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E le sauaina tatou tagata matutua: re-examining abuse through the cultural lens of the fonofale model

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ABSTRACT

Introduction Cultural paradigms are emerging as the appropriate way to examine Samoan people's life experiences. This study employs the fonofale model to explore and examine the notion of abuse among Pacific elders, mainly from a Samoan lens.

Methods In framing this study, the talanoa approach was deemed culturally appropriate. Twelve Samoan *tagata matutua* (elderly people) were asked to *talanoa* (discuss) their experiences of what abuse means to them.

Findings These suggest that, initially, abuse of Samoan elders was contested. That is, it is not the *fa'asamoa* (Samoan way) or the *fa'akerisiano* (Christian way). However, as the talanoa gathered *mafana* (warmth) and *malie* (maintained healthy social relationships), most agreed that physical abuse was uncommon within an *aiga* (familial) context, but other forms as in spiritual abuse were apparent. Overall, the disruption of the *fa'asamoa* through the violation of relational *vā* concepts are noted and perceived as a form of abuse that counters the universally accepted notions of abuse.

Conclusion For these *tagata matutua*, six different forms of abuse were identified, with particular emphasis on cultural and spiritual abuse. Following the fonofale paradigm, which reflects a Samoan worldview, this article informs a perception of spiritual abuse from the Samoan elders' point of view. Their views have relevance to the wider Pacific context.

Key words: abuse, fa'asamoa, fonofale, spiritual, Talanoa, Samoan elderly

INTRODUCTION

Elder abuse is now a pervasive and global phenomenon.¹ There is a relative lack of conclusive research regarding elder abuse within the Samoan community. Samoans make up most of the Pacific population in Aotearoa New Zealand; they are the fifth largest ethnic group in the country and Samoan is the third most common language.² Samoan families, like many Pacific Island families, value and care for their elders.³ Elderly people, known as *tagata matutua*, are esteemed in both the socio-cultural and spiritual context. They are sacred and, as such, abuse is not overtly considered conceivable. While much of the literature pertaining to abuse as a form of violence is focussed on women and children⁴ as well as the physical, emotional, and sexual^{5,6} abuse between intimate partners⁷ perceptions of elder abuse among Samoan people residing in New Zealand are yet unexplored. Furthermore, older people's experiences of abuse, and the ways in which abuse impacts elders in the wider Pacific population are limiting.

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Elder abuse is an extensive and serious issue defined by the World Health Organisation (WHO)⁸ as a “single or repeated act or lack of appropriate action occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust, which causes harm or distress to an older person”. Abuse of the older person can lead to severe physical injuries, financial misery, as well as to long-term psychological consequences through manifestations of mental health suffering.⁹⁻¹² Current Age Concern New Zealand statistics record one in ten people over 65 reporting abuse.¹³ However, with many cases undisclosed, prevalence is extremely misattributed, with WHO reports indicating that only 4% of abuse is reported worldwide.⁸

In traditional cultures such as that of the Samoan people, where *fa’asamoa* (Samoan way) places great emphasis on faith and spiritual value (including the *fa’akerisiano* or the Christian way), spiritual abuse may have grave existential and psychological consequences. The WHO and other common definitions of elder abuse do not overtly mention spiritual abuse, but consider sexual, financial, psychological and physical abuse, as well as neglect both intentional or unintentional. Spiritual abuse (SA) has been broadly defined by Gray, LaBore and Carter¹⁴ as, “actions that damage one’s subjective experience and personal practice of the sacred, creating a severe disconnection with a higher power or other spiritual sources of meaning and resulting in harm to one’s spiritual integrity, lack of access to spiritual resources to cope, and/or an inability to pursue spiritual growth” (p.3).

Research in this area is predominantly Eurocentric and primarily focused on spiritual abuse by church ministers or spiritual leaders within power positions.^{15,16} Though conceptualised for American Indian cultures, and although characterisation will vary from culture to culture, Gray’s definition is flexible and adapts well to the experiences of Samoan elders in this study where the elderly experience a severe relational disruption with the higher power or spiritual sources and with consequent harm to spiritual integrity, and disconnection through the inability to access spiritual resources to cope, therefore, leading to the inability to pursue spiritual growth. This may also have implications on elder neglect.

Definitions of elder neglect, too, are commonly centered around the failure of a caregiver to meet the needs of an older adult who is unable to meet those needs alone. Behaviours highlighted include denial of food, water, medication, medical treatment, therapy, nursing services, health aids, clothing and visitors. In research

orientated toward indigenous American Indians, Gray and colleagues¹⁴ highlight the importance of incorporating a definition of spiritual abuse which may aid in healing the historical trauma of colonisation, often perpetuated by acculturation and assimilation. Whether this is the case for the Samoan elderly is yet to be investigated. It is imperative to provide a Samoan perspective of the elderly person’s role within New Zealand society in its traditional and contemporary context so as to understand how the participants’ view of abuse is influenced in this study.

Samoan Elderly

Samoans address the old people or the elderly as *tagata matutua* and are perceived as mediators between the cosmos, people and the land. Traditionally, old people “often control useful knowledge and hold positions of political and economic power”.¹⁷ As a result, their status is regarded highly and is feared. *Tagata matutua* have a vital role in maintaining harmony within the communities as well as preserving and passing on cultural traditions and values to the younger generations. Tamasese and colleagues noticed how spirituality has a “significant role in maintaining elderly people’s overall wellbeing”.¹⁸ Their identity and wellbeing are inherently related to family heritage, roles, connections, and responsibilities to their land, including being caregivers as well as custodians to genealogy and chiefly titles. Spirituality is central in this role, guiding them in such practices. In this regard, the *tagata matutua* were therefore perceived as ‘sacred’ figures who should be respectfully treated and not neglected or abused as expressed in this phrase *e lē sauāina tatou tagata matūtua*. Younger generations are expected to maintain this relational integrity through the *vā tapuia* (sacred spaces) concept. To be respectful you have to *tausi-le-vā*, that is to nurture and maintain this *vā fealoaloa’i* (respectful relations). To disrupt this relational covenant, one will be violating it, that is, *solile-vā*. One can restore this *vā* through *teule-vā* or restore the disrupted relations. To sustain this relational space, one has to care for the elderly through *fetausia’i* or servant leadership guided through mutual reciprocity, love (*alofa*), compassion and service (*tautua*).

Migration to New Zealand and other countries have posed challenges to this relational status of the Samoan elderly. They have become caregivers to their grandchildren. Cross-cultural studies conclude that loss of prestige and esteem by the elderly are the ‘biproductions of urbanisation, industrialisation, and modernisation’.¹⁷ Over time, their roles and intergenerational perspectives of the elderly as revered and sacred

entities and even as cultural treasures have been misconstrued. The demands of children and grandchildren more assimilated to Western culture may leave elderly grandparents pressured to fulfil expected roles and are possibly exploited by their adult children.¹⁹ With inadequate English comprehension and ability, Samoan elderly people in New Zealand have been treated as babysitters out of the financial necessity for adult children to save childcare costs and afford housing.¹⁸ Therefore, Samoan perspectives of elderly and ageing in New Zealand conflict. Such views have impacted this *vā* as well as the spiritual relational domain that has influenced Samoan elderly views of abuse.

This study aims to further inform the definition of spiritual abuse, specifically from a Samoan worldview, by giving voice to the views of Samoan elders, and highlights any differences from the typical Eurocentric understanding of spiritual abuse.

METHODS

Fonofale Model as a Cultural Paradigm

A framework for understanding elder abuse must be culturally informed. The fonofale model was employed as a guiding framework to examine tagata matutua abuse within the Samoan worldview.²⁰ Pulotu-Endemann uses a traditional meeting (*fono*) house (*fale*) to portray the symbolic values underpinning Samoan values, beliefs, customs and world view. Drawing on his metaphorical representations, a Samoan is born into a *fale* that consists of the various *pou* (posts) conveying the spiritual, physical, emotional, sexual and other domains that facilitate Samoan well-being. Spirituality permeates all the physical landscapes and people and it is significantly broader than religion. Sometimes the two beliefs are conflated. In some ways, spirituality is inclusive or different from religion (*fa'akerisiano*).

On top of the *fale* is the thatched roof. The roof depicts the overall culture that shelters Samoans. The traditional foundation of the *fale* represents the basic unit of the *aiga* (family), and is indicative of the values embedded in the Samoan culture or *fa'asamoa*. Suaalii-Sauni, Wheeler²¹ emphasises that “for the house to stand firm, its core structure must exist and hold together – from the foundation to the posts and roof” (p.27). This collective ideology of *aiga* in caring for elders is important. It reinforces the spiritual component as manifested in the nurturing social relations such as *tausi-le-vā*. If there are problems with one of the domains within the fonofale model, holistic well-being will be impacted. This impact is trampling or violating of

the sacred spaces – *solile-vā*. For the purpose of this study, this means consideration of not only the biomedical condition and physical manifestations, but of other dimensions – including the socio-economic situation, cultural and spiritual beliefs, and aspirations regarding health issues – is imperative.

In order to explore what abuse means to the Samoan elderly, and in doing so, to identify any form of abuse witnessed within their *aiga* and/or communities, the talanoa methodological framework, introduced by Vaoleteti²² was employed. Grounded in phenomenology, with emphasis on the participants' lived experiences, talanoa has become multi-disciplinary and cross-cultural in its application, not only across the Pacific but also internationally within the wider social sciences and academic realm.

Participants

Twelve participants (6 females, 6 males, 58-87 years old) were recruited through purposive sampling who were included as part of a 50-person Pacific elderly cohort. They voluntarily agreed to engage in the larger Pacific Elderly Abuse Research Project between August and September 2019. All participants were Samoan-born, currently residing in West and South Auckland, New Zealand, still maintaining their cultural ties to the homeland. Except for a few, all held chiefly matai titles. Three of the respondents were currently caring for an elderly person.

Ethics and Anonymity

The Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee provided approval for this project. (Reference 19/176 17 June 2019). Anonymity of the participants' responses are represented by their gender abbreviation and age (m, 63). Samoans regard their elderly people's knowledge as merit. Having a culture of oratory for many centuries, and acknowledging one's self in a discussion is regarded as a means of authenticating and validating knowledge.²³ All of the *tagata matutua* performed leadership roles within their families, communities, and the church, giving them life experiences that are to be valued. Samoan elders' views point to the importance of not being physically abused but how the next generation of adult children disrupt this meaning of respect, sacredness without reverence that can be addressed from a culturally and spiritually specific interpretation of abuse. *Talanoa* (discussion) with the twelve Samoan elders in the group were conducted within familiar community centres that were central to them.

Thematic analysis

Braun and Clarke²⁴ introduced a six-phase guide to the thematic analysis exercise which was

adopted in this study. This approach to thematic analysis gives rise to the people's voices. Its findings provide the narratives evoked through the *talanoa*, giving meaning to the elders' social experiences. Patterns here reflected themes of cultural, spiritual, emotional and financial abuse.

DISCUSSION

All the participants initially declared that abuse was non-existent among their families, that is, "*e lē sauāina tatou tagata matutua*" (m,69). Participants argued that, "*due to our culture, we have to look after our elders*" (m, 69). Another participant concurred "*I agree with that. It's part of our culture. It was told to us by our parents.*" (m, 63). With regards to the fonofale model, the *aiga* is the foundation and the basic unit of Samoan families. Such expressed views reflect *fetausia'i* or the reciprocal nurturing of serving between the *aiga* and the elderly is customary. Appreciation of this collective ideology of *aiga* in caring for the elders is reflected in many of the views that were comprehensively discussed. Often, this approach assists in the cultural dynamics because it is the *aiga* who makes decisions about who takes responsibility for the care of the *tagata matutua*.

These salient views perceived by the Samoan elderly participants were similar to that of communities where the collective ideology is important, as with Asian migrants, as well as Indians, and many Polynesian societies.^{1,25,26} Notably, the fonofale model uses the concept of spirituality deliberately inclusive of pre-Christian values, beliefs and practices. Tamasese alluded to the importance of this spiritual understanding towards the mental well-being and quality of life of a Samoan elderly person. As one respondent succinctly put it, if "*Samoan families do not look after and care for their elderly people, they think that their sacrifice is not going up... these are the fundamental beliefs*" (m, 63), meaning the sacrifice to the cosmos (God). Parents who are often the elderly are viewed as a symbolic representation and connection with the spiritual realm. In return for their dedication, children will receive abundant blessings. This view is influenced by biblical scripture. Elders believe children are obligated because stipulations in the book of Exodus (Chapter 20, verse 12) is engrained through Sunday school or *aoga faifeau* (village pastor's school) that one must "honour your father and mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your god has given you". For Samoan elders, such a belief is synonymous with their cultural ones influenced the *vā* of respect, honour, and obedience. In this regard, elderly are considered

as 'sacred' and treated with 'reverence' (*vā faaaloalo*). One participant considers that if this is the underlying view, then respecting elders is part of looking after them well and not abusing them.

Physical abuse of elders was strongly argued by the participants. A female participant began by stating that when she hears the word 'abuse', she only understands its physical connotations:

When I think about abuse, I think about punching, kicking, ... so [elder] abuse is not the Samoan way because we do respect our elders but when I hear some of you, well, I guess it does happen in our culture but it's behind closed doors. Yes, I realise that there is the emotional and verbal abuse. I think, for the Samoan elderly, the emotional abuse is a big one. Not the physical or verbal but emotionally ... (f, 58).

While the WHO emphasise physical abuse as the most reported category of elder abuse because of the 'granny bashing' phenomenon in Western communities, the Samoan elders here countered this view.²⁷

Another perceived view of abuse is the placing of elderly people in a rest home. The participants considered this as an act against *fa'asamoa*, and the spiritual values and beliefs encapsulated therein. According to one participant, abuse deprives an elderly person of their autonomy which leads to constraint and increased psychological deterioration. She clarified that she had not experienced it, but witnessed this form of abuse:

My understanding is that abuse takes away their [elderly] freedom, to uphold their values and opinions. For example, I've seen an elderly person who was a family member taken to the rest home. He had a bit of dementia. Because family members and extended family have abandoned him by not visiting, his memory quickly faded. He was staying with a palagi person and he lost that mother tongue [Samoan] language that he feels he needed. That mother tongue makes him not forget things. It would have helped if the family talked to him in his own language [to] make him feel good and feel valued (f, 65).

Placing elderly in a rest home goes against the collective notion of *fetausia'i*. As mentioned earlier, the *aiga* has the obligation and responsibility of caring for elders. Apparently, this participant believed that placing an elderly in a rest home is mistreatment to exercise their

independence to engage in cultural obligations. Although she had not experienced abuse in her home, she shared her observations from other members of their extended *aiga*, she heavily argued that the option of placing elders in a rest home is an act derived from conflicting held worldviews, values and beliefs between the Samoan elderly husband and his *palagi* (European) wife. According to her, this in the rest home, this elderly limited his abilities:

...to do things Samoan, like speaking Samoan, eating Samoan food, attending Samoan family gatherings... he was the head matai of his particular extended family. He could be closer to his Samoan family for his mental wellbeing and quality of living (f, 65).

The example here suggests that not adhering to the *fa'asamoa* is considered abuse because it is potentially damaging cultural norms. This is because the elderly person is being withheld from conducting his *matai* duties. Such duties uphold the cultural domain of the *fonofale* model; the roof which is the overarching aspect of the holistic wellbeing of the Samoan person.

Abandoning elders in rest homes created much discussion because participants considered it a disrespectful act, against the *fa'asamoa* as well as *fa'akerisiano* (Christian) values. One participant likened opting to take the elderly person to a rest home as also a form of not upholding Christian beliefs:

It's like sinning. If we put our elders in a rest home; that's emotional abuse. I'm sure no elder wants to go and stay there. They want to be looked after by their children (m, 69).

Disrespect was not a common feature of the Eurocentric literature. In a Chinese context, Tam and Neysmith²⁶ argue that “to categorize disrespect as psychological abuse or neglect misses its meaning and significance as a culturally specific form of abuse”. Disrespect – of the individual elderly person, of their cultural role, and of their cultural and religious beliefs – is a powerful form of abuse because it is concealed within the cultural context, “where the value of elder respect lacks meaning equivalent to that in western society”. In the Japanese context, Tomita²⁸ found that silence functioned as a form of abuse to suppress elderly people in a culture where free expression of emotion is unacceptable. While Japanese people may recognise disrespect as unacceptable, it remains invisible under the generic categories of elder abuse. Even though victims themselves may not articulate disrespectful acts as elder abuse, we

surmise that they experience tremendous harm, given that disrespect means the rejection of cherished values by close family members.

The global literature identifies mistreatment as another form of abuse. Placing the elderly in a rest home may be considered mistreatment or neglect. Therefore, more research and discussions on such context-specific examples warrant recognition.

There were discussions on other forms of abuse, but participants highlighted the significance of what they perceived as spiritual abuse. The participants described not having access to Church:

Sometimes, I want to go to church, but no one takes me. Everybody has their own lives, and they don't think about me!” (f, 70).

Another participant supported this view,

I went to Australia and I asked my cousins to look after my grandmother. I got a call from my cousin saying, “you'd better come; Grandma wants to go church”. They argued, “no we don't have time to take her to church”. That's abuse. I got on the phone and I said, “How dare you! I told you to look after her”. Cousin replies “I don't have time. I went out last night and I'm tired”. That, to me, is abuse”, (f, 58).

Two things are important here in a spiritual or *fa'akerisiano* (like a Christian) context; one is the relationship with God and the other is the act of worship. Boling²⁹ explains that as older people in the church mature, this relationship becomes a priority for them, they desire to make peace with God. They develop a spirit formation as they expect they will die soon and want to be ready for ‘the crossing’ to walk with God (p. 59). They want to go to church because they have been taught that through the practice of worship, such as hearing scripture readings from the Holy Bible and praying, they create the space and place to develop a sense of proximity before meeting their maker. While young people may not share the urgency of their faith, this aspect of spirituality is significant in adulthood. Attending church is a soul-searching experience and if family members do not help to ensure older people are assisted to church, it deprives elderly people of this journey. In effect, Lui and Schwenke³⁰ assert that if this happens, it will impact heavily on their holistic well-being, in particular, their spiritual and mental well-being. To demonstrate this the participants noted:

Abuse is not the Samoan way of life... I don't feel abused because I have a very

good support system in place with my daughter. Our relationship sometimes go up and down, but she knows it's her place to look after us. We taught her those values and she has stuck to them. Values of respect for our elders. Humility: be humble in the presence of elders, lotoalofa – love and compassion, have faith, hope and love all the time. It is very important that we teach our kids the essence of spiritual life, so in this respect, they respect us. However, I know some older people are lonely.

Being lonely and neglected occurs when children are not around to look after their elderly. This is an intergenerational conflict. The fonofale model also shows how time, environment, and context are dynamics that should be considered as social determinants of the context-specific analysis of abuse.

Caring for elders in New Zealand seem to be an obligation in nurturing the relational space or *tausi-le-va* and participants acknowledged that because of such neglect, they have witnessed some elders wanting to return to the homeland. For example:

Their kids leave them. I know some [elderly] want to return home to the islands because no one here wants to look after them. ... (f, 82).

Studies from the global literature identify neglect as another form of abuse with psychological and emotional consequences.²⁷ This above comment raises a problem solving solution, that the *aiga* collective can resolve *vā* relations amongst the generations, even over time as Ihara and Vakalahi suggested.^{31,32}

Further exploration of such notions of abuse need to be clarified. This article argues that any definition of forms of abuse must be informed by the culture in which the abuse occurs. Discussions were focussed more on how the *fa'asamoa* and its values and beliefs are not practised when it comes to caring for the *tagata matutua*. Elder abuse is inextricably linked to specific cultural and spiritual elements because there are cultural variations that point to particular references in these areas.³³

The Samoan worldview guided by the dimensions of the fonofale paradigm grounded the ontological importance of nurturing the *vā* (relationships). This nurturing is achieved by attempting to harmonise the balance between the spiritual, physical, emotional, cultural and intergenerational elements.³⁴ Because such are the epistemological underpinnings of these norms, as a result, abuse of the Samoan elderly was at first contested.²⁰ Biblical concerns to do

with the care and respect for the elderly as a filial responsibility are also expressed in Jewish law with similarities in equating it with the *fa'asamoa* values, beliefs, customs and practices synergies presented in the participants' views here.³⁵

For these Samoan elders, their belief was that their families should be looking after the parents or grandparents due to these philosophical or, as one participant said, 'fundamental' foundations. The relationships between these elements or domains involves the core values of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *tautua* (service), *alofa* (love), and *fetausia'i* (reciprocity in the form of servant leadership).³⁶ Hence, the thought of putting their elders in a rest home was perceived as 'sinning' because it deviated from these core values. Equally abusive was the younger generation not making the effort for the elderly person to attend church. All twelve Samoan elders agreed with these views. The *fetausia'i* paradigm came through strongly. It is nuanced and theoretically related to the discourses alluding to the notions of elder abuse, neglect, disrespect and mistreatment.

CONCLUSION

The fonofale paradigm in this study afforded an awareness of the cultural and spiritual dimension within the Samoan *vā*, or relational framework, to allow an understanding of elder abuse. The elderly in this study drew on the *fa'asamoa* to explore and express whether the spiritual and cultural elements cherished by the *tagata matutua* are responded to by the younger generation. The findings highlight that elder abuse not only exists but is prevalent in the Samoan community and that there may be a need to redefine abuse using a cultural lens to inform health policies.

Elder abuse may be an associated emerging act of violence adding either to the deconstruction or the co-construction *talanoa* or dialogues of domestic violence and child abuse¹, which has potential significant adverse impacts on the health and quality of life of Samoan elderly and on Pacific people more broadly. This study has found that Samoan families, like other diasporic communities, are undergoing changes. Values in the traditional collective are impacted by the intergenerational values and priorities of children. However, it can be said that strengthening the *fa'asamoa* and *fa'akerisiano* within the families can deter elder abuse.

Conflicting Interests

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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