

Applying the Vanua Framework to Explore i-Taukei Nurses' Job Satisfaction in Fiji

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Abstract

This paper contributes to research on the application of the Vanua framework as a research methodology. The Fijian Vanua framework guided the theoretical and methodological approach to exploring nurses' job satisfaction in Fiji, highlighting ways of living, interacting, and sharing knowledge. The Vanua is founded on social principles that provide a structural framework in understanding the beliefs, values, ceremonial rituals, taking place in both the physical and social structure of Fijian society. Indigenous based approaches are critical to understanding job satisfaction, in post-colonial societies, as they highlight how historical and systematic factors shape the workplace experiences of localised employees. Twenty individual Talanoa conversations were held with Fijian registered i-Taukei nurses, and in addition two Talanoa group discussions took place with nine nurse leaders and government administration officials. The individual Talanoa participants were all females and with between 5- and 10 years' nursing experience in their respective roles. The Talanoa focus group participants were involved in nursing policymaking in urban and rural settings. This is the first time nurses' job satisfaction has been examined in Fiji using the Vanua as a lens to highlight the historical influence of culture, belief systems, organisational power imbalances, the role of women and impact of colonisation.

The engagement with Vanua together with employing Talanoas enabled deep and rich descriptions of nurses and nurse leaders' employment experiences and engagement to emerge, while honouring of Fijian ritualised engagement ceremonies and respect protocols.

Key Words: Vanua Methodology, Fiji, Nurses, Job Satisfaction

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Introduction

When understanding job satisfaction, indigenous worldviews and life goals within workplace settings must be considered in post-colonial societies. The need for culturally aligned and informed workplace practices that promote equity and socio-cultural respect is necessary for enhancing an environment where all employees can thrive (Craven, Dilton & Parbury, 2013). In Fiji, the 'Vanua' is a deeply localised worldview governing all aspects of physical, social, and cultural of structure and everyday life. Vanua encompasses both 'Yavusa' (clan) and 'Mataqali' (sub-clan), which have their specific roles in the community in ensuring the protection and well-being of the chief as the head of the Vanua. The structural setup of the Vanua works towards achieving harmony, prosperity, and, most importantly, solidarity; and has a strong influence on how Fijian people behave in their community as well as a sense of identity and belonging (Degei, 2007; Ravuvu, 1983).

Nabobo-Baba (2006), defined Vanua as a reference to the people as an extension of and their relationship to the land which includes their fishing ground, environment, and geographical location. The Vanua (Fiji Island) is divided into three main 'Matanitu' (confederacies) which are known as 'Tovata', 'Kubuna', and 'Burebasaga' (see Figure 2). Each *Matanitu* has their own paramount chiefly titles which are used in a traditional addresses or in the presentation of gifts in which the chiefly confederacy title will always be addressed first, followed by chiefly tribal titles. Each confederacy has several tribes (Vanua) that are governed by the same social structure system (Eräsaari, 2013).

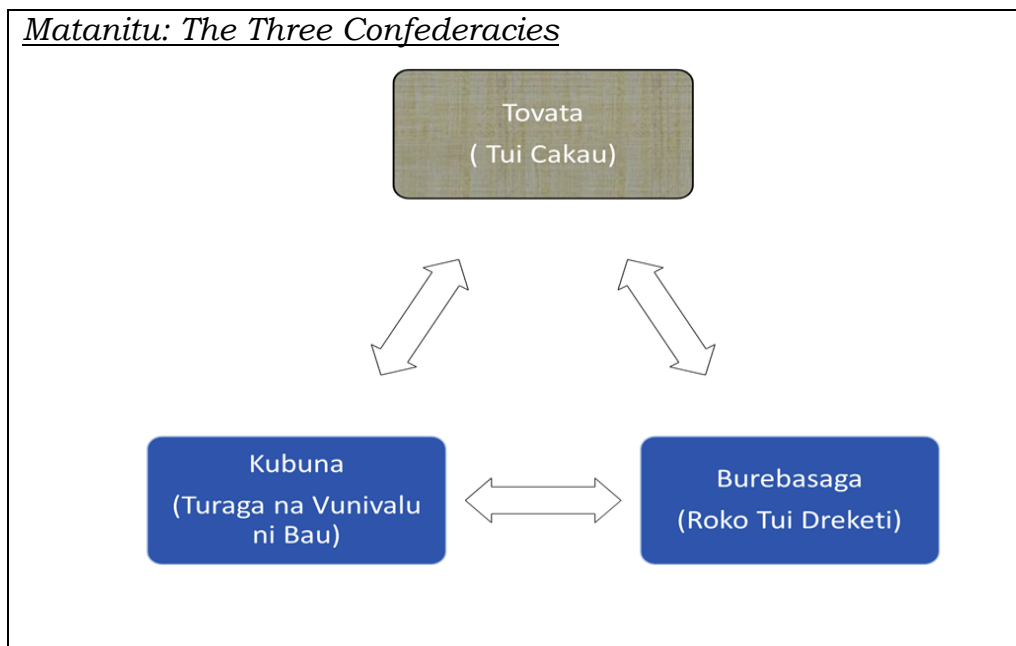


Figure 1 *Fijian confederacies*

Fijian Social Structure

Indigenous Fijians originating from a Vanua or tribe will always introduce themselves by stating the origin of their Yavusa, Vanua, and Confederacy (Matanitu), with such framing playing a critical role in the political context, relations with kin, and as a driving force in ensuring the Pacific people are socially protected when facing social or economic crisis (Macpherson, 1999). The cultural links within the Vanua structure articulate the kinship relationship amongst the people within the clan and is expressed as 'veiwekani.' The pyramidal structure (Figure 2) provides a visual understanding of the social structure within the community. The Yavusa is a chiefdom level from the origin of which can be traced down to a common male ancestor where several Mataqali sub-clans make up one Yavusa (Eräsaari 2013). The Mataqali branches out into smaller households or closely related family members known as the Tokatoka. Each Mataqali is allotted a specific area to reside in within the village compound (Erasure, 2013).

Philosophical Framework of the Vanua

'Vanua' is a Fijian term that includes the physical, social, and cultural elements of the land and how these are interrelated. It is identified by its culture and tradition and serve to maintain solidarity and attaining harmony and prosperity. Having a sense of belonging and identity allows for confidence and security and gives a sense of belonging to a social unit. The Vanua is further defined into three main dimensions—physical, social, and cultural—that determine how the Fijian people think and carry out activities, including traditional supernaturalism (Ravuvu, 1983).

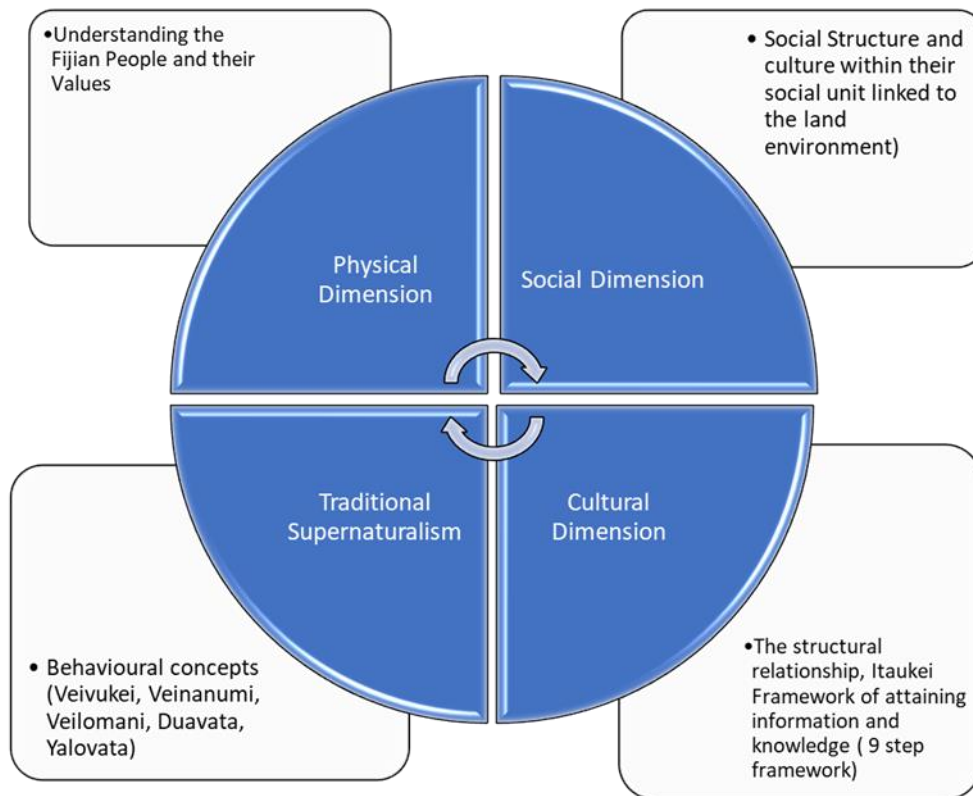


Figure 2 Characteristics of the Vanua

The members of a group that are related socially or politically linked to one another may also be identified as a 'Vanua.' Thus, the Fijian people (members) are referred to as the Vanua (share common bonds), also used as a reference to a social group where members will have a common link and allegiance to an identified authority. Also, the small rural clans in different provinces are also called 'Vanua' having their distinctive tribal chiefs as the heads of the Vanua (Ravuvu, 1983).

Traditionally, a member of a Vanua (different clan–Yavusa or Mataqali) would request entry when visiting or meeting with a different Vanua clan. This is done through the traditional welcoming or request of entry ceremony called 'sevusevu.' It is practiced even when visiting different family members or smaller groups of people. In seeking permission from the chief to enter the Vanua, there must not be any direct contact with the head of the Vanua, instead the village "herald" (Matanivanua) is used as a mediator to communicate and present the sevusevu to the chief. There cannot be any activity or progress of action until the sevusevu is accepted (blessings given) and to ignore this will bring great misfortune to the visiting individual or clan.

Furthermore, while Fiji society is known to uphold the Vanua, smaller groups such as the government or the Ministry of Health also share common links, values, and beliefs may also be referred to as representations of the Vanua.

The Fijian Itaukei ‘Vanua’ as a research framework

The Vanua framework was employed in the current research both as a world view a research methodology to explore the deeply personalised and professional meanings of job satisfaction among Fijian nurses and nurse leaders. Similar to other indigenous methodologies such as the Māori concept of whakapapa in Aotearoa New Zealand, which emphasizes relational, ethical, and community-led approaches, the Vanua provides a culturally grounded lens through which to understand knowledge and practice (Kawharu, Tapsell & Tane, 2024).

This approach facilitated a deeper understanding of indigenous Fijian knowledge-sharing practices and Pacific epistemologies, particularly in relation to the structural and cultural factors that shape job satisfaction among Fijian nurses. It revealed the influence of customary hierarchy and patriarchy within Fijian society and to a lesser extent demonstrated how integrating indigenous and western research methods, such as in data analysis, can enrich insights and support improved outcomes in nursing job satisfaction and ultimately healthcare delivery.

In the current study the Vanua model effectively conveyed the voices of Fijian nurses, illuminating their interpersonal and professional relationships, values, cultural identity, knowledge systems, and spirituality, and offering new perspectives on contemporary nursing in Fiji (Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Indigenous approaches not only validate diverse forms of knowledge but are essential in offering crucial approaches to addressing both colonisation and systemic challenges.

In the current research, the Vanua portrays Fijian nurses as the embodiment of the Fiji Ministry of Health and a representation of a ‘Vanua’ with cultural and professional authority. The ‘Fijian Vanua’ framework highlighted how participants' worldviews were reflected through their defined social and political structure, religious belief system, and inherited customary practices.

This manuscript uses the terms “Fijian” and “i-Taukei” in accordance with official Government of Fiji definitions. “Fijian” refers to all citizens of Fiji regardless of ethnicity, whereas “i-Taukei” denotes the Indigenous people of Fiji. This distinction is essential to avoid misleading interpretations of the findings and to ensure conceptual accuracy. As the study sample consists exclusively of i-Taukei nurses, the findings reflect the experiences of one ethnic group and should not be interpreted as representing all Fijian nurses.

The Fijian Vanua research framework, developed by Nabobo-Baba in (2008), guide the current research design being that : 1) The research should benefit the needs of the Fijian people and the community, including the acknowledgement of Fijian protocols, cultural values, and philosophies regarding access to knowledge and processes of ethics in the Vanua context; 2) The researcher should be fluent in the Fijian language (dialect) to ensure deep understanding; 3) That the verification of indigenous concepts should be addressed appropriately; 4) The primary researcher should be of

indigenous descent to enable a deep understanding of the issues raised by the people and gain an 'insider view' of the situation; and 5) The researcher should address the social and cultural norms of respect and acknowledgement for the knowledge/information gained through elders and other sources in the Vanua structure. These cultural protocols must also involve exchange of gifts, resources, and privileges awarded to certain groups as a token of appreciation (Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Beliefs, values, and ceremonial practices embedded within the Vanua directly influence how i-Taukei nurses engage in their professional roles. Cultural expectations of respect, service, reciprocity, collective identity, and relational accountability shape professional interactions, responses to hierarchy, communication preferences, and understandings of duty and responsibility. These cultural influences are foundational to interpreting the professional experiences of i-Taukei nurses and form a critical context for the study.

The application of the Vanua Framework within the professional setting requires recognising how indigenous cultural structures interface with the formal expectations of the nursing profession. Although the Vanua is grounded in kinship, land, spirituality, and customary hierarchy, these principles continue to inform how i-Taukei nurses navigate leadership, teamwork, workplace relationships, authority, and ethical practice. This commentary clarifies how a culturally specific framework can operate within a larger, nationally regulated professional identity such as nursing.

The Vanua research approach was deemed as the appropriate framework for this research, given the historical colonial context of Fiji, and its associated health care delivery systems. The first author is of indigenous descent and speaks the language fluently. As a Fijian registered nurse and a citizen of the Republic of Fiji, the first author assumed the position of an insider researcher, gauging and understanding Fijian nurses' experiences, as well as reflecting on the structure of nursing in Fiji. The second author is also an indigenous Fijian and has been a registered nurse in Fiji. The third author is a Pakeha from Aotearoa with a background in medical anthropology and a New Zealand registered nurse. In addition, reflexive journaling and supervisory dialogue were used to manage role duality and help to reduce bias.

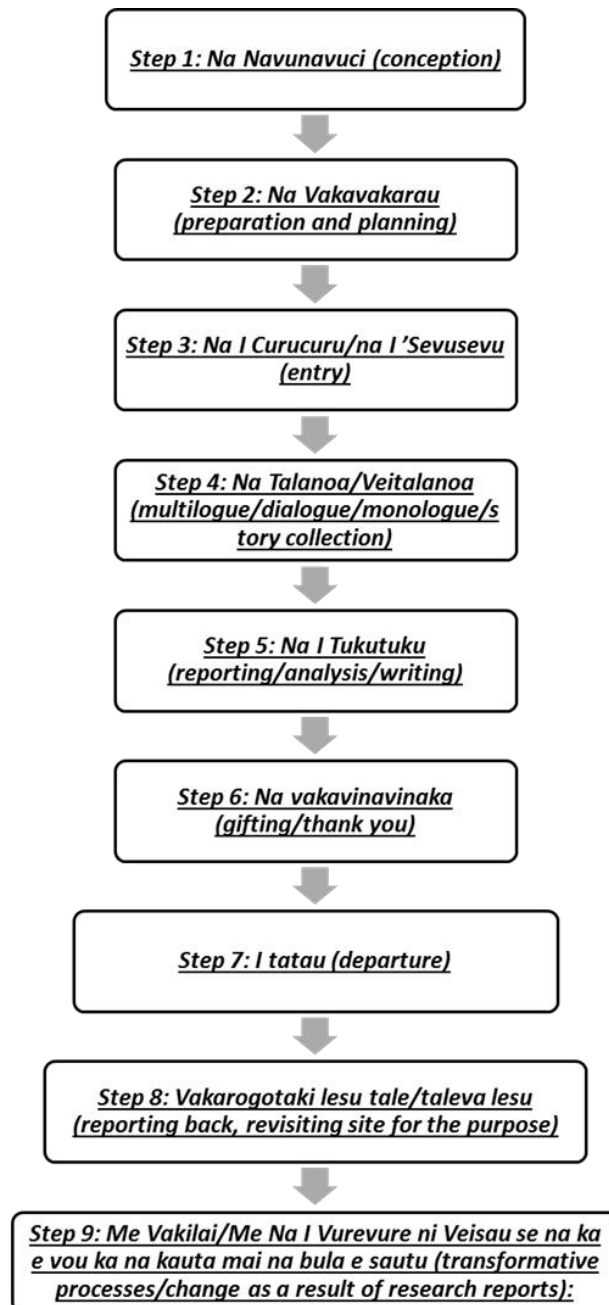


Figure 3 Vanua Research Steps

Source: Vanua research steps adapted from Nabobo-Baba (2008, p. 147)

The research questions were:

- To understand the meaning of job satisfaction as perceived by nurses in Fiji.
- To understand the personal, organisational, leadership, and workforce challenges that nurses in Fiji experience in their roles, and how they perceive these challenges impact their job satisfaction.

The approach to answering the research questions is described in the Vanua Research steps below.

Step 1: Na Navunavuci (Conception)

This stage represents the theoretical conception of the approach, including who will participate, the research framing, conceptualisation of theories and ideas, and timelines and planned schedules. This stage was achieved through regular consultations with selected members of the Ministry of Health in Fiji. Other nursing stakeholders, such as members of the Fijian Nursing Association (FNA) and the Fijian School of Nursing (FSN) were further consulted as to the relevance of the research. The process of establishing relationships and seeking approval and support from the relevant organisations was sought before proceeding with other arrangements. This process of honouring and seeking ideas and permission for any proposed activity with the people that are involved before taking any action is termed as '*veirogorogoci*,' and this is part of the 'Vakaturaga' behaviour in the Vanua. To ensure that the research benefited the nursing community, the involvement of the local people and relevant stakeholders was sought throughout all stages of the research, through oral feedback and written reports to ensure that culturally respectful relationships were maintained.

Step 2: Na Vakavakarau (preparation and planning)

To recruit participants, we sought the verbal approval of the nursing leaders, village chiefs, community leaders, and relevant government authorities. This involved the cultural practice of showing respect and courtesy to organisational and community leaders, which in return they offer their blessings for the safe conduct of the research, after they felt they had been fully informed. Subsequently an application to the Fijian Ministry of Health and Medical Service Research Committee was also sought to request ethical approval to carrying out the research, This was duly granted number FNHRERC-2019.98.MP, as well as ethics from the university concerned AUT-19/261. All participants provided written informed consent; confidentiality was ensured via de-identification and secure storage, with data retained for five years.

Step 3: Na I Curucuru/na I 'Sevusevu (entry)

A central part of Fijian custom is the process of requesting entry into the Vanua, which includes the home, village, or community. Entry is usually in the form of the presentation of yaqona (kava), which is called 'I 'sevusevu'. To gain access to the study participants', we formally approached the Ministry of Health, after having obtained ethics. We offered morning teas and token gifts to various government institutions, to promote I 'sevusevu and permission to conduct our Talanoa interviews.

We sought to recruit registered nurses from urban and rural areas, nursing leaders, and nursing directors. All engagement and support with recruitment were centred on cultural protocols and honoured through

appreciation gift giving, together with consideration for dates that were convenient to the participants and did not conflict with important cultural events or holidays

When conducting our Talanoa conversations, we offered yaqona or a meals/refreshment before proceeding with each Talanoa.

Step 4: Na Talanoa/Veitalanoa (multilogue/dialogue/monologue/story collection)

In this study, the Talanoa conversations were intentionally conducted in an informal and relational manner to help participants feel at ease, even though traditional i-Taukei protocols typically prescribe conversational tone according to social hierarchy—for example, more formal speech between chiefs and commoners (Vudiniabola, 2011). Following discussions with community advisors, it was agreed that these hierarchical linguistic conventions could be temporarily suspended to minimise power differentials and foster an environment conducive to open, emotionally honest dialogue. This culturally negotiated decision represents a deliberate and ethically grounded modification of strict Vanua practice but remains aligned with the relational principles of Talanoa as articulated by Vaoleti (2006), who emphasises that authentic story-sharing emerges when participants are not constrained by status-based protocols. To achieve this balance, researchers began each encounter with broader, informal conversations before transitioning into the Talanoa itself, a process that supported methodological authenticity and upheld Nabobo-Baba's guidance on culturally responsive engagement while ensuring that participants' narratives reflected genuine experiences and emotions relevant to Pacific research contexts.

Step 5: Na I Tukutuku (reporting/analysis/writing)

All Talanoas, both individual and group were recorded via audio recording, with informed consent, and drawn together through thematic analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2014). Furthermore, two researchers (KN, EH) independently coded transcripts and compared interpretations to validate theme development.

Themes and sub-themes from the Talanoas

Theme 1.

- Organisational environment
 - Sub-themes
 - authoritative decision making
 - devaluing of nurses

Theme 2

- Issues with traditional management

Sub-themes

- unclear promotion pathways
- lack of leadership

Theme 3

- Work environment

Sub-themes

- poor workforce environment
- stress and burnout

Theme 4

- Professional nursing environment

Sub-themes

- stigma
- unsafe working conditions

Reporting the results to the participants (*Na I tukutuku*) enabled us to maintain the trust acquired from the community without compromising relationships. This contributed to maintaining the spirit of unity among the people of the Vanua. The research results to date have been reported back to the Fijian Ministry of Health and other nursing institutions as an acknowledgment for being part of the research.

Step 6: *Na vakavinavaka (gifting/thank you)*

Fijian gifting is a token of appreciation and can occur between the researcher and the people that are being researched in both directions. It strengthens the relationship between the two parties. As part of the 'Vakaturaga' behaviour, gifting contributes to the cultural protocol of being considerate and respectful of others. Therefore, as a token of appreciation, gifts such as New Zealand souvenirs were presented to all research participants and the nursing organisations involved in the consultations (*Vakavinavaka*).

Step 7: *I tatau (departure)*

On completion of the Talanoa, the Vanua departure protocols were enacted with the 'I tatau', as a formal way of thanking the community and saying farewell. In the Fijian Vanua context, farewell is not the end, as once a relationship has been established it is seen to continue into the future. Similar to the entry process (*I 'sevusevu*), the Yaqona is presented to the community for farewell; once accepted, an ongoing relationship is forged. This was achieved with regular communication with the participants, and the sharing of the transcribed conversations with each participant for verification once the Talanoa conversation had been completed.

Step 8: Vakarogotaki lesu tale/taleva lesu (reporting back, revisiting site for the purpose)

Feedback signifies respect and appreciation for the nurse's contribution to the research. Feedback on the results was provided in the form of a presentation to the Fiji Nurses Association general meeting in March 2023 and a written report to the Fiji Ministry of Health Medical Services, which gave recognition to the chiefs, nurses, and communities involved. The feedback report also allowed for transparency and honoured the Fijian protocol of respect (*Vakarogotaki lesu tale*).

Step 9: Me Vakilai/Me Na I Vurevure ni Veisau se na ka e vou ka na kauta mai na bula e sautu (transformative processes/change)

The results aimed to enable change to be implemented to improve the status and associated job satisfaction of nurses in Fiji), as well as informing the key nurse leaders and policy makers and are currently being shared and socialised both directly or indirectly as a mechanism for change and for improving the health of the Fijian community.

Fiji is an island that has had adverse political instability with a unique mix of democracy; thus, the introduction of the research through the Vanua needed to be diplomatic without directing attention at the government or any exploitation from political parties within nursing governance structures (Lane, 2012).

Strengths

The use of the 'Vanua' indigenous framework, though a challenge and a privilege, emphasised the advantage of having Indigenous researchers on the team. The strengths of applying the Vanua Framework included deeper relational trust, richer narrative detail, and culturally aligned engagement. Challenges involved balancing insider positionality with analytic rigour, negotiating ceremonial practices within research timelines, and adapting cultural protocols to professional contexts. These reflections outline what worked well, what required negotiation, and how the study advances methodological understanding of applying Indigenous frameworks in health research.

This process also required substantial time to translate the meaning and concepts of the Talanoa conversation that were enriched by the rich details of the nurses' experience on their job satisfaction.

Limitations

Although the nursing workforce in Fiji comprises multiple ethnic groups with diverse cultural backgrounds and professional experiences, this study focuses exclusively on i-Taukei nurses, and as such, the findings reflect the perspectives of this single ethnic group and should not be assumed to represent or be generalisable to the wider population of Fijian nurses.

To ensure ethical and conceptual clarity, the manuscript explicitly notes that nursing in Fiji comprises multiple ethnic groups and that the findings of this study reflect only the experiences of i-Taukei nurses. As a result, the

findings may not be fully generalisable to all Fijian nurses. Policy-makers, researchers, and practitioners using this study must therefore understand the cultural boundaries of the sample and the culturally localised nature of the insights.

Additional limitations include the gender imbalance of the participants' sample. Furthermore, the cultural protocols — including ceremonial expectations and the waiving of hierarchical language conventions — may have shaped participant responses. The insider status of the lead researcher strengthened cultural alignment but may also have influenced interpretation. These contextual considerations should be recognised by researchers and policymakers who draw on the findings.

Conclusion

The 'Vanua' highlighted many factors of customary hierarchy and patriarchy within Fijian society. In the current study, indigenous knowledge approaches, when integrated with Western methods, for example data analysis, lead to strengthening two different perspectives that can pave the way to advocating for and producing empirical data that serve to improve nursing job satisfaction and ultimately health care outcomes in Fiji.

The Vanua research model enabled the magnifying of these Fiji nurses' voices to serve to inform an understand their relationships, values, culture, knowledge system, and spirituality. This contemporary data provides novel insights into the context of contemporary nursing in Fiji (Nabobo-baba, 2008).

Indigenous values offer unique insight which are key factors in addressing nursing job satisfaction and addressing systemic challenges within the global and Pacific health care organisations and nursing management systems. This in turn enables the development of tailored strategic plans that cater to unique and novel post-colonial population health needs.

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