Police and Maori:
Perceptions of one another

Presented by

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¹ This paper is partly based on one prepared by Allison Morris in 1998 to summarise two separate research studies commissioned by the New Zealand Police and Te Puni Kokiri, and conducted by the author and others (Maxwell and Smith, 1998; Te Whaiti and Roguski, 1998).
Introduction

In 1997, the New Zealand Police and Te Puni Kokiri jointly commissioned research on 'Perceptions of Maori and Police'. The aims of the research were to:

- Provide information that would assist the police to make organisational changes that would contribute to improved perceptions on both sides.
- Feed into the ‘Police responsiveness to Maori’ strategy aimed at:
  - A greater understanding and acceptance on the part of the police of the significance and role of the Treaty of Waitangi to Maori, to New Zealand and to the New Zealand Police;
  - A greater capacity in the police for bringing the voice of Maori into decision-making, policy and operational procedures;
  - More effective consultation between the police and Maori to identify, design and implement strategies which might reduce the number of Maori offenders and victims.

The work was contracted to Victoria University. Two separate research studies were carried out and three separate research reports resulted:

- 'Maori perceptions of the police' by Pania Te Whaiti and Michel Roguski from He Parekereke (1998)
- 'Police perceptions of Maori' by Gabrielle Maxwell and Catherine Smith from the Institute of Criminology (1998).

Since then, the Responsiveness Strategy has been implemented and there have been many changes relating to the policing of Maori. These changes include the creation of an Office of Ethnic Relations, a panel of advisors to the Commissioner, the appointment of Iwi Relations officers throughout the country and major changes to the training programmes both for basic training and in-service courses. Although there has been no further research to determine the results, there is anecdotal evidence of some change.

This paper describes the original research, briefly discusses some of the subsequent response to the findings and raises questions about the future of relations between Police and Maori
Objectives and methods of the two studies

The two studies were conducted by two different groups quite independently of one another. Both studies aimed to explore the attitudes of the target group towards the other and to identify variables that might influence these attitudes.

Maori perceptions of the police

The methodology involved:

- Arranging ten focus groups, each with 8 to 10 participants in five different towns/cities.
- Respondents of a variety of ages, incomes and educational levels - though women outnumbered men.
- Groups that contained individuals with a range of different types of contact with the police.
- Discussion of participants' experience with and perceptions of the police and views on how the police might better serve Maori.
- Participants in focus groups essentially spoke for themselves but a number of themes and concerns were raised repeatedly suggesting that they were widespread.

Police perceptions of Maori

The method was through a postal survey of front line police officers:

- Questionnaires were mailed to about 1000 front line police officers of different ranks, genders and ethnicities and from different regions. These were followed up with a phone call after 7-10 days if no reply was returned.
- About 75% of those approached responded.
- The questions were primarily designed to find out about how police in 1997/98 responded to Maori and their views about Maori and future police policy in relation to Maori.
- The sample was stratified to include a sufficient number of women and senior ranks to make separate analysis of these groups possible, but otherwise the sample was randomly chosen and so is broadly representative of the behaviour and attitudes of front line police officers throughout New Zealand.
Results

Both studies provide a wealth of information, both powerful and disturbing. Despite different methods and questions, both studies raised many similar issues. Both reports also raised some separate issues. The main findings from each study are described under the following headings:

- Stereotyping Maori
- Stereotyping police
- Recruiting more Maori police officers
- Differences in the views of Maori and non-Maori police officers
- Police knowledge and understanding of Maori culture and issues
- Training of police officers

Stereotyping Maori

Police perceptions of Maori

Although for the most part police reported that they treated Maori and non-Maori similarly, there were a number of areas where important differences in behaviour were reported. Overall, about a fifth of those interviewed said that police officers were more likely to ask Maori what they were doing in the early hours of the morning, about a third reported that police officers were more likely to suspect Maori of an offence and nearly a half reported that police were more likely to query vehicle registrations when Maori were seen driving 'flash' cars. About 10% of the police officers also reported that their colleagues were more likely to carry out a routine vehicle stop of a known offender if the offender was Maori, to use abusive language towards a suspect or offender if he or she was Maori or to treat a suspect roughly if he or she was Maori.

It is interesting to note that Maori police officers were significantly more likely than those of New Zealand European descent to believe that Maori were more likely to be stopped in a car, to be asked what they were doing in the early hours of the morning, to be the recipient of abusive language, to be treated roughly, to be suspected of an offence and to be checked when driving a 'flash car'.
The survey on 'Police perceptions of Maori' also found that the police used discriminatory language. For example, at least two thirds of the police officers reported that they had heard colleagues using racist language about suspects or offenders. Admittedly, much of this was in private rather than in face-to-face interaction with suspects or offenders, but that is not the point. The data show that police officers felt able to freely make such statements within the hearing of their colleagues. This freedom seems to be confirmed by the finding that about half of the officers who reported witnessing negative behaviour by fellow officers said that it was not necessarily reprimanded by senior officers. It is again noticeable that Maori police officers reported witnessing higher levels of such negative practices than their non-Maori colleagues.

Maori perceptions of police.

The Maori respondents believed that the police viewed Maori as essentially 'criminal'. Simply ‘being Maori’ was perceived as a sufficient cause for suspicion by the police. More than half the participants reported that they had been questioned by the police. The others knew of people, often whanau, who had been stopped or questioned and spoke vividly of such incidents.

Participants were also unanimous in their perception of the police as a racist institution with strong anti-Maori attitudes regardless of the officers’ age, income, education, region, and gender. These views were did not necessarily come from personal or individual experience, but from familial, whanau and collective experience. Maori participants provided a number of examples of what they described as racist practices. These included stopping and searching Maori on suspicion that a crime had been committed, harassment, verbal and sometimes physical abuse, the use of strip searches and the failure of the police to offer protection to women, especially gang women, who were experiencing abuse by their partners. Maori participants also felt that there was little point in complaining about these practices as they did not see the Police Complaints Authority as independent from the police.

Understanding differences in views

On the matter of differences in behaviour and general perceptions by the police about Maori, the two reports complement one another but they present different views on how the stereotyping of Maori occurs.
**The view of the police**  Several respondents said that their actions toward suspects and offenders were more related to the context of the situation and to the attitude of the individual than to the individual's ethnicity. While that may sometimes be the case, nevertheless the survey found that one in four police officers believed their colleagues had negative attitudes towards Maori; furthermore Maori officers were significantly more likely than officers of New Zealand European descent to see police officers as having negative attitudes towards Maori (and towards people from Pacific Island nations).

**The Maori participants**  On the other hand, Maori respondents interpreted any negative responses as indicative of racism. This may not always be so, but given the history of negative interactions recounted by the participants in 'Maori perceptions of the police', it is perhaps not quite so simple to distinguish whether the behaviour reflects generally racist attitudes or specific circumstances as the suggested by the police. The negative perceptions of Maori held by some police and the negative perceptions of the police held by Maori can clearly fuel and reinforce each other. Added to this is the fact that Maori are over-represented in offending statistics; this in itself, in the eyes of some police, may justify targeting. Hence the potential for a self-perpetuating and self-fulfilling cycle is set in place. Both groups expect trouble and it is hardly surprising if it results.

**Stereotyping the police**

**Maori perceptions of police**  Many of the statements by participants in 'Maori perceptions of the police' suggest that they saw all police as holding similar (negative) attitudes to Maori and as displaying similar (negative) practices. However, it seems apparent too that they also often saw older police officers as more approachable and as having more social and communications skills. These attributes were seen as important indicators of the likelihood of positive interactions between the police and Maori than either the gender or ethnicity of the police officer.

There were other indications in 'Maori perceptions of the police' that Maori did not see all police officers in the same terms. For example, young officers fresh out of the Police College were seen by Maori participants as the most 'offensive and dangerous'. Youth Aid officers, on the other hand, were seen as 'helpful, realistic, flexible and approachable'.
The other principal factor identified by Maori as likely to result in positive perceptions of and experiences with the police was the officer's knowledge and use of tikanga Maori. Participants in 'Maori perceptions of the police' also believed that those police officers who were focussed in their community and who got to know the people in it would earn the respect of that community, including Maori. They suggested that police should work more closely with Maori community organisations if relationships were to improve.

Police perceptions of Maori

Some of the police officers participating in 'Police perceptions of Maori' made comments that endorsed similar views on what could create more positive relations. They noted that their experiences with marae programmes had increased their understanding of Maori. Furthermore, most of the police officers surveyed believed that the police should develop contacts with Maori groups and agencies. Older officers and those in contact with Maori in their personal or social life were most likely to endorse such a policy and the more positive attitudes toward Maori of these officers lends support to the belief that contact is likely to bring about improved attitudes.

The recruitment of more Maori police officers

Maori perceptions of police

Some of the Maori participants believed that more Maori police officers would make a difference, but others claimed that the worst treatment they had experienced was at the hands of Maori officers. They saw the main reasons for this as lying in the racist nature of the police culture, the socialisation of Maori police into this culture and the need or desire on the part of Maori police officers to 'prove' that they were 'real' police.

Overall, most participants in 'Maori perceptions of the police' were described as 'wary' of recommending the recruitment of Maori into the police because of a perceived unwillingness in the police to allow them to be 'Maori'.

Police perceptions of Maori

Participants in 'Police perceptions of Maori' were also wary of the suggestion that there should be further changes although for different reasons. There was only limited support for affirmative action policies in the recruitment (and promotion) of Maori. Indeed, one in seven of all the officers questioned specifically disagreed with the proposal to recruit
more Maori and over one in five disagreed with the proposal to promote more Maori. Also, from the survey data, some Maori police officers clearly shared their colleagues’ negative attitudes towards Maori offenders. The common ground here seems to be the need to select the 'right' people to be police officers, whether or not they are Maori, and to ensure that these officers are then well trained in Maori issues and in the positive aspects of policing.

Comparing the views of Maori and non-Maori police officers  It is significant that Maori and non Maori police officers participating in the survey did not in general believe that there were differences in police attitudes, language or behaviour depending on whether the officer was or was not Maori.

However, there were some important differences between the views of Maori and non-Maori officers. Maori did not see relationships between them and their New Zealand European colleagues as good as their colleagues. Also, despite an increase in the number of Maori police officers over the years prior to the survey, participants in both research projects felt that there had been little change in race relations. Indeed, the Maori officers felt that the situation might be deteriorating.

Limited police understanding of Maori and the Treaty of Waitangi

At a number of points in 'Maori perceptions of the police' participants made clear their view that the police had a limited understanding of what is it to be 'Maori', of Maori culture and of the Treaty of Waitangi. The survey of police officers approached these issues in a different way and asked participants about their views on Maori political aspirations. Though many agreed with such items as the importance of settling Treaty claims and of respecting Maori customs, and redressing socio-economic inequity, there was considerable disagreement about such items as the guardianship of native plants, restoring traditional fishing rights and creating a separate Maori justice system. From these data, the researchers devised a scale on 'attitudes to Maori political aspirations'.

Analysis of responses to this scale showed that a quarter of the police participants disagreed or strongly disagreed with some of the items in this scale and a minority disagreed with most of the items in the scale. More often, those disagreeing about these items were young, front line constables rather then at the level of sergeant and above and those with limited contact with Maori in their personal or social life. These findings fit
with the beliefs of the Maori participants already mentioned who suggested that younger police officers were more problematic in their attitudes to Maori than older officers and that increased community involvement, particularly increased involvement with the Maori community, might make a difference.

**Training police officers**

The need for the police to have an increased understanding of Maori issues was endorsed in both research reports. The authors of 'Maori perceptions of the police' explicitly recommended the adoption by the police of Ramsden's (1997) training package (first developed for the nursing profession). And more than three quarters of the police participants agreed that they should understand Maori culture and protocol. Indeed, more than half agreed that all police officers should be provided with training in Maori culture and protocol. On the other hand, nearly one in five disagreed with the provision of training in Maori culture and protocol so that it seems likely that there was, at that time, considerable resistance on the part of some police to the changes that have occurred in more recent years.

The authors of 'Maori perceptions of the police' also suggested that addressing Maori concerns requires 'getting to the core of police attitudes to Maori'. In particular, they invited the police to look critically at themselves as an organisation. Though advocating cultural safety training as well, this self-examination was seen as the more critical. There is some evidence that this was a view that also endorsed by the police participants as two thirds of those surveyed agreed that the police should foster positive police perceptions of Maori.

**The impact of the Responsiveness Strategy**

There are important indicators in these findings that are consistent with the both the general direction and specific policies in the Strategy that has since been implemented. Already, at the time of the research the “Strategy for Building Police Responsiveness to Maori” was being introduced and extended. Today, the impact of the Strategy is very evident in the changes that have occurred in police training at all levels, the appointment of Iwi liaison officers throughout the country, the establishment of a national Office of Maori, Pacific and Ethnic Affairs, the increasing role of Maori officers in resolving matters of significance for Maori and the importance that has been placed on consultation
with Maori at all levels in the organisation. Hui throughout the country to increase police understanding are a tangible indication of the value being placed on the role of the iwi liaison officers who have been involved in the management of them.

The research itself seems to have had an impact on the attitudes of at least some police officers. I have recently had discussions with several different Maori Police officers who have reported that since reading or hearing about the earlier research, there attitude to being Maori officer within the police has changed – they now feel that it is important that they bring Maori values and culture into their work within the Police.

There is little doubt that, across the board, the amount of collaboration between the Maori community and Police officers has increased throughout the country and there are some very notable occasions on which the results have been to defuse potentially critical situations. One example of the success of the involvement of Maori in a community-based approach has been the effectiveness of the Police in brokering a resolution of the problems resulting from the occupation of Moutoua Gardens in Wanganui. Another would be the effective handling of the Seabed and Foreshore Hikoi to Parliament in 2005 that, despite the potentially explosive nature of the issue, occurred without any clashes between Police and Maori. Others would include the successful negotiation of the return of a valuable McCahon painting removed as a protest by Tuhoe activists and the handling of a recent case involving the failure to return body parts of an infant autopsied in the Waikato to relatives in the far north. Other incidents have had more mixed outcomes, for example the controversy surrounding the shooting of a Maori man in Waitara by Police in (1998? or 1999?). But arguably in this case, the involvement of Maori Police as advisors and managers of the negotiation process matters may have prevented matters escalating even further..

On the whole, then, there is a prima facie case for believing that relationships may well have improved, that Maori communities now have closer links with local police, that police are better informed about Maori cultural issues and that the feared backlash against an increased emphasis on issues relating to Maori has not occurred. The numbers of Maori in the Police appeared to have increased by half again and the numbers of Police officer of Pacific descent has doubled and a number of senior police are visibly Maori. However, fewer Maori recruits are successfully completing training, there are still far fewer numbers of Maori police officers than Maori suspects and offenders, relatively few Maori officers compared to non-Maori are represented in senior positions and the position
of those who have been asked to take a lead role in promoting Maori issues is undoubtedly not always a comfortable one. Furthermore, there is no evidence of the overall impact of the new policies on perceptions of either the police or Maori. Perhaps it would be timely to once again carry out research that could allow a celebration of the gains and a focus on new strategies that could further improve the relationships between the two parties in a key area for race relations in New Zealand.

**Conclusion**

There is no doubt that the two pieces of research described here generated much emotion and heated debate among their two 'constituencies' in 1998. Some police participants felt that the survey was too simplistic for such complex questions and that the findings were likely to damage the public image of the police. Maori participants recounted many examples of abuse by the police and to a large extent saw the police as a symbol of white or colonial oppression.

Many have undoubtedly been outraged by the catalogue of abuses documented in 'Maori perceptions of the police' and by the confirmation in 'Police perceptions of Maori' that discriminatory attitudes and practices have been widespread within the New Zealand Police. The reality of these attitudes and practices by some police officers towards Maori cannot be denied. What was unclear at the time and remains unclear today is the prevalence of these attitudes and practices. Maori perceived them to be widespread. The survey of police officers suggested they existed in only among a minority of officers and at least three quarters of police officers were reported by their colleagues not to engage in discriminatory behaviour against Maori and not to hold negative attitudes towards Maori.

The issue here, however, is not who is ‘right’: perceptions among Maori of the universality of discriminatory police attitudes and practices can, of course, result from the attitudes and practices of a few police officers and the widely reported experiences of a few Maori. It is also true that the existence of negative attitudes and practices among the police may well be under-reported by those supportive of them. However, documenting further examples of abuse and determining the precise number of police officers who hold negative attitudes towards Maori or who are involved in discriminatory practices against Maori is not what is now needed.
There need to be changes within both communities. For Maori to dismiss all police as racist does a disservice to those officers who have worked well with the Maori community and to the commitment signified by the ‘Police responsiveness to Maori’ strategy. Indeed, this negative stereotyping of the police by Maori can be potentially damaging to Maori, especially to Maori victims. Equally, for the police to target Maori simply because they are Maori does a disservice to Maori. Indeed, again, this negative stereotyping of Maori by the police can be potentially damaging to the police. Targeting Maori is only likely to further intensify the feelings of alienation experienced by many young Maori and their drift into crime. As noted earlier, stereotyping sets the scene for the perpetuation of mutual negativity.

In 1998 the findings in the two research reports provided a basis for how the problems might be addressed. Explicitly or implicitly the following can be read in both: the improved selection and training of police officers, particularly the provision of training in Maori culture and protocol; the further endorsement of community policing, particularly with the involvement of the Maori community; the strict monitoring and sanctioning of discriminatory attitudes and behaviour; and regular hui of Maori, local police and others to discuss issues of mutual importance. In addition, Maori asked for the introduction of a complaint mechanism that they saw to be independent. Goodwill on both sides, however, is the first precursor to real change in the attitudes and practices of both Maori and the police.

Since 1998, the Police have made considerable strides in implementing most of the practical policies outlined above: training has changed, Iwi liaison officers are in place and are acknowledged to have a key role in issues relating to Maori, there are much stronger links with Maori community at all levels and there are regular hui, both nationally and regionally on key issues. Anecdotal evidence about changes in the policing of key incidents involving potential clashes with non-Maori in relation to tikanga and political aspirations are indicative of positive outcomes but little evidence is available on the basis of which, to judge the impact of the changes on perceptions.

The key issue today is to determine the extent that the measures that have been taken adequately address the problems of the past. This means once again asking questions about the extent of Maori perceptions of negative attitudes and practices towards them by the police and the negative attitudes and practices of some police towards Maori. And it
means asking questions about the successes and failures of the strategies of the past six years and determining what new initiatives are needed.

In conclusion then, in the past there have undoubtedly been real causes for concern and there are almost certainly still real problems today. Stereotyped attitudes and prejudiced behaviour do not change in a matter of a mere 15 years – especially in an environment where many ‘ordinary’ New Zealanders undoubtedly still share the same negative stereotypes as were reported in 1998. Politically, issues relating to Maori remain volatile and controversial. Notably two leaders of opposition parties have announced concerns about unequal treatment of Maori and policies aimed at “Closing the Gaps” in social and economic inequity have been challenged as inappropriate. Issues of Maori rights over land remain controversial and those relating to the seabed and foreshore are currently potentially explosive. The amount of public support for less supportive policies in relation to basic Maori social and economic issues is indicative of the continuing problems that are likely to find expression in negative attitudes toward Maori on the part of some individual members of the Police and a continued volatility in race relations nationally. The contribution that can be made to the future of New Zealand race relations by effective policing around ethnic issues and the professionalism of police in responding even-handedly to Maori, and Pakeha alike in basic day–to–day dealings with offenders could be critical in the years to come.

References