

Palagi counsellors and effective counselling practice with Pasifika youth

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Abstract

An increasing proportion of youth in New Zealand, and more particularly in Auckland, identify as Pasifika. However, because there are relatively few Pasifika counsellors working in secondary schools, it is likely that a Pasifika youth will be counselled by a non-Pasifika counsellor. The purpose of this small, qualitative study was to provide some insight for non-Pasifika counsellors into effective counselling practice with Pasifika youth. Three Pasifika counsellors took part in a focus group where there was sharing and discussion of knowledge, giving an opportunity for consensus on a range of relevant issues. From this focus group, some important knowledge emerged: Pasifika counsellors often demonstrate *mea'alofo*—an act of generosity where the counsellor is giving his or her physical, emotional, psychological, familial, and spiritual attributes in the counselling room. Sometimes this may involve a prayer or a hug when initiated by a Pasifika youth. Interactive drawing therapy (IDT) has been found to be effective with Pasifika youth where both the counsellor and the young person draw and share their stories. As the Pasifika youth gets to know the counsellor, trust develops, allowing the young person to share concerns and anxieties and therefore assisting client outcomes. Further research is recommended as to how applicable these findings are to non-Pasifika counsellors working with Pasifika youth.

Keywords: Pasifika youth, palagi counsellors, identity, *mea'alofo*, spirituality

What is best counselling practice when palagi counsellors are working with Pasifika youth? Does this differ from best counselling practice in New Zealand with palagi youth? According to the 2013 Census, 295,941 Pacific people comprised 7.4% of the total New Zealand population, and over a third (35.7%) of Pacific peoples were aged under 15 years, compared with only a fifth (20.4%) of the total population. The median

age for Pacific peoples in 2013 was 22.1 years, compared with 38.0 years for the total population. In addition, two-thirds (65.9%) of Pacific peoples in New Zealand live in the Auckland region (Ministry of Health, 2014).

Manukau City is the hub for Pasifika people living in Auckland. It is projected that by 2021, 34% of Manukau City's population will identify with a Pacific ethnicity (Statistics New Zealand and Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010). Despite this, only a small proportion of New Zealand counsellors are Pasifika (Manthei, 1999a). We therefore have the reality of many Pasifika students being counselled by palagi counsellors. Do palagi counsellors understand how to offer the most effective counselling they can with Pasifika youth?

Best practice in counselling Pasifika youth

Seiuli (2010) expressed concern that Samoan clients were often sent to agencies that had no Pasifika counsellors. The clients reported discomfort, especially when cultural needs were ignored. They were often treated as Māori clients.

In terms of best counselling practice, the general literature (e.g., Lapworth & Sills, 2010; Manthei, 1999b; Sexton & Whiston, 1991) seems to suggest that the therapeutic relationship lies at the heart of effective counselling. However, research by Western researchers on Western people does not appear to present the total picture of best counselling practice for our Pasifika youth living in a distinct yet rich culture. Pasifika people tend to experience their identities as being connected to an extended family, community, and church rather than as autonomous individuals. Spirituality is also part of the identity of many Pasifika youth. These aspects are often left out of the counselling environment, therefore Pasifika youth may not be counselled in an appropriate and holistic manner. A youth approaches the counselling environment physically, mentally, and spiritually. As described by Makasiale (2007), clients come with their heart: warm, human, and healing.

So how does a counsellor approach the counselling room? The counsellor needs to bring his/her heart into the counselling room with the practice of *mea'alofo*—giving oneself in the counselling process (Seiuli, 2010). In doing so, the counsellor can come into the world of the youth—perhaps, as Lupe (2007) suggests, one foot in (the world of the youth) and one foot out (counselling methods and interventions). As Seiuli (2010) explains, this involves an intertwining of Western counselling models with Samoan (or Pasifika) understandings and protocols. Articles he reviews seem to confirm that an effective counsellor is a holistic counsellor: one who is prepared to work with the physical, spiritual, and mental. Perhaps it's all about the heart.

This does not seem to contradict the findings in the general literature (Lapworth & Sills, 2010; Manthei, 1999b; Sexton & Whiston, 1991) that the therapeutic relationship is the most important aspect for successful counselling outcomes. Perhaps it is more about the most effective way the relationship can be developed with Pasifika youth. Lupe (2007) suggests that a non-Pasifika counsellor can effectively build up a therapeutic relationship with Pasifika youth through a reciprocal heart relationship involving the physical, mental, and spiritual aspects of the Pasifika youth in relation to their extended family and church.

Augsburger (1986) has described an effective counsellor as one who is willing to be immersed in Pasifika culture, and therefore will be able to relate better with Pasifika youth and build up the therapeutic relationship so essential for successful client outcome. Perhaps over the years some palagi counsellors have left their spirit and part of their heart out of the counselling room.

The question, we suggest, is not “What can we (as palagi) teach them?” but “What can we learn from them?” Could palagi perhaps learn from Pasifika about thinking with the heart? Counsellors need to come not only with their minds but also their hearts, with an attitude of *mea’alofa*—an act of giving.

It’s a matter of the heart.

The first author carried out a small-scale, qualitative study to explore some of the issues involved for palagi counsellors when they counsel Pasifika youth. He held a focus group with three experienced Pasifika counsellors, inviting them to talk about some of the important aspects of counselling Pasifika youth. They willingly and generously shared their wisdom and experience. Permission to undertake the research was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

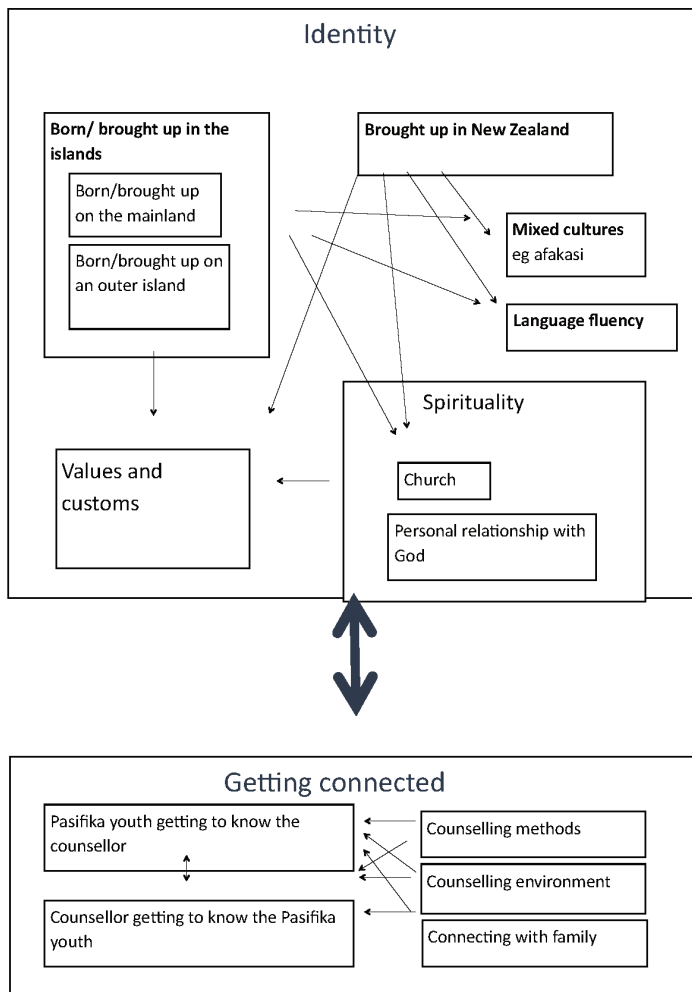
Results

Two main themes emerged from this study of counselling Pasifika youth: Pasifika identity, and getting connected. Spirituality and understanding culture were key elements of the theme of identity. For clients, getting to know their counsellor was a highly significant aspect of the theme of getting connected. This may be considered a special feature of effective counselling with Pasifika youth.

The themes and subthemes can be represented by the following diagram (Figure 1), which shows the many interconnecting factors revealed in this research affecting identity and relationship with Pasifika youth. A single arrow demonstrates how one factor can affect another. For example, where someone is born can have an influence

on language fluency. A youth brought up in Samoa is therefore more likely to be fluent in Samoan. A double arrow shows how factors can affect each other. A counsellor who has a deeper understanding of identity is therefore more likely to be able to connect with Pasifika youth. Also, a counsellor who is more connected to Pasifika youth is more likely to understand Pasifika identity.

Figure 1: Diagrammatic representation of the principal findings



Identity

The participants explained that there were differences among the diverse Pasifika groups:

They [different Pasifika cultures] are very diverse.

There are some similarities and some differences. We are the same as we are different. We get lumped into the one title; that's dangerous.

Even within a Pasifika group the participants talked about diversity:

You know there are differences and similarities and you've also got the question of whether they are New Zealand born or born in the Islands, because there are huge differences.

They may be identifying themselves as a particular PI, but also the "island" they are from. The island lifestyle is very different from the mainland.

At the same time don't assume that all Islanders go to church because I have found that a lot of PI young families do not go to church at all.

There are different identities and complex identities within that. It's almost like "What variation are you?"

Spirituality

This study confirmed that spirituality forms an important component of Pasifika identity, supporting earlier findings by Pasifika researchers (Alefaio, 2007; Makasiale, 2007; Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005) who have indicated that spirituality is inseparable from the mental and physical components of Pacific Island people. The participants talked about spirituality as a strength for Pasifika youth and explained that it therefore needs to be addressed in the counselling context. Pasifika youth may not only want to talk about God, but also commonly want the counsellor to pray with them. The participants discussed some anxieties they had previously had about praying for Pasifika youth. This included the perception of colleagues' thoughts about praying in a secular setting. This is also reflected in research by Gubi (2007), where counsellors who prayed with their clients were reluctant to explore the practice of prayer with their supervisors for fear of not being understood, of being judged, or losing respect and credibility. Through discussion and exploration of this issue, the participants now seemed comfortable about praying in the counselling room when initiated or cued by the Pasifika youth.

But it's something that I'm totally comfortable with because it's not initiated by me; it is something that is initiated by my client: "Can you pray for me, Ms?" They give you a cue.

I am so glad that I heard you say that because I forgot that the client in front of me is my client, and if they bring it up, then I have to respond to it.

You are getting to know them; they are identifying it; they are requesting it; so it is in terms of effective counselling practice.

The participants affirmed that counsellors, whether Pasifika or palagi, who are comfortable with spirituality can bring that strength into the counselling room. Counsellors who are not so comfortable can still allow conversations about God but not necessarily offer a prayer. As suggested by one of the participants, they could use a two-chair technique to enable their client to talk to God. However, they went on to say that discussing spirituality and praying is not necessarily encouraged in the Western counselling context. This can lead to Pasifika (and also palagi) counsellors being cautious or reluctant to pray in a situation where prayer may be a means of helping a young person gain strength.

Humour

The ability to laugh and give each other some friendly cheek was considered another important aspect of Pasifika culture:

Do you know what I think is really important, now that you guys have reminded me so elegantly? I think what's effective, we're really good at laughing. Our sense of humour can be quite wicked sometimes. Your ability to laugh at yourself as well. We can do that, and it might not be quite Western. It's delicate, it's different, but when we are Pacific we can laugh at ourselves.

And it might be inappropriate in Western and it's the other bit of, OK, mocking. You've got to watch that. Don't do it if you don't know how to do it, but humour definitely.

Getting connected

As found in previous studies (Lapworth & Sills, 2010; Manthei, 1999b; Sexton & Whiston, 1991), participants emphasised the importance of building the relationship with a client because of the significant contribution the therapeutic alliance makes to positive outcomes for clients. This typically involves getting to know the client. Rogers

(1975) describes the process of empathy as “entering the private perceptual world of the other and becoming thoroughly at home in it” (p. 6), and this study suggests that it is as relevant to Pasifika youth and palagi counsellors who work with them as it is to any other group.

The participants also talked about the counsellor sharing themselves. This may include sharing part of their life story or about their family and interests. Participants in this study explained that appropriate sharing allows the youth to begin to know the counsellor, which in turn opens up the door for trust. This encourages sharing and therefore the opportunity to address issues faced by the young person. This supports Seuli (2010), who described the Samoan concept of *mea’alofa*—the act of giving. *Mea’alofa* in the counselling context involves the counsellor giving of their physical, emotional, psychological, and spiritual selves in the act of *alofa* (love). As described by participants, giving may involve the counsellor’s sharing a story, or a practical gesture such as giving food to a hungry youth.

The participants talked about sharing about themselves in the process of helping Pasifika youth to get to know them. Self-disclosure remains a controversial therapeutic practice (Jeffrey & Austin, 2007). Some authors (Edwards & Murdock, 1994; Hendrick, 1990) have focused on types of disclosure and reasons for disclosure. Justifiable reasons include modelling appropriate client behaviour and increasing awareness of similarity between the counsellor and client.

So how can a counsellor share a little more of themselves without contravening ethical boundaries? The participants described sharing their story and using pictures. One of the participants found a form of interactive drawing therapy (IDT) particularly effective, where both the young person and the therapist draw as a means of getting to know each other. This is in contrast to IDT as practised and described by Withers (2006), where only the client does the drawing, which the therapist then works with. The first 15–20 minutes of IDT with the Pasifika counsellor may involve the counsellor and Pasifika youth drawing a picture about who they are, their family and interests. This is followed by an opportunity to talk about their pictures. Usually the Pasifika youth likes the counsellor to share their picture first. Once the youth gets to know a little of the counsellor, they are more willing to open up and share themselves.

This participant explained that this process takes time and so allowing an hour for the first session may be advantageous. The participants also made the point that Pasifika youth, particularly boys, often find it easier to share by drawing or using pictures initially and then later using words as they feel more comfortable. From my

experience of using IDT with Pasifika youth I am convinced that this method can indeed work for palagi counsellors who are working with Pasifika youth.

Touching

IDT, as discussed above, is used as a method of helping build connection between the counsellor and Pasifika youth. Touching is another means of helping form connections, although probably more controversial than a method such as IDT.

The counsellor participants shared some of their thoughts about a hug between the counsellor and the client:

Yes, yes, yeah and having said that I think there are times where a hug is appropriate. My PI kids, both girls and guys, they will come and hug me. It's their way of thanking me; it's natural. It would be initiated by the kids, never by us and often when their world has just fallen apart. I would always ask, whether it's a PI or non-PI.

It's respectful.

I have no problems; I don't have a problem. I think it's a sad world that we put the barriers there. It's obvious, that's why we have been given arms; it's loving arms and we need more of that and so I have no qualms in my context when they are sobbing their hearts out I am just rubbing their back. I think whether it's Western or not, something has gone wrong. We need to do more of it.

The participants felt that Western culture has moved away from natural touching. Earlier research and commentary (Burkholder, Toth, Feisthamel, & Britton, 2010; Hetherington, 1998; Willison & Masson, 1986) appears ambivalent about touching in the counselling context. It gives some indication that appropriate touching can have a positive effect on clients, but overall these authors reported that there is much confusion in and caution about this area.

The participants felt that Western counselling culture sometimes puts up barriers in reference to spirituality and touch. Some commentators (e.g. Hartmann, 1997) have expressed caution with regard to boundaries, while others have focused on boundary management (Hermansson, 1997; Pope & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). This could lead a Pasifika counsellor to being hesitant about an appropriate prayer, or using touch, which would otherwise have been natural in the context of their culture.

This current study therefore provides some clues into what palagi counsellors can do to help form connections so that Pasifika youth are more likely to trust their

counsellors and share their issues of concern. These findings were generated through the discussion environment of the focus group, highlighting the value of this methodology.

Conclusion

Identity

Understanding Pasifika identity is not just about trying to understand Pasifika as one people, because there are differences between different Pacific Island groups as well as differences among individuals of the same Pacific Island group. It's really about asking, and not making assumptions. The counsellor who asks paves the way for understanding the Pasifika youth sitting in front of him or her in the context of their own special culture.

Pacific Islanders are very holistic people in the way they experience themselves and view their world. Addressing the physical and spiritual parts of their identity is just as important as addressing the social, mental, and psychological parts.

Spirituality

Spirituality may be the greatest resource for some of our Pasifika youth. Counsellors with a spiritual awareness, whether Pasifika or non-Pasifika, may bring this strength into the counselling room. It is therefore important that all organisations working with youth consider an environment where counsellors are at ease to address spirituality if it is appropriate for that young person. This could apply to all youth, as non-Pasifika youth also may have a God as their strength in difficult times. Although spirituality is part of Pasifika identity, there are huge differences among Pasifika youth, therefore it is important not to assume all Pasifika have spirituality as a focus in their lives.

More recently, since carrying out this research, I have used prayer as a strategy for students in my school who are struggling to manage anger. Linehan and Wilkes (2015) describe the strategy of "Opposite Action" as an internal regulation tool for changing unwanted emotions. Many of my students are Pasifika, coming from a church background. Praying for someone they are angry with is presented to students along with several other strategies. Many young people are choosing this as their preference, and feedback from them at this early stage has been positive.

Getting connected

As indicated above, it seems that Pasifika counsellors who participated in this study are willing to share a little more of themselves with their clients. This may be spiritual

in the form of a prayer, or physical in the form of a hug. In doing so the Pasifika counsellor is demonstrating the act of *mea'alofa*—bringing the counsellor's physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual components into the counselling room.

From my experience of being part of a Pacific Island church for eight years and teaching and counselling in South Auckland for over eleven years, I feel this is a reflection of Pasifika culture in general. Pacific Island people are a touching, sharing, and spiritual people. Therefore, what is natural and appropriate in the context of Pasifika culture may be viewed with caution by people of Western culture, particularly those not previously exposed to Pasifika culture. Some people may see Pasifika counsellors crossing boundaries. So, do we take the conservative stand and never touch and never pray with a Pasifika youth? In trying to protect ourselves, are we becoming more concerned about how decisions will affect us rather than the client? Are we not at risk of removing empathy, which is so crucial in the therapist-client relationship?

Dalal (1999) discusses boundaries and barriers between different cultures: "Boundaries and barriers are also fluid entities, shifting and sliding from one to another, as they are used to structure particular realities out of an infinite set of possible universes" (p. 170).

What about counselling students who are not Pasifika? Does any of this apply to them? In my experience as a teacher of mathematics, form teacher and counsellor, students have specifically asked to see me as a counsellor. Most of these students have not been Pasifika. They have got to know me: they know my values and perhaps they know a little of my heart. Perhaps what works for Pasifika students can work for all students. More research in this area may be needed.

In summary, we offer some cautions, some suggested guidelines, and some recommendations for further research.

Be careful about assumptions

- Don't assume all PI groups are the same.
- Don't assume all people of the same PI group are the same.
- Don't assume a PI counsellor understands a Pasifika youth from another PI group.
- Don't assume all Pasifika people go to church.
- Don't assume a Pasifika youth is being rude just because what s/he is doing or saying is rude in your culture.
- Don't assume he plays rugby just because he's PI and big.
- Remember to ask about anything you think may be relevant or appropriate.

Guidelines for counsellors working with Pasifika youth

- Be willing to share yourself within flexible boundaries that are appropriate for the culture of the young person you are counselling.
- Find out about who they are: their interests, their family, and their church.
- Be willing for them to teach you; they love that.
- Interactive drawing therapy (IDT) can be a useful tool for getting to know each other. The counsellor draws their picture while the young person is drawing their picture. Allow the young person to choose who shares their story first.
- Use their words as much as possible.
- Take time. Allowing only 20 to 30 minutes for the first session doesn't give the opportunity to really get to know each other.

Recommendations for future research

This was a small-scale study which sought the views of Pasifika counsellors on what they thought was effective when counselling Pasifika youth. It may be interesting also to research what non-Pasifika counsellors find effective in working with Pasifika youth and compare the results. It may also be of particular interest and importance to ask Pasifika youth what they find helps them in the counselling room.

Final thoughts

Although there has been research about Pasifika identity and Pasifika counselling, little research has been done on counselling Pasifika youth. These findings suggest that counsellors, whether Pasifika or non-Pasifika, who are willing to share a little of themselves within appropriate but flexible boundaries can help Pasifika young people to open up and share concerns and anxieties and thereby assist clients to achieve positive outcomes.

Have we become too careful: careful about sharing ourselves in the counselling room; careful about talking about spirituality, and even careful about giving a prayer or an appropriate hug when initiated by a young person who knows us? In becoming so careful we may have put up barriers, making it difficult for youth to get to know us. How can they trust us and share their lives if they know little or nothing about us?

The early Westerners set up schools and churches in the Pacific Islands to try and educate the locals. Perhaps it's time for Western culture to learn from Pasifika culture, and learn about listening with our hearts.

Remember to ask

Remember to take time

Remember to share

Remember to listen with your heart

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