The writers fail to note the overwhelming evidence, that the users of the science they favour are also the ones who set the rules about what counts as

science, where it can be taught, learned, published or funded. This issue is extremely relevant to the need to decolonise the power base held in our learning institutions.

3. The trope of colonial imagination: “Science is universal, and not especially Western”—here the writers state that “western science derives from ancient Egypt, Greece, Mesopotamia, and India before developing later in the US and with a strong presence across Asia”. They also added: “with contributions from mediaeval Islam”. This trope imagines that science developed naturally through the healthy exchange of knowledge between cultures, rather than through the inextricable ties to imperialist expansion via the colonisation of peoples and the plunder of their natural, cultural and intellectual resources. As I read their narrow understanding of history, I noted the absence of the Pacific, Africa, the Americas, Greenland, and the Arctic circle, all of whom exist in relationship with their own mātauranga science. To add to the point above, if the New Zealand curriculum intends for their future citizens to understand the world, they also need to know about hegemonies, sexism, racism, Islamophobia, and the forces that use science to oppress some peoples and privilege others.
4. Inciting moral panic trope: “science is helping us battle worldwide crises... COVID-19, global warming”. The assumption here is that the science they refer to is the key to our survival, and that we can’t afford to mistrust science (see point 1). While science is in a global debate about truth, this should not be an invitation to panic about mātauranga Māori potentially destabilising their safety zones. Māori do have solutions to global warming, as do many other Indigenous epistemologies. These solutions centre on protecting the planet as an ancestor by using Indigenous science and addressing exploitative capitalism. It is unfair to claim that we should be concerned (and therefore panic) that science won’t be trusted if we teach the truth about the colonisation of peoples, or about racism that occurs in New Zealand society. We should instead be concerned that viable and sustainable solutions, derived from Indigenous worldviews, are systematically ignored and marginalised, or suppressed and criminalised by those who do not understand their role in epistemic injustice.
5. The White Saviour trope: this is where Māori are told which elements of our Indigenous knowledge are important and to whom. The writers, speaking for Māori, offer the opinion: “Indigenous knowledge is critical to the perpetuation and preservation of culture and local practices and plays key roles in management and policy”. The writers (as is their inherent privilege) relegate Māori knowledge to archival value, ceremony, management and policy (although it is not clear what is meant here). Speaking for Māori ignores obligations to honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and ignores the overwhelming evidence that racism is a primary reason that mātauranga Māori science is undervalued. Māori knowledge is indeed critical to the preservation of our culture and practices because we are resisting epistemic and cultural genocide, while also striving to flourish and develop. Speaking for Māori again, they add that “in the discovery of empirical, universal truths, it falls far short of what we can define as science itself”. Māori aren’t asking them to define science. We have done that ourselves despite having obstacles thrown up at all stages.
6. The writers also use the trope of condescending compassion, and, dangerously, the myth of the “White man’s burden”⁵ where Māori need to be saved from ourselves. They comment: “to accept it as the equivalent [of Western science] is to patronise and fail indigenous populations. Indigenous knowledge may help advance scientific knowledge, in some ways, but it is not real science”. This statement of condescending compassion is also a form of gaslighting (manipulation and psychological control)⁶ where Māori are told that believing in ourselves, and our potential, will fail us. Trusting our own cultural epistemologies is viewed as dangerous, and like children, we must be protected, not by our own, but by Western science. Or as the writers note, [Māori are] “better off participating in the world’s scientific enterprises”.

Psychology has a long history of marginalising Māori knowledge, and it is concerning that two of the writers are professors of psychology. We note that the letter reinforces known racist assumptions about the validity of mātauranga Māori science that occur across psychology and academia. We are particularly concerned about the wellbe-

ing of Māori staff and students in academia who must now navigate the fallout of this letter. We are often expected to justify our existence, to explain or defend Indigenous knowledge of psychology, mātauranga Māori, and kaupapa Māori theory. This is an example of Māori doing double-duty⁷ to educate others within a largely hostile system (see McAllister et al,⁸ and institutional racism allegations at the University of Waikato⁹).

Research conducted over 40 plus years in psychology shows the impact of racism on Māori health outcomes, curriculum development, student numbers, research outputs, and staff recruitment, advancement and retention. More needs to be done, and the NCEA curriculum changes will go some way to achieving mātauranga parity. We welcome the changes on the horizon and embrace the potential for enhanced understandings of science, whatever their origins.

Across the country (and internationally) colleagues spoke up and rejected the letter. Tina Ngata's blog is particularly good,¹⁰ as is the Royal Society of New Zealand,¹¹ the University of Auckland, the New Zealand Association of Scientists¹² and the students' reply to university academics.¹³ However, systemic change is needed to dismantle the foundations of institutional and scientific racism¹⁴ that employs, enables, promotes, and protects the science that is reified in the letter, and the deliberate exclusion of mātauranga Māori.

The NZPsS is in the process of reviewing their membership and awards process to consider their ethical responsibilities when members, or holders of distinguished awards, bring the profession into disrepute. In taking this approach, the NZPsS is cognisant of its values to protect the dignity and mana of members and the organisation. Other organisations are keenly interested in the outcomes of this process as similar issues (including sexual harassment and bullying) occur across differing professions.

Since the letter was published, the Royal Society of New Zealand has received complaints about the letter writers who are members of the Society. According to the Royal Society's complaints process they are obliged to consider whether to proceed to a full investigation. On 11 March 2022, the Royal Society published their decision not to investigate complaints against their members, stating: "The Panel referred to clause 6.4(i) of the Complaints Procedures: "the complaint is not amenable to resolution by a Complaint Determination Committee, including by reason of its demanding the open-ended evaluation of contentious expert opinion or of contested scientific evidence amongst researchers and scholars."¹⁵ The decision not to proceed appears to be based on concerns that an investigation will be open-ended, and amount to who is right and who is wrong. Rather than become enmeshed in an ontological enquiry, the investigation could consider whether there is evidence that the Society's fellows were dishonourable in their processes. Our questions are simple. Did the letter writers act as good scientists? Did they consider the impact of their viewpoints in a magazine whose readership is unlikely to feature Māori perspectives? Did the writers consider that their letter will have revisited the impact of epistemic racism on Māori academics and researchers? In the very least, did they consult with their colleagues in their own institutions?

Finally, Mihingarangi Forbes on the Hui (2 August 2021)¹⁶ asked one of the writers, the late Professor Corballis, if he knew what mātauranga Māori is. He stated: "We've tried to find out about it... we don't know any Maori who knows what matauranga [sic] is". Following the interview, Dr Jade Le Grice tweeted her response to not knowing any Māori: "and yet western Science cannot assist him to navigate his way to my office, next door".¹⁷ I agree, we've been here all along, right next door, practicing our mātauranga-informed science.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Nil.

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