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Abstract

Positive youth development requires good information to improve outcomes for service provision and delivery. This article discusses Tongan concepts that are central to effective intergenerational communication between parents, caregivers, people and at-risk Tongan youth. The concepts *fevahevahe'aki* (sharing), *fakafekau'aki* (connecting) and *tauhi vā* (looking after relationships) emerged out of qualitative research exploring communication with at-risk youth in South Auckland, New Zealand. These concepts are fundamental to reviving what, once normal practice, has become slowly diluted by globalisation. It is argued that communication is culturally constructed and that it is important to consider the cultural interplay of how communication is perceived, practised and understood in order to contribute positively to the development of young people.

Background

The escalation of death by suicide among Pacific people in 2010 and 2011 was most distressing for Pacific communities. Data showed there had been 30 deaths by suicide of Pacific people during this period (Ministry of Health, 2012; Youthline, 2013). An especially alarming aspect of this was how many were Tongan, and the youthful nature of this group aged 15-24 years (Counties Manukau District Health Board, 2012). A rapid community response was

orchestrated in a partnership between Pacific communities and the three Auckland District Health Boards (DHB) to establish the best way to intervene and to support Pacific communities. At a Tongan community *fono* (meeting) in 2011, the *talanoa* (discussions) focused on what could be done to address youth suicide and what services were available to support youth and their families. As noted, the term 'communication' was bandied about, as were words such as "we must communicate" (Tongan Youth Trust, 2011). The idea that communication issue(s) and/or barriers were a key factor in suicide and vulnerability amongst Tongan youth (Fuka-Lino, 2015) was clearly accepted.

Research on communication and Pacific youth vulnerability, more specifically Tongan, has not been adequately undertaken. However, Pacific researchers recognise and have documented various components of communication and Pacific youth vulnerability. Tiatia (2003) discovered that a lack of communication due to inability to speak English was a risk factor, and could lead to suicidal ideation and attempts amongst New Zealand-born Samoan youth. Puna (2013) highlighted how remaining culturally connected and having healthy communication contributes to positive wellbeing and having a balanced life for New Zealand-born Cook Island youth. The breakdown of parent-child relationships and communication has been identified as increasing the vulnerability of Tongan youth to suicide in Aotearoa New Zealand (Sinisa, 2013).

Cultural identity is important to Pacific youth and is central to their understanding of communication and sense of belonging (Anae, 1997). Many reports indicate that poor communication is a core issue for vulnerable Pacific youth. For example, according to Pacific health professionals and research academics speaking on a *Tagata Pasifika* documentary, communication is one of the major issues in relation to at-risk youth (Tagata Pasifika, 2010; 2013). Dr Siale Foliaki, a Tongan consultant psychiatrist, has also stated that the two fundamental signs to look out for in at-risk children are consistent aggression and inattention, often caused by parents' lack of communication. Foliaki highlighted that, gone unchecked, these influences often had dire consequences (Rees, 2003). What seems to be lacking to date in research on communication is literature based on Tongan understanding of youth communication. This area of research remains underdeveloped, especially in regard to cultural and intergenerational constructs and conceptualisations.

Context – a Tongan worldview

Tala 'o e fonua encapsulates and accounts for a Tongan worldview that centres on three notions: the sacredness within all things; the priority of people and family; and communication and relationships as fundamental to how people live and relate to one another. *Tala 'o e fonua*, made up of four words, translates to mean the following: *tala* is defined as to tell (Churchward, 1959, p. 446); *'o* is a preposition in this context meaning 'of'; *'e* is an article which represents 'the'; and *fonua* means 'land, country or territory' (p. 186). The term *tala 'o e fonua* translates as 'to tell the story of the land'.

Tongan communication practices are influenced by the Tongan worldview,

which locates values, beliefs and behaviours within the Tongan social system that underpins it and which is hierarchical, rankings being ascribed by birth. As in many cultures, there are narratives connecting people to their creation story through lineage to ancestors. There are different versions of why, where and how Tongan culture came about before the advent of Christianity. While the church plays a pivotal role today in facilitating social order and establishing what is expected to be *mo'oni* (truth) and *totonu* (right), long-time religious rituals associated with key life events are central to the *anga faka-Tonga*. Within a Tongan worldview there is sacredness in how things are related to each other. For example, the sacredness of people's relationships with the Gods transfers to the sacredness of the relationship between people and the monarchy, commoners and nobles. Tu'itahi describes this sacred relationship with these words:

> Maintaining a sustainable, harmonious and balanced relationship with nature and one's fellow human beings, both at the individual and collective levels, illustrates the spiritual dimension of fonua. Since the introduction of monotheistic religion, Tongans re-conceptualized the spiritual dimension of fonua to include God, the creator of the universe. (Tu'itahi, 2009, p. 14)

The Tongan world is community and people focused, where the motivation is for the good of all, with lesser attention on the individual. It functions on a belief in the relationship between the parts of mind, body and soul as represented in the *fonua* concept (Tu'itahi, 2005). The chronicle of knowledge which is embedded in the Tongan worldview does not pertain to or focus on an individual but centres on sharing and mutual exchange for the benefit of the whole. Therefore, a Tongan worldview is based on knowledge that is transmitted through lineages and from ancestors to the next generation. It has strong roots within the *nofo 'a kainga Tonga* (the dwelling together of Tongan families) and how the Tongan society is socially constructed as in the *anga faka-Tonga* (Tongan way of life). The *anga faka-Tonga* highlights and gives meaning to the place of communication.

Relationships and social organisation are essential to the Tongan worldview, including ideals of what is sacred and not sacred. For example, there is sacredness in the relationship between a brother and sister, and this sets how they behave and communicate with one another and within the family. Mafile'o (2005) proposes that "Tongans are entwined within a matrix of multiple and complex inter-relationships, which govern the operation of inter-relationships and which in turn constitute well-being within a Tongan worldview perspective" (p. 135).

Meaning of communication

In any profession that deals with people there must be great investment in ensuring that there is a heavy communication element present that promotes shared narratives, experiences, and the opportunity to connect and build understanding. However, a considerable amount of literature assumes a

universal understanding of communication. DeVito (2003) proposes that communication means the arousal of common meanings with resulting actions between communicator and interpreter through the use of language or other signs and symbols. Furthermore, communication, here, is about sharing of information, ideas, hopes, attitudes, values, beliefs, dreams, fears, frustrations and the meaning of life (DeVito, 2003). Similarly, Chandler and Munday (2011) suggest it is the process used to send and interpret messages so they can be understood. From a social-work perspective, communication refers to "the capacity of an individual or group to pass on his feelings and ideas to another individual or group" (Day, 1972, p. 121). In contrast, Knapp, Hall and Horgan (2013) illustrate that communication is transmitted through behaviour and elements of speech rather than through the words themselves. For example, non-verbal elements include pitch, speed, tone and volume of voice, gestures and facial expressions, body posture, stance and proximity to the listener, eye movements and contact, and dress appearance.

In Tongan, the literal translation of communication is captured in three terms: *fetu'utaki*, *fetohi'aki* and *fehokotaki* (Churchward, 1959, p. 609). *Fetohi'aki* is "to write to or correspond with each other" (Churchward, 1959, p. 178). *Fetu'utaki* refers "to be joined together, to be connected or related to one another and to communicate…" (Churchward, 1959, p. 181). *Fehokotaki* means to be "in contact with or connected with, or communication with each other, to make mental contact with one another…" (Churchward, 1959, p. 156). The difference between the universal understanding of communication and Tongan forms of communication is that the Tongan places greater emphasis on the importance of connecting rather than a one-way process.

Intergenerational conflict and communication

Scholars highlight that there are many types of challenges young Pacific people face in this current climate, especially those who are of migrant parents and have moved to Western, modern and cosmopolitan societies such as New Zealand, Australia and the United States of America (see Morton, 1996; 1998; Morton-Lee, 2003; Anae, 1998; Hansen, 2004). These include tensions between the expectations of adhering to cultural norms within the home and the experience of applying these behaviours outside of the home. For example, Tupuola (1996) suggests that crossing between borders (home and school) often entails feeling tormented, confused, frustrated and alone. Communication between generations becomes a major factor in conflict where changes in technology have affected the way different generations communicate with each other.

Living in two worlds can be a reality that Pacific youths face, as they struggle to merge and make meaning of the values, beliefs and practices that they learn at home and at the same time connect with the social, educational and environments they find themselves in (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi, 2003). One of the common challenges Pacific youths face is conflict with their parents and elders. This can lead a lack of understanding, and miscommunication between parents and children; and often relates back

to traditional values that Pacific parents have and their expectations of their children.

Cultural transmission of communication

This complexity of culture and communication is also interpreted variously due to differing cultural traditions. A study by Fuka-Lino (2015) noted that open communication and sharing of information is fundamental to a Tongan youth's upbringing, and that this also influences how they position themselves and view the world around them, and to their sense of meaning and connection to their world and their culture. These cultural links gave prominence to relationships and traditions that were essential in a Tongan youth's understanding of communication practices. Therefore, communication for Tongan youth is socially constructed within the Tongan world. Cultural concepts such as *fevahevahe'aki* (sharing information), *fakafekau'aki* (connecting with) and *tauhi v*ā (relationship) were protective factors in strengthening and sustaining healthy and effective communication.

Fevahevahe'aki (sharing)
Fevahevahe'aki is known to Tongans as a concept that is centred on communal sharing, and means to divide out to one another. The value and practice of *fevahevahe'aki* moves beyond simply sharing. It epitomises *'ofa* (love, compassion and affection) with a 'selfless' giving and/or sacrifice (Mafile'o, 2005). *'Ofa* is the catalyst of *fevahevahe'aki* within the communication process, especially with youth who are marginalised and oppressed in their own realities because they feel a sense of disconnection and have minimal trust in their environments (Fuka-Lino, 2015). Demonstrating *'ofa* within the communication relationship ignites an emotional connection regardless of the spoken words.

    Fevahevahe'aki also centres on delivering *fatongia* (responsibilities). For example, one may not wish to share something, however, because of one's responsibilities whether it is to the family and/or social structure, one is obliged to share. The association between *fevahevahe'aki* and *fatongia* constitutes that sharing and/or gifting within communication can relate to rank in the *nofo 'a k*ā*inga*. Therefore, within a Tongan worldview, sharing that is attached to rank signifies acceptance of one's place in the *kainga* (position within the family) as well as submitting to those of higher rank.

Fakafekau'aki (connecting)
Connections and connecting to people is paramount to the understanding of communication for Tongan youth. Having a sense of connection means more than just a physical presence or knowing each other. Connecting encapsulates a position and association of who you are and where you come from. *Fakafekau'aki*, from a Tongan worldview, means connecting with or 'to bring into relationship with each other' (Churchward, 1953, p. 33). Mafile'o (2005) highlights *fakafekau'aki* as a process that establishes associations, connections and belonging to each other. For Tongan youth, *fakafekau'aki* creates a sense

of *maheni* (familiarity) and *fe'ilongaki* (knowing each other's identity and place) (Fehoko, 2015; Fuka-Lino, 2015).

The concept of *fakafekau'aki* can be examined in two parts. Firstly, *faka* is the prefix that denotes the making of something. Secondly, the word *fekau'aki* can be broken down into three parts: *fe* (prefix), *kau* (root word, in this context means inclusiveness or belonging) and *'aki* (suffix). *Fekau'aki* then implies that a relationship already exists – for example, the *fekau'aki* between a mother and son can represent all the things that physically, emotionally and psychologically illustrate the connection and bond a mother and son have, this suggesting that *fekau'aki* is socially and culturally developed and nurtured. Although they may seem very much connected, it is explained that, without the word *'faka'* included in the beginning, a disconnection is implied. When *faka* is placed in front of *fekau'aki* to produce *fakafekau'aki*, it signals that a third-party element is involved, and facilitates the connection. For example, a mother will have her own position and views, yet this may differ to those of the son – the *faka* brings together the two views. *Fakafekau'aki*, then, is the action that helps people to embrace, respect and accept difference (Fuka-Lino, 2015).

According to Fuka-Lino (2015) *fakafekau'aki* in communication extends from valuing the act of sharing to a system that absorbs, filters and processes differences to reach a level of acceptance. In sum, Tongan youth in the study carried out by Fuka-Lino (2015) emphasised the benefits not only to themselves, but to the other person engaged in the conversation. In my view, Tongan youth's construction of communication embodies a holistic perspective involving elements that were integral to their relationships and their interpretations of these (Seiuli, 2013).

Tauhi vā (looking after the relational space)

The process of *tauhi vā* (building and maintaining respectful relationships) is fundamental to connections in relation to activities, actions and ways of knowing. As described earlier, respectful relationships signify a sacred association that has an intent, purpose and obligation, and which indicates how practice, behaviours and attitudes should be shaped – and are very much centred on the ability to relate to and communicate with one another.

Tauhi vā is significant to the practice and understanding of communication for Tongan youth. They claimed that building trust and feeling safe with the person they communicated with was essential to their wellbeing (Fuka-Lino, 2015). Mafile'o (2005) described *tauhi vā* as being pertinent to the wellbeing of Tongans – *tauhi vā* underpinning the expectation to maintain social harmony within the *nofo 'a kāinga* (dwelling within the family and/or community). Tongan youth were mindful of and valued how the other party was going to treat them because the sharing came from their inner and most private feelings. They felt the need to be reassured that whoever they invited into their space was going to value and respect them for who they are. Relational connection allowed them to measure and authenticate their faith, belief and hope in the person(s) they were communicating with, and to ensure there was a safe space for them to open up and share. Similarly, Seiuli (2013) argues that dishonouring the relational space contributes to the breakdown of the communication relationship in a Tongan context.

Tauhi vā gives importance to looking after something or someone, and

the focus for these youths was to nurture, sustain and maintain a connection with the person they were communicating with (Fuka-Lino, 2015). Their views were similar but not limited to that recorded by Mafile'o (2005) that involved discussion of *fetokoni'aki* (mutual helpfulness) as a reciprocal practice. For example, if I come to your family member's funeral, in return you will *tauhi vā* by attending mine. For some, the practice of *tauhi vā* is measure by wealth in terms of money, fine mats and boxes of corned beef that are donated to the person or family. However, the essence of *tauhi vā* here moves further than *fetokoni'aki*, and is animated by a heart-felt obligation that ties the bonds together within the communication relationship. An element within this obligation is contained in a notion of *mo'ua* which exemplifies 'to be indebted' to something or someone (Churchward, 1959, p. 369). *Mo'ua* within *tauhi vā* is more than an act of reciprocity, it is an obligation to sustain good harmony within relationships and within the practice which enhances wellbeing. These ideas reinforce the work of Tiatia (2012) where young New Zealand-born Samoan people are shown to value social connections and relationships. Furthermore, this is recognised by Tu'itahi (2005) where he refers to the importance of harmony within the family dwelling, and its role in general wellbeing.

Tongan youth refer to valuing relationships within their communication. In order for them to share their sensitivities, there must be an element known in the *tauhi vā* as *mo'ua*, or a bond that binds them to a person. In this context the other person will feel indebted to the relationship and develop a sense of loyalty, which will in turn reinforce the youth's sense of security to open up and share. Having this bond allows the youth to feel safe and have confidence in sharing information that maybe sensitive or unpleasant (Fuka-Lino, 2015). This reinforces and builds a sense of self-assurance and self-belief, which can contribute to youth resiliency (Resnick, 2000).

Conclusion

In conclusion, cultural knowledge and practices are valued by Tongan youth in Aotearoa New Zealand in the construction of their communication practices. Particularly, the concepts of *fevahevahe'aki*, *fakafekau'aki* and *tauhi vā* are vital in the process of communication for Tongan youth. They exist as ontological markers in building trust and creating bonds essential for communication, development and building resilience.

Fevahevahe'aki, *fakafekau'aki* and *tauhi vā* are important because they explain how the cultural interplay in Tongan communication is essential to fostering a sense of harmony and contributes to maintaining respect and appreciation of the other person. Most importantly, these concepts indicate important principles and practices for effective ways to communicate with vulnerable Tongan youth.

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