Simon Chapple

Legitimacy and the Use of Ethnic Categories in Public Service Long-Term Insights Briefings

Abstract

This article considers the way government agencies use the concept of ethnicity in their long-term insights briefings. Ethnicity receives a disproportionate focus compared with other socio-demographic categories. Yet the concept is treated as self-evident, and its manifold limitations are unexplored. Salient outcome variations are reduced to average ethnic differences, and variation is further reduced, in an essentialised manner, to comparisons between Māori, Pacific and the largely invisible others in the European and Asian categories. Human commonality and complex webs of micro-connections between people are not explored. Questions arise regarding whether the briefings' treatment of ethnicity relative to other socio-demographic dimensions fulfils statutory obligations to be impartial and politically neutral. The article argues that the briefings' treatment of ethnicity may undermine their public legitimacy. Significant recommendations for positive change are made.

Keywords long-term insights briefings, ethnicity, socio-demographic differences, reductionism, essentialism, in- and between-group variance, societal complexity, impartiality, political neutrality, public legitimacy

Simon Chapple is an economist and public policy researcher. He is currently an affiliate at Motu Economic and Public Policy Research in Wellington.

This article critically considers the way government agencies conceptualised and utilised ethnicity in their first long-term insights briefings, prepared during 2022–23, and offers a significant number of suggestions for improvements. Introduced by the Public Service Act 2020, these briefings are designed to provide 'information about medium- and long-term trends, risks, and opportunities that affect or may affect New Zealand', as well as 'information and impartial analysis, including policy options' (schedule 6(8)) to address the issues raised (see Menzies, Jackson and Boston, 2024 for an overarching and largely critical assessment of the debut briefings). The briefings are also intended to give the public service an avenue for free and frank advice, independent of their current ministers, enabling exercise of long-term stewardship. In addition to being impartial in their briefings, the public servants creating them are more generally required to be politically neutral. Creating long-term briefings that meet these requirements helps to build trust in and enhance the legitimacy of the public service in the eyes of citizens.

As the basis for the discussion, this article first considers the construction of the ethnicity data used in the briefings by Statistics New Zealand, revealing significant ambiguity behind the concept and the way

that the data is both collected and aggregated. It then examines how agencies have used Statistics New Zealand data on ethnic categories in their briefings compared with other commonly used dimensions of socio-demographic differences, revealing a disproportionate focus on Māori and Pacific ethnic binary categories and outcome differences by group. It then critically analyses how ethnicity is actually used in the long-term briefings in terms of population projections of shares of high-level ethnic categories. As the analysis reveals a considerable agency focus on the Māori ethnic category as a binary, a detailed consideration is made of the briefing of the main government agency advising on Māori, Te Puni Kōkiri, and how it conceptualises Māori as a social category. Lastly, consideration is given to what meaning agencies ascribe to ethnicity, revealing a significant element of public service essentialism.

Statistics New Zealand's approach to measuring ethnicity

In undertaking these briefings, policymakers regularly categorise people into ethnic groups. Where quantitative data on ethnicity is referred to in the briefings, it comes from Statistics New Zealand's (Stats) definitions and data collections. In its background notes on the concept, Stats defines ethnicity as 'self perceived' and about the groups people 'feel they belong to' (Statistics New Zealand, n.d.). Stats also observes that it is not a measure of race, ancestry, nationality or citizenship. The conceptual distinction Stats makes between ethnicity and nationality is not a strong one, as indicated by an assessment of international approaches to ethnicity questions, where the two terms frequently overlap (Morning, 2015, pp.22–3). Additionally, when Stats collects ethnicity data, it does not supply these conceptual prompts to respondents, so the meaning which it ascribes to ethnicity may have little or no connection to what is in respondents' minds when filling out forms. For example, the census question simply asks respondents:

> Which ethnic group do you belong to? Mark the space or spaces which apply to you.
>
> NZ European
> Māori
> Samoan
> Cook Island Māori
> Tongan
> Chinese
> Indian
> Others such as Dutch, Japanese and Tokelauan.

Overall, the conceptual framework and the question are poorly integrated. While the conceptual description is in terms of subjective self-identification, the actual question is posed in terms of a taken-for-granted objective fact that someone must belong to an ethnic group (compare this with ethnicity questions in several other countries, which are worded much more subjectively: see Morning, 2015, p.25).

Additionally, while Statistics New Zealand states that conceptually ethnicity is not a measure of nationality, all ethnic categories explicitly mentioned in the question, barring New Zealand European and Māori, are directly mapped onto current nation states (viz, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tonga, China, India, the Netherlands, Japan and Tokelau). Hence, the fundamental underlying definition and the question are inconsistent with one another.

These raw individual responses are typically aggregated. Stats defines six aggregations of the data in terms of sets of binary groups: European, Māori, Pacific peoples, Asian, MELAA (Middle Eastern/Latin American/African) and 'Other ethnicity'. Strictly speaking, these are ethnic categories, and they will be referred to as such below. Because significant numbers of New Zealanders report multiple ethnic categories, in order to generate these binaries an algorithm is needed. Stats recommends the total count approach, where people are recorded as members of each of the categories into which they fall. For example, if a person ticks both a New Zealand European and a Māori box, they are counted in both the European and Māori categories. Because of consequent multiple counting of multi-ethnic people, the sum total of ethnic groups exceeds the total population. The total count approach also has the undesirable feature of obscuring the existence and identities of multi-ethnic people.

A method which more accurately reflected societal complexity and which honoured people's responses would be to create a series of discrete categories whereby all permutations of groups were reported on separately if they were of sufficient absolute size. Thus, for example, if the number of people ticking both a New Zealand European and a Māori box were sufficiently large, it should be reported on as a group separate from both the only New Zealand European and only Māori groups (again, if these latter two groups were sufficiently large).

While the existence of multi-ethnic people is acknowledged, their populations are not projected, so they remain statistically and hence analytically invisible.

Statistics New Zealand uses this total count ethnic data to descriptively compare outcomes across ethnic categories in the census and in various social and economic surveys, and to generate population projections by the broad ethnic categories (Statistics New Zealand, 2022). While the existence of multi-ethnic people is acknowledged, their populations are not projected, so they remain statistically and hence analytically invisible. These projections are based on a range of assumptions based on different combinations of fertility of women and paternity assumptions for men (to allow for the fact of inter-category paternity),

mortality, migration and inter-ethnic mobility.

The limitations of the ethnicity data discussed above are not a focus of any of the agencies' briefings when this data is employed.

How important is ethnicity in the briefings compared with other socio-demographic categories?

As of 24 November 2024, there were 19 first round published briefings available for analysis (see Public Service Commission, 2024). Of these briefings, four were produced by two or more agencies and 15 were the product of single agencies.

The briefings typically consider current and future demographic differences and a wide variety of outcome differences between different socio-demographic categories. None of the briefings report any analysis of why these particular groups were considered to be salient to the briefings. Their salience was taken by agencies as self-evident. Additionally, sometimes these differences are cast descriptively as inequalities (e.g., by Treasury) and at other times as inequities, reflecting a tacit distributional value judgement (e.g., by the Ministry of Health).

This analysis commences with a count of the number of times each briefing refers to one of the four largest main ethnic categories used by Statistics – European, Māori, Asian and Pacific – and the overall term ethnic(ity). It compares these to mentions of four other social categories commonly used to consider differences in outcomes – socioeconomic, men/male, women/female and disabled.[1] The aim is to contextually assess the extent to which agencies have focused on specific ethnic categories, relative both to other ethnic categories and to other socio-demographic categories.

Table 1 indicates a very strong dominance of the four ethnic categories in briefings, which form a very large majority – 89% – of all mentions of the eight socio-demographic categories considered here. Two out of 19 briefings – Inland Revenue and the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet – contain relatively few references to ethnicity compared to others, but do not replace this with a focus on other socio-demographic categories. The other four socio-demographic categories (11%) are barely visible, with, for example, the average mention of 'socioeconomic' being one per briefing and the median mention being zero. Surprisingly, the Ministry of Health makes no mention of 'socioeconomic' in its briefing. While the expectation was that four ethnic categories would attract significant numbers of mentions, the extent to which they dominate over other socio-demographic categories was unexpected.

Considerations of ethnic differences are strongly focused on Māori. Within the ethnic categories, Māori are a considerable majority – 63% – of mentions, followed by Pacific at 29%. By way of comparison, the 2023 census puts the Māori category at 18% of the population and the Pacific category at 9% of the population. The Asian category, 17% of the population in the 2023 census, is significantly under-

Table 1: Summary of mentions of ethnicity and other social categories across long-term insights briefings

Agency or first agency	Pages	European	Māori	Pacific	Asian	Ethnic (ity)	Socio-economic	Women/ female	Men/ male	Disabled
Ministry for Pacific Peoples	40	2	37	534	3	43	1	1	0	1
Ministry of Health	37	2	115	28	2	9	0	4	0	8
Departmental of Internal Affairs	60	3	69	11	5	12	0	0	2	4
Department of Conservation	50	0	32	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Te Puni Kōkiri	48	3	537	4	0	18	0	2	2	0
Statistics New Zealand	35	0	68	5	0	1	0	2	0	2
Public Service Commission	63	1	74	11	1	5	1	4	2	3
Ministry of Transport	64	3	15	3	3	5	0	3	0	6
Ministry of Education	60	0	115	53	0	2	7	22	2	77
Treasury	93	9	80	28	6	18	3	16	11	0
Prime Minister and Cabinet	41	0	3	2	2	7	0	0	0	0
Education Review Office	108	24	29	22	148	504	0	5	5	1
Housing and Urban Development	36	5	45	10	0	9	1	1	0	3
Justice	124	5	318	93	1	12	6	147	73	0
MBIE	37	0	80	24	0	1	1	0	0	0
Ministry for the Environment	79	0	78	1	0	8	0	0	0	1
Ministry for Primary Industries	56	0	22	1	0	3	0	0	0	0
Ministry for Culture and Heritage	37	4	128	5	2	10	4	0	0	1
Inland Revenue	111	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	1068	61	1845	835	173	667	24	207	97	107
Average	62	3	97	44	9	35	1	11	5	6
Median	53	2	72	11	1	9	0	2	0	1
Maximum	124	24	537	534	148	504	7	147	73	77
Minimum	35	0	3	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

represented at 6% of mentions. The majority of Asian category mentions (86%) come in the Education Review Office (ERO) briefing. The European category, despite being 68% of the 2023 census population, is virtually invisible in the briefings, at 2% of mentions, 39% of these being concentrated in the ERO briefing. While again this disproportionate pattern was expected, its degree, and the extent of the invisibility of the majority European ethnic category and the large Asian category, was surprising. Notably, the qualitative disproportion among the four main ethnic categories survives exclusion of the Māori and Pacific population agency briefings from the counts, with 71% of category mentions now Māori (a higher proportion), 17% Pacific, 9% Asian and 3% European.

In terms of the relatively invisible other socio-demographic categories, some are more invisible than others. The (relatively) dominant categories are women, twice as likely to be mentioned as men (including, puzzlingly, in Justice's briefing, which has a focus on imprisonment, where males are massively over-represented) and the disabled. Of the other two non-dominant categories, the socioeconomic category is the least important, getting half the mentions compared even to relatively neglected men. It is difficult not to conclude that New Zealand's public servants across all agencies demonstrate little long-term strategic interest in the socio-demographic stratification of the New Zealand population beyond the Maori and Pacific ethnic categories and virtually no interest in socioeconomic differences in understanding longer-term futures.[2]

How do the briefings use ethnic population projections?

In addition to considering ethnic categories in relation to outcomes, a significant number of agencies refer to ethnicity in terms of Statistics New Zealand's ethnic category population projections. However, they do so mechanically, not providing a comprehensive picture of why the projected shares of main ethnic categories change or indicating why the changes are salient, and paying little attention to drawing out the implications of those projected changes.

For example, Internal Affairs (p.25) indicates a fall in the share in the European category and a rise in the Māori, Pacific and Asian categories to 2043. It does not explain why the shares change and draws no implications of this change analytically. Using the same data, in the context of a weakening international order, the Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet suggests that a more ethnically diverse community arising from the projections raises concerns about foreign countries seeking to divide ethnic communities in New Zealand (p.20), while Te Puni Kōkiri uses the data projections to emphasise the differences in age distributions between Māori and non-Māori categories.

According to the Ministry of Health (p.8), the projected change in population shares of the major ethnic categories may shift health needs and aspirations, but it takes this no further, not addressing how needs and aspirations might change and by how much. The Ministry of Justice (p.99) notes the same sets of projected changes, but again with little analysis of the implications. Culture and Heritage too presents a short outline of the projections and asserts, without explaining why and without any supporting evidence, that greater ethnic population diversity 'is associated with economic and social benefits, such as increased productivity, innovation and cultural vibrancy' (Manatū Taonga, 2023, p.34).

Both the Public Service Commission (p.21) and the Treasury (pp.12–13) discuss the drivers of change in Māori and Pacific category shares in terms of a younger age structure and higher fertility rates than European and Asian categories – that is to say, in terms of differences between ethnic categories. However, a further reason for rising shares arises out of high rates of exogamy for Māori and Pacific categories. With multiple ethnic identification likely to arise out of this exogamy – which is a dimension of similarity, not difference – this means these minority groups will appear as younger and growing faster even in the face of a common fertility rate for all categories, simply by virtue of data construction.

A case study: Te Puni Kōkiri's use of ethnic binaries

Given the strong focus on Māori revealed in Table 1, the concentration on that focus in Te Puni Kōkiri's briefing, and the fact that it is the government's main policy advisor on Māori, its briefing is an interesting and pertinent analytical case study. Te Puni Kōkiri's briefing is based on five oppositional binaries – between Māori and non-Māori people, between Māori whānau and an implied other, between Māori communities and an implied other, between the Māori economy and an implied other, and between te ao Māori and the Pākehā or 'Western' world.

> In a cross-section, a large and rising majority of Māori New Zealanders … and, as importantly, in most other ethnic categories … identify or are identified … as multi-ethnic.

In terms of binaries between people, Te Puni Kōkiri briefly acknowledges Māori people who also self-identify with other ethnic categories (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2023, p.5). However, these people are then automatically subsumed into a binary Māori category. But by ticking multiple ethnic boxes, these people are rejecting binary categorisation. As well as providing a misleading view of New Zealand society, this algorithm suppresses a potentially important dimension of these people's self-identity.

In a cross-section, a large and rising majority of Māori New Zealanders (see

Figure 1) and, as importantly, in most other ethnic categories (see Figure 2) identify or are identified (primarily by their parents) as multi-ethnic. Multi-ethnic people exist largely because of inter-ethnic category partnering and childbearing and raising. Consistent with a traditional te ao Māori world view, multi-ethnic people are frequently whakapapa-driven, with a whakapapa including people from other ethnic categories. Inter-ethnic partnerships and consequent whakapapa demonstrate a fundamental micro-engagement between humans across macro-ethnic categories. If there are a lot of multi-ethnic people, and there are in New Zealand, this indicates a low degree of social distance between human beings in different ethnic categories.

An intergenerational consequence of inter-ethnic marriage is that children of mixed ethnicity couples are less likely to define themselves as a single ethnic category than those of sole ethnicity couples, likely further reducing effective macro-category distinctions. This dynamic is a recursive process of further breaking down macro-category difference through time. One might have thought that this whakapapa relationship dynamic would be an salient consideration in a briefing about Māori futures, given a very long history of significant rates of exogamy (Callister, 2003).

This ethnic binary is also implied to be a temporally enduring primordial one. Yet the linked census data indicates the opposite – a socially significant amount of movement into and out of the Māori category. For example, linked census data between 2001 and 2006 indicates a high turnover rate of the base 2001 Māori category of 22% to 2006, with an inflow rate of 12% and an outflow rate of 10% (rates calculated from data in Didham, Nissen and Dobson, 2014, Table 9, p.30). The turnover rate between 1991 and 1996 was even higher at 29%, but this figure was dominated by a much higher inflow rate (23%) and a much lower outflow rate (6%) (see Chapple, 2000, p.104). Clearly, ethnic categorisation is a choice variable, not a primordial binary for many in the Māori category. Category mobility is an absolutely and relatively important demographic feature of Māori which is, again, not identified as salient by Te Puni Kōkiri.

Te Puni Kōkiri develops another binary in terms of Māori whānau, who exist in implied contrast to other, non-Māori family structures (e.g., p.2). In Statistics New Zealand's 2018 Te Pukenga survey, Māori respondents generally reported that their whānau are relatively small, with a median size of under 10 people. In the 2013 Te Pukenga survey, 40.2% of Māori defined their whānau as only including respondents' parents, their partner, their children and their siblings.[3] Further including grandparents and grandchildren to this base category adds 15.2% of people, and including aunts, uncles and cousins adds a further 31.9% (Kukutai, Sporle and Roskruge, 2016, p.60). In other words, most whānau (87.3%) seem similar in definition, breadth and size to how many other New Zealanders, irrespective of their ethnic categorisation, would frequently define their families. Again, the consequence of ignoring social similarity and overlap is a focus on contrasting, binary difference. Te Puni Kōkiri defines this form of whānau as whakapapa whānau and defines a second form of whānau, 'kaupapa' whānau, including friends/other: 23% of Māori had whānau in this category in 2018.[4]

The further presumption is that both these forms of whānau are uniquely Māori. Once again, the implied Māori/non-Māori dichotomy does not hold for whānau. In addition to the many Māori respondents who will identify with other ethnic groups, their partners, parents, siblings, children and other relatives may all identify partly

Figure 1: Growing numbers of multi-ethnic people resist binary categorisations in the census

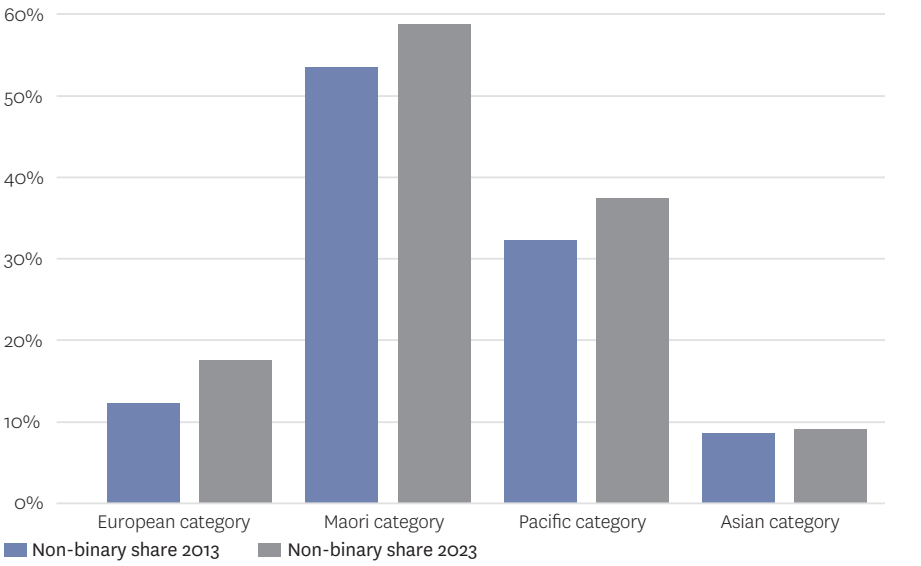
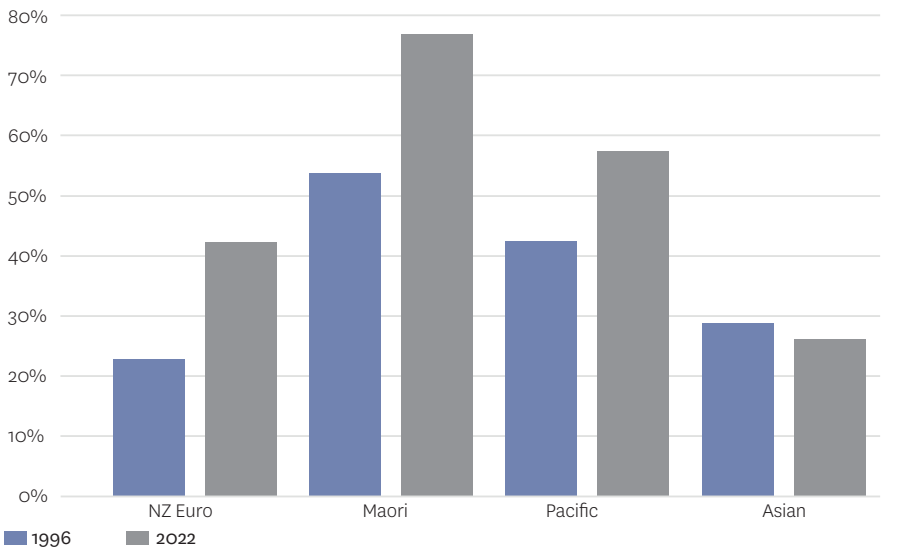


Figure 2: The future is looking increasingly non-binary: Multi-ethnicity births by major ethnic category, 1996 and 2022



or wholly with non-Māori categories. In terms of kaupapa whānau, many Māori will have non-Māori friends/others whom they consider as whānau. Again, consideration of micro-connections between people is neglected for an overwhelming emphasis on macro binary differences.

Central to Te Puni Kōkiri's briefing is the belief that 'whānau wellbeing depends on achieving a meaningful balance between participation and achievement in both *wider society* and *Te Ao Māori*' (p.18). However, analysis by Kukutai, Sporle and Roskruge of the relationships between Te Pukenga's self-assessed whānau wellbeing and the te reo Māori, mātauranga Māori and te taiao dimensions of te ao Māori finds to the contrary: 'having a high level of whānau wellbeing does not depend on an individual's engagement in the activities that sustain Te Ao Māori' (Kukutai, Sporle and Roskruge, 2017, p.49). Thus, there is no evidence that te ao Māori matters for whānau wellbeing, yet this strong assumption is the foundational basis for Te Puni Kōkiri's briefing.

Te ao Māori is prescriptivised by Te Puni Kōkiri, making the te ao Māori model a cultural deficit model. A deficit model suggests that people who identify as Māori who do not prioritise te ao Māori – as defined by government agencies – are deficient and somehow not fully or authentically Māori. It is noteworthy that this sort of cultural deficit ruler is not run over any other ethnic category by any other government agency.

Lastly, Te Puni Kōkiri also employs other binaries in its use of the conceptual terms of Māori communities and the Māori economy, again based on a tacit implication that these are meaningfully discrete, clearly defined categories.

Ethnic essentialism in the briefings

Essentialism is the notion that groups of people have unique defining characteristics which only they possess, and which make up their essence, differentiating them and allowing categorising them into groups. Explicit idealised essentialising views of the Māori ethnic category are scattered throughout the briefings. For example, Te Puni Kōkiri mentions the 'unique characteristics of the Māori population', the 'particular and innate responsibilities that come from "being Māori"' and 'elements that are uniquely important – to whānau and to Māori' (Te Puni Kōkiri, 2023, pp.38, 36, 24). Essentialism also comes from other agencies. The Public Service Commission mentions the 'unique [Māori] relationships with lands, waters, and biodiversity' (Public Service Commission, 2022, p.22), Culture and Heritage identifies 'the unique cultural and spiritual connection iwi/Māori have to whenua' (Manatū Taonga, 2023, p.49), and Internal Affairs asserts that 'Māori are active participants in community life, with marae at the centre' (p.18). Finally, Treasury notes that 'Māori have an enduring connection with their ancestral lands' (Treasury, 2021, p.35).[5]

> The public service treatment of ethnicity in the briefings can be seen as a form of strategic essentialism, a notion arising out of post-colonial theorising.

However, the only thing that is unique about people in any ethnic category, including Māori, is that they ticked a particular ethnic box and were allocated to that ethnic category by a statistical algorithm. A thought experiment is salutary here: replace 'Māori' with the European or Asian ethnic categories in versions of these quotations and consider how it appears. For example, phrases like 'the innate responsibilities that come from being European' or the 'unique relationship which Asians have with education' reveal the essentialism and stereotyping uncritically employed by the public service with regard to Māori people.

Further essentialism comes in the widespread conflation of individual people in ethnic (and other) categories with actual communities. Lastly, a repetitive focus on average outcome differences between ethnic categories and the neglect of any consideration of in-group variances, which many of the briefings do, is essentialist in nature via creation of the perception that the group is further uniquely defined by a shared average outcome dimension, associated with their common ethnic category.

Discussion

In their assessment of long-term insights briefings, Menzies, Jackson and Boston (2024) find a general lack of cross-departmental coordination and consistency. Agencies' treatment of ethnicity and other socio-demographic categories is more consistent, but also quite problematic. Overall, ethnicity receives a disproportionate focus in the briefings, yet the concept is treated as self-evident, and its manifold limitations remain unexplored. Briefings tend to reduce salient outcome variations to average ethnic category differences. With ethnic categories, variation is further reduced in most briefings to comparisons between Māori, Pacific and the largely invisible others who fall into the European and Asian categories. There is consequently a disproportionate focus in most of the briefings on macro-differences between a limited set of ethno-binaries. Human commonalities and the complex webs of micro-connections between people are not considered or even acknowledged. Ironically, a more connective approach is consistent with a traditional te ao Māori world view, where whakapapa is a central organising concept. At least in the case of treatment of ethnicity, rather than the general conformity on offer, perhaps a greater degree of inter-agency intellectual diversity, reflecting serious thought, might be encouraged in the future.

As Gillespie, Howarth and Cornish (2012) point out, 'social categories simplify

the social world, homogenising intra-group differences, accentuating differences between groups and are resistant to falsifying evidence'. That's a good description of the briefings. The public service treatment of ethnicity in the briefings can be seen as a form of strategic essentialism, a notion arising out of post-colonial theorising. Under strategic essentialism, '[a]ssertions of profound difference are evoked to achieve political recognition and the redistribution of authority and resources' (Hoskins, 2012, p.85). An economist would readily recognise strategic essentialism as supporting unproductive rent-seeking activities. Strategic essentialism is a strategy commonly employed by ethno-political activists. Thus, questions should be asked of the public service about whether their briefings' endorsement of strategic essentialism fulfils their explicit statutory obligations under the Public Service Act 2020 to be impartial. Questions also consequently arise about whether the approach is consistent with the broader statutorily endorsed principle for public servants 'to act in a politically neutral manner'. If, by apparent acceptance of strategic essentialism, the briefings are consequently neither impartial nor politically neutral, public trust in and legitimacy of the briefings are directly undermined. The broader legitimacy of the public service is also reduced.

In another recent *Policy Quarterly* article, Doole, Stephens and Bertram identify a form of government capture which they describe as 'culture capture', summarised as 'influencing decision making and conduct of an agency with politicised expectations that detract from independence' (Doole, Stephens and Bertram, 2024, p.50). Culture capture regarding ethnicity is arguably observed in the briefings.

If re-legitimisation of the briefings were to take precedence, how might it be done? A place to start for the public service is simply acknowledging the problem. Does the essentialist treatment of ethnicity and the absolute and relative neglect of other socio-demographic differences meet the statutory requirements of public servants to be impartial and politically neutral? If the answer is no, and it is difficult to see how it could be otherwise, then an analysis of why the problem has arisen is necessary. What shared structural features of agency organisations give rise to the apparent lack of thought-diversity in the agency briefings in their treatment of socio-demographic categories and their apparent partiality and non-neutrality?

The public service … needs to be far more cognisant of the limits and the risks for understanding of categorisation of people into ethnic and other social categories, including risks of endorsing a society revolving around unproductive rent-seeking.

Moving forward, agencies need to consciously avoid making essentialising claims about any ethnic or for that matter any other social category. Moreover, rather than a primary focus on Māori and a secondary focus on Pacific categories, agencies need to report on the fullness of ethnic binaries, including those which are largely currently invisible.

Greater consideration also needs to be given by the public service to New Zealanders identifying in multiple ethnic categories and the extent to which this broadens our understandings of human identity, as well as analysing its current and future implications. More widely, a balanced emphasis needs to be placed on other socio-demographic differences in the New Zealand population, including differences in socioeconomic position and their future implications.

The public service also needs to be far more cognisant of the limits and the risks for understanding of categorisation of people into ethnic and other social categories, including risks of endorsing a society revolving around unproductive rent-seeking. Further, an unnuanced use of common-sense ethnic categories in briefings doesn't only reflect, but also creates and legitimises these categories. This endogeneity means an extra layer of care needs to be taken by impartial and politically neutral public servants in the analytic utilisation of such categories.

Human differences exist and some of these differences correlate (although often less strongly than many people think) with various macro, including ethnic, categories. There are typically both differences between (but not always) and within (always) ethnic categories, and consequently also similarities between people in different ethnic categories. The degree of that balance is not a matter of opinion, it is a fact which can be empirically established. Focusing only on group difference and ignoring similarities offers New Zealanders a fundamentally misleading picture of our society and is thus a poor evidential basis for policymaking. Consequently, when reporting on average ethnic category differences, public servants should present data on in-category variances and between-category overlaps and discuss *both* commonality and difference. Additionally, basic social science cautions should always be made that any correlation or average difference between a socio-demographic category and an outcome is not necessarily evidence of a causal relationship running from category to outcome.

Furthermore, human commonality and micro-connections between humans exist and in many cases are arguably more significant and important than macro-differences. These connections therefore need serious consideration in briefings. Their analysis means taking a far more whakapapa- or relationally based approach to these matters than do the first wave of briefings.

A particular issue here is the habit of many agencies of referring to some social categories as discrete 'communities', implying a strong degree of in-group homogeneity (e.g., the 'disabled community', the 'Asian community', the 'LGBTQI community' etc.) and out-group difference. No serious analyst would discuss the 'European community', the 'male community' or the 'university-educated community'. Where possible, blanket assertions that social categories are communities should be avoided unless supported by powerful independent evidence that a category actually constitutes a community. In most instances, the alternative, neutral word 'people' readily and accurately suffices.

1 'Social class' was tried as a term and yielded no results. 'Rainbow' and 'LGBT' and variants were also tried and yielded only a minor handful of results. Consequently, these are not further reported on.

2 Interestingly, the Ministry for Pacific Peoples has announced that its 2025 briefing 'seeks to address the gap in our understanding by looking at the experiences of people who identify as both Māori and Pacific individuals', who it puts at 20% of the Pacific population in the 2023 census (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, n.d.). The larger proportion – about 25% of Pacific people – who identify also in the European category in the census are invisible, as are other Pacific ethnic non-binaries. The agency has apparently made a choice to concentrate exclusively on connections with the Māori ethnic category rather than broader Pacific social connections. The motivation behind such a choice is unclear from the consultation document, but is consistent with the overall narrow Māori/Pacific focus in the 2023 briefings and the focus on Māori/Pacific difference from the majority European category.

3 Somewhat confusingly, Tibble and Ussher (2012, p.11) describe this three-generation form as a nuclear family. A nuclear family is usually defined as two generations – mum, dad and the kids.

4 See the Excel data downloadable at https://www.stats.govt.nz/information-releases/te-kupenga-2018-final-english/.

5 Similar essentialising claims are made on behalf of Pacific people by the Ministry of Pacific Peoples. For example, 'For Pacific peoples, data represents the tangata (a person), 'āiga (family), or community, from the past and the present' (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2023, p.6). There is insufficient space, however, to examine this issue in detail in a Pacific context.

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