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# Reflections on community academic partnership in health research with the Niue community using the Matalili-Aga Gahua (Matalili Wellbeing Framework)

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## Abstract

Community-academic partnerships are essential for addressing health inequities and ensuring public health research reflects the values and priorities of communities. This study presents reflections from community and academic researchers in a collaborative research project conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic to explore the wellbeing of the Niue community in Aotearoa New Zealand. The research was guided by the Matalili Wellbeing Framework, a model developed from Niue cultural values and traditional knowledge, with the principles of Vahā Loto-Agaaga Ofania (Spirit of Care), Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship), and Fakamalolo (Empowerment). Using a collaborative autoethnographic approach, both community and academic researchers contributed written reflections spanning all stages of the research process. The reflections in this study described how community members were involved in the broader health research project, contributing to its initial conceptualisation and design and participating in data collection, interpretation, and dissemination. The reflections also highlighted the importance of trust-building, flexibility, and integrating traditional knowledge and lived experience. Informal and inclusive settings, supported by technology and collaborative practices, facilitated active participation and mutual learning. The partnership successfully navigated tensions between institutional procedures and community practices, demonstrating how culturally inclusive, community-led research can yield outcomes that are academically rigorous and socially meaningful. The study offers contextually grounded implications for practice that may inform effective community-academic partnerships in future community health research and public health policy development involving the Niue community, as part of the wider Pacific communities. The findings reinforce the importance of co-design and relational accountability in public health research.

**Keywords** Community-academic partnership, Matalili Wellbeing Framework, Niue community, Public health, Collaborative autoethnography, Inter-professional learning



## 1 Introduction

Community-academic partnerships (CAPs) play a crucial role in addressing health disparities, particularly in marginalised and under-represented communities [1–4]. CAPs are characterised by collaborations between academic researchers and community members or agencies to achieve specific causes or goals [5]. Traditionally, research has often prioritised the interests of academic researchers over those of the community [6]. This imbalance may have resulted from researchers developing projects with minimal input from community stakeholders, failing to disseminate information to the community, and implementing interventions without considering community needs [5, 7, 8]. Therefore, CAPs represent a potential approach to improve collaboration between academic researchers and community stakeholders.

CAPs have been applied in various fields, particularly in health and education [5]. Increasingly, communities, funding agencies, policy makers and academic institutions favours research that involve partnerships between relevant stakeholders [5, 9, 10]. Community stakeholders can identify critical issues facing their community through their lived experience [11–13]. Their cultural knowledge and expertise can guide research design and implementation, fostering more equitable participation in the research. Involving community stakeholders at all research stages ensures relevance, as well as improving communication and trust between researchers and communities. These partnerships leverage the strengths of both community members and academic researchers to foster mutual learning, co-creation of knowledge to develop culturally appropriate and translational research, such as in public health strategies [14, 15] and health policies [2, 16, 17].

CAPs must be conducted and managed to avoid imbalances by promoting reciprocal relationships where power is shared, and all parties benefit mutually from the research process [18]. Effective CAPs require the engagement of diverse stakeholders [17], including community members and academic researchers, in collaborative efforts that promote shared learning, trust, and reciprocity. A range of organisational practices and public health policies emphasises the need to build capacity for community engagement [19]. Authentic engagement goes beyond mere community consultation or research *in* the community but requires involvement *with* community stakeholders as equal partners throughout all stages of research [3].

### 1.1 Context of research with the Niue community

Pacific communities in New Zealand were disproportionately affected by the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic [20]. Several factors contributed to these health inequities, including higher risks of COVID-19 complications and fatality due to existing health conditions [21], lower vaccination rates [22], and greater need for socioeconomic support [23]. Research on the impact of COVID-19 so far has been mostly focused on Pacific Island communities as a collective [20], which can mask important differences amongst heterogeneous populations [24].

Within this broader Pacific context, the Niue community represents a distinct cultural group whose experiences require specific attention rather than being subsumed within generalised Pacific categories. The Niue community is an integral part of the Pacific Island communities in New Zealand. Niue is a self-governing country in free association with New Zealand, and the Niue community has been a part of New Zealand realm

since 1901. The Matalili-Aga Gahua (Matalili Wellbeing Framework) was recently developed from traditional Niue cultural practices that sustain wellbeing, as recounted by Niue elders [25]. The Matalili Framework weaves together three interconnected principles: Vahā Loto-Agaaga Ofania (Spirit of Care), Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship), and Fakamalolo (Empowerment). The term matalili refers to a circular woven pattern unique to Niue culture. It serves as a cultural anchor to connect the Framework with the values and tradition of the Niue community. The principles of the Matalili Framework have been proposed to provide a cultural guide when engaging in research with the Niue community.

In this study, we detail the community-academic partnership between academic researchers at a university and members of a community trust who work closely with the Niue community. The reflections analysed in this article are drawn from the research team, rather than community participants, because the purpose of the study is to examine the dynamics of the community-academic research partnership. These reflections arise from our collaboration on a national Ministry of Health-funded project investigating the experiences of the Niue community during the COVID-19 pandemic in Aotearoa New Zealand. By focusing on reflections from both community and academic researchers, this study aims to provide insights into partnership formation, power-sharing, and reciprocity, contributing to broader discussions on the role of CAPs in advancing health equity and community wellbeing. In addition, we demonstrate the first use of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework in research to provide cultural context for guiding all stages of the project and engagement with the Niue community.

## 2 Method

The broader Ministry of Health funded research project, on which the reflections in this article are based, was conducted by a team comprising community members from a Niue community trust and academic researchers from a university, with roles that encompassed principal investigators, data analyst, and research advisory group members. Ethical approval for the project was obtained from the Monū Education and Social Services Trust Ethics Committee (MESSTEC) and the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEK approval reference 22/279). The research was conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and regulations of both committees. The broader project involved surveys and tala (narrative interviews) with the Niue community, and the findings [26] have been shared with the New Zealand Ministry of Health to support the development of future public health initiatives.

The present study focuses specifically on the research team's reflections on conducting the broader health research project with the Niue community. For this purpose, we used a collaborative autoethnography approach [27] in which all contributors, who were researchers directly involved in the broader project, provided their free and informed consent to participate in the reflective process. Collaborative autoethnography is a form of self-reflection [28], where the researchers' experiences and writing become the primary source of data. Building on autoethnographical methods, collaborative autoethnography brings together experiences and perspectives from multiple researchers to create a richer pool of data [27, 29].

We adopted the iterative process of collaborative autoethnography, as described by Chang et al. [27]. In the preliminary data collection step, each author provided a written

reflection on their experiences of the research project, contributing their own perspective to any aspects of the community-academic partnership that felt significant to them. In the subsequent data collection step, we met as a group on at least three occasions, along with several smaller informal discussions among team members, to share and discuss our reflections. These meetings allowed authors to clarify the intent of their reflections, identify areas where key contributions or experiences may have been overlooked, and suggest additions or refinements. Following these discussions, each author had the opportunity to revise their reflections as part of the iterative process.

A categorical coding approach was applied, where key ideas were coded from extended phrases or sentences in the reflections [30]. The initial coding was conducted using the commenting feature in Microsoft Word, and the codes were extracted using the Thematic Analysis macro [31]. During the second cycle of coding, the initial codes were reviewed and grouped together into broader categories based on the pattern coding technique. These categories formed the basis for the development of overarching themes [30]. The resulting themes were then organised according to the guiding principles of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework [25], which provided a Niue cultural lens for the analysis. We interpreted the meaning from these themes to develop implications for practice that can guide future community-academic partnerships.

To enhance the consistency and depth of the findings, investigator triangulation was applied. Multiple researchers participated in the coding and thematic analysis process, offering a more diverse perspective and interpretation [32]. Investigator triangulation also added breadth and reflexivity to the analysis. Throughout the analysis, we incorporated reflexive dialogue to consider how our diverse cultural identities, research roles, and varying levels of connection to the Niue community influenced the way we interpreted and represented the reflections. Interpretive differences were resolved through discussion with the original authors, and coding and theme development were finalised through group consensus to ensure consistency with the authors' intended meaning. As part of the report writing step of the iterative process of collaborative autoethnography [27], all authors contributed to the development of ideas articulated in this article, including checking the interpretation of the themes to ensure that the final analysis represented their voices and experiences authentically.

### 3 Results

Each author contributed a reflection that added their unique experiences to the dataset. As collaborative autoethnography draws on researchers' positionalities, the roles and affiliations of each contributor are listed to support reflexive interpretation of the findings. The areas described below represent analytic summaries identified through coding of the open reflections. Reflections contributed by:

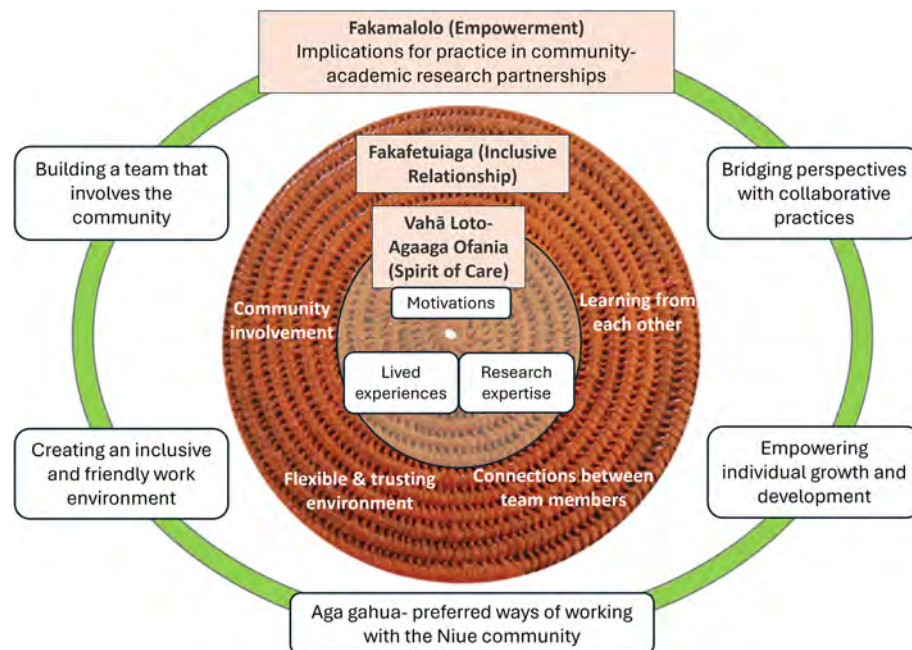
- **Elviso (Principal Investigator, community)** emphasised the motivation for this Niue community research and integrating cultural practices in academic research.
- **Cecily (Principal Investigator, community)** emphasised engagement with the Niue community and the application of the Matalili Framework in research.
- **Kelvin (Principal Investigator, academic)** emphasised navigating collaborative research processes and community engagement.

- **Barbara (Research Consultant, community)** emphasised supporting community researchers in understanding academic processes and bridging expectations between community and academic settings.
- **Anja (Data Analyst, academic)** emphasised cross-cultural data analysis and research with the Niue community.
- **Hailey (Research Advisory Group member and Tala Facilitator, community)** emphasised her experiences as both a nurse during the COVID-19 pandemic and a community researcher working with the Niue community.
- **Dianne (Research Advisory Group, academic)** emphasised Indigenous parallels and the importance of inclusive relationships in community research.
- **Nick (Research Advisory Group, academic)** emphasised the importance of leadership and holistic health models in community research.

The reflections were examined to identify themes that aligned with the three principles of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework (Fig. 1).

### 3.1 Vahā loto-Agaaga Ofanía (Spirit of Care)

**Vahā loto-Agaaga Ofanía (Spirit of Care)** is symbolised by the eyelet or space at the centre of the matalili. The space of the eyelet metaphorically represents the spiritual space that is created by the research project, where the research team came together, bringing with them their experiences and expertise to care for the project. This central positioning also reflects how the spirit of care demonstrated by the research team was at the heart of the work and contributed to a shared purpose through their diverse roles. The themes identified from the reflections relating to this principle are motivations for being involved in the project, as well as the convergence of lived experiences and



**Fig. 1** Thematic analysis of reflections from the research team overlaid on a woven matalili pattern, showing how the themes align with the three principles of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework. The eyelet at the centre represents Vahā Loto-Agaaga Ofanía (Spirit of Care), the woven strands of the matalili depict Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship), and their interaction leads to Fakamalolo (Empowerment), which could inform implications for practice in future community-academic research partnerships

research expertise. These themes are illustrated in Table 1 through selected quotes from the reflections.

### 3.1.1 Our diverse motivations brought us into the project space

In this theme, the research team members reflected on their motivations or reasons for being involved in the research project, which were deeply personal and relational (Table 1). Elviso was driven by his late mother's dedication to preserving Niue language and culture, while Cecily's passion for linguistic and cultural conservation led to the project's inception. Kelvin, as an academic, saw alignment with his previous research and joined to support the community-led initiative. Other researchers, including Anja, Dianne, Nick, Hailey, and Barbara came into the project space because they were

**Table 1** Themes relating to the Matalili Wellbeing Framework principle of **Vahā loto-Agaaga Ofania (Spirit of Care)** and examples of reflections from the research team

Theme	Examples of reflections
Our diverse motivations brought us into the project space	<p>"My late mother, Vetehemana Inoke Togiama, cared about the conservation of the Niue language and culture and was deeply committed to their revival. This commitment truly inspired my own interest and active involvement with the Niue community. [...] Our research revealed a significant lack of available literature on Niue and its people. Additionally, we found that the Niue language has been classified as endangered and threatened. No written literature of Niue culture- therefore a need for more research." (Elviso)</p> <p>"I was hesitant at first because community research and Pacific methodologies were not my area of expertise. However, I saw a connection between this project and my previous research on wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic, which made me realise that I could contribute to this project." (Kelvin)</p> <p>"As an emerging academic living in New Zealand for the past three years, contributing to a project based on the Niue community's experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic offered not only unique challenges for me, but opportunities for growth as a researcher in New Zealand." (Anja)</p> <p>"I was honoured to be a member of the Advisory Group using the partnership approach from a public health and Kaupapa Māori specialist perspective." (Dianne)</p>
A meeting place of lived experiences and research expertise	<p>"I have experience working with the community, including as a social worker for rangatahi [young people], a teacher in the Niue early learning center, chair of MESST, a restorative justice facilitator for family health, and a facilitator in Mana Tane program for Niue men's groups. I have gained a unique perspective on the challenges these individuals face in each of these sectors. These perspectives were important in thinking about the support required for wellbeing of the community during the COVID-19 pandemic." (Elviso)</p> <p>"the Spirit of Care / Self-awareness, with its focus on continuously caring for self and others including the environment aligns with a Māori worldview of interconnectedness between people and the land, water and sky. As with all Indigenous populations, Māori consider being connected to all living things places humans alongside nature as opposed to being in control of it." (Dianne)</p> <p>"My experience as a Māori biostatistician with involvement in Māori health research projects as well as reviewing Māori health research projects has given me a good perspective on the processes involved in engaging in community academic partnerships especially with Māori and Pacific communities." (Nick)</p> <p>"The partnership with an academic institution meant that we were able to receive support from a Research Development Manager and the Research Office, who provided critical insights into the funder's assessment requirements and guidance throughout the process." (Kelvin)</p> <p>"I was required to draw on my background knowledge of research to assist the community trust members' understanding of academic, contractual, and reporting processes and requirements." (Barbara)</p> <p>"Working as a Nurse during Covid and the lockdown meant a lot of sacrifices needed to be made. [...] On behalf of Monu Education and Social Services Trust, my role within this research was finding participants and conducting their interviews (tala in the Niue context). I was able to collect relevant information and understand perspectives and experiences from Niuean peoples during the time of Covid." (Hailey)</p> <p>"My role entailed doing the data analysis of the survey that had both close and open-ended questions." (Anja)</p>

called on, and were drawn to the project by a desire to contribute their expertise and perspectives.

### **3.1.2 A meeting place of lived experiences and research expertise**

The research project became a meeting place of lived experiences and research expertise, brought by members of the research team (Table 1). Community members, such as Elviso and Hailey, brought rich Niue cultural knowledge and professional experience working with the community, including social work and nursing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The lived experiences gave insights into the challenges faced by Niue families, including misinformation, digital exclusion among elders, the support required, and difficulties faced by healthcare workers working with the community during the pandemic.

Academic researchers emphasised their contributions in terms of their research expertise and their role within the project. For example, Anja, Nick and Kelvin reflected on their roles in research design, data analysis, methodological guidance, and integrating holistic health models. Kelvin's reflections also highlighted the importance of academic institutional support in managing ethical and contractual requirements, which were essential to the grant application and ongoing management of the research project.

Importantly, the reflections highlighted crossovers between lived experiences and research expertise. Academic researchers reflected on how their own cultural and lived experiences helped them to navigate this Niue community project. For example, Dianne, drawing from her background in kaupapa Māori and public health, provided valuable insights into Indigenous research methodologies and emphasised the parallels between Niue and Māori worldviews. Similarly, research expertise is not the exclusive domain of academic researchers as community researchers also brought with them relevant research expertise that were crucial in this project. For example, Hailey's experience conducting tala (narrative interviews), and her understanding of Niue culture and the community's health needs enriched the data collection process. Barbara's ability to interpret academic requirements and to support community members in understanding research protocols ensured that the project maintained both cultural and academic rigour.

## **3.2 Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship)**

**Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship)**, represented by the connected strands in the matalili, described ways that relationship was established and cultivated between the team members, stakeholders, and the environment. In this partnership, the reflections weave together inclusive relationship between members of the research team, the research advisory group, the Niue community, the government agency who funded the research, as well as the work and healthcare environments. The themes identified from the reflections that relate to the principle of Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship) encompassed community involvement, forming the team of community and academic researchers, creating a trusting work environment, and learning from each other. Table 2 provides examples of reflections that illustrate each theme associated with Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship).

### **3.2.1 Weaving community involvement into every stage of the research project**

Relationships with the community were clearly evident in the reflections of both the academic and community researchers. The reflections emphasised the community's

**Table 2** Themes relating to the Matalili Framework principle of **Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship)** and examples of reflections from the research team

Theme	Examples of reflections
Weaving community involvement into every stage of the research project	<p>“Initially, the research team’s approach to the community was met with scepticism . . . they perceived us as wanting to extract information without the intention to share our findings. However, through deeper conversations, meetings with elders, and participation in various group discussions, their confidence grew, and they became increasingly willing to share their insights. [...] Before securing the necessary funding, we communicated our need for information, which initially led to hesitation. Gradually, as trust was established, the Niue community began to open up. Upon receiving the funding and returning to inform them, they were pleased to see that the government was interested in supporting their community. From that moment on, they have consistently offered their support whenever the research team approached them for assistance. [...] I learned that data collection in an Indigenous context . . . often requires multiple meetings just to gather a single piece of information. Creating a conducive environment for participants was essential for them to express themselves freely.” (Cecily)</p> <p>“It was slightly difficult to get participants to commit to interviews due to time and availability. A few participants wanted the interview to be conducted in the Niuean language, which took slightly longer than done in English.” (Hailey)</p> <p>“We also had the opportunity to engage directly with the Niue community in Auckland as we presented our preliminary findings to a local weaving group at an informal community meeting. It was a very relaxed setting over coffee and food, and this was my first experience speaking face-to-face with participants, as I usually work with survey data. I realised how valuable these discussions were, offering insights that go beyond what can be captured in surveys. Explaining findings in simple, relatable terms led to rich conversations, with community members sharing their thoughts and asking questions. Hearing their firsthand experiences gave me a deeper understanding of the data and the human stories behind the experiences of COVID-19.” (Anja)</p>
Laying the foundations for connections between community and academic researchers	<p>“Initially, I met with Cecily and Elviso online, with friendly introductions, and initial discussions about their plan for the grant application, as they saw a need in the Niue community. [...] Subsequently, we developed a working relationship, where we met in person multiple times. I learned more about the Matalili Framework and it took several sessions for me to become familiar with the principles. As the Framework was new and written explanations had not been published, we relied on oral explanations of the traditional Niue knowledge from Elviso. [...] As community partners are often juggling their work, community involvement and other responsibilities, it was important to realise that it was not always easy to work to deadlines. I found that organising these work sessions and managing the required tasks were key. As the grant submission deadline approached, we had to work late into the night to complete the application document. The friendly working relationship that we had formed over the previous weeks enabled this dedication from the team. Learning from the lessons was important in the building of this community-academic partnership as we worked on the project.” (Kelvin)</p> <p>“The community trust members called on me to assist them with project delivery for a structured, contracted research, and with their interactions with the academic staff.” (Barbara)</p> <p>“Having worked on previous academic research with investigators Kelvin and Anja...” (Nick)</p>

**Table 2** (continued)

Theme	Examples of reflections
Building a flexible and trusting team environment	<p data-bbox="475 300 1267 480">“meetings were informal and friendly, sometimes over coffee, creating a relaxed and non-threatening environment. What started as research discussions grew into something more personal. Elviso and Cecily shared stories about Niuean culture, traditional food, and the health benefits of their diet. These interactions allowed me to build relationships with my colleagues, and I began to feel truly welcomed, despite being an outsider. It felt less like work and more like meeting with friends, a sense of connection and belonging that I will carry with me long after this project.” (Anja)</p> <p data-bbox="475 485 1267 559">“The Niue experiences’ weekly research project meetings played a crucial role in maintaining a cultural lens, adhering to safety protocols, and ensuring the proper handling of consent forms and confidentiality.” (Cecily)</p> <p data-bbox="475 563 1267 1070">“Weekly meetings with the research team and monthly meetings with the research advisory group were organised. To work around everyone’s busy schedule and locations throughout the city, we found it easier to organise regular meetings online, rather than battle rush hour traffic to meet in person. This worked out well because the members of the research team and research advisory group were spread across three countries at one stage during the project. [...] Throughout our collaboration, I realised that working with community partners required flexibility and openness to alternative ways of working. For example, it was necessary to be flexible with meeting times because community partners often have another job during work hours, so it was necessary to meet in the evenings and weekends. In contrast to most academic meetings, our in-person meetings had a more informal and social atmosphere, such as conversations over coffee and discussions to co-design and workshop ideas. [...] The ability to share documents online and work on them together in real-time enabled effective collaboration, and transparency around the work that has been done. However, the reliance on technology also presented some challenges. Institutional security requirements made it difficult for community members, who were not employed by the university, to gain access to the shared files on the university platform. We overcame these challenges by requesting access to the university system for community partners as contractors. It was also crucial to support and guide community partners in the set up and navigation of programs required for online meetings and accessing the shared files.” (Kelvin)</p> <p data-bbox="475 1074 1267 1121">“we were able to form relationships with each other through commencing and ending the meetings with karakia [prayer] and keeping to the agenda.” (Dianne)</p>

**Table 2** (continued)

Theme	Examples of reflections
Bridging the disconnect between community and academic researchers by learning from each other and leveraging our strengths	<p>"Aspects of the ethics field protocol made the tala sessions quite challenging. The requirement to sign permissions and bring specific questions to the tala created a sense of struggle ... This highlights a tension between established protocols and the natural flow of interaction within the community. If you want to go to Niue or engage with the cultural community, let them do things naturally, as they do. [...] During my interactions with participants regarding mena fakaalofa [gifts], I discovered that such practices are not traditionally recognized in Niue culture. The essence of giving freely, of time and resources, is deeply ingrained in their way of life. However, upon my arrival, I sensed an underlying acknowledgment that others had come before me and offered rewards for participation. This realization highlighted the unique dynamics at play within their community and how they navigate the concept of reciprocity in their interactions. [...] This disconnect was evident in how knowledge is traditionally shared within Niue culture: that is what the Niue do; they talk and listen. They pass down knowledge through conversation and sharing. The emphasis here is on observation and participation rather than rigid instruction." (Elviso)</p> <p>"One major difference I noticed during the study design phase was the contrasting goals of academics and community partners, and our different interpretation of research. As an academic researcher, I was often focused on trying to find out about something new as part of the research, such as how the communities may have been affected. In contrast, Elviso and Cecily were often focused on what the research may mean for the community, such as what needs to be done to support the community. They were also able to fill in knowledge gaps in the literature relating to the Niue community through their familiarity and interactions with the community. This highlights the importance of co-designing research studies with the community. Using the Matalili Framework, we were able to converge on the same research objectives, where the research aimed to understand the community's experiences, as well as inform future initiatives. [...] An important factor in the development of our partnership was understanding each person's qualities and leveraging these strengths." (Kelvin)</p> <p>"Applying the Matalili framework, with its focus on care, relationships, and empowerment, was not straightforward to me at first. It challenged me to move beyond my own biases and conventional thematic analysis and engage with the data in a way that honoured the community's values. However, this challenge was also an opportunity for growth. It broadened my research skills, particularly in cross-cultural contexts, and deepened my understanding of how culturally embedded frameworks can enhance qualitative research. [...] We held weekly research meetings where I received invaluable guidance from my research partners. Elviso and Cecily patiently explained the Matalili framework, helping me understand its core values of care, relationships, and empowerment." (Anja)</p> <p>"It is important to recognise that the model of health embedded in the community is different from the western individualistic model of health, recognising the community health focus and a wider more holistic view of health. [...] It is also key to have community members who have leadership roles in the research team and actively engage with the community at all stages of the research. And to ensure that the community's voices were evident in the research." (Nick)</p> <p>"Inclusive relationships- the weaving together and interlinking of each person's knowledge and contribution to the project was role modelled throughout the time I have been involved. [...] The inclusive relationships with each other are also evident with Kaupapa Māori where ideas and thoughts are genuinely integrated to form part of the weaving or whariki of the final product." (Dianne)</p> <p>"Magnifying perspectives from the Niue people and utilising the Matalili framework as a framework of this research was a diligent experience. The AUT team were so helpful during this time, it was lovely working with them all, especially with their expertise and contributions." (Hailey)</p>

enthusiasm to be involved throughout the research process (Table 2). Cecily's reflection highlighted the importance of engaging with the community prior to securing funding as an important way to understand their needs and to build trust. Her reflection detailed how the community was initially sceptical due to their past experiences, perceiving researchers as extractive. However, through consistent engagement, including meetings with elders and group discussions, trust was gradually built. The community had input into shaping the research design, and ongoing feedback during the research project.

Hailey reflected on her experience with recruitment and tala with the community, including language preferences and availability. She was able to incorporate her lived experience and understanding of health in the Niue community to cultivate a trusting relationship with community that is central to the tala methodology.

Cecily, Kelvin and Anja highlighted the importance of sharing information with the community and getting feedback in community meetings. These community meetings take time, and multiple meetings are usually required. However, the gatherings fostered meaningful, two-way dialogue that deepened the researchers' understanding and strengthened community relationships. Kelvin and Anja described their experiences of presenting preliminary findings to the community. The relaxed community gathering over food and coffee without time pressures or rigid agenda encouraged greater participation by the community. These community meetings allowed community members to share personal experiences, with rich and meaningful conversations, and contributed insights that informed the reporting to the Ministry of Health. Their reflections emphasised the importance of tailoring communication in ways that are accessible, respectful, and culturally relevant to the community context.

### ***3.2.2 Laying the foundations for connections between community and academic researchers***

In this theme, the reflections described how relationships were formed between members of the research team. These relationships were often initiated through existing networks, deliberate engagement, and culturally appropriate practices (Table 2).

Cecily described how her pre-existing working relationship with Elviso was instrumental in identifying funding opportunities to support health initiatives for the Niue community. Kelvin reflected on the development of a strong foundation with community researchers through face-to-face meetings, and the sharing of oral knowledge and stories. This early connection laid the foundations for the constructive working relationship that withstood the pressures of working to deadlines and the formation of the research team.

Once funding was secured, existing relationships were leveraged to fill key roles in the research project. Barbara and Hailey joined the team from their connections with Cecily and Elviso through the Monū Education and Social Service Trust. Similarly, academic researchers, Nick and Anja, became involved due to prior collaborations with Kelvin, demonstrating how established professional relationships can support the formation of an interdisciplinary team comprising both community and academic researchers.

### ***3.2.3 Building a flexible and trusting team environment***

This theme explores the factors that enabled successful interactions within the community-academic partnership. A key insight was the importance of flexibility and informal approaches, which were consistently described as more effective in fostering inclusive and trusting relationships (Table 2).

Anja and Kelvin highlighted the need to build trust within the team, noting that a work environment that was informal, relaxed, and flexible was more conducive to developing strong interpersonal connections. Meetings often took place over coffee or shared meals, creating a welcoming and non-threatening atmosphere. These informal settings allowed for deeper conversations, including personal stories and cultural exchanges,

such as discussions about Niue food and traditions. This sense of hospitality and relational warmth is also consistent with interactions with the community.

Multiple team members, including Anja, Cecily, and Kelvin, reflected on how these informal gatherings helped shift the dynamic from professional to personal, from colleagues to friends. This relational approach was particularly important in working with community researchers, who often need to balance their main job and other responsibilities. Flexibility in scheduling, including evening and weekend meetings, was essential to accommodate their availability and ensure meaningful participation. The flexibility reinforces a sense of connection and belonging to the team.

Technology played a crucial role in maintaining and strengthening relationships, especially as team members were spread across different parts of the city, and at one point, three countries. Weekly online meetings and monthly advisory group sessions enabled consistent communication. However, this reliance on digital tools also presented challenges. Institutional security protocols made it difficult for community partners to access shared documents on institutional platforms. These barriers were addressed by granting community members access as contractors, and providing support to navigate the required systems, ensuring equitable participation.

Cultural inclusiveness was another cornerstone of the team environment. Dianne and Cecily emphasised the importance of beginning and ending meetings with culturally appropriate practices, such as *karakia* (prayer or incantation), which helped ground the work in shared values and respect. The integration of Niue cultural elements, such as oral traditions and food, further enriched the collaborative process and reinforced the importance of maintaining a cultural lens throughout the project.

#### ***3.2.4 Bridging the disconnect between community and academic researchers by learning from each other and leveraging our strengths***

A key feature of this research partnership was the process of learning from one another and intentionally leveraging the diverse strengths within the team (Table 2). Barbara described an initial disconnect between academic and community researchers, particularly in their approaches to research and engagement. However, through the development of strong, trusting relationships and ongoing guidance, these differences were navigated and ultimately became a source of growth and collaboration.

Reflections from across the team highlighted how academic and community researchers brought distinct but complementary perspectives. Kelvin noted that academic researchers often approached the study with a focus on generating new knowledge, while community partners such as Elviso and Cecily were more concerned with how the research could support and benefit the community. Their deep familiarity with the Niue community allowed them to fill critical gaps in the literature and ensure the research remained relevant and grounded in cultural lived experience. Nick further highlighted the importance of having community members in leadership roles and actively engaging with the community throughout all stages of the research, ensuring that community voices were central and visible.

The use of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework was instrumental in aligning these perspectives. It provided a cultural foundation for co-designing the research, guiding the development of research questions, shaping team relationships, and establishing a shared understanding of care, empowerment, and relationality. Kelvin reflected on how

the framework helped the team converge on common goals. Nick emphasised that the framework reflected the community's holistic view of health, contrasting with Western individualistic models. Hailey's reflection described the experience as both diligent and rewarding, particularly in being able to apply the Matalili Framework and amplify Niue perspectives. Dianne likened the collaborative process to weaving a whāriki (woven mat), where each person's contribution was interlinked and valued, drawing parallels with kaupapa Māori principles of inclusion and integration.

The reflections also described tensions between conventional academic practices and community values, particularly with ethics and the use of mena fakalofa (gifts to participants in appreciation of their time). While mena fakalofa was included in the research design to acknowledge participants' time and contributions, Elviso clarified that this form of reciprocal giving is not traditionally practiced in Niue. Instead, giving freely is a deeply ingrained cultural norm. However, the use of mena fakalofa reflected an adaptation to research expectations and prior experiences with external researchers, rather than a native cultural practice. Cecily and Elviso highlighted how formal ethics protocols, such as signing consent forms and adhering to pre-planned narrative interview questions, disrupted the natural flow of tala, which are central to Niue knowledge sharing through oral traditions. Elviso emphasised that in Niue culture, knowledge is passed down through observation, participation, and informal dialogue. This underscored the importance of balancing institutional protocols with traditional cultural values.

### **3.3 Fakamalolo (Empowerment)**

The principle of **Fakamalolo (Empowerment)** is embodied by the entire Matalili Framework, as it depends on the interaction between the Vahā loto-Agaaga Ofania (Spirit of Care) and Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship). The principle of Empowerment demonstrates how the experiences gained from participating in the research can provide valuable insights that support the community and promote future community-academic partnerships. Drawing from the themes that were constructed from our reflections of the research partnership, we propose the following implications for practise to guide other community-academic partnerships. These implications for practice could be important for research with communities, especially in areas such as public health or health policy.

#### ***3.3.1 Build a team that centres leadership by community researchers and involves the community in every stage of the project***

Communities should be empowered to co-design the research to ensure that it reflects their values, aspirations, and ways of knowing. Engagement needs to occur at every stage of the research process, to ensure that the community is supported to define the priorities, articulate their needs, lead the direction of the research, and be informed of the research outcomes.

Key actions that supported this practice included:

- Engaging early with the community to understand their needs before securing funding, which built trust and helped to overcome initial scepticism.
- Focussing on oral explanations and sharing results in an understandable way, including intergenerational dialogue.

- Ensuring that community researchers lead and perform key aspects of the research, such as recruitment, conducting tala, interpreting results, and communicating the results in community meetings.
- Adapting academic processes, such as data collection and the sharing of results, to align with community values.

### **3.3.2 Create an inclusive and friendly environment where everyone feels safe to contribute, and all voices are heard**

Empowerment is fostered in culturally inclusive, flexible, and relational environments where people feel safe, respected, and valued, enabling meaningful participation by all researchers.

Key actions that supported this practice included:

- Holding meetings in informal settings, such as over coffee or shared meals, to build trust and relational warmth. Cultural practices, such as karakia, were also woven into team interactions to honour cultural values and create a sense of belonging.
- Using technology to maintain and strengthen relationships by enabling communication across locations and time zones. Ensuring adequate digital support was essential to facilitate inclusive and sustained engagement.
- Allowing flexibility to accommodate community members' responsibilities, such as scheduling meetings in the evenings or weekends, to enable participation by team members who may have varying commitments and responsibilities.

### **3.3.3 Empower individual growth and development through reciprocity and mutual support**

Reciprocal empowerment of academic and community researchers can be achieved through mutual support, to enable growth from shared learning and capacity building.

Key actions that supported this practice included:

- Creating opportunities for mentoring and skill-sharing in research meetings and conversations. The collaborative environment allowed for ongoing feedback, adaptation, and learning from each other's experiences and expertise.
- Intentionally recognising and drawing on each team member's strengths, including lived experience, professional expertise, and cultural knowledge.

### **3.3.4 Collaborative research practices that bridge community and academic perspectives**

Empowerment is strengthened when diverse perspectives are integrated into research design and interpretation. While differences in worldview may initially present challenges, they can ultimately foster innovation and growth when embraced collaboratively.

Key actions that supported this practice included:

- Using the Matalili Wellbeing Framework as a cultural framework to guide research design, team dynamics, and establishing a common goal.
- Encouraging open dialogue, which enabled the team to navigate differing expectation, worldviews, and ways of operating. This ultimately strengthened relationships and trust through inclusive and supportive team practices.

### 3.3.5 *Aga gahua (Preferred way of working with the Niue community)*

Researchers can be empowered to engage with the Niue community by observing respectful and cultural practices. The behavioural guidelines for preferred ways of working and interacting with others in the Niue culture (aga gahua) reflect the importance of spirituality, intergenerational respect, and relationality. Observing aga gahua provides a foundation for researchers, particularly those from outside the community, to engage in ways that are culturally safe, empowering, and aligned with Niue values. These practices can help foster trust and build relationships, as well as contributing to the revitalisation of Niue cultural identity and language through research engagement.

Key actions that can achieve this practice include:

- Using the Niue language, such as “Fakaalofa lahi atu” (Hello) and “Fakaue lahi” (Thank you) to acknowledge the cultural identity of the community.
- Beginning meetings with liogi or karakia (prayer), followed by a Niue whakatoki (proverb) or traditional chant to set the tone and spiritual context of the gathering in the space.
- Acknowledging all those present, especially matua (elders), community leaders, and the younger generation, as well as recognising spiritual sources such as God and ancestors.
- Having the researchers introduce themselves and their matohiaga (background), including their genealogy, geographical connections, and purpose for being present, to establish relational connections and accountability.

## 4 Discussion

The formation of the partnership between community researchers from a Niue community organisation and academic researchers from a university emerged from a need to better understand and address the impacts of COVID-19 on marginalised groups. This study offers Niue-centred insights that contribute to wider Pacific health research by demonstrating how the Matalili Wellbeing Framework, developed from Niue traditional knowledge, can guide inclusive, relational, and reflexive approaches to CAPs.

While previous literature has emphasised the importance of community engagement and co-design, this study offers an example of how Pacific principles were operationalised across all stages of a national public health research project in Aotearoa New Zealand. The reflections from both community and academic researchers reveal how community engagement at every stage, flexibility and informality, mutual growth and development, and bridging academic and cultural worldviews helped shape the research process and outcomes. These relational and culturally embedded practices reflect approaches commonly reported in other Indigenous and Pacific community-academic partnerships [33, 34]. However, our use of the Matalili Framework represents a Niue-specific approach, offering a Niue cultural principle for translating reflections into implications for practice.

The implications for practice synthesised in this study reinforce key principles for effective CAPs, including culturally defined ways of working and for institutional flexibility to uphold community values [35]. Early and sustained engagement with the community at every stage of the research process was essential for building trust and strengthening relationships [34], enabling co-design of research that is impactful for the community [36]. The need to create inclusive and flexible spaces, where all voices can

be heard and respected, has been identified as crucial for Pacific research contexts [37]. Informal gatherings, shared meals, and cultural rituals played a central role in our partnership, supporting trust-building and easing power dynamics [38, 39].

The implications for practice highlight the importance of mutual growth and development within CAPs. Academic researchers gained cultural insights and expanded their methodological repertoire, while community researchers strengthened their research capacity and leadership. Consistent with our reflections, studies have shown that such reciprocal learning through relational practices contributed to a more equitable distribution of decision-making authority within the team and strengthened cultural capability among academic researchers [40]. These processes illustrate how deliberately nurturing cross-cultural understanding can advance more inclusive and meaningful research outcomes, including sustainable partnerships and reducing health disparities in Indigenous communities [39, 41].

A further contribution of this study is the promotion of *aga gahua* or preferred ways of working with the Niue community. While not derived directly from the written reflections, *aga gahua* was articulated by Niue researchers on the team as a set of behavioural guidelines for interacting with the Niue community. These guidelines echo similar themes discussed by Niue scholars, who emphasise the importance of centring relational approaches and Niue cultural practices, including language, genealogy, and oral traditions [42]. *Vagahau Niue* (the Niue language) has been classified as an endangered language by UNESCO [43], and its preservation is seen as vital to the wellbeing and identity of Niue people. Research has shown that language revitalisation efforts not only strengthen cultural identity but also contribute to improved educational outcomes and Indigenous community wellbeing [44]. Therefore, empowering researchers to engage with the Niue community in culturally appropriate ways enables the reciprocal empowerment of the Niue community by supporting the revitalisation of language, identity, and intergenerational knowledge.

Importantly, this study advances the literature by demonstrating how relational approaches can function not only as cultural values but as formal methods that are intentionally integrated into research practice. Relationality must be clearly defined and applied with specificity to avoid tokenistic inclusion and to ensure meaningful engagement [45]. The reflections in our study demonstrate how relationality was embedded in community engagement, team dynamics, research design, data analysis, and dissemination of findings. The reflections from community members recount how they were able to contribute critical insights during the research process, ensuring that findings were both culturally and practically relevant.

#### **4.1 Collaborative autoethnography and Pacific research**

A collaborative autoethnography approach was adopted in this study, where each author reflected on working together in a community-academic research partnership. The analysis of individual narratives from the group enables greater coverage of experiences on a topic and can lead to collective interpretation based on their unique insights [28, 46]. Collaborative autoethnography has been used to detail numerous Pacific-related research [47–49]. These studies have encompassed perspectives from Pacific and non-Pacific researchers on topics that are important to Pacific communities.

The use of autoethnographic methods, where researchers reflect on their own lived experiences align well with Pacific methodologies, such as talanoa (or tala in the Niue context) that emphasises open, respectful dialogue and storytelling. Storytelling or the recounting of lived experience is an important aspect of Pacific research [50] and in autoethnography [51]. The ability for each member of the research team to include their reflection on their experiences and cultural context ensures that all voices are heard at the table [29]. This is particularly important in the context of the partnership with Pacific communities due to the historical power imbalance where community voices, particular of minority communities have not been heard [52]. In addition, the iterative process of collaborative autoethnography requires multiple discussions amongst contributors to come to a consensus [27]. This aligns with the talanoa approach, which also involves an iterative process where critical discussions between all voices at the table are required before leading to a consensus [53].

#### **4.2 Integrating the Matalili Wellbeing Framework to provide a Niue lens**

The integration of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework offered a Niue-specific lens for interpreting reflections and structuring thematic analysis. During the development of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework, stories recounted by elders highlighted the interconnectedness of the physical and spiritual dimensions, illustrating the reciprocal relationship between empowering the individual and empowering the collective [25]. For example, in a story describing the vaka (canoe) used for fishing, the canoe represents the physical dimension that forms a spiritual space of safety for the individual, who is empowered to safely venture out to sea. In turn, the individual can bring fish that provides sustenance for their family and community. The person must overcome the challenge of the journey, with the reward being nourishment and wellbeing for the collective. Similarly, reflections from the research team reveal a need to empower personal growth and development, which in turn empower the whole research team to successfully complete the project. The researchers revealed initial challenges, such as the disconnect between academic and community researchers. By having a trusting and collaborative work environment, it was possible to overcome these challenges, to nurture both individual and collective empowerment. These parallels demonstrate that the principles of the Matalili Framework are not only applicable to traditional practices in the context of survival and sustenance, but also transferable to contemporary research processes.

The principles of the Matalili Framework are closely aligned with research processes. The principles of Spirit of Care and Inclusive Relationship resemble the ethic of care central to research, which emphasises sensitivity, respect, and attentiveness to the needs of all stakeholders [54]. The principles also support reflexivity and positionality, encouraging researchers to critically examine their roles, assumptions, and relationships within the research process [55]. In this study, reflexivity was not only a methodological requirement, but a relational practice integrated in team interactions and decision-making, which is embedded in the principle of Inclusive Relationship. The principle of Empowerment depends on the interweaving of spirit of care and inclusive relationship. This interdependence mirrors the implications for practice identified in the study, which emphasised the importance of building a team with diverse cultural experiences and expertise, developing relationships, and creating a flexible, inclusive environment that enabled the team to navigate initial disconnects and challenges. Therefore, the Matalili

Framework served not only as a cultural guide but as a practical tool for promoting equity and mutual accountability in research partnerships.

The use of the Matalili Framework responds to the need for public health research approaches that are culturally inclusive and reflect community-defined priorities, with the aim of improving health outcomes for the community [56]. Rather than adapting Western models, the framework that was developed from Niue traditional knowledge was used to guide the entire research process. This supports broader calls for Indigenous methodologies that prioritise relationality, cultural context, and community-defined outcomes [39].

This study addresses a significant gap in the literature by providing a specific study involving the Niue community. Niue people are often subsumed within broader Pacific categories in research, which can obscure their distinct cultural perspectives and needs. By centring Niue voices and values, this study offers a culturally aligned model for community-academic partnership and contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Pacific health. The Niue study represents a stepping stone in community health research, with potential implications for the broader Pacific and Indigenous communities.

#### **4.3 Limitations of methods and findings**

This study provides rich insights into the dynamics of a community-academic partnership guided by the Matalili Wellbeing Framework. While the framework offered a Niue-specific lens for guiding the research with the Niue community, its application is still in early stages and requires further refinement and validation across different contexts. The reflections and findings are based on a single study involving a specific group of academic and community researchers, which may limit generalisability to other Pacific or Indigenous communities. Future investigations into how community-academic partnerships can be maintained in the long term will be beneficial for strengthening the sustainability of these initiatives.

Additionally, the collaborative autoethnography approach relied on retrospective reflections, which may be influenced by memory and personal bias. Although triangulation and thematic analysis were used to strengthen credibility, future research could benefit from longitudinal or real-time reflection methods to capture evolving perspectives and deepen understanding of partnership dynamics. Future work could also examine how the Matalili Framework supports other Niue-led initiatives and explore whether elements of the framework can be thoughtfully adapted for use with other Pacific communities.

The overlap of themes across the three principles in the Matalili Wellbeing Framework reflects the relational and holistic nature of wellbeing in Niue culture [25], but also posed challenges for thematic categorisation. The reflections also highlighted systemic barriers, including institutional ethics protocols and digital access limitations, which constrained the ability to fully align research practices with community values. These challenges echo broader critiques of global health research that overlook Indigenous epistemologies and relational approaches to knowledge [45, 57]. Understanding these dynamics is essential not only for addressing immediate health concerns, but also for building long-term capacity for policy advocacy and structural change [17]. Evaluating the outcomes of future community-academic partnerships and the implications for practice drawn

from the reflections in this study, particularly their influence on community research, will be critical in determining the long-term success.

## 5 Conclusion

This article presents reflections from researchers working together in a community-academic partnership focused on understanding and supporting the wellbeing of the Niue community during the COVID-19 pandemic. Guided by the Matalili Wellbeing Framework, a model rooted in Niue traditional knowledge and cultural values, the research team explored how Vahā Loto-Agaaga Ofania (Spirit of Care), Fakafetuiaga (Inclusive Relationship), and Fakamalolo (Empowerment) shaped both the research process and its outcomes.

The reflections from community and academic researchers revealed how diverse motivations, lived experiences, and research expertise converged to create a shared space of care and collaboration. Engagement with the community, trust-building, cultural inclusiveness, and reciprocal engagement were central to the success of the partnership. Informal and flexible environments, supported by technology and relational practices, enabled meaningful participation and mutual learning across the team. The study demonstrated how community-led research, co-designed with cultural frameworks, can bridge academic and community worldviews. The integration of the Matalili Wellbeing Framework provided a cultural lens for research design, team dynamics, and interpretation, ensuring that the research remained relevant and respectful to the Niue community. These insights offer valuable guidance for future community-academic partnerships, which are needed for impactful outcomes in community health research and policy development involving Pacific communities and other Indigenous groups.

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### Author contributions

The study was conceptualised by K.L. All authors participated in the collaborative autoethnographic process by contributing written reflections and engaging in iterative discussions. Thematic analysis and investigator triangulation were conducted by K.L., A.V., E.T., C.E., D.W., and B.H. E.T. and H.P.-T. provided cultural guidance throughout the research process. All authors reviewed and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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### Data availability

The full written reflections analysed in this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request. These reflections are not publicly available due to their personal and culturally sensitive nature, and because they are not anonymised.

### Declarations

#### Ethics approval

This study was approved by the Monū Education and Social Services Trust Ethics Committee (MESSTEC) and the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC approval reference 22/279). All procedures were conducted in accordance with the ethical guidelines and regulations of both committees.

#### Consent to participate

All contributors to this study were members of the research team and co-authors. Each author provided their free and informed consent to participate in the collaborative autoethnographic reflection process.

### Consent for publication

All authors have reviewed the final manuscript and provided consent for the publication of their reflections and contributions.

### Competing interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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