

## Pacific counsellors' use of indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, symbols, and stories in their counselling practices

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### Abstract

This article reports some of the findings from a qualitative study, undertaken by the first author, to investigate the use of indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, symbols, and stories in the therapeutic practices of experienced Pacific counsellors and psychotherapists. Incorporating both talanoa and grounded theory methodologies, the study aimed to give Pacific counsellors a voice in order to inform the development of counselling practice by both Pacific and non-Pacific practitioners who work with Pacific clients. Individual interviews were conducted with four female Pacific practitioners, three of whom were Island-born and one New Zealand-born. All had completed their professional counselling training in New Zealand. Rich information was obtained about the ways in which participants incorporated a range of indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, symbols, and stories in their counselling practices. This article foregrounds the voices of the participants in describing their sources of these verbal treasures, which included their parents, Pacific elders (matua), and their spirituality. Participants also tell stories of their use of indigenous values, concepts, and metaphors, and the ways that these have helped establish connections with clients and have supported their change processes and wellbeing. A future article will present the counselling model that has been developed from the results of this study and discuss the creative potential for interweaving indigenous Pacific and Western approaches.

**Keywords:** Pacific, Pasifika, counselling, psychotherapy, indigenous values, qualitative research

As a Pacific woman, counsellor, and indigenous researcher, my desire to explore Pacific practitioners' use of values, proverbs, metaphors, symbols, and stories originated in

my counselling practice over many years and in a variety of contexts.<sup>1</sup> These included the rural villages of Faleaseela Tai, Faleaseela Uta, and Matafa'a in Samoa when on practicum placement in my original counselling training; working as a multi-systemic (MST) therapist; practising as an Accident Compensation Corporation (ACC) registered sexual abuse and trauma counsellor in South Auckland; currently counselling at the University of Auckland, with special responsibility for Pacific students; and maintaining a private practice supervising Pacific Island counsellors, as well as sexual abuse research work for TOAHNNEST (Te Ohaakii a Hine—National Network Ending Sexual Violence Together), churches, and communities.

I became curious about why some of my clients were particularly resilient, and found that there were sacred spiritual indigenous values underlying their coping strategies. Observing this, and hearing similar anecdotal evidence from colleagues as well, it seemed that using cultural, social, and spiritual indigenous values in counselling sessions with clients would support their therapeutic change processes and wellbeing, resourcing them with hope and courage. Some significant experiences with my clients enabled them to make meaning of their own indigenous values within their own worldview and in the wider context of the world around them.

The indigenous Samoan proverbs “teu le va” and “va feloa'i” are relational concepts that involve respecting sacred spiritual boundaries and the relational space between two people. If fully understood, these could be vital tools in a therapeutic relationship. The desired outcome is the optimal state of wellbeing for clients, and similarly, when I undertook this research, I was conscious of my ethical responsibility to safeguard the wellbeing of the participants in this research (Anae, 2010).

Returning from Samoa as a counselling student, I had struggled with the constant challenging of European mainstream counselling knowledge while holding on to my own Pacific indigenous practices. Yet at the time, when searching for Pacific counselling literature, the only source I could find was Culbertson's (1997) edited book, *Counselling Issues in South Pacific Communities*. This became my reference book, as there were stories there that reflected my Samoan cultural worldview on counselling, and could inform my practice. However, it still seems evident that Pacific values are not often heard, understood, or acknowledged in the Western counselling world.

Therefore, in designing this study years later as a postgraduate student and Pacific researcher, my hope was to bring Pacific counsellors together to share their practice-based knowledge and enable its dissemination to a wider audience of Pacific and other counsellors. This would enable them to “speak into the silent space of unexplored

Pasifika practices and needs in the field of mental health” (Makasiale et al., 2007, p. 29) to help raise awareness and understanding of indigenous Pacific counselling practices.

### **Literature review**

To appreciate the context in which Pacific counsellors in New Zealand are working with Pasifika clients, it is necessary to understand the history of Pasifika peoples in New Zealand. The growth of industrialisation, particularly in the labouring, manufacturing, and service sectors, was reflected in an increase in Pacific people's migration to New Zealand just after the Second World War (Spoonley, 2001). In the 1960s and early 1970s, these numbers increased as Pacific people travelled from the Islands and moved to urban regions (DeSouza, 2006). With reference to migration and the effects that globalisation has had on the macro level for Pacific people, Samu (2010) referred to Hau'ofa's (1993, p. 6) concept of “world enlargement” as “arguably, a Pacific perspective of globalisation” (p. 5), and a process whereby

*many Pacific people map their worlds in terms of the location of their extended families. These maps frequently include New Zealand, Australia, and the West coast of the United States of America, where parents, aunts and uncles, brothers, sisters and cousins reside. (p. 4)*

Furthermore, Pacific peoples access modern technology to fulfil their traditional sociocultural duties, such as sending money electronically back to their Pacific homeland, travel, telecommunications, and the “counter-flow of cultural wealth such as tapa (traditional cloth made from mulberry tree bark), and tivaevae (traditional quilts) and ie toga (fine mats)” received at family celebrations, weddings, and funerals (p. 5). There are, however, many pressures on Pacific peoples in the diaspora involving tensions around cultural identities and fulfilling cultural obligations.

### *The Pacific population in New Zealand*

Pacific ethnic groups' diverse and multicultural vibrancy enriches New Zealand's population. The 2013 census revealed that 7.4% of New Zealand's population comprises Pacific ethnic groups. A total of 295,941 people identified themselves with one or more Pacific ethnic groups: Tongan, Samoan, Cook Islands Māori, Niuean, Tokelauan, and Fijian. Pacific peoples as a group had the highest number of children aged 0–14 years compared with other major ethnic groups such as European, Māori, Asian, and Middle Eastern/Latin American/African. Samoa continues to be the largest

Pacific ethnic group at 48.7% or 144,138 people. Other large groups are Cook Islands Māori at 20.9% or 61,839 people, Tongan at 20.4% or 60,333 people, and Niuean at 8.1% or 23,883 people. Most Pacific ethnic groups live in the North Island (92.9% or 274,806 people) (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

Most Pacific people live in the Auckland region (65.9% or 194,958 people), with 12.2% or 36,105 living in the Wellington area. Only 7.1% or 21,135 lived in the South Island at the time of the 2013 census, and Canterbury had the largest number of any city in the South Island at 12,723 Pasifika people (4.3%) (Statistics New Zealand, 2013).

The profile of Pacific identity is complex, with 62.3% or 181,791 people of Pacific ethnicity living in New Zealand being born here. In 2013, the New Zealand-born groups were Niuean 78.9%, Cook Island Māori 77.4%, Tokelauan 73.9%, Samoan 62.7%, and Tongan 59.8% (Statistics New Zealand, 2013). Amid the diversity of a young, growing Pacific and multi-ethnic population, however, there are the challenges, particularly affecting mental health and wellbeing.

### *Mental health challenges*

A growing concern in Aotearoa New Zealand is the increase in mental-health-related challenges affecting Pacific ethnic groups. In 2006, Foliaki, Kokaua, Schaaf, and Tukuitonga drew attention to the fact that the rate of mental health disorders among Pacific peoples in New Zealand was high compared with the total population, and there have been ongoing concerns about suicidal behaviour among Pacific people, particularly youth (see, for example, Samu, 2003; Sinisa, 2013; Tiatia, 2007; Tiatia-Seath, Lay-Yee & Von Randow, 2017) and about Pacific wellbeing and mental health (see, for example, the entire issue of *Pacific Health Dialog*, 15[1], 2009 <https://www.leva.co.nz/resources/pacific-mental-health-and-addictions---pacific-health-dialog>).

Contributing influences affecting Pacific people's physical and mental health include socioeconomic and cultural factors such as low income, poverty, unemployment, occupation, education, housing, and ethnicity (Ministry of Health, 2014). On average, there are relatively more Pacific people experiencing hardship than other groups, including living in overcrowded homes, as they are less likely to own their homes. The unemployment rate for Pacific people is nearly twice the national rate (Ministry of Health, 2014).

Cultural conflicts can also be associated with the complexity of contemporary Pacific identities, including evolving Pasifika identities (Anae, 1998); multi-ethnic

heritages (Berking, Fatialofa, Lupe, Skipps-Patterson, & Agee, 2007; Culbertson & Agee, 2007), and divergence in worldview and life experience, creating tensions between New Zealand-born and Island-born Pacific people (Agee, McIntosh, Culbertson, & Makasiale, 2013). While in recent years research and resource development have increasingly been undertaken to identify and address specific needs of Pasifika people—e.g., Manuela and Sibley's (2015) Pacific Identity and Wellbeing Scale (PIWBS); the work of Le Va, <https://www.leva.co.nz/>—much more is needed.

### *Pasifika perspectives on counselling and psychotherapy*

Although governed by separate professional bodies, there is overlap in practical terms between counselling and psychotherapy, and some Pasifika counsellors practise both psychotherapy and counselling. Counselling has been referred to as talk therapy, the purpose of which is to “understand and make positive changes to our thinking, behaviour, feelings, relationships and emotional well-being” (Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui, 2010 p. 3). A Pasifika perspective on talk therapy is “talanoa, people storying their issues, their realities and aspirations” (Vaiolleti, 2006, p. 1). In conversations, some University of Auckland Pasifika postgraduate students have identified words in the Samoan language that describe counselling, such as *fautua ina ia lelei*, meaning to encourage, to counsel for the good of your wellbeing, and in the Tongan language, *fale'i*, meaning to encourage and counsel. In the Cook Island language, the words *kopapa* (physical), *tu ngakau* (emotional), and *vaerua* (spiritual) all relate to wellbeing.

### *Pacific counsellors and psychotherapists in Aotearoa New Zealand*

Pacific counsellors in New Zealand work in various community, educational, and government settings. Approximately 40 are full or provisional members of the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC), and approximately 20 counsellors are full, provisional, or student members of the New Zealand Christian Counselling Association (NZCCA). The New Zealand Association of Psychotherapists (NZAP) does not record members' ethnicities; however, three Pacific psychotherapists are known to the authors as registered with the NZAP.

Only a small number of Pacific counsellors or psychotherapists are ACC-registered to work in the field of sexual abuse trauma. Some have personally confided that they have chosen not to register with ACC or an affiliated professional counselling association because of the criteria and the complex process of gaining membership or registration and writing client reports if English is their second language.

### *Counselling and psychotherapy training for Pacific practitioners*

It seems that tertiary training to become a counsellor or psychotherapist has proven disempowering for some, if not many, experienced Pacific counsellors and psychotherapists. They have commented on a lack of acknowledgement of their cultural identity, their uniqueness, and the value of who they are as Pasifika people. Therefore, their voices have been unheard and their indigenous knowledge suppressed. This raises the question of the effectiveness of training for Pacific counsellors and psychotherapists. How are they to work with their clients and incorporate indigenous values into their practice when their knowledge has not been validated? Makasiale (2007) observed that

*in my psychotherapy training...spirituality was left outside the door. For me, as a Pacific Islander, it was like being asked to leave an essential part of me out in the corridor. It is this experience that strongly motivated me to complete my psychotherapy studies and to experiment with the undoubted belief that the Pacific Islander's view of life and the world is well suited to counselling and psychotherapy. To a large extent, the Pacific Island client truly believes in the motherly/fatherly love of God. We believe that it is God's presence, God's being, that makes all the difference in anything human. (p. 111)*

In addition, Berking et al. (2007) quoted a participant as saying "in psychotherapy, I just put my culture away in order to survive, and by Jove, if you ever brought up cultural issues...don't ever!" (p. 57). Research into the current experiences of Pacific students in both counselling and psychotherapy programmes is necessary to see whether change has occurred in the intervening years.

### *Indigenous Pasifika model of wellbeing*

Broad definitions of Pacific wellbeing relevant to counselling have focused on working holistically, incorporating concepts such as culture, spirituality, and family. The Fonofale model of Pacific mental health and wellbeing was developed by Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann (2001) in the New Zealand context, using the metaphor of a Samoan *fale* (house) to capture what is important to Pacific cultural groups, with its four poles labelled physical, spiritual, mental, and other (culture, family, context, time, and environment) respectively (see Figure 1).

"The circular movements in this Samoan house metaphor capture the way in which the foundations, floor, posts, and roof 'have an interactive relationship with each

Figure 1: Fonofale model



other' in representing and supporting holistic values and approaches, and ongoing continuity" (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001, p. 3).

### *Pacific values, proverbs, metaphors, and symbols used in counselling*

#### *Va and teu le va*

Va is a Pasifika term that relates to honouring space. In counselling terms, it is honouring the space between oneself as counsellor and the client. This is particularly significant in the first session, where building a relationship, rapport, and trust with a Pasifika client in a respectful way is crucial. Anae (2010) further defines va as a sacred space:

*Our va with others is sacred...to not teu le va in relationships can incur the wrath of the gods; the keepers of tapu and positive successful outcomes will not happen. That if there is violation, relational arrangements will need to be readdressed and realigned. (p. 234)*

When a Pasifika client enters a counselling room, their own personal va is likely to have been violated, shattered, and broken. As a counsellor, the responsibility for building rapport and relationship begins within the va of the room, the nurturing relational space, all the more so if the client is new and coming to counselling for the first time.

Teu le va is the obligation to maintain this as sacred space, to tend and care for it and keep it clear so that real meeting, connection, and healing can take place. This means giving time to clients to talk about their connections, their support people, and the community of care (church or other) around them.

So how do we engage Pasifika clients? It is through honouring the sacred space by having a va-centred approach to relationships, which emphasises that they are sacred, and are characterised by harmony, balance, reciprocity, and mutual respect (Mila-Schaaf, 2006). The Samoan worldview and the Samoan relational self cannot be separated from the va or relational collective space between individual and parents, siblings, grandparents, and community members. “That there is tapū and sacredness in relationships is recognised” (Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005, p. 303).

When relational connections have been formed, a Pasifika client is willing to step into the *va’a/vaka/paopao* (meaning indigenous outrigger) and the journey begins. As Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui (2010) states, the therapist needs the confidence and skills of navigation, of “fishing for what is important in a round-about or indirect way. It involves seeking information and allowing the Pacific client to tell their story and this may take time” (p. 24).

### *Other values*

**Gender:** *Feagaiga* is “a binding and sacred covenant” (Tuimaleali’ifano, as cited in Huffer & So’o, 2000, p. 172) which refers to the status of the sister and to the covenant between sister and brother. This relationship has as its focus the treasured and protected status of sisters, and by extension, of women generally (Aumua Mata’itusi Simanu, 2002; Huntsman & Hooper, 1996). In Samoa this forms the basis of gender relationships.

**Empathy, compassion, and respect:** Ma’ia’i (2010, p. 639) identified key Samoan values as “*fa’amafafa’ina* (empathy), *pa utonu* (compassion) and *fai pe e fa’alia fa’atasi ma le malosi* (respect).” These values are consistent with the therapeutic empathy that Bohart, Watson and Greenberg (2011) described as being like entering another’s world and walking in their shoes, appreciating that world, and as Rogers (1995) described, having unconditional positive regard for one’s client.

Values of love, compassion, and care towards Pasifika clients empower them in the therapeutic change process. The Samoan term for this is *le tiagafusia iga; tigofofa; feaga’ialofo* (Ma’ia’i, 2010, p. 564). Lewin (1996) defined compassion as “a virtue that comes from an appreciation of links binding us to each other, a pursuit of kindness



in which compassion is a central feature of search for creative potential” (p. 36). Compassion bridges the worlds of counsellor and client, and provides a platform for clients' creative potential to come to the forefront in their healing journey.

### *Metaphors*

In 2010, the guide document *Talking Therapies for Pasifika Peoples* was published by Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui, offering best and promising practice ideas for mental health and addiction services. It uses the metaphor of “the unfolding of the metaphorical mat and honouring the va” in engaging and making relational connections with Pasifika clients. The importance of laying out the mat in that first encounter is crucial. This is the “creation of the va, a safe space, a space of encounter” and, by offering the mat, it is an invitation for the client to join the therapist on the mat, or not. While communicating professionalism and inspiring confidence in the client, this needs to be balanced by conveying “genuine human warmth, care and humility. Maintaining respectful relationship is a central cultural tenet that exists across Pasifika cultures” (Te Pou o Te Whakaaro Nui, 2010, p. 24).

Makasiale (2007) uses metaphors and similes in her counselling practice as a means of a straight pathway into her clients' therapeutic being:

*18-year-old Kira, Tongan girl. Cue was “I feel as if there is rain in your soul, heavy rain. Is it raining everywhere, inside of you, or only in some places?”*

*40-year-old Tia, Samoan man. “I have the feeling that your anger is like a covering like a blanket (Samoan: ufiufi), protecting something very tender. I wonder what might be there under this protective cover. If we were to lift up the cover, what might we see underneath?”*

*In this example, the Pacific Island protocol of the use of a simile, anger being like a protective cover, and that of storytelling proved to be an effective tool in facilitating Tia to trust and further explore the power that the past had over his present. This dynamic usually takes a long time to build up to in the therapeutic relationship (Kahn, 1997). With Tia, the use of simile and storytelling seemed to have provided a more direct route that enabled him to bring to the surface some of the buried principles that had been governing his expressions of anger. Time and time again in my experience, the use of these language tools has not failed me. (Makasiale, 2007, pp. 118–119)*

Some of these core values and approaches underpin counselling across differences of culture and ethnicity. Values of caring, love, and relationship are key factors in healing

and growth processes for clients (e.g. Hall, as cited in Penny, Epston, & Agee, 2008; Rogers, 1995). Nevertheless, relatively little has been published about the approaches used by Pacific counsellors with Pacific and other clients, and the current research project was designed to make a modest contribution to filling this gap.

## Method

The purpose of this research project was to investigate the ways in which Pacific counsellors and psychotherapists use indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, and symbols in their counselling practices. The aim was to find out what indigenous knowledge four experienced practitioners were using, how they were using it, and what effect it had from their perspective on clients' therapeutic change processes and wellbeing.

Given the Pacific landscape of the topic, the purpose of the research, and the scope of the study, a qualitative, exploratory approach using individual interviews followed by a focus group with all participants was chosen as the most appropriate. Aspects of "shared knowledge" and "joint reflection" with participants were emphasised by Wiesenfeld (2000) when describing the kind of environment and attitudes that qualitative approaches require, and which are consistent with Pacific values:

*a researcher-informant (participant) relationship in which the informant's life experience and the meanings they attribute to it are reported in a climate of equality in which mutual respect and reflexive dialogue prevail and the researcher can legitimately involve his/her own subjectivity in the process. (p. 205)*

In terms of Pacific research methodologies, these principles are consistent with those of *talanoa*, "a personal encounter where people story their realities and aspirations" (Vaioleti, 2006, p. 23). According to Vaioleti, "talanoa embodies researchers' and participants' emotions, knowledge, experiences and spirits" (p. 24), making it well-suited to this particular study in which I was an "insider" as researcher (Smith, 1999), both personally and professionally. Talanoa research methodology also refers to Helu-Thaman's (1997) use of the metaphor *tui kakala*. *Kakala* is "Tongan for fragrant flowers and leaves woven together in special ways according to the need of the occasion they are woven for" (as cited in Vaioleti, 2006, p. 27), referring to the process of selecting flowers, weaving them, and the stories and emotions that arise from this.

Despite the strengths of talanoa in theory and in action, a further, compatible methodology was needed in order to account for aspects of the research process.

Grounded theory (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was chosen because of the close attention paid in this approach to the words and perspectives of the participants, in the generation of theory, from data that are grounded in the participants' experiences. This is consistent with the Pacific values of respect as well as the purpose of this study. Grounded theory also encourages researchers to hold open expectations, to constantly compare and contrast aspects of the data, and to continuously question what the data seem to be showing, while making new discoveries (Regmi & Kottler, 2009).

### *Participants*

The research participants were four Pacific female professionals aged 42–63 years. One was a family therapist, two were psychotherapists, and one was a counsellor. Because of the small numbers in the Pacific counselling and psychotherapy community, confidentiality was crucial and pseudonyms were initially chosen by participants to protect their identities. However, it was later decided to use numbers instead. Their ethnicities included Samoan/Niuean, Māori/ Niuean, Tongan, and Samoan, and only one was born in New Zealand. The generic term “counsellor” is used in referring to the participants.

### *Procedure*

Approval to conduct the research was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee. Participants were recruited through word of mouth and snowballing, and as a result, individual interviews took place with four participants in locations that were suitable for them. Each interview began with my respectfully checking in to see if there was a cultural protocol the participant would prefer to follow, and inviting her to open her talanoa. I provided food and hot drinks, and the interviews were digitally audio-recorded.

Five open-ended questions were developed to guide the conversation in the interviews and—in keeping with the respectful reciprocity of talanoa—extended time and space were provided in each for both of us to reflect on what had been said, to add to or clarify the meaning of what had been shared or of any unfamiliar indigenous terms, and to discuss matters further when necessary. During the interviews, whenever indigenous languages were used, I worked with the participants to ensure that the spelling and meaning of the words were captured and accurately recorded in the transcripts. Participants also received their completed transcripts to check.

Although a focus group was planned when the results had been analysed, this proved impossible to arrange, and instead, follow-up meetings were held with three of the four. The results were sent to the fourth participant for her feedback although she was unable to respond because of her circumstances at the time.

### *Analysis*

The thoroughness and structured nature of the grounded theory process respected and honoured each participant's talanoa. Sequences of detailed coding and the constant comparison of similar ideas and codes were used with both individual participant data and across the transcripts throughout the process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Some data were coded and recoded as a result of further comparison and questioning. Going back to the transcripts helped clarify participants' meanings and contributed to the final level of coding.

The participants were sent the results of the analysis for any corrections and final comments or input on their part. This part of the process provided a check and final verification that theory had been created from the ground up—that it was truly grounded in the participants' words. This was vital in finalising the theorising of the participants' experiences, and arriving at a place in which the comparative process was complete (Charmaz, 2006).

### *Ethical considerations*

In addition to the ethical obligation to protect the participants' identities, accountability for my own lenses was important as an "insider researcher." As an insider researcher, the need to journal "my Pacific self" while conducting my research was therapeutic, and it enabled me to record "process notes" consisting of my own personal reflections on ideas shared and points of difference. This was consistent with grounded theory in which writing memos is a key component in the process of auditing and analysing data, together with the constant comparative method. Teu le va and client-centred concepts were used in the talanoa process to ensure that the interview processes with participants were ethically and culturally safe.

### **Results**

The aim of this study was to find out whether indigenous values and concepts such as teu le va, proverbs, metaphors, or symbols were being used by Pasifika counsellors in their counselling practice, and if so, in what ways. In addition, the effects the counsellors

perceived them as having on clients and their wellbeing were also explored. While the subjective perspectives of practitioners were sought in this study, the participants could also provide factual information about their use of these indigenous resources, and illustrative examples of their effects.

During the interviews, stories were told of the participants' organic grassroots as people and as counsellors, revealing that they approached their work from a place of pride, dignity, and strength. Their stories resonated with the fluidity of their identities as Pasifika people and as counsellors.

While there were unique aspects to each counsellor's experiences and approaches to their practice, common strands emerged from the talanoa, with each participant interweaving in the pattern that was revealed through the analysis of the transcripts.

*"A growing work": Incorporating Pasifika values in counselling and psychotherapy*

The incorporation of indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, and symbols in therapeutic practice was identified as "a growing work"—or an area of creative development over time—that involved remembering these indigenous resources and both instinctively and consciously incorporating them in their practice, while also using the approaches they had been trained in, based on Western or internationally used theories and techniques. Writing about metaphors and other indigenous resources in a book had provided one participant with the opportunity to make them more widely accessible:

The use of the metaphors etc. for Pacific umm in the Pacific context, has been ahmm. . . a growing work because most of the counselling processes have been in English. So, using our own Pacific metaphors and symbols and proverbs I have enjoyed ah. . . creating them, using them and ah. . . in the last few years being able to put them into a book so that they're accessible to a few more people.  
(Counsellor 3)

This counsellor also identified the importance of the use of resources such as metaphor in communicating with and understanding Pasifika people, who "think in pictures":

I think for Islanders it's absolutely essential to be able to work in that way because we think in pictures, ah. . . we think in symbols. I think mainly because we are an oral people; that's why we use nature, creation, images to explain what we think. . . if one uses imagery from creation, nature, water, the sky, that's

what is telling and important for Pacific peoples in a counselling practice. . . wise sayings from the elders or wise sayings from the scriptures, any wise sayings are very helpful.

Interestingly, rather than dichotomising Western methods and indigenous resources and values, participants in this study recognised the value of both.

I think it's that in Western thinking, some of the ideas are great, but I also think equally great is our own indigenous umm. . . values and beliefs and what we observe our parents taught us is equally as valid. (*Counsellor 1*)

However, at the same time, remembering personal stories about the sources of her indigenous knowledge was challenging for this counsellor because she had realised during a presentation by a leading Pasifika practitioner that her own "Pacific uniqueness and Pacific value" had been "shelved" in her development as a professional:

Yes, the Fonofale [model] but he [Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann] also talked about *teu le va*, the respect, and I recall talking about doing some of his work. Here I am a competent, experienced counsellor and I sat there, and I came out feeling very incompetent, not because of the Western way of thinking. I felt incompetent now because I'd shelved my own Pacific uniqueness and Pacific value because of so-called professionalism and clinical. . . I came away feeling incompetent as a Pacific person.

#### *Sources of indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, and symbols*

As the participants recalled where they had been taught or had acquired this indigenous knowledge, influential sources came to mind.

#### *Parents*

Parents were highly influential, and all participants spoke of stories from childhood and learning about indigenous ways of healing with or from parents in various contexts. For one it was being in Fiji with her parents and the Pacific people; for another it was with her parents in church and Sunday school. A third participant still found her mother a source of strength even more than six years since her death. For her, the boundary between the living and the dead was permeable:

I talk to my Mum regularly and I talk to people who are important to me. I have regular conversations with my mother as to how I am doing as a mother, how

I am raising my children...you know, because I remember what she tried to instil in me, the concept of compassion. My mother was a compassionate woman. (*Counsellor 4*)

She recalled her mother telling her Samoan stories and myths, such as the lady in the mirror. Another counsellor identified both her Samoan parents as having “implanted” wisdom within her, mentioning, in particular, her mother’s huge influence on her knowledge of natural indigenous medicine, women’s health, and mental health and wellbeing. She also uses in her counselling practice a proverb her father taught her about teenage pregnancy, while noting that sometimes proverbs could be too obscure and more direct communication was needed with young people.

### *Matua, and going back to their heritage*

As well as parents, all participants acknowledged their matua, or Pasifika elders, as sources of knowledge and wisdom. Counsellor 4 spoke of older Samoan women “*who come in and you know, they always teach you something, they always bring something ... another part of Samoa is that we learn, I am not the expert here. I am learning, you know, from my matuas*”.

Counsellor 1 recalled, ‘It is only when another Pacific older, mature, wise practitioner would sit back and say, what about your heritage? And go back to what you know.’

In contrast to those who learned traditional stories orally from matua or other Pacific sources, another participant identified her source as reading English literature:

My own reading and thinking—and I’ve taken time to do that and having a sound sense of English literature—I could then translate how to do that in our own Pacific way of thinking. The ideas of these, um, metaphors, etc, I have to say they really came from having read literature in the English context, because we don’t have too much in literature that had those concepts unless you listen to the older people talking. (*Counsellor 3*)

### *Influential elements: Cultural identities, language, and cross-cultural experiences*

Other interrelated elements that influenced their practice were interwoven with participants’ experiences as practitioners, including their cultural identities, language, and cross-cultural experiences. For one counsellor, her struggle with her identity, and her inability to speak the Samoan language, were significant and she talked of sharing her stories with her Samoan clients.

I suppose where I find my place is with Pacific people with the new kind of educated professional Samoans coming through. I can hold that kind of professional hat, academic hat, but also I am a Pacific Islander so they find a lot of relevance in that and...and because a lot of them struggle with this whole identity thing too, and a whole lot are Samoans, if they don't know the language they feel really embarrassed and they don't say they're embarrassed 'cos they can't speak it, and the assumption is, if you're Samoan you should know how to speak it and be able to speak it when someone speaks it to you. So a lot of times, they are struggling in how to fit, how to marry these two worlds, the world that's been chosen for them... 'cos a lot of them didn't choose to come to New Zealand but because of their parents and the big migration and all that...for a lot of them they come. And I think they find relevance in me, because of my struggles and how I went through that whole journey of who am I and where do I belong, and I relate and walk alongside them and try and help them find their own way and what that means for them. (*Counsellor 4*)

She perceived language as creating connection with clients, and identified her speaking conversational Samoan, her respect for her matai, and her humility as reflecting indigenous values. She expressed a sense of humbling herself when she invited Pasifika people into her counselling room.

A counsellor who co-facilitated a group of Pasifika men in her Stopping Violence programme found that English was a second language for most of the participants, who were of mixed Pasifika ethnicities. Her co-facilitator was an elderly Samoan *matai* (chief) and she herself was of a different Pasifika ethnicity. In accordance with appropriate Pasifika cultural protocol, she asked him to open each session with prayer. He prayed in his own language, and the fact that she had invited him to do this demonstrated respect for his status, knowledge, and wisdom. She would also refer to him as her co-facilitator with respect during the groupwork in each session, drawing on both his knowledge and his Samoan language. This encouraged the other men within the group who were of different Pasifika ethnicities to respond in their own languages, enriching the therapeutic process:

And so that [prayer] really undergirded our work together. It kept us close as a Pasifika value to our Atua, to say our leoni [prayer]. It was just...drew us together and kept us strong and I also believe it made a difference for the men



who saw us working together and there was a real respectfulness around language because some of our men could not speak English properly and so...it was really important in respect of Pasifika worldview. (*Counsellor 2*)

### *Indigenous values*

#### *Spirituality*

All participants acknowledged spirituality as an indigenous value associated with diverse meanings including “working from your spirit-self,” and faith in and relationship with God.

One referred to

...looking at working from your spirit self...So, there's something more than ethnicity and indigenous context or indigeneity, more than that, and I think we need to be looking at working from your spirit self...that's universal. (*Counsellor 3*)

For her, this transcended the differences between herself and her clients. Others associated spirituality with religion and their relationship with God as a source of strength “undergirding” their work. It was associated with the Samoan philosophy of giving by another participant.

For another, spirituality was strongly related to her identity, something deeply meaningful for her both professionally and personally:

God has given me a brand name, Mapafika, a sacred word. It is honouring Māori because oftentimes Māori are not honoured, there's token gestures toward Māori. And for Pākehā, there's Pākehā here. Fika for Pasifika, same thing. All three are part of my ancestry. (*Counsellor 2*)

In terms of practice, allowing space for conversations about spirituality that were initiated by clients themselves was seen to be very important by one participant, given what she perceived as a shift among young contemporary Samoans to seeing spirituality as different from, and bigger than, God. Another participant spoke of “the spirituality and sacredness” of Pasifika counselling when describing her use of a whiteboard when working with Pacific clients.

I use the whiteboard a lot. So, for me, I call it “This is your life board” and they say “Is this school?” And I go “No”, it's the school of your life okay and the only thing that will go up on the board is everything about you, and they go Ooh...and for some clients they will find the whiteboard confronting because

your words don't lie, and I write up their words and for me when my clients come into the room that's part of the spirituality and the sacredness as Pasifika counselling of clients. (*Counsellor 2*)

The same counsellor described two instances when she had used prayer with clients, offering to pray together with one when she "picked up on her spirituality," and holding a telephone counselling session including a liogi (prayer) together with a client who was struggling with shame and had been unable to attend her counselling session in person.

### *The use of song*

Spiritual and religious songs, scriptures, or songs from the Islands were often incorporated in sessions with her clients by another participant, specifically choosing the themes of songs, for example trust or suffering, depending on what the client was going through. She explained that Pasifika peoples relate to songs and hymns, and that the language used in songs is metaphorically rich. Music supported clients' going to a deeper level and helped facilitate change processes.

Counsellor 2 also reported using song as a means of connecting with a group of Pasifika men who were referred for domestic violence. When she sang to them she could tell that something had "bridged" and "connected."

### *Teu le va: The sacred space in counselling*

The kind of "space" referred to earlier which the counsellors created for their clients in their counselling rooms was described as "sacred." One participant explained how the physical set up in her counselling room helped create the sacredness of that counselling space and bring in the Pasifika:

sacredness of the space. The space and surroundings are very important. When my client walks into my counselling room there will be Pasifika necklaces, shells, things, colour that's represented in the room. On top of my umm. . . shelf I have, umm. . .my. . .I was gifted a Māori canvas that has a. . .not a statue but the carving of Māori designs in the room. So, it's all about making the client feel comfortable whether they are Māori, Pacific or whatever nationality, and why I say this is that for us as Pasifika people, we cannot come into the centre and feel clinical, we don't feel at home. So for me, it may be like that at reception but when you come into the counselling room it will be a sense of the Pacific in the space that makes people feel settled and welcomed. (*Counsellor 2*)

Because Pasifika clients are not “taught” to come into a counselling space, creating that space for them was seen as important. This included being humble and sitting back to allow clients to share their stories and experiences in their own way:

One of the things I said to you initially is humbling yourself, you know, when anyone comes in, I remove the kind of mantle that I have in being a counsellor. I am just a Pacific Island person and I open up my heart to bring what I can and it's not easy, for as Pacific Islanders we are not taught to come to a counselling space. So we have to create that space in any way possible, and one of those ways is to be humble and to sit back and allow that person to talk about their stories, their experience in any way they want. (*Counsellor 4*)

Humility was an inherent value she used in meeting with Pasifika clients for the first time, especially when meeting a matua (older Pasifika person). Whakapapa was also important:

it's inherent to a lot of Pacific people that we are very humble and when you come into a counselling room for the first time with any Pacific person, whether it's a matua or a young person, is that you humble yourself. You humble yourself to that person's experience and to that person's knowledge and what that person is bringing into the room. Maulis [Samoan for “Māori”] call it whakapapa, and maybe also on our way through conversation you find out where they come from and their links.

The beginning process for first-time clients was crucial for Pasifika clients:

Embracing, part of self-growth and yes, it's those kind of things you know, a Pacific client can walk into the room and you can say talofa and say hello it's the greeting, it's that beginning process. The beginning process, and that will determine how they're going to respond to you or what way the direction of the session will go, you know. (*Counsellor 4*)

Another participant noted that the importance of *teu le va* and respecting the interpersonal space in counselling were discussed by Pulotu-Endemann (2001) who developed the Samoan Fonofale model. This client was able to articulate the practice of *teu le va* from both a counselling/psychotherapeutic viewpoint and as a spiritual space for individual thought processes for her clients. She would use this same approach across the board with all clients. One example she gave was with a male Middle Eastern asylum seeker in his fifties:

I don't have a good grasp of *teu le va* from a Samoan perspective but I do understand the respect of space from a psychotherapy point of view or counselling point of view. . .the space where everything happens. . .that's where everything happens. The one hour that you and I spend together as a client and a therapist and that space that happens between us and a whole lot happens when you walk out of the counselling room. So, I understand that kind of space. . .and I am assuming, that's probably what it means when it's *teu le va*. So, whatever happens between us, in between us, that is *teu le va*. Does that make sense? So [pauses and thinks] because *le va* is a space of relationships and I see it as a spiritual space for the individual person because that is where their thought processes begin. Umm. . .that's where they begin their outer works and inner works of who they bring. It's by respecting people's space, by knowing the boundaries. . .I have boundaries, personal boundaries and my clients have boundaries. It's about checking it out with clients and not assuming. It is always making sure that you work in a way that is transparent but also umm. . .not in conflict personally and with the client. (*Counsellor 1*)

#### *Sharing stories and using symbols and metaphors*

Within the sacred space, stories are shared, with counsellors self-disclosing appropriately as well as clients, something that was seen as far more relevant than a counsellor "looking like a stone" and quoting research:

there is a lot of relevance in sharing our stories. I don't think it would be helpful for a Pacific Islander person to sit here and go well, you know, research has said, you know, this is what is said about that. I understand that because this happened to me, blah, blah, blah. . .I think it's good too 'cos it gives people. . .you know it's like the feedback is. . .yeah, "I think you didn't meet me in the beginning but when you started something about yourself I felt met." That's the feedback. . .Isn't it a Pacific thing that you don't wanna be sitting with someone who's looking like a stone, eh? [Loud laughter] (*Counsellor 4*)

This counsellor described using some of her own personal stories in session to offer symbols and metaphors (e.g., a car running out of petrol), and to weave tapestries that represented how she perceived her clients' experiences:

Using different kinds of symbols to illustrate what I am saying and that is the difference in what we do. We don't just talk, hello, how are you, how's your life

been? It might be oh...hello, how are you? Oh, today I went to go and get my brother something and the car was out of petrol. You know, we create a story about the whole experience of what that person is in and for me. It gives me a deeper insight into their life without them saying anything. I can see what's going on through that rich tapestry that they're weaving, that's all (ha ha). We weave tapestries. Our heritage like even, you know Pacific we've got a bit of Tongan in us, we've got a bit of this and that in us, taking a little bit of everyone's culture, you know of course we are a rich tapestry. (*Counsellor 4*)

Most Pasifika counsellors naturally speak in metaphors. The following is an example of this same counsellor who became mindful, to her surprise, that in her interview she was creating a picture and story around breathing without realising it:

I think there's an intrinsic understanding that Pacific people have about their culture. It's just in us, like the air we breathe and sometimes whatever happens in our lives we either stop breathing deeply, maybe inhaling deeply and that, and we start, you know, we inhale other kind of negative influences. Ah...see I'm creating a picture for you [smiles] I'm telling you a story. (*Counsellor 4*)

Another participant described listening to her Tongan client's metaphors and using her words in sessions. "All the burden in my heart" was one metaphor that she explored further as this client was experiencing grief related to her fear of her father dying. The counsellor was able to talk to her client about her grieving process and to normalise it.

### **Discussion and conclusion**

All the Pacific counsellors interviewed spoke about the important aspects of family, culture, and spirituality in their use of their indigenous values, proverbs, metaphors, and symbols with Pacific clients. These aspects are named in the Fonofale Pacific mental health model (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001). One participant found that in her training and development as a professional counsellor/psychotherapist, her Pacific uniqueness was put on hold. Her discovery of the Fonofale model and the values of *teu le va* challenged her to bring her own Pacific uniqueness and Pacific values into her counselling practice. These enabled her to respect the interpersonal space in counselling with new meaning, and working with the concept of *teu le va* enabled her to create a spiritual space for her clients' individual thought processes.

The indigenous concept of *teu le va* as a paradigm in which relationship, and maintaining and caring for the sacred relational space, are key has been applied by Anae

(2010) as a research practice in Pasifika educational contexts. Results from the current research project have confirmed that from a counselling and psychotherapy perspective, *teu le va* applies to the sacred relational space in counselling—the space which counsellors create for their clients in their counselling rooms, the sacred spiritual relational space between counsellor and client. It is a space in which Pacific clients are invited and encouraged to bring their whole selves (Makasiale, 2007).

The significance of taking care to establish authentic connection with clients from a holistic perspective, inclusive of clients' spirituality, can be seen as a challenge to the current reliance in the mental health system, as well as in some counselling practices, on approaches that are primarily cognitive, and do not give weight to indigenous values or resources. Unless we demonstrate openness, trustworthiness, and sensitivity to the lenses through which our clients see their worlds, and these values and resources that enable them to walk in their worlds, we will not be invited in. Unless our clients invite us in, we are likely to be of little use in helping them navigate the challenges they experience in their spaces. As the hosts of the sacred relational space, we are charged with responsibility for carefully tending and protecting the *va* of our counselling rooms as places of caring and reciprocity, so our clients feel truly met and find support and healing, through sensitive, flexible, and creative practices—as illustrated in the stories of the research participants.

The results of this study represent those of only four experienced counsellors and reflect female perspectives, and further research needs to obtain Pacific male counsellors' views. A larger scale study also needs to be undertaken, to assess whether these results are representative of the views and practices of the wider Pacific counselling community.

Although small in scale, this study provides a glimpse into the worldviews of Pasifika counsellors and psychotherapists' indigenous knowledge, and has enabled the participants to break the silence around Pacific practices. These counsellors identified both differences and similarities in the ways in which they used their indigenous resources in counselling processes with both Pasifika and with non-Pasifika clients, revealing a diversity of practices. From the findings, two frameworks were developed: the Pasifika Indigenous counselling framework (Fonofale in the spirit of *teu le va*), and the Pasifika Integrative framework (Fonofale, client-centred principles, and *teu le va*). We hope that these will contribute to the development of new perspectives on, and knowledge about, Pasifika counselling practices, as well as to the development of indigenous Pasifika counselling theory. These frameworks will be the focus of a future article.

## Note

1. When the first person is used, this is Sarah's voice speaking as first author.

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