Weaving Stories Through the Lens of the Fish
Sāmoan Perspectives on Oranga Tamariki: A Digital Fāgogo

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Abstract

Sāmoan families living in Aotearoa New Zealand manoeuvre western systems while holding strong to Fa'a Sāmoa (Sāmoan worldview) concepts of 'āiga (family). They are misrepresented in the Oranga Tamariki (OT) data, acknowledged as the heavily criticised child foster system. This study aims to highlight the lived experiences that are absent in the literature, through visual storytelling with a Sāmoan-led focus. This was achieved with a microfilm documentary that accompanies the written work, produced with the goal of being more accessible to the community and capturing our rich stories with a wider lens than achievable in traditional research. The study employed fa'afaletui beyond its typical use by centring the lens of the fish. As a Sāmoan woman with experience in the system, the primary researcher embodied the "fish", or studied issue– a notoriously difficult perspective to obtain. The Tree view (Dora) and Canoe view (Frankie) offered rich insights regarding the bind between policy and values, and efforts to support 'āiga where OT strategies do not reach. By filming the fa'afaletui the research was transformed into digital fāgogo, with the aim of disseminating the findings accessibly to the community. Fa'afaletui was further enhanced by centring the water within the metaphorical ecosystem to demonstrate the impact of the vā as a method of analysis. Findings demonstrated an urgent need for genuine engagement with Sāmoan families. Profound layers of disconnect were identified, between families and social workers as well as within communities. Implications for child welfare policy, community engagement, mental health efficacy and future research for Sāmoans in Aotearoa are discussed.

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I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly defined in the acknowledgements), nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

List of Figures and Tables

Glossary of Terms

Sāmoan

Alofa	Love
Fa’a Sāmoa	Sāmoan way
Fa’aaloalo	Respect
Fale	House
Faaleagaga	Spirituality
Feagaiga	Sacred covenant
Fesuiaiga	Reciprocity
Gafa	Lineage
Gagana	Language
Matai	Chief, title holder
Palagi	Non-Sāmoan, European
Talanoa	Conversation
Tautua	Service
Va’aalo	Canoe
Vā	Relational space
Va fealoa’i	Relationships

Māori

Aotearoa	New Zealand
Kaupapa Māori	Māori ideology – a philosophical doctrine, incorporating the knowledge, skills, attitudes and values of Māori society.
Koha	Give thanks, appreciation
Mātauranga	Knowledge
Tamariki	Child/ren
Tangata Whenua	Indigenous people of the land
Tapu	Sacred, forbidden, taboo
Te Ao Māori	Māori world
Whakapapa	Genealogy, ancestry
Whakawhanaungatanga	Process of establishing relationships
Whanaungatanga	A willingness to build relationships through relating
Whāngai	Informal adoption

Abbreviations

CYFS	Child, Youth and Family
FGC	Family Group Conference
OT	Oranga Tamariki

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Foreword

Māori have historically held significant influence in driving positive changes for minority groups in Aotearoa. The advocacy efforts directed towards the government to enhance outcomes for Māori have consequently led to support being extended to other marginalised communities. This pattern is evident in the realm of state care as well. Māori initiatives have been at the forefront of inquiries into the misconduct within OT while concurrently proposing Indigenous-led solutions. The inclusive environment they have cultivated has opened avenues for other marginalised groups, addressing their often overlooked, mistreated, and underrepresented needs. It is paramount to acknowledge that my ability to engage in this crucial work is indebted to the courageous Māori leaders who have paved the way in this field.

Analogies of the fish position her as slippery, mysterious, hard to obtain. When I think of myself as a fish, I imagine the scales I have earned, grown into, that enable me to swim upstream. I think of the idealism embedded in Piscean folklore, a soft underbelly craving warmth. I find the sunlight striking through the chilling depths, my shoal awaits me.

Whakatauākī, Wild, C. (2024).

Introduction

O lo'u tupu'aga e malaga mai Vae-ga-Satupa'itea I Sāmoa, i Saina, Farani ma Sikotilani.

O Malini e tupuga mai ai lo'u Tama o Tyrone

Katerina ma Semisi, ae o lo'u Tina o Megan. Ole la fanau o Taneya ma Cassidy (a'u).

O Megan e fananau mai ai o'u uso o Toby

Tyrone ma Donna Gia ma Romy

O Tyrone ma Elizabeth na fanaua Max

Melanie Nelson ma lo'u uso taufegai o Tasmin

Elizabeth ma lo'u tuafafine o Alaisa

Gareth ole Tama faale-tulafono a lo'u Tama, ae o Angela e fanaua o'u uso taufeagai o Connor ma Nico.

O Matua o o'u matua ma o'u tei matutua sa latou tausia a'u ma nai o'u tei laiti sa faamoemoe mai ia te a'u, fa'afetai ile fesoasoani mai ia te a'u ua avea ai a'u ma tagata ua tou mitamita ai.

To my grandparents and older siblings for raising me and my younger siblings for relying on me, thank you for helping me become a person you can be proud of.

Positioning

As someone who spent most of her life surviving, I have always been in-between. Whether in housing, culture, even academic disciplines. Walking multiple worlds enables me to help others in new ways. This work is exceptionally personal and important to me as an afakasi foster kid who wants to see people thrive. The idea of someone who has been in foster care, like myself, being well-adjusted is often seen as astounding. This should be absurd. No one who requires foster care should be considered exceptional for leading a fulfilling life. The fact that this is not considered normal, or even public

perception, is a clear indication of how deeply broken the system is. The reality is, that it is a system that demands survival.

Being Diasporic

Being a third-generation diaspora, I feel a disconnect from the land of Sāmoa that is amplified by my experience in the foster care system. My father was ashamed to be brown and tried to assimilate as much as possible. Becoming an orphan at fifteen, he no longer had any connection to fa'a Sāmoa. The cord was cut for his children, which became increasingly difficult to reweave after each institutionalisation. This is to emphasise that each journey into the diaspora faces unique challenges, with intricacies that we can attempt to describe, but often not even family can comprehend. This section aims to capture the shared challenges that the Sāmoan diaspora faces upon their arrival to Aotearoa.

Pacific-Indigenous people have lived in Aotearoa for over a century (Lee, 2009). Significant Sāmoan migration to Aotearoa began in the decades following World War II, driven by a combination of economic factors in Sāmoa and the demand for labour in Aotearoa. Many Sāmoans were recruited to work in industries such as agriculture, manufacturing, and construction, contributing to Aotearoa's post-war reconstruction efforts (Loomis, 1991). In the 1950s and 1960s, Aotearoa implemented the Pacific Islander Immigration Scheme, which encouraged migration from Pacific Island countries, including Sāmoa, to address labour shortages. This scheme facilitated the migration of thousands of Sāmoans to Aotearoa, many of whom settled in urban centres such as Auckland, Wellington, and Christchurch (Lee, 2009). Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, family reunification became a significant driver of Sāmoan migration. Many Sāmoans who had initially migrated for work or education were later joined by family

members seeking to join them in Aotearoa, leading to a larger Sāmoan network (Kallen, 1982; Macpherson, 1999).

However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, Aotearoa was experiencing economic downturns and scarce employment. Laborious jobs became desirable, creating tensions from Pākehā (European settlers) who questioned whether Pasifika[1] peoples deserved these roles (Iloilo, 2023). In response, the government influenced the idea of Pacific-Indigenous peoples being 'overstayers' and implemented stricter immigration policies and visa regulations. Beginning in the mid-1970s, the government launched a series of immigration enforcement operations known as the Dawn Raids. These raids typically took place in the early morning hours, hence the name, which involved police officers conducting surprise visits to the homes of suspected overstayers, primarily targeting Pacific-Indigenous communities (Day, 2023; Williams, 1977). Many Pasifika people were subjected to harassment, intimidation, and detention during the raids, often singled out based on their ethnicity and regardless of their actual immigration status (Asafo & Tuiburelevu, 2021; Iloilo, 2023). The Dawn Raids left a lasting impact on Aotearoa's Pasifika communities, contributing to feelings of stigma, fear, and distrust towards government authorities (Iloilo, 2023).

[1] The term Pasifika is used in this paper to describe people Indigenous to the Pacific region, not to be misconstrued as a singular culture or ethnic group. Where possible, the term Pacific-Indigenous is used as a way to further decolonise the term 'Pacific Islander/s', as it acknowledges the diverse cultures Indigenous to Oceania, both born or residing in their Island homelands and within the diaspora (Alefaio-Tugia, 2021).

The process of migration and acculturation can be challenging for Sāmoan families (Day, 2023). Moving to a new country often entails adjusting to an unfamiliar cultural context, language, and societal norms, which can lead to stress and feelings of disorientation (Day, 2023; Fa'alau, 2016). This stress may be compounded by experiences of discrimination, racism, and social isolation, which can strain family relationships and contribute to breakdowns (Ofahengaue Vakalahi & Godinet, 2008). One of the primary challenges faced by the Sāmoan diaspora is maintaining a strong connection to their cultural heritage while adapting to the norms and values of Aotearoa society. Balancing traditional Sāmoan values with the expectations of the mainstream Aotearoa culture can be difficult, especially for younger generations growing up in a different cultural context (Fa'alau, 2016). Sāmoan families in Aotearoa may experience inter-generational conflicts as younger generations adapt to westernised[2] values and norms, sometimes diverging from traditional Sāmoan cultural practices. This generational gap can lead to misunderstandings, disagreements, and tensions within families, particularly regarding issues such as education, gender roles, and cultural identity (Vakalahi et al., 2013). However, Aotearoa has housed Sāmoan families for generations, therefore, the diasporic experience is widely variable. Being treated as an immigrant, regardless of when landing ashore, is a persisting microaggression against many in the diaspora (McCarthy, 2022; McCarthy, 2022), which implicates interactions with the state and its services (Godinet et al., 2019).

[2] Removing the expected capitalisation of western is a tool used in this exegesis to decentralise the ideologies that do not represent nor serve Indigenous communities as in McArthur (2022), and Merlan (2009).

Thus, the research aims for this study are:

1. To examine the experiences of Sāmoans with OT in a manner that privileges their voices.
2. Through a unique application of fa'afaletui, this work aims to shed light on the unseen aspects of Sāmoan experiences with OT.
3. To find the overlapping vā within the perspectives to offer insights that could better the system, and therefore, the impacts on families.

Further justification for these research aims are examined in Chapter Two.

Exegesis Overview

In Chapter One, I provide my positionality within this work and offer an outline of the Sāmoan migration history to Aotearoa as a prelude to this work.

In Chapter Two, I review existing literature regarding Sāmoan disciplinary behaviours throughout the diaspora, the history of Oranga Tamariki and its impacts on today, and where these two worlds collide.

In Chapter Three, I examine the cultural, historical, philosophical and practical importance of my three methodologies; fa'afaletui, fāgogo, and Fonofale. Details of how they are woven together to amplify each other is presented.

In Chapter Four, these methodologies are translated into methods. This chapter entails the recruitment, consultation, filming, editing, and analysis processes performed for this research.

In Chapter Five, details of the findings from analysis are presented by theme within the fa'afaletui framework.

In Chapter Six, these findings are examined and situated into the broader context of Aotearoa society. Recommendations are offered and concepts for future research explored.

Literature Review

Background

Sāmoan culture is anchored in the family and community teachings of fa'a Sāmoa (Sāmoan ways and worldview) which has varying degrees of successful translation in Aotearoa (Fa'alau & Jensen, 2006). One example is the contrast between Sāmoan norms of raising children compared to the dominant social-ethnic group in Aotearoa, Pākehā. Obedience and service are pinnacles to the function of 'āiga (family) which can be enforced through verbal and physical discipline (Fa'alau, 2016; Schoeffel et al., 1996). Heavily influenced by the Christian missionaries' doctrine of 'spare the rod, spoil the child', physical discipline is normalised and widespread in Sāmoa (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2001; Meleisea & Schoeffel, 1998; Pereira, 2010). This link is further suggested by results that non-religious Sāmoans in Aotearoa tend to score low on harsh discipline (Iusitini et al., 2011). Within other homes of the Sāmoan diaspora such as Hawai'i and Brisbane, corporal punishment was pervasive among at-risk Sāmoan youth (Mayeda & Okamato, 2008; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014). These studies indicate a legacy of taught violent expression of varying degrees within the diaspora. Significantly, Sāmoan fathers residing in Aotearoa score higher on harsh disciplinary behaviours than parents in Sāmoa (Iusitini et al., 2011). Research indicates this is symptomatic of living in contrast to Indigenous[3] Sāmoan culture which entails having less extended family, being in lower socioeconomic communities, and having less time with

[3] I use the term "Indigenous Sāmoan culture" to refer to the reclaimed cultural ways of living that are pillars to fa'aSāmoa.

their children (Fa'alau, 2016; Fa'alau & Jensen, 2006, Iusitini et al., 2011, Tamasese et al., 2005). 'Āiga is a core component of fa'a Sāmoa that transcends place of residency (Fa'alau, 2016; Iusitini et al., 2011), however, research displaying the complexities of 'āiga breakdown to the extent of child removal is lacking.

Oranga Tamariki

Formerly named Child, Youth, and Family (CYFs), Oranga Tamariki (OT) is the government agency responsible for the child welfare system in Aotearoa. They function under the Ministry for Children and primarily maintain the foster care and youth justice systems. As of 2022, there were 4722 children in the care of OT through foster homes and 134 in youth justice facilities (Oranga Tamariki, 2023). Any member of the public can raise concern through the phone, website, or more professional channels such as school counsellors and staff. When concern is raised for a child being at risk of harm, social workers (often accompanied by police) will remove the child from the home and place them with wider family or into a foster home. They are placed there until a Family Group Conference[4] (FGC) is held, for 'āiga to agree on a plan for the child's wellbeing. The amount of homes children are passed through while an FGC is organised has not been consolidated therefore the average is unknown (Groom, 2020).

To understand the problems inflicted by the current system, it is important to highlight the historical purpose of state care and how that foundation continues to perpetuate harm. In the 1940s, uplifts were a

[4] Family Group Conference: Meeting held with whānau/'āiga and OT staff to agree on an outcome for the children, including housing, well-being, and offending if relevant.

mechanism for removing Māori children from public view as they migrated from rural areas to post-war urbanised cities (Labrum, 2002). Approximately forty-five thousand tamariki Māori were taken by the state, then adopted by Pākehā through closed adoption (Griffith, 1998). This process prohibited any possibility of tamariki finding their birth parents, which is argued to be part of a cultural genocide against the Indigenous[5] population (MacDonald, 2003; MacDonald, 2023) alongside land theft (Mutu, 2015) and banning of language (Jackson, 2018) to name a few. This was masked by colonial norms of the time that convinced Pākehā and pressured Māori parents into believing they were inadequate due to the racist interpretation of cultural differences (Haenga-Collins, 2011). The result was overcrowded state facilities where abuse was rampant (Royal Commission, 2023). In the 1950s, most western countries shifted to familial foster care with the influence of Bowlby's (1951) emphasis on maternal care for child development, and Aotearoa followed suit. However, reports of abuse in state care continue, while the procedure for child uplifts has recently caught public concern and outrage (Keddel et al., 2022; Robson, 2022; Sharpe, 2022). The systemic racism and the perpetuation of ongoing institutionalisation came to light when whānau recorded social workers harassing a Māori mother in her hospital bed, pressuring her to relinquish her newborn baby. The mother's past experience in foster care and an abusive relationship raised alarm, shedding light on several issues. Firstly, it revealed the

[5] Indigeneity is a term defined as the communities who existed within a territory pre-colonisation and continue to persist. Indigenous peoples are considered the original inhabitants of an area, such as Māori who are the Indigenous peoples of Aotearoa. Stewart (2017) describes "Indigenous" as a placeholder to homogenise the Indigenous experience, which necessitates the recognition of the many differences between Indigenous groups.

alarming rate at which Māori newborns are removed without valid reasons, prompting scrutiny of Oranga Tamariki's practices (Keddell et al., 2022; Smith & Stevens, 2022). Secondly, it sparked debate on the appropriateness of responding to past institutionalisation with further institutionalisation (Atwool, 2021). Lastly, it underscored the significance of digital tools in capturing and revealing this previously unseen injustice, ultimately influencing change in OT policies (RNZ, 2022). As we confront these realities, we must acknowledge that the historic injustice of forcibly separating families continues to haunt our present, urging us to redouble our efforts in dismantling systemic racism and ensuring equitable treatment for all whānau.

It should be emphasised that the demographic that is most disproportionately affected by the policies and practises of OT continues to be Māori (Webb, 2017). Tamariki Māori are six times more likely to be uplifted than non-Māori, predominantly without warrant or warning (Becroft, 2020). While Sāmoan families face assimilation in the form of being diasporic, it could be assumed they face similar institutionalised racism (Ofe-Grant, 2022). However, state intrusion is significantly less researched for Sāmoan families, therefore unjustified intervention is currently unknown.

This is concerning for a population that is reportedly living in the most deprived socioeconomic areas (Atkinson et al., 2019) with a high frequency of exposure to family violence (Family Violence Death

Review Committee, 2014) who are overrepresented[6] in violent crimes compared to other types of crime (Ioane & Lambie, 2016). These statistics have led to labels that endorse over-policing in largely Māori and Pasifika populated suburbs, despite crime statistics consistently being higher in other areas (Statistics New Zealand 2016b). Furthermore, these stereotypes are often internalised and accepted as a valid part of Sāmoan identity (Mayeda & Okamoto, 2008; Rivas-Drake et al., 2014) in part as a retaliation to the discriminatory practices of police (Webb, 2019). Considering the youth justice side of OT, Pasifika youth tend to offend later in their adolescence, averaging around seventeen, an age that is legally no longer considered a 'youth'. Compounded by their initial offences often involving violence, Pasifika youth are frequently tried at District or High Courts and face harsher penalties without appropriate interventions or support (Ioane & Lambie, 2016). Incarceration is well-known to lead to worse life outcomes, such as unemployment, poverty, reoffending, and mental health deterioration (Johnston, 2016; Lambie & Randell, 2013; Roettger et al., 2019). In the worst cases, this cycle is perpetuated onto the next generation.

Statistics for Sāmoans in Aotearoa require interpretation, as police and OT record all Pacific-Indigenous peoples as 'Pacific', meaning details about each respective culture are difficult to obtain through their data (Ioane & Lambie, 2016; Oranga Tamariki, 2019). This recording practice underscores a concerning trend highlighted by Tunufa'i (2017): while Sāmoans make up only five percent of the total Pacific

[6] This analysis resonates with the ideology of Jackson (1988) wherein the use of the term "overrepresentation" oversimplifies the disparities that colonisation has imposed. Therefore, the use of it here and throughout this work is to put in perspective the power and position that the dominant group holds, by acknowledging the systemic causes of these statistics.

population, they constitute over half of the Pasifika population in Aotearoa. This concentration suggests that issues affecting Pasifika communities likely disproportionately impact Sāmoans (Tunufa'i, 2017). For instance, poor health, low literacy rates, educational attainment, and involvement in gangs are prevalent among Pasifika, with Sāmoans likely bearing a significant share of these challenges (OECD, 2016). Such disparities contribute to negative perceptions of Sāmoan individuals and families, perpetuating a cycle where external authorities are often seen as the solution rather than a proactive community-based approach. This is arguably naïve, as the government facilitated the flow of Pasifika into gangs following the Dawn Raids and again through state ward facilities (Gerrard et al., 2023; Royal Commission, 2023). Oranga Tamariki (2019) notes that many Pasifika children are of mixed heritage, often leading to their Sāmoan ethnicity being overlooked in official records. For example, it has been documented that a Sāmoan/Pākehā child is often recorded as Pākehā (Oranga Tamariki, 2019). This oversight obscures the true extent of Sāmoan involvement in state care and hampers efforts to address their specific needs within the system. A sentiment championed by Māori likens the expectation for colonial structures to repair their systems which disadvantaged Māori and Pasifika communities, to trusting an arsonist to extinguish a fire (Smale, 2018). This distrust stems from both anecdotal accounts and research findings, which suggest involvement in state care may exacerbate the existing negative outcomes experienced by our communities. For instance, Pennington (2023) reports that 47 percent of children in state care are not enrolled with a health practitioner, while educational achievement is significantly disturbed (Voices of Children and Young People, 2019b) alongside reports of abuse and neglect in state care (742 reports of harm in 2020-2021, Oranga Tamariki, 2021).

Worlds Collide

Concepts of government-run facilities for struggling families are just as alien to Sāmoans as to Māori. In Sāmoa, extended family typically gain guardianship of children if the parents are experiencing challenges, but the parents do not lose their rights or entitlements as parents through this system (Corrin & Mulitalo, 2015). These methods are also seen through Māori whāngai which is similarly an informal adoption process (Haenga-Collins, 2011). It is well-documented that the psychological or mental well-being of a Sāmoan person is immensely intertwined with gafa (lineage), the culture of the family, and cultural practices (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001; Tamasese et al., 2005). Due to the importance of being well-connected to family in fa'a Sāmoa, when a child is removed, psychological distress occurs from cultural shame alongside the emotional distress from the event (Moton et al., 2022). This could be further antagonised if frontline workers do not respect cultural protocols (Becroft, 2020).

To combat this, OT introduced the Va'aifetu practice policy in 2019 for social workers working with Pasifika children. Their main objectives are to "support cultural responsiveness in the application of duties and powers in accordance with the Act 1989, VCA 2014 and the Adoption Act 1955" and "help grow practitioners' understanding of Pacific cultures, and develop cultural competency to meet professional registration and accreditation requirements." (Oranga Tamariki, 2019 p.4). These duties entail authentically connecting with Pasifika children to facilitate meaningful engagement and response, upholding the dignity of Pasifika children, and prioritising their best interests. This involves respectfully engaging with caregivers, family members, and other significant collectives involved in the child's life, working together towards achieving the child's optimal outcome.

However, research focusing on the psychological outcomes of Sāmoan families after intervention is limited to OT reports, which are child-centred and lack a holistic view of the family. In particular, documentation of the psychological effects on parents is exceptionally underdeveloped. One report conducted by both OT and an independent research company aimed to fill this gap and is the most robust qualitative research in this area to date. Their findings revealed the Va'aifetu practice policy is yet to be implemented in a way that reduces negative interactions for Pasifika families with OT staff (Integrity Professionals Limited et al., 2022). While some parents reported having supportive social workers, the prevailing sentiment among the majority was one of distress during interactions. They recounted instances of feeling unheard, patronised, and abandoned without assistance following interventions. Notably, many parents reported examples where social workers engaged with their children at school without their prior knowledge, highlighting a crucial need for transparency in such practices. Furthermore, families expressed significant concern regarding the lack of communication within OT channels. Instances of social workers being reassigned without adequate information transfer were common, resulting in families having to repeatedly recount their circumstances. In summary, the research garnered significant insights, facilitated by the candid feedback of parents. However, it also raises concern regarding potential limitations in the study's capacity to fully capture unreserved responses from families. This concern stems from the ongoing involvement of OT in the research process, which could potentially influence the extent to which families feel comfortable expressing their opinions freely.

A comprehensive search revealed that research focuses on the psychological impact on the children and foster parents, but rarely the biological family. In Aotearoa, this means information about these distressful experiences is largely limited to families speaking out to media and news outlets (Baird,

2019; Smale, 2017). This is problematic, as academics have repeatedly emphasised the need for reform in racially motivated removals by OT, yet this concern continues to be overlooked (Hyslop, 2021; Te Aho, 2022). News reporting on OT has also resulted in demonising the families who come into contact with the agency, creating an increase in uplifts due to the public perception that the state is not intervening enough (Keddel et al., 2022). Furthermore, news outlets are often tragedy-focused and can take the narrative out of the people's hands. I therefore argue that while digital tools are crucial in influencing change through public pressure, our people are denied the opportunity to be critical while being portrayed in an uplifting manner.

Conclusions

Sāmoan migrants have played an integral role in shaping Aotearoa's cultural landscape, contributing significantly to its rich diversity through language, traditions, and customs. However, Sāmoan communities in Aotearoa are disproportionately affected by socioeconomic challenges such as poverty, unemployment, and limited access to quality education and healthcare. These disparities can exacerbate existing inequalities and contribute to social marginalisation within broader society. Research on the impact of these factors on Sāmoan families in Aotearoa who have undergone OT intervention is sparse, confined to reports by the organisation and sensationalised news coverage. Both methods cannot fully celebrate the voices that tell these stories, nor are they amplified by someone with personal experience with the system. This urges the first research aim:

1. To examine the experiences of Sāmoans with OT in a manner that privileges their voices.

In this chapter, I noted how the exposure of this issue is controlled by tragedy-focused news reports, child-centred OT reports, and rarely within the academic community. Research on this topic is often

sterile and does not reflect the protocols of Sāmoan culture. In the case of OT reports, this issue arises from the need to encompass a range of Pacific-Indigenous cultures together. While this method is convenient for government reporting, it obfuscates culture-specific experiences. With this in mind, the present research focuses exclusively on the Sāmoan demographic, prioritising Sāmoan narrators and employing Sāmoan methodologies in a novel manner, notably through the utilisation of film. Moreover, the primary researcher, who possesses firsthand experience of foster care, brings insider insight to the study therefore uniquely offering the lens of the fish. The study analysed the relational space within the perspectives and examined how these perspectives overlap to offer insights that will better the system. Thus, the remaining aims of this research are:

2. Through a unique application of fa'afaletui, this work aims to shed light on the unseen aspects of Sāmoan experiences with OT.
3. To find the overlapping vā within the perspectives to offer insights that could better the system, and therefore, the impacts on families.

Methodology

In this section, I delineate the methodological frameworks employed in the study, which investigates Sāmoan experiences with Oranga Tamariki (OT) through a distinctive lens. The approach integrates Indigenous storytelling traditions, digital media innovation, and a culturally responsive model to illuminate the complexities of navigating OT interventions. Central to the methodology is the concept of fa'afaletui, a Sāmoan practice where the primary researcher embodies the "fish" or studied issue– a notoriously difficult perspective to obtain (Dunlop-Bennet et al., 2019; Faleolo, 2003). To augment the fa'afaletui methodology, I employ a unique fusion of "microfilm documentary" style (Zhang & Yuan 2018) (further described in Method) and the traditional art of fāgogo. This approach elevates fa'afaletui into a digital narrative form, allowing a larger audience to engage with oral storytelling traditions. By utilising microfilm documentary techniques, the study aims to capture the essence of fāgogo, presenting stories with authenticity, depth, and cultural resonance. In doing so, I seek to empower the storytellers, providing them with a platform to share their narratives in their entirety, and giving context to their lived experiences with the OT system. Guiding the research is the Fonofale model, which offers a holistic framework for examining the multifaceted dimensions of Sāmoan experiences in Aotearoa. By encompassing cultural, social, spiritual, mental, and familial aspects, the Fonofale model enables the research to deeply explore the intricacies of the issues potentially influencing intervention. Through this holistic approach, the study endeavours to not only identify challenges but also uncover strengths, resilience, and culturally grounded solutions within the Sāmoan community.

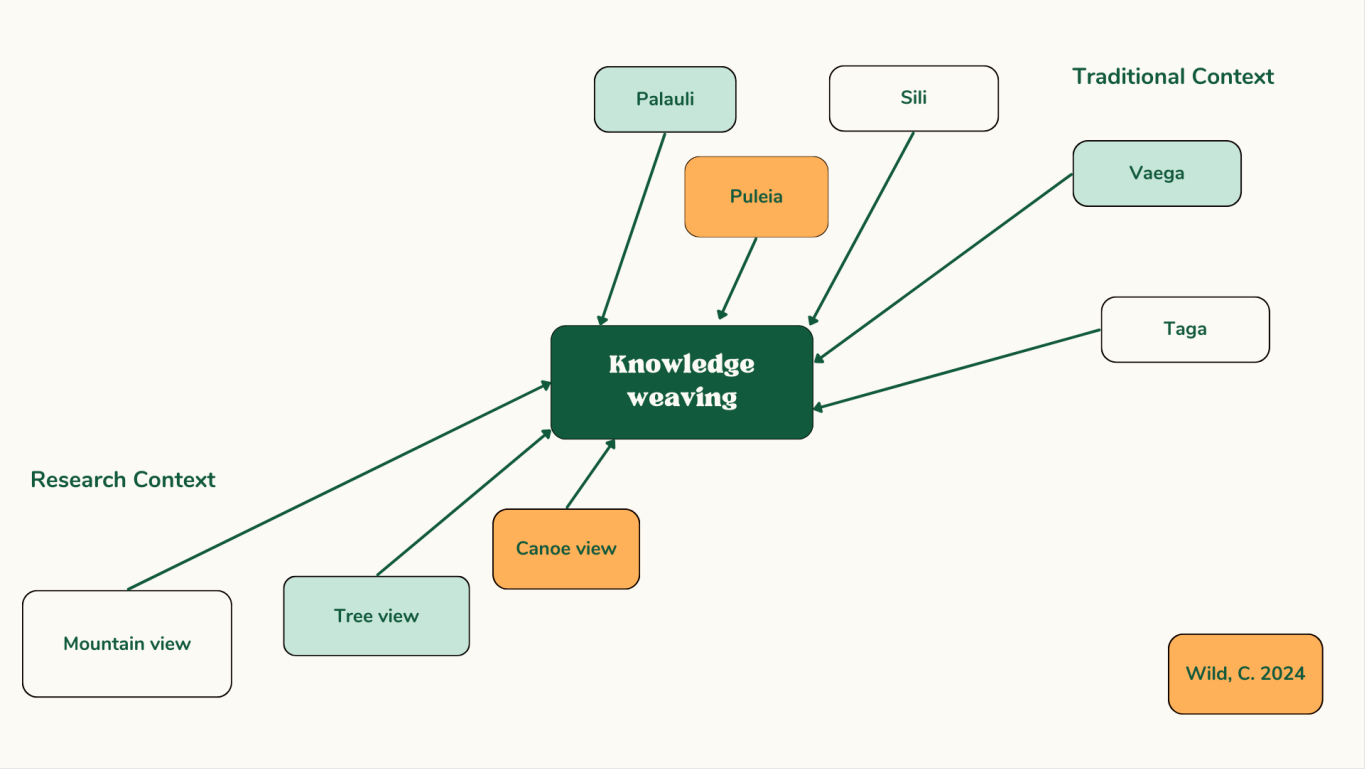
Fa'afaletui, a Methodology and a Method

Fa'a (the ways of) gathering, sharing, and validating knowledge from deliberations of different groups or fale (houses) and tui (weaving these together) for knowledge-sharing and consensus-building (Tamasese et al., 2005). Fa'afaletui in a research context describes the process by which Sāmoan participants see themselves as part of a whole in constructing knowledge. Traditionally, group discussions are held to substantiate an action on an issue or authenticate knowledge, which Tamasese et al., (2005) brought into a western context to measure healthcare efficacy for Sāmoans in Aotearoa. It is a method of communal discussion that facilitates the weaving of important knowledge within the culture (Tamasese et al., 2005). A practical example is fa'afaletui in Sāmoa, where matai (chief, title holder) from surrounding villages convene to represent their people and discuss pressing matters that are affecting the people and area. More recently the word has been used to describe a group meeting such as political conversations wherein laws and regulations are formed in Sāmoa.

In a methodological sense, fa'afaletui uses the analogy of three distinct perspectives to categorise participants' proximity to the researched issue: O le faautaga I tumutumu o mauga (the perspective of the person at the top of the mountain looking at a school of fish), O le faautaga I tumutumu o la'au (the perspective of the person at the top of a tree looking at a school of fish), and le faautaga o le pii ama (the perspective of the person in the canoe who is close to the school of fish). The fish represents the research topic, such as Sāmoan experiences with foster care. Using the three perspectives acknowledges the varying experiences that one brings when observing an issue (Cowley, 2013). Figure 1 displays this constructivism in the research context and within the traditional context by using different villages in south Savai'i to exemplify how each village comes together to weave knowledge.

Figure 1.

Fa'afaletui: Knowledge Weaving in a Traditional and Research Context.



Tuia and Cobb (2021) argue the use of fa'afaletui has been oversimplified to appease western research standards, therefore, to decolonise our practises we must come back to our traditional protocols. Fa'afaletui as a conversational process enables close bonds to form between the researcher and participant by prioritising the collaboration between them. This can be illustrated by observing the traditional use of fa'afaletui, where matai come together physically to weave knowledge to co-create a positive outcome for the people. The mat in the fale represents a space where everyone is equal and can speak freely. However, it is a space for a critical discussion on issues, as seen in the alternative epistemology of the word; Fa fale "the house" tui "to strike, thump, pierce" (Tuia & Cobb, 2021).

The present study incorporates both interpretations, by weaving together knowledge (methodology) in a critical conversation (method). This research also offers a new perspective, by capturing the voice of the fish itself, not just the traditional perspectives that are situated in relation to the fish. Faleolo (2003) used the metaphor of the fish to describe Pasifika youth who are often voiceless in the issues that affect them. He argues that the three perspectives of (what would become) fa'afaletui are representative of the hierarchy of Sāmoan culture. However, Faleolo (2003) points out that the perspective of the fish is not accounted for as a separate perspective. While bringing this to light, Faleolo (2003) and others who amplified this message (Dunlop-Bennet et al., 2019) were not the fish themselves as the researchers. As the researcher, I aim to embody this opportunity as a Sāmoan woman who experienced foster care in Aotearoa as a child. Being in this position brings a unique standpoint to this work, and in turn, could encourage other 'fish' to surface. This is especially important within the topic of foster care where the children are often voiceless, making this the first opportunity for the fish to be heard by leading research which is independent of state entities (Atwool, 2020).

This research was particularly enriched by capturing different perspectives. Previous research that employed fa'afaletui has used the three perspectives as an angle to form research questions or as three different approaches to address the research question (Goodyear-Smith & 'Ofanoa, 2021). In cases where participants embody the perspectives, the main difference between participants was age and gender (see Tamasese et al., 2006). While this can signal positionality regarding the three perspectives, the current research went further by identifying key roles for each perspective as presented in Figure 2. It should be noted that the mountain view was inaccessible for this study, as detailed further in sampling, therefore its position serves to exemplify the hierarchy of OT processes.

Figure 2.

Fa'afaletui Categorised

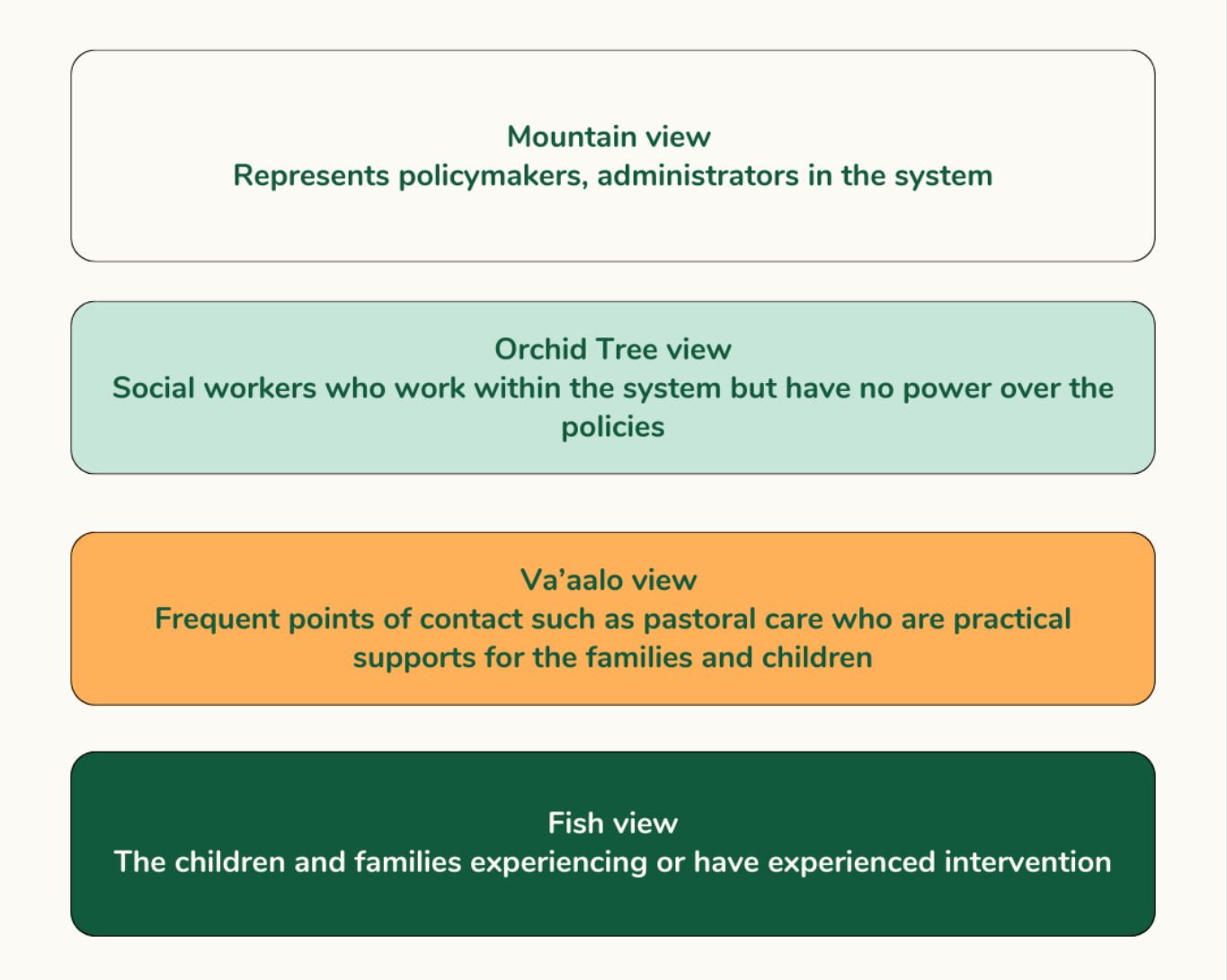


Figure 2 describes the positionality of the perspectives, while simultaneously illustrating how the levels of support are currently a top-down process. Note the distance between the policymakers and the people affected. This research then visualises the relationship between the perspectives by mapping shared

experiences and knowledge to co-create a meaningful way forward. Each perspective was treated as faifāgogo (storyteller of fāgogo) contributing to the compilation of different perspectives to co-create the social reality as an act of fa'afaletui.

Fāgogo

Fāgogo is an ancient Sāmoan art form of sharing stories about the origin of Sāmoan culture for education or entertainment. It is expressed through solo (poems), lagi (songs), and tagi (chants). In comparison, contemporary fāgogo is a tool by which reflection and commentary on life can be made, focused on the present and future, rather than the past (Tielu, 2016). Fāgogo has been used as an analytical lens to examine and critique digital media in Aotearoa (Mesmer, 2016). Sāmoan academics and creators are using it to Indigenise non-Sāmoan digital tools and technologies to claim digital spaces not indigenous to Sāmoa (Tielu, 2016).

The formational principle of fāgogo is to foster a bond between faifāgogo and the audience. The educational aspect of fāgogo exists between the faifāgogo and their audience. This is enacted through the opportunity to reflect on the meaning of the fāgogo collectively (Tielu, 2016). As the first audience and member of this group, I had the role of reflecting with the faifāgogo on what it means for the collective. Furthermore, the faifāgogo are called on as knowledge holders, meaning they have a key role in influencing the aims and outcomes of the research, due to their input shaping what the next step should be for positive change. Therefore, they were treated as co researchers throughout the research process.

It was imperative for this study to celebrate the voices, faces, and spirit of the people in this space. Our Pacific-Indigenous people created a legacy of storytelling, which is increasingly important to continue

as we create new waves throughout the diaspora. Our people are intricate, as is the topic of foster care. To honour the complexities of where these components overlap, the research must be used as a vehicle to serve the faifāgogo and the community. This was achieved by utilising microfilm documentary as a tool to simultaneously allow the participant to share their experience in their own words and make the findings more accessible to the community. These methodologies can be used to build upon the existing knowledge of qualitative research, which targets under-researched practices to examine the underlying rationale for perceptions. However, rather than using qualitative methods with cultural integration, this research is rooted in Pacific-Indigenous methods and methodologies, which overlap with the foundational concept of qualitative research.

Blending Fa'afaletui & Fāgogo

Fa'afaletui and fāgogo overlap in the shared effort to think forward for our people, but particularly in the act of fāgogo, finding that meaningful change through stories. Furthermore, in the process of filming and editing the fa'afaletui, they become structured fāgogo.

Faifāgogo/Co researchers

Dora (faifāgogo at the top of the orchid tree)

Born in Sāmoa as the seventh of thirteen siblings, Dora moved to Aotearoa when she was twenty-one years old. Dora was recommended to me by Community Approach, the NGO that she works for. Dora previously worked for Oranga Tamariki as a social worker in both the uplifts and the youth offending departments. This enables her to critique the systems from an insider perspective and speak to the Sāmoan family dynamics she encountered in the field. Dora has a distinct perspective from

the tree because she has the closest proximity to the mountain view which in this case are the administrators of the system. In this research, the mountain view represents policymakers, as they implement the parameters that social workers use (which affect the family and children). Dora's perspective is unique because she has equal proximity to the policymakers and the families. As a social worker, there are limitations to the impact one can have on the lives of clients and policy. Therefore, the relationship between these perspectives is examined in this thesis but requires further research.

The orchid tree in Sāmoa originally came from China and is a symbol of beauty and resilience. It seemed appropriate to use to specifically represent Dora because it signifies her journey of migration, where she brings her sei (flower) with her. The sei in this case does not mean any specific flower, but the act of adorning your ear with a sei to assert your culture in a non-native land.

Frankie (faifāgogo in the va'aalo)

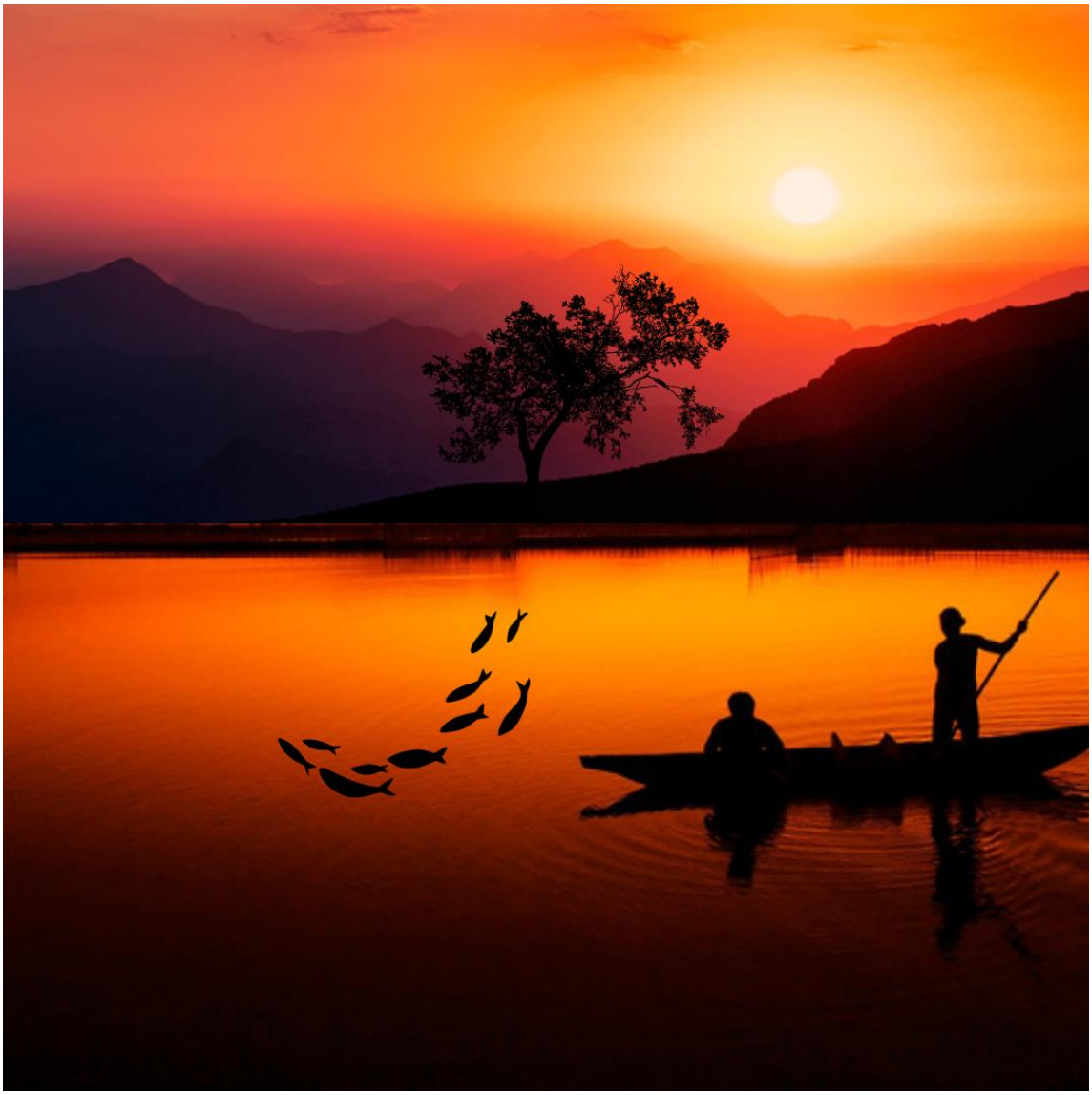
Born in Aotearoa to Sāmoan German Tongan and Māori parents, Frankie works in pastoral care at an intermediate school in Tamaki Makaurau. Frankie reached out to me after hearing about the study through word of mouth. Frankie is the first contact for the children in his school if they are experiencing hardship or troubles at home. He also has close relationships with the families as he coaches rugby. This frequency of proximity to the children and families places Frankie in the va'aalo (canoe), where he has a deeper understanding of the day-to-day issues facing "the fish." As the person who advocates for the child to both OT and their family, Frankie can also see the strengths and weaknesses of the systems in place, but from a view similar to that of extended family rather than an insider view like Dora.

Cass (faifāgogo of the fish)

Born in Aotearoa to Sāmoan Chinese and European parents, I am the primary researcher. I was uplifted at 18 months old, lived in foster care until I was five, and back into foster care when I was eleven. My experiences with the system allows me to not only speak as the fish, but connect on a deeper level with my coresearchers than if I was an outsider (Haynes, 2012). Through lived experience, I truly know what it feels like to be in the situations that are often described in the literature by those who have not lived it. Now that I am in a place to help others, I want to increase the likelihood of families and children affected by the foster care system having a decent life.

Figure 3.

Fa'afaletui Reincorporated



Note. This figure was created by the author for this work.

In contrast to Figure 2, Figure 3 represents the perspectives as an interconnected ecosystem rather than separate entities acting individually to contribute to a system.

Fonofale

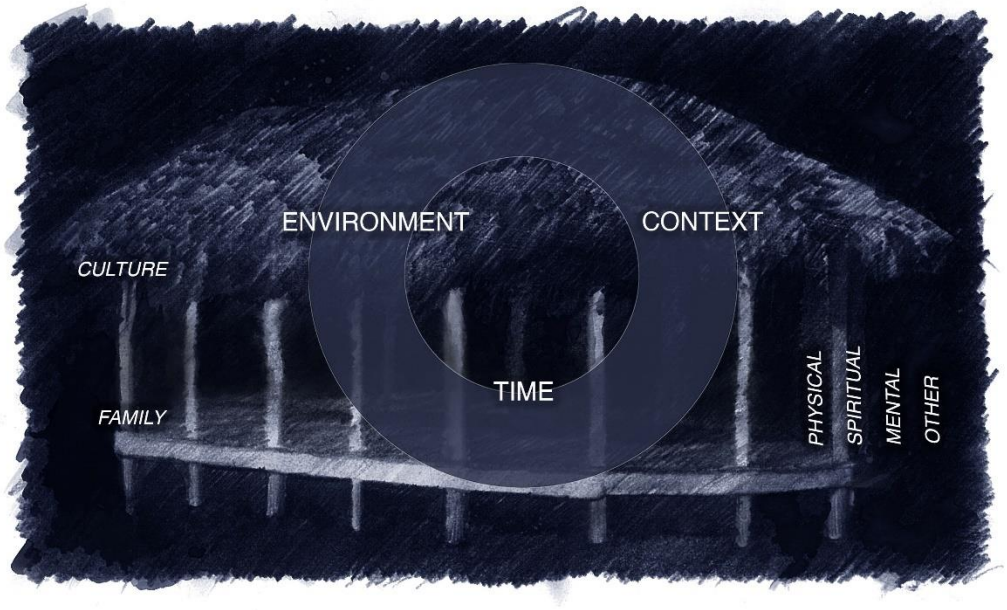
Fonofale was created by Pulotu-Endemann initially in 1984 while he was teaching health studies and nursing at Manawatū Polytechnic. Its inception was fuelled by the call for Pasifika self-determination following the Dawn Raids. In part to acknowledge the disproportionate negative health outcomes for this community, the Ministry of Health contracted Pulotu-Endemann to design a health model that could capture the values of Pacific-Indigenous people living in Aotearoa. These values are widely understood in the Pasifika diaspora as essential dimensions of health, making the compilation of the Fonofale framework a lens to understand the needs of Pacific-Indigenous people in an Aotearoa context. While it is a recommended way of interacting with Pasifika people in a health context, this model has yet to be translated into a practical way of delivering service to Pasifika people. Currently, it is largely just a way of knowing.

The current research used Fonofale as a guide in the talanoa to identify which aspects of health were most affected for Sāmoan families going through an Oranga Tamariki intervention, which was essential to formulate questions throughout the process. It was also incorporated as a guiding methodology to analyse the data holistically. Fonofale uses the metaphor of a Sāmoan fale (house) where the foundation, roof and posts are encompassed by the cycle of time, context, and environment as seen in Figure 4 (Faumuina, 2024). This symbolises the philosophy of continuity and holism taught within many Pasifika communities. The overarching metaphor exemplifies that if any dimension of the fale is out of balance, the rest of the structure will be affected. An often-used example of this, which relates

heavily to this research, is if the foundation of the fale (family) is cracked, the fale will not be able to support the pou (post/s) and roof in a storm.

Figure 4.

Fonofale



Note. This figure was created by C. Faumuina specifically for this work (personal communication, April 26, 2024). Reprinted with permission.

Conclusions

To examine the intricate dynamics of foster care in Aotearoa, this study draws upon the intersecting philosophies of fa'afaletui, fāgogo, and the Fonofale model. These methodologies converge to provide a

comprehensive understanding that encompasses cultural, social, historical, and systemic dimensions of Sāmoan experiences with OT. By incorporating digital storytelling techniques, this study adapts fāgogo to a contemporary context while preserving its cultural integrity. This method aligns with the fa'afaletui methodology's emphasis on honouring Indigenous knowledge and using it to inform better outcomes. The use of microfilm documentary enhances accessibility by visually documenting narratives, aligning with oral traditions. This medium allows for broader dissemination compared to traditional western research methods and unveils insights previously unseen. Within this framework, the Fonofale model serves as a guiding structure, integrating cultural, social, spiritual, mental, and familial dimensions, thereby facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the complexities inherent in Sāmoan experiences with OT. Through this blending of methodologies, this study aims to shed light on the nuanced realities and adversities faced by Sāmoan individuals navigating the interface with OT, highlighting the interconnectedness of their lived experiences within broader sociocultural contexts.

Method

Building upon the methodological foundations, the subsequent methods include a filmed fa'afaletui, utilising digital storytelling techniques to capture and amplify the voices, experiences, and perspectives of those directly engaged with OT. Fonofale was used to formulate questions, through ongoing talanoa which was central to establishing relationships needed for fa'afaletui. Through this method, the study seeks to honour Indigenous knowledge, foster community engagement, and contribute to more inclusive and culturally relevant understandings of foster care in Aotearoa.

Ethics

An ethics application for this study was approved by Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC reference number 23/156) prior to any data collection. Informed consent was crucial because this research did not use anonymity, as this would negate the purpose of amplifying the narrators in this space. This was obtained through consent and release forms (see Appendix A). Additionally, depending on what the participant shared, there was the possibility for deidentification if the data were released elsewhere. Hence, participants were duly informed that the data they provided would be presented back to the community, thereby empowering them to make conscientious decisions regarding the extent of information they wished to disclose.

Recruitment

Criteria to participate included:

1. Being of Sāmoan descent.
2. Being 18 or over.

3. Must have significant knowledge or experience working with Sāmoan families that are facing or have faced OT intervention.
4. Be comfortable being interviewed on camera.
5. Be able to complete the interview in English.
6. Not a current employee of OT.

Recruitment occurred through digital poster via social media, contacting NGOs, and word of mouth. Five potential participants expressed interest. Two became unavailable for filming due to work commitments, and one did not respond to further invitations. The discussion of family cases is confidential within the organisation, therefore people currently working at Oranga Tamariki were not sampled, as they would not be expected to speak on their cases due to breach of contracts and other potential professional ramifications.

Talanoa and Consultation

Initial meetings were essential to build rapport between myself and the faifāgogo. Consultation was utilised consistently through each stage to ensure the faifāgogo felt heard and engaged. Derived from oral tradition, talanoa is an act of exchanging insights through meaningful conversations which are principal in both Sāmoan and Tongan culture (Brown Pulu & Filisi, 2024). It is a way to centre the merit of the unique Pacific epistemology, as western research methods are not always suitable to represent Pacific contexts (Fa'avae et al., 2016). Through talanoa, authentic and relevant responses can be captured comparatively to Eurocentric instruments which rely on the disconnection of researcher and participant (Vaioleti, 2006). Talanoa accomplishes this because the act itself creates a cultural context between the Pasifika researcher and participant that inherently acknowledges each other with respect

and value. Both parties understand and uphold the process of cocreating through conversation (Matapo & Enari, 2021).

Talanoa and Fāgogo: The Differences

Talanoa and fāgogo have cultural and social functions that overlap, but the main purpose of talanoa is to find mutual understanding, while fāgogo is a passing on of knowledge in an entertaining way. Between myself and the faifāgogo, an act of talanoa is taking place, but by digitising the talanoa, it becomes fāgogo for an audience beyond us. For my individual interview, talanoa ā ia ‘iā ia (conversing with oneself) was used to create the fāgogo (Tunufa’i, 2016).

Pre-filming Consultation and Preparations

My first meetings with Frankie and Dora focused on getting to know each other and discerning whether they wanted to participate in the research. I outlined clearly that this would be a short documentary, therefore they would need to be comfortable being identifiable and at the forefront of the research. Our whakawhanaungatanga (process of establishing relationships by relating) was centred on sharing gafa and how we provide service in our communities. I informed them that I had experience with the system, and my purpose for doing this research. Knowing that I have this ‘insider status’ removed hesitancy from our talanoa and allowed us to be straightforward with the realities of the system. They each shared contextual information regarding how long they had been in their line of work to determine whether they would be appropriate for the study. By the end of the first talanoa, they were both eager to participate. I gave contextual details about my methodologies fa’afaletui, fāgogo, and Fonofale. This included explaining the purpose of filming and the importance of celebrating the faifāgogo. After

meeting with Dora and Frankie, I paraphrased the contents of our talanoa in email format to encourage clarity and give ample space for them to correct any potential misunderstandings. We formed questions together from our conversations to use as parameters for the official interview, but agreed that we wanted the filmed talanoa to flow freely. Consultations thereafter were via email and phone to send information sheets, receive consent forms, formulate questions, and confirm filming locations. The last pre-filming consultations were on the day of filming, where Dora and Frankie met the film crew and we shared kai (food) so they could become comfortable with the crew, and as an act of koha (thanks, appreciation).

The locations were scouted beforehand by the primary researcher and film crew to discern that the chosen locations were appropriate spaces that were private and quiet enough. Faifāgogo were welcomed with ‘ula (see Figure 5), both a framework and custom in Sāmoan culture and research (Sauni, 2011). ‘Ula means garland or lei, which is presented as an important welcoming gesture of fefa ‘asoaiga/fesuiaiga (gift giving and exchanging) to ensure it is known they belong. From a framework perspective, ‘Ula encompasses the engagement of alofa (love), faaloalo (respect), tautua (service), feagaiga (covenant), faaleagaga (spirituality), fesuiaiga (reciprocity), va fealoa’i (relationships), and gagana (language). The circular shape of blossoming flowers strung together is a symbol and expression of the continuous practice of these values in one’s life and a greater expression of Sāmoan generosity and hospitality. The act of sharing ‘ula in a research setting aims to establish conversational freedom among participants that are otherwise tapu (sacred/taboo) between ages, genders, and statuses. ‘Ula is particularly important in this research process as it creates an opportunity to express the importance of each person’s participation in this research, gratitude for their knowledge and to invite them into the space.

Figure 5.

‘Ula I Made for Dora

Note. These images and content of these images were made by the author for this work.

Microfilm Documentary

Traditional microfilm refers to an analogue storage medium used to archive documents on 16mm or 35mm film, intended for preservation rather than public viewing (Brown et al., 2012). In contrast, the modern use of "microfilm" describes short digital films or video snippets, typically 5 to 9 minutes long,

designed for public consumption and storytelling on digital platforms (Zhang & Yuang, 2018). The study enacted fāgogo by employing the latter, to engage audiences through bite-sized information, reduce filming costs, and achieve the completion of complementary pieces without reducing quality (Zhang & Yuan, 2018). Specifically, this study comprised three microfilm documentaries; the perspectives of the Tree view, the Canoe view, and the Fish itself. Indigenous filmmaking has emerged as a valuable tool in showcasing not only Indigenous excellence and creativity, but unveiled the issues that threaten our ways of being (Stoddard et al., 2017). Notably, land grabs (Morrison, 1999), environmental destruction (Maiorana, 2019), and violent racism (Hunziker, 2022). In the case of Filisi's (2023) work, documentary film created the opportunity for seemingly niche topics such as fa'alavelave in Aotearoa to be understood by a wider audience, but more importantly, as a way for Sāmoan people to critique our traditions. I posit that the ability to critique established structures is often safeguarded by academic institutions, necessitating extensive research to develop informed opinions. However, documentary film stands out as an accessible medium, offering a direct avenue for many to engage with and understand complex topics without the barrier of scholarly jargon or extensive reading. Thus, my choice to utilise film as a research method is grounded in its ability to bridge the gap between academic discourse and community engagement.

Filming

Two voluntary crew members were present for each interview to operate camera and sound. Shivani Karan who was my film advisor, and a close friend of mine, Gabbi Courtenay. Their expertise was invaluable, as film is not my discipline. They were both required to sign and return confidentiality agreements (see Appendix A).

Table 1.

Finalised Questions

Dora	Frankie	Both
What were your experiences working for OT?	What were your experiences working with OT? Can you give us a scope of the process at your school for reporting abuse?	Tell us about yourself
What are the differences you see between families living in Sāmoa compared to those in Aotearoa?	How can we improve mental health for Sāmoan families?	What is your passion?
		What would you say you are an expert on?
		How can Sāmoan families be better supported? What are some barriers to this and what might reduce barriers?
		What do you want to teach others in this space? (the families, the workers, the system?)
		Are there any other thoughts you have that you would like to add to our talanoa? (Whether in English or Sāmoan).

Process of Filming

Shivani and Gabbi set up cameras while I chatted with the faifāgogo. We laid a mat to sit on and I presented them with ‘ula. Gabbi attached microphones and did a sound check with Shivani. I relayed what was shared in the talanoa before filming, stating the purpose of the research and using the tapa

cloth as a metaphor for the faifāgogo; the process (journey) they have undergone to be celebrated by the community. The faifāgogo introduced themselves, we referred to the questions we developed throughout but let the talanoa flow. My own filming process differed slightly, where rather than following the cultural protocol of fa'afaletui, I took a reflexive approach as I was the only faifāgogo at that time. Gabbi set up the camera but I attached my own microphone and let the fāgogo flow from there. We dedicated two hours to filming the talanoa itself and then spent an average of thirty minutes filming the B-roll. More details are provided in Appendix B.

Editing

The files were imported into Adobe Premiere Pro (Adobe, 2024), where the original files were synced with the audio and turned into sequences. I then watched the interviews in full and marked each theme or quote. I kept notes of these themes in a document to reorder the video clips into groups. Once I had cut and reassembled the videos into groups of themes, the most impactful messages were identified in consultation with my film advisor. First drafts were sent to my supervisors, who gave a fresh eye to the possible order of the fāgogo to improve the flow. Dora and Frankie were given drafts of their videos with the core themes for them to approve the content and give feedback. The B-roll was then incorporated to strengthen the talanoa while also overlapping any transitions. Multiple LUTs (colour filters) were used as the two cameras had vastly different outputs. Improving audio was also a time-consuming task, as the interviews were held outside and therefore had a lot of background noise. However, there are limits to post-production abilities to improve sound and also limitations within this project as a no-budget documentary.

Post-edit Consultation and Dissemination

Consultation is ongoing as we plan to disseminate the microfilm documentary through screenings in the coming months. This is with the aim of returning the research to the community and celebrating the faifāgogo in this work. Importantly, it will create the opportunity for members of the community to reflect on the findings and give immediate feedback. This feedback loop is invaluable as it provides an opportunity to understand how the community perceives the issues, what resonates with them, and what might need further clarification or exploration. This iterative process ensures that the final product is accurate, relevant, and impactful (Chaskin, 2008; Chen et al., 2010). By screening these documentaries within the community, I aim to give the community a platform to engage with the stories on a personal level. This engagement fosters a sense of ownership and involvement in the issues being presented (Chen et al., 2010). Effective dissemination builds trust between the researchers and community. It demonstrates a commitment to transparency and collaboration, showing that the research is not conducted in isolation but in partnership with those it seeks to benefit. This trust is essential for fostering long-term relationships and ensuring the sustainability of any interventions or recommendations that may arise from the research. Beyond the immediate community, dissemination allows the findings to reach a wider audience, including policymakers, stakeholders, and the general public. This broader impact could help raise awareness, shape public opinion, and influence decision-making at various levels. Therefore, this work is ongoing long after this thesis is submitted.

Analysis

The vā

The relational space that connects those engaged in talanoa. Fa'a Sāmoa is founded on the sense of belonging within and expressed by vā. The vā in a relationship is key to the outcome of the collective goal, as it is about the space within, not apart or between.

In this section, I describe my reflective processes that contextualise the process of analysis. Within this process, analogies were formed to conceptualise how the perspectives exist within the vā in fa'afaletui. I will describe how the vā, or relational space of the perspectives were woven to examine how they interact with each other. The dynamics of the perspectives are examined, using the metaphor of the water to describe the vā among us and deepen the connection often ignored in typical uses of fa'afaletui (Tuia & Cobb, 2021). This analysis acknowledges the symbolic significance of the water in the metaphorical ecosystem that is fa'afaletui, and aims to enhance fa'afaletui beyond its conventional definition. I do this by centring the role of the water as a method of analysis, shifting away from analysing the separate perspectives, and rather the vā that connects us. Water is an exceptional tool to describe our lived realities, as it represents the interconnectedness, fluidity, and flow of communication between the perspectives. Through highlighting the shared experiences of the Fish, Va'aalo, and Orchid Tree perspectives, this analysis aims to display the broader impact of the recommendations by exemplifying the waves of those affected.

The Evolution of the Fish

Figure 6.

Film Still Taken by Gabbi Courtenay, Interview #1 with Dora

Note. This figure was created by G. Courtenay specifically for this work (personal communication, October 9, 2023). Reprinted with permission.

To describe how the analysis was formed, it is necessary to give background to the events that influenced it. My first interview was with Dora (pictured in Figure 6), which was pivotal to how this research was conducted. This is the first research I have pursued where I am physically positioning myself in the research, contrary to my experience in psychology research. My intent with this work was

partially to challenge the constructs of western research by blending traditional and modern Sāmoan ways of being, but this did not go as expected. I found it difficult to enact fa'afaletui and insert myself as matai in my first interview with Dora, to share my experiences on screen. In contrast, we successfully expressed the modern act of fāgogo, but I resided too heavily in the role of the audience. Instead of cocreating, I fell back on my position as a psychology graduate, resulting in a rather clinical interview. This experience taught me to balance the role of the audience and matai simultaneously while also detaching from the western psychology methods that made me feel so restricted.

During the interview, I had many moments where it would make sense to insert myself, specifically when she spoke of the relationship between the social worker and the child. Upon reflection, I realised that Dora and I had shared realities from different perspectives. I often felt like I was the child she was telling the story about. This experience made me reassess how I wanted to whanaungatanga and set the pace with my co-researchers. I decided to be more intentional about bringing the talanoa we had beforehand onto the screen.

This was clear in my interview with Frankie, where we found the space that overlaps among us through the roles that we had both occupied in different spaces but in the same context. The second time that I came out of foster care I was the same age as the children that Frankie does pastoral care for. We considered how significant it would have been if I had a support person during that time to be a safe person. Once we had established how we were connected within the vā, the talanoa flowed like water and our objectives were much clearer.

As mentioned, the questions were formed before the interview took place and used as guidelines for the talanoa, but the message was solely composed by the faifāgogo. My role as the fish was to affirm these

experiences and open the gates for the other perspectives to have their voices heard. Hence the importance of the vā encompassing us that created a rare opportunity for these fāgogo to take place, as Frankie expressed, “if you hadn’t gone through your experiences to be here with me today, I wouldn’t be able to share my story. You going through the system brought you here today”.

Thus, the analysis evolved from weaving fāgogo through a fa’afaletui lens to weaving the overlapping vā of the fāgogo through the lens of the fish. Metaphorically, this method of analysis reimagines fa’afaletui, by incorporating the vā in the form of water that connects the three perspectives of this study. As fa’afaletui is a balance of theoretical and metaphorical, incorporating vā requires a metaphorical equivalent, hence the use of the water. This was naturally logical as the metaphor necessitates the existence of water; however, it is never fully incorporated. By centring the water in the fa’afaletui model, the analysis can clarify the dynamics of relational space and collective engagement inherent in fa'afaletui. The same water flicking off the fins of the fish keeps the va’aalo buoyant and creates the sea breeze that rustles through the leaves of the tree. This analysis, therefore, examines the water that connects us, and which offers new ways to evolve. The metaphor of water informs the analytical insights and thematic findings derived from each perspective. I reflected with friends and family on the significance of each perspective to enable me to craft the following analogies. These analogies aim to exemplify the framework for this analysis, by illustrating how the vā interacts in the environment and therefore used in analysis.

Analytical Perspectives: The Fish

> *Once single-mindedly focused on surviving the unpredictable currents, the deep sea of knowledge now beckons the fish further into knowing. With idealism in tow, the fish dives profoundly toward the uncharted; creating ripples behind as it resurfaces. These ripples serve as a guide for other fish, inviting them to embark on similar journeys of exploration and discovery. As the fish ascends, it carries with it treasures from the depths, offering the wisdom gleaned from the sea of knowledge to enrich the collective understanding of its community. No longer disoriented by thrashing waves, the fish endeavours to find ways to calm the waters.*

This descriptive analogy situates my analytical perspective as resilient like water, one that aims to invite fellow "fish" into this process and allow their voices to be heard through my own. Through my process of delving deeper into myself, my gafa, my experiences, and ultimately this work, I aim to help others who are still being swallowed by the ocean. I acknowledge that although my life is less turbulent now which enables me to do this work, that is not always the reality for other foster kids. My lived experience highlights to me what is missing in the literature; authority over our own stories and accurate representation. Therefore, my analytical perspective is driven by service to the oft-misunderstood fish, by centring our knowledge of the system as Sāmoans.

The Va'aalo

> *Just as fish may not perceive what lies above the water until the fisherman reaches in, children and families may remain unaware of available support until someone takes action to reach out to them. Much like how the fisherman's net touching the water provides sustenance for the community, proactive outreach and support initiatives can nourish and sustain the well-being of families and children. Through the fisherman's careful navigation of the waters, the bounty of the*

sea is harnessed for the collective good of the village, mirroring the transformative potential of proactive intervention in addressing the needs of vulnerable individuals and communities.

This descriptive analogy situates Frankie's analytical perspective as adaptable like water, focused on proactive and productive support. He is driven by quality care for the children, family, and community. He has the wisdom to assess the tides that the fish have no control over and act accordingly. Therefore, this analytical perspective is rooted in fostering connection and empathy.

The Orchid Tree

When a tsunami takes place, the tree is overflowed with the water that the fish struggles in. By absorbing these experiences it becomes not only a source of support but also a conduit for change. Just as the water sustains the tree's growth, the insights gained from interacting with those affected inform the social worker's advocacy efforts. Like the mist that rises from the leaves, carrying the essence of the water, the social worker's voice carries the collective experiences and aspirations of those they serve. It is this mist, this distilled essence of lived realities, that drifts upward, reaching the towering presence of the mountain. The tree beckons the mountain to heed the call for change, to shape policies that reflect the needs and challenges encountered at ground level.

This descriptive analogy situated Dora's analytical perspective as transformational like water, an effort that is deepened by the insights of the families she has worked with. As an advocate for culturally responsive practice, her focus is primarily driven by a sense of justice and holistic well-being.

The microfilm documentary was able to capture the analytical lenses in real time. The analysis in this exegesis takes this framework further by analysing where the perspectives overlap, or the shared vā.

Process of Analysis

Similar to the Whakaāria (Heke & Vera, 2024) method of reflective thematic analysis, stage one included revisiting the existing notes from the video editing process, where I had highlighted, coded, and conceptualised themes from the full-length videos to create the microfilms. I repeated this process with my manual notes that I had taken throughout the study; before, during, and after each interview. I digitised the manual notes and compiled them with the video notes in a document. The compiled notes were reordered and reintegrated by theme, as they were previously organised by faifāgogo for the editing process. At this stage, potential themes were now organised, consisting of data from Dora, Frankie, and myself. The process of immersing myself in the data by repeatedly watching the videos enabled sufficient familiarisation to begin a reflexive thematic analysis (Heke & Vera, 2024).

As a "sense-making" process of analysis, reflexive thematic analysis from an Indigenous perspective pulls on specified knowledge within the culture (Heke & Vera, 2024). One way of expressing this mātauranga (knowledge) is by merging creativity and critical thought to create metaphors from themes. In my case, this was achieved by exchanging stories about the ocean with friends and family, creating diagrams, mind mapping themes, and exploring the links with my supervisors.

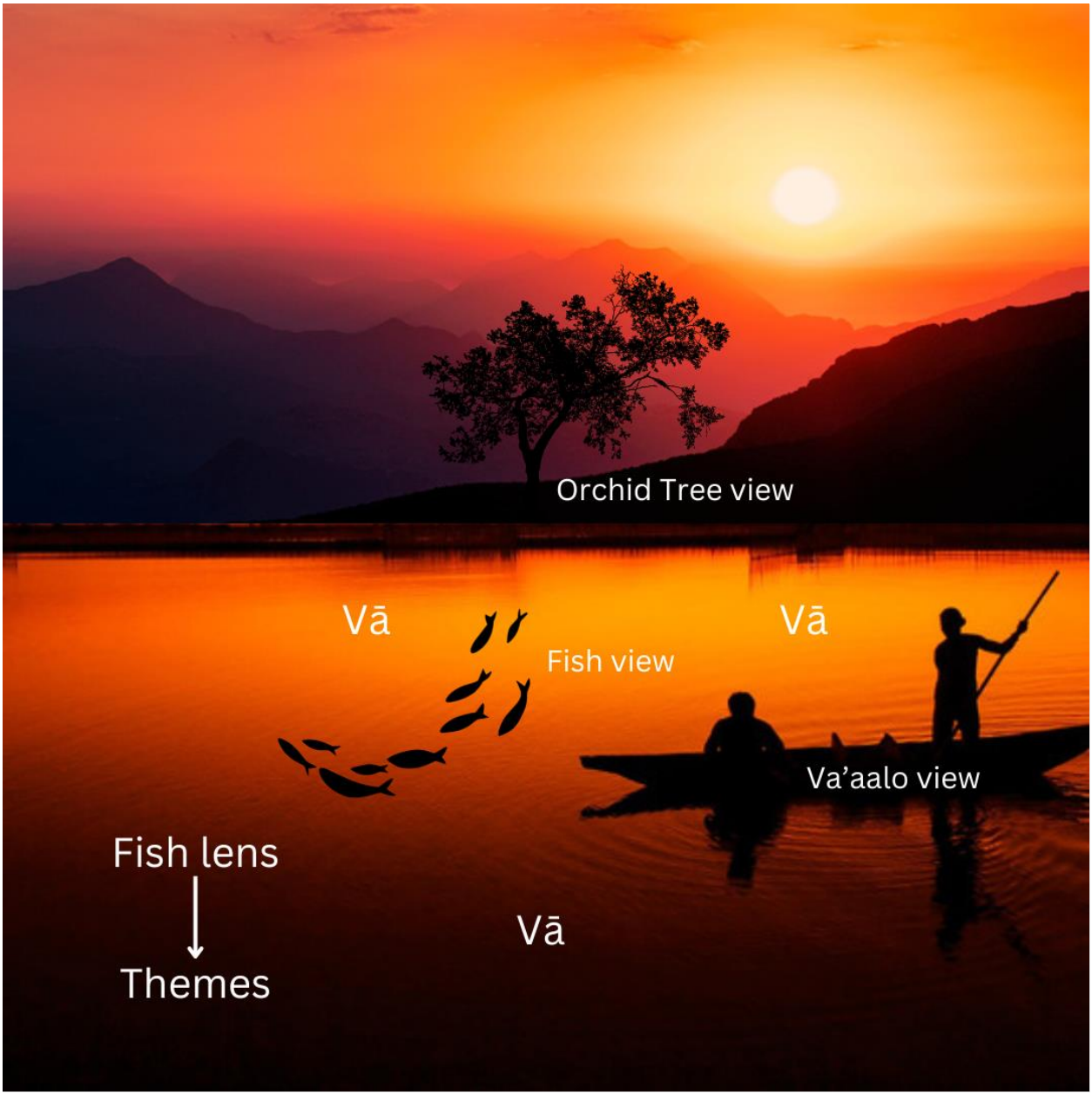
When identifying useful data from the notes, topics that were not included in the final microfilm documentary were prioritised, however, some themes overlap and substantiate the findings from the video. Our shared lived experiences from different perspectives were easily identifiable, therefore it was not necessary to exclude any data. Once the overlaps were discovered, I summarised what the

finding of that overlap was into diagrams, which I presented to my supervisors. My supervisor and I engaged in reciprocal idea exchange during this part of the analysis phase. My supervisor played an active role in stimulating my critical thinking by prompting me to interpret the themes emerging from the analysis. Her insightful inquiries guided and enriched my perspective of the data. Our discussions involved mutual agreement or disagreement regarding the potential themes. The final themes, further described in the Findings Chapter, were chosen based on accuracy to lived experience and capacity for authentic representation.

A reflexive approach was necessary throughout to ensure each of the perspectives retained their ideas without interference, while the essence of the fāgogo was captured. However, this research not only acknowledges, but centres on the idea that this analysis is then processed through the lens of the fish, as seen in Figure 7. To reiterate, the fish can be difficult to obtain true data from, which is especially the case in the topic of foster care. Others have barriers to profoundly accessing this topic if they are not Sāmoan or have not been through the system. As someone who is both, I can contribute rich knowledge to the issue. However, this insider knowledge also necessitates constant reflexivity throughout analysis to avoid leaning on assumptions and biases (Haynes, 2012). This was achieved by consistent reflective journaling, clarifying information with Dora and Frankie, and discussing with supervisors. Using the water, or vā, is a way for me to validate the mutuality of the realities we lived, to invite affected others in to either feel affirmed or disagree. Furthermore, the metaphor of water facilitates a deeper engagement with the lived realities of the faifāgogo and invites diverse perspectives to converge and interact.

Figure 7.

Vā of the Fāgogo Through the Lens of the Fish



Conclusions

In summary, this research was able to access the Orchid Tree, Va’aalo and Fish view. By having the primary researcher be the Fish, this project could focus on how the perspectives interact and overlap. The metaphor of water, symbolising the vā that connects us, has provided a lens through which to examine the overlapping perspectives of the Fish, Va'aalo, and Orchid Tree. By centring the water in the fa’afaletui model, this analysis centres relational space and collective engagement, offering new insights into the dynamics of fa'afaletui. Through emphasising shared experiences, this analysis endeavours to underscore the ripple effect of recommendations, illustrating the profound impact on those affected by the waves of change.

Findings and Connections

Considering the fundamental issues underlying the critiques from Dora, Frankie, and myself, this chapter will discuss the shared themes elicited from the three perspectives. The core message of connection was featured in the middle video of Frankie's fāgogo and is highlighted throughout these findings. The microfilm documentary concludes with my final remarks highlighting the absence of compassion in the practices of Oranga Tamariki. I emphasise that meaningful progress will remain elusive while they operate merely as a business or institution, neglecting the profound responsibility inherent in their role.

The Storm Clouds: Themes of (Dis)Connection and (Dis)Trust

(Dis)connection was a result of (dis)trust between families and their communities and social workers. The importance of community support emerged as a recurring determinant of family outcomes. This was exemplified in Dora's story of a bedridden mother who had her children uplifted as her neighbour called OT due to them "being too loud in the front yard unsupervised" (Wild, 2024 field notes). Furthermore, my family's response to my mother struggling was to bring in OT rather than offer support. Moreover, OT's approach was found to potentially antagonise this process, as they asserted these uplifts rather than offering resources or support. These examples link to the disconnect between vulnerable families and social workers, but also their communities, stemming from trust being broken, and families being treated as untrustworthy. Alternatively, when communities and social workers act on trust, this makes connection to the family more attainable. Moreover, expectation of intervention can exacerbate the disconnect between social workers and families due to mutual distrust. The issue of intergenerational state care emerged as a significant but often overlooked factor, sometimes utilised to justify or exacerbate complex situations rather than addressing underlying systemic issues. Dora

expressed how on multiple occasions, social workers may expect intervention to be necessary when dealing with families with a history of intergenerational state care. She reported this expectation can stem from a perception that the family is inherently dysfunctional or incapable of providing adequate care for their children, based on past interactions with the child welfare system. Families who have experienced intergenerational state care may perceive social workers as representatives of a system that has historically failed them, leading to feelings of resentment, resistance, and distrust towards any form of external intervention.

The Tsunami: Themes of (Dis)Connection Through (Lack of) Accountability

Cultivating and maintaining trust is reliant on all frontline OT staff to be accountable to families and held accountable by the organisation when they break this trust. Absence of accountability was identified by myself and Dora. In my case, this was prevalent among my social workers throughout my time in care, especially leading up to FGCs, where much of my family were given inconsistent and often contradicting information. Furthermore, my social workers were hesitant to meaningfully engage with myself and my sister, which I perceived as them being too exasperated to invest. It is difficult to recall instances where frontline workers were responsible or accountable to me and my family. Dora's perception of this kind of behaviour was a lack of experience or not being given the right tools to be able to engage with families meaningfully. The families in Dora's care repeatedly voiced grievances concerning their interactions with their prior social workers, recalling deficiencies in communication which left them feeling constantly excluded. These families' negative encounters made it challenging for her to establish rapport, as they harboured negative preconceived notions about social workers. She was profoundly disappointed by the indifference displayed by some social workers towards their responsibilities. Dora's perception stresses the lack of accountability within the organisation to

adequately train their staff nor deal with interpersonal issues that arise. In our experience, when a breakdown occurs, a new social worker is assigned regardless of the severity, which removes any opportunity of reconciliation or accountability.

The Ocean Veneer vs The Ocean Depths: Themes of (Dis)Connect Through Performativity or Sincerity

The analysis identified (dis)connection as the result of performative or genuine interactions, which impacts the quality of care provided, both by OT workers and family. Firstly, both perspectives highlighted that Sāmoan parents often lack understanding about mental health, which is exacerbated by the generational gap in the diaspora, resulting in adverse effects on the well-being of children and teenagers. This can manifest in behaviours such as non-attendance or disruption at school. Frankie considered the elders' capacity to support when recounting a Tongan boy he had worked with, who was ultimately sent back to Tonga after being shifted around different family in Aotearoa: "Once a kid gets to that level…treating them like they're someone else's problem shouldn't happen. They're everyone's children at the end of the day." While capacity to offer support is one aspect, in my experience, their actions often prioritise upholding community expectations rather than genuinely addressing the needs of those individuals. Enforcing harsher attitudes towards individuals with mental illnesses becomes performative behaviour when parents or elders prioritise appearances of the 'āiga and their performative duties in the community or church over the well-being of the unwell. For example, instead of addressing the underlying issues causing disruptive behaviour or non-attendance at school, elders might resort to punitive measures or strict discipline as a way of demonstrating their authority and adherence to cultural norms.

Furthermore, Frankie discussed the significant learning curve he encountered when dealing with cases of abuse beyond physical harm, highlighting the difficulty of intervening effectively. Frankie recalled the case of a girl he supported in court because of the sexual abuse inflicted by her mother's boyfriend: “The courts just threw her case out. That’s a perfect example of how it doesn’t work, how OT doesn’t work, the system doesn’t work.” I shared my own experiences where OT’s lack of follow-up left me in negative living conditions; my sister filed concerns on at least five occasions due to my father leaving us home alone for days with no food or water. These concerns went unaddressed, underscoring the prioritisation of physical abuse as the primary concern, which overshadows other forms of abuse in such cases. This also exemplifies an area of disconnect, where children or families are treated as though their concerns are performative when they need genuine intervention. Finally, Frankie shared an interaction with a social worker which turned performative when the social worker's expectations did not align with genuine engagement. She had asked him about his whakapapa, and he assumed because she was Māori the aim was to whakawhanaungatanga. However, “she threw (him) under the bus” by abruptly expecting him to perform a tokenistic opening for an FGC. Frankie described it as subtle racism, which devalued the initial positive interaction. While potentially an indication of greater normalised racial microaggressions, this finding highlights the disconnect often occurring from performative and superficial levels of cultural understanding in organisations that claim to serve such cultures.

Smooth Sailing; Themes of Connection: Meaningful Effort and Gafa

Furthermore, Frankie emphasised the pivotal role of establishing meaningful connections with vulnerable children, who often grapple with identity issues amid the turbulence of their lives. I resonated deeply with this notion, recalling how my relationship with my college Dean helped me curb

destructive behaviour and feel safe at school. Frankie also emphasised the significance of children connecting with their gafa, particularly in the absence of parental guidance. This process enables children to delve deeper into their family history and, consequently, understand themselves better. My own experience echoes this sentiment, as reconnecting with my gafa facilitated my healing journey and prepared me for the work I do now.

Figure 8.

Themes Illustrated as Vā

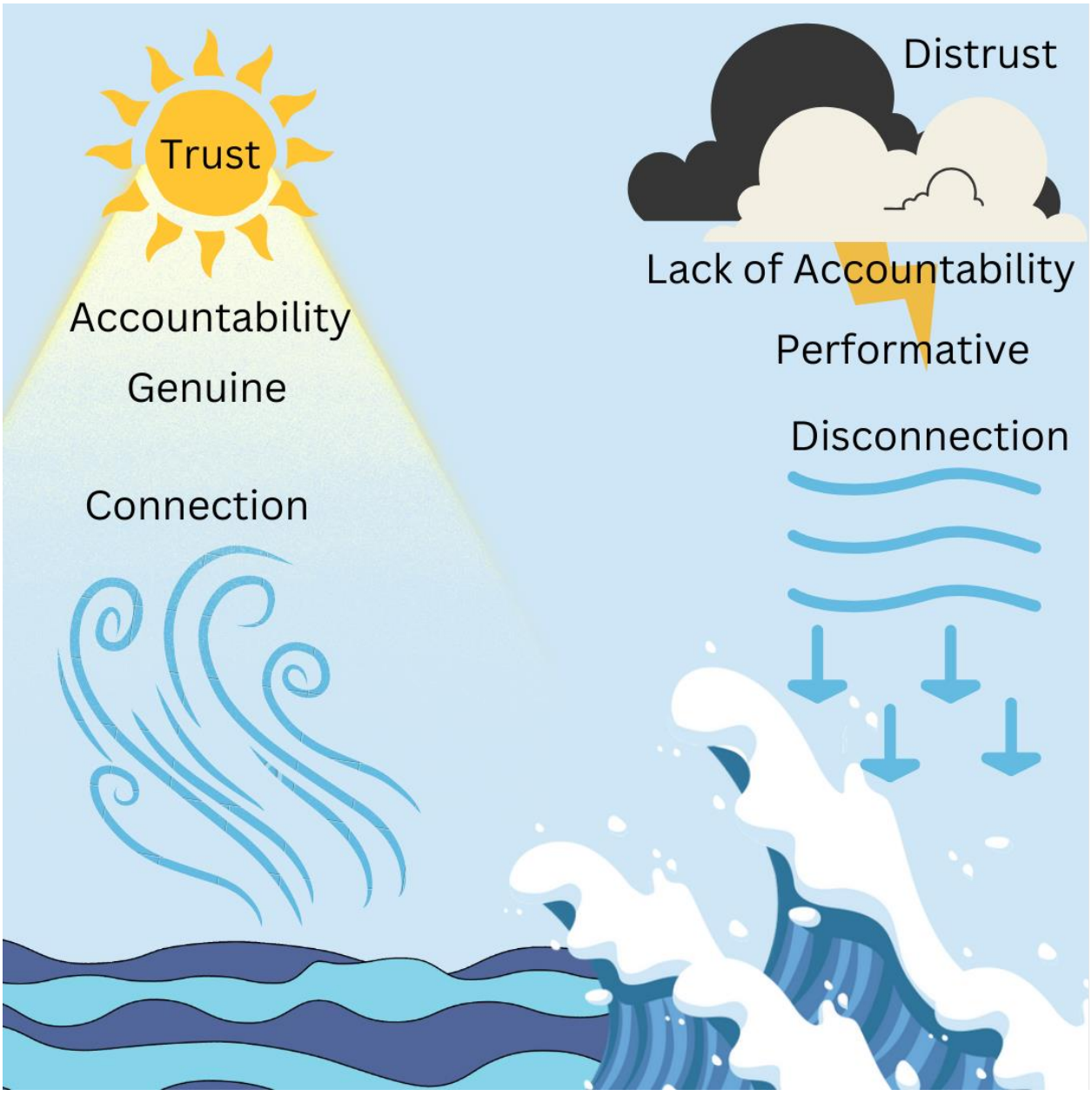


Figure 8 displays how different themes impact the water, or the vā, either positively or negatively. The left side illustrates how trust serves as a guiding light for families, fostering accountability and authenticity. This encourages reciprocation of these qualities, fostering connections between the parties involved. Conversely, the right side demonstrates how distrust is immediately sensed by families. When combined with a lack of accountability and performative interactions, this distrust can extend towards social workers, their community, or both. These themes collectively contribute to a broader theme of disconnection between vulnerable families and both their communities and social workers.

Conclusions

The findings presented in this chapter illuminate critical deficiencies within the practices of OT from the perspectives of the faifāgogo, particularly regarding their lack of compassion and meaningful engagement with the communities they serve. It became evident that community support plays a pivotal role in family outcomes, yet OT interventions often exacerbate rather than alleviate challenges. Moreover, the reluctance of social workers to engage meaningfully with 'āiga underscores a systemic issue of disconnection, rooted in distrust and lack of accountability. Similarly, this chapter shed light on the complexities of intergenerational and cultural dynamics that impact the well-being of children and families. The inadequacy of mental health support, the importance of meaningful connections with vulnerable children, and the superficiality of cultural understanding within institutional frameworks all contribute to a system that fails to meet the needs of 'āiga in the system.

Discussion

The findings underscore the urgent need for OT to transcend its role as a bureaucratic institution and embrace a paradigm shift towards genuine compassion, cultural competence, and community collaboration. Without addressing these fundamental issues, meaningful progress is stagnant, resulting in cycles of harm and disconnection. Drawing on insights from the microfilm documentary and existing literature, this chapter contrasts punitive child-centred approaches with more holistic, family-oriented methods that emphasise meaningful consultation and collaboration. I explore the effectiveness of community support systems, particularly within the Tongan and Sāmoan communities, and underscore the importance of addressing cultural attitudes towards shame and family issues. Furthermore, I critique the inadequacies of current social work practices, especially in their engagement with Māori and Pasifika families, and advocate for an Indigenous-led system rooted in Te Ao Māori principles. This chapter also discusses the persistent generational gap in understanding mental health within the Sāmoan community and the broader implications of these findings for future research and policy development.

As explored in the microfilm documentary, uplifting children as the first action potentially indicates a punitive approach, or child-centred as coined in the literature (Barnes, 2018). This method often focuses solely on the child's immediate removal from a perceived harmful environment, without considering the broader context of family dynamics and support systems (Atwool, 2020). Comparatively, a supportive approach would entail meaningful consultation with the family, engaging to understand their needs and working collaboratively to provide the necessary support and resources. This approach transcends cultural needs, as it meets people at a human level and centres the importance of familial bonds and community support in child welfare (Freisthler, 2013; Kemp et al., 2009). This research, therefore,

recommends a shift away from punitive measures and into prioritising collaboration for genuine respect within these relationships to be the norm, not the exception.

The findings demonstrated a need for a supportive approach from the community, family, and social workers. Focusing on community support, Frankie noted that the Tongan community encounter OT less often compared to Sāmoans. This difference could be attributed to the Tongan community's resistance to assimilation which results in tight-knit networks (Tatafu, 2014). Strong family ties and community support systems can reduce the need for external intervention, as these networks provide a robust framework for managing and resolving disputes internally (Fa'alau, 2016). In such a context, familial responsibility is collective and integral to the community culture, ensuring that issues are addressed within the community without external involvement (Ofahengaue Vakalahi & Godinet, 2008).

The efficacy of this community-based approach lies in its ability to maintain and strengthen familial bonds while ensuring that children and families receive the support they need. When a community collectively takes responsibility for its members, it can offer a more nuanced and culturally appropriate response to issues, while maintaining family unity and stability (Ofahengaue Vakalahi & Godinet, 2008). However, the success of this approach also depends on an attitude shift in how communities deal with shame. In the Sāmoan context, bringing abuse to light often results in disgrace and shame for the family, expressed through the phrase 'O oe ma louaiga' meaning one member's actions reflect the whole family. This can deter individuals from seeking help, as the fear of bringing dishonour to the family outweighs the need to address the issue (Ah Siu Maliko, 2016). Although the community repercussions of exposing family issues may not be as intimate in Aotearoa as in Sāmoa, the underlying

cultural attitudes persist. Aotearoa, despite its larger size and diverse population, still operates with close-knit communities where news and reputations can spread quickly (Rankine et al., 2017).

To harness the benefits of community support systems, there needs to be a cultural shift in how shame and family issues are perceived (Ah Siu Maliko, 2016; Rankine et al., 2017). Educating communities about the importance of addressing abuse and family disputes openly and providing support that respects cultural values while encouraging transparency, is crucial. This could involve creating safe spaces within the community where issues can be discussed without fear of judgement or disgrace. While community support is vital, it must be balanced with access to external resources when necessary. Families should feel confident that seeking help from social services or other external agencies will not lead to further shame or ostracization but rather complement the community's efforts to support and protect its members. By fostering a supportive environment that balances cultural values with transparency and accountability, communities can effectively reduce the need for external intervention and ensure that all members, especially children, are safe and supported (Moton et al., 2022). This is particularly important considering the lifestyle within Aotearoa in contrast to the cultural values the diaspora tries to maintain. Currently, family members may be unable to help or intervene as they might fear retaliation from the abuser or further harm to the child. They may also lack the financial, emotional, or social resources to provide adequate support. This approach could address these concerns by effectively crowdfunding solutions from within the community (Hyslop, 2022; Kemp et al., 2009).

Practically, the most preventative approach for Māori and Pasifika would be the investment in ending poverty and racism, increasing education in our communities, and implementing robust support systems

alongside efforts to promote awareness of these tools (Hyslop, 2022). However, these methods would take time that families cannot afford. Thus, utilising the existing community could be a way forward.

Furthermore, the research substantiated from an insider perspective that social workers are often ill-equipped to engage meaningfully with 'āiga. It is troubling that, despite the clear negative impact, the government has recently cut 447 jobs in the organisation. This is particularly worrisome given the existing overload of cases on social workers. Especially concerning is the elimination of Māori specialist support roles, which have been instrumental in improving relations between the crown and iwi (Oranga Tamariki, 2023). Removing Māori consultants undermines the ongoing partnership inherent in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. As we face another economic downturn, it is alarming that governments repeat historical mistakes and continue to impose harm on our communities through exploitative means under the guise of "economic necessity" and a scarcity mindset. Weaponising livelihoods, whether during the Dawn Raids or post-COVID restructuring, government methods rarely prioritise brown or poor communities. The current landscape makes it difficult but even more important to uplift the need for investment in our communities.

While research points to socioeconomic and societal factors affecting family breakdowns (Atwool. 2021; Hyslop et al., 2022), the current study highlights that this knowledge is not fully comprehended by social workers. This was exemplified in Dora's account of past institutionalisation being a point of bias among social workers wherein it was expected that intervention was necessary rather than offering understanding. This could indicate a normalisation of the trauma that institutionalisation imposes, however, further research is required to determine how widespread this is. The expectation of intervention can intensify the divide between social workers and families due to a mutual lack of trust.

Families with a history of intergenerational state care often view social workers as agents of a system that has repeatedly failed them (Leckey et al., 2022). This historical context fosters resentment, resistance, and deep-seated distrust towards any form of external assistance (Leckey et al., 2022; Toros et al., 2018). Conversely, social workers may approach these cases with preconceived notions or biases, influenced by stereotypes or stigmas associated with families involved in the child welfare system. This can result in a lack of genuine engagement or understanding of the family's unique circumstances and strengths, further perpetuating the cycle of distrust (Terrefe, 2024).

The findings of this study highlight the ongoing misunderstanding of mental health between Sāmoan elders and youth. This generational gap of misunderstanding may be fuelled by traditional beliefs influenced by the church and newer trends that see the younger generation promoting self-diagnosis and a general acceptance of mental illness (Haltigan et al., 2023; The Editorial Board, 2024). Although research advocates for Pasifika mental health as an essential component of a holistic approach to health, elders typically respond to someone experiencing depression or anxiety by labelling them as possessed by a demon and shaming them for their inability to perform duties (Paterson et al., 2018). This aspect of our culture is important to acknowledge, as it offers greater insight into the relationship between mental and spiritual health. Tamasese et al., (2005) received realistic insights on the external influences that affect mental health such as cultural adjustment, Aotearoa societal pressures, and the breakdown of relationships. However, more recent studies suggest the belief that mental illness is an external spiritual force persists (Paterson et al., 2018). While there is still a heavy reliance on religious views of mental health within the community, pathways to healing are impeded regardless of age.

Furthermore, this is in extreme contrast with the trend among the more accepting younger generation who, with the influence of platforms such as TikTok, tend to self-diagnose at higher rates than any generation prior (Basch et al., 2022; Haltigan et al., 2023). This trend is bolstered by studies suggesting mental health is worsening for this age group, described as "persistently inequitable" (Menzies et al., 2020, p.2) and "a matter of urgency" (Menzies et al., 2020 p.5). Updated research regarding Sāmoan youth mental health is required, as the existing pressure from familial responsibility, socioeconomic and societal inequities that affect Sāmoan communities is likely to be exacerbated by these trends.

However, a balanced approach is required, as western therapy culture often prevents community action by turning mental health into a matter of the individual (Eshun & Gurung, 2009). Paired with the existing narrative in the community that being mentally unwell is something you need to fix in isolation, I question the efficacy of these systems in the Aotearoa Sāmoan context. Pathology can alienate one from their cultural context, yet denial of medical definitions can cause one to neglect their individual needs. This was alluded to in Frankie's story of the Tongan boy who was sent back to Tonga after being tossed between family members in Aotearoa. While details of their situation are limited, as a case study, this may have happened due to a combination of struggles assimilating, negative mental health, a lack of community, and the aforementioned attitudes. While therapy, although enormously inaccessible, can be life-saving, I argue a different approach that balances community support and psychological intervention requires further investigation.

Moreover, the research highlighted the danger of not taking reports of concern seriously. Numerous news reports have documented cases where children have died at the hands of their carers due to social workers failing to act. Between 2017 and 2023, 57 children had their lives taken (Casinader, 2023).

Examples include high-profile cases like Baby Ru, where systemic failures and neglect in the social care system led to the death of a child despite multiple warnings and reports of abuse (Roberts, 2023). Repeated inaction on abuse reports erodes public trust in social services, causing families and communities to hesitate in reporting abuse, fearing their concerns will be ignored. This distrust can result in underreporting, leaving more children at risk. It is unacceptable that families cannot rely on these services, especially when they already face barriers to seeking help.

Conclusions

The current study critiques OT's attempts to diversify itself as being superficial and tokenistic as it lacks genuine cultural competence and fails to address systemic biases. Despite promoting diversity, OT's practices often perpetuate structural racism and undermine Indigenous practices (Doyle, 2022; Walters, 2022). The inconsistent implementation of inclusive policies and cuts to specialist support roles exacerbate the problem, reflecting an exploitative approach that disproportionately harms Māori and Pasifika communities, especially during economic downturns (Fitzmaurice-Brown, 2024). To genuinely address these issues, OT must implement deep structural changes that honour Indigenous practices, provide comprehensive cultural competence training, and ensure consistent, meaningful application of inclusive policies.

However, a complete overhaul of the system has been urged for years (Boshier, 2024; Waitangi Tribunal, 2021). Rather than implementing minuscule aspects of Te Ao Māori into the system, a completely new system delivered by Tangata Whenua could benefit all (Boshier, 2024; Smith & Stevens, 2022). This aligns with our recommendations of moving away from a punitive approach inherent in individualistic societies. Regardless of the intervention outcome, it can be consistently observed that the negative impacts outweigh the positive (Atwool, 2021; Webb, 2017). Very few parents could experience their child being taken and not feel a profound loss compounded by grief, guilt, and shame. The current system makes them powerless, diminishing their role as a parent (Integrity Professionals Limited et al., 2022). Children are left confused, often feeling abandoned (Connolly et al., 2017). The remaining family is left to grapple with the separation, uncertain of the child's safety or whereabouts (Integrity Professionals Limited et al., 2022). The removal of a child can disrupt the family structure and dynamics, creating more issues than pre-intervention (Struik, 2017).

While in some cases this restructuring is necessary for healthy relationships, I argue the intervention by the state (and the trauma inflicted thereof) is not.

In comparison, a kaupapa Māori approach honours the interconnectedness of all family relationships where fostering is an act of supporting parents, not taking their rights away. OT attempts to borrow from Te Ao Māori to minimise the disruption of relationships by placing children with extended family. However, the current implementation fails to address the core needs of Indigenous people because it merely sprinkles Māori concepts over an inherently western system, which is neither sufficient nor sustainable in the long term (Boshier, 2024). For Te Ao Māori principles to be genuinely effective, the system itself must be entirely Indigenous-led. Only through Māori leadership can the practices, policies, and interventions reflect a true understanding and respect for Māori values, culture, and social structures. An Indigenous-led system would prioritise the wellbeing of children and families through principles of communal responsibility, holistic wellbeing, and respect for cultural identity that underpin Te Ao Māori. These values resonate strongly within the Sāmoan community, which could foster a sense of trust and community engagement that is currently lacking.

The first research aim, to examine the experiences of Sāmoans with OT in a manner that privileges their voices, was effective by using film to uplift the voices of the faifāgogo. This was expressed by faifāgogo post-filming, who reported that the process was relieving and validated their experiences. The microfilm documentary method showed efficacy in shifting the narratives within this space from deficit-based to strengths-based while maintaining honesty of the realities. This addresses the second research aim, through a unique application of fa'afaletui, this work aims to shed light on the unseen aspects of Sāmoan experiences with OT. This research demonstrates the power of film as a tool for advocacy and social change within disciplines outside of media, particularly in challenging existing

narratives and promoting more inclusive and empowering representations of marginalised communities. Furthermore, by blending fa'afaletui and microfilm documentary, this study contributed to the existing library of digital fāgogo while also bringing a unique expression of fāgogo.

The method of fa'afaletui calls upon different matai to share the vā and engage in critical discourse to illuminate solutions. The analysis furthered this by centring the idea that all perspectives were connected through lived experience. By putting this at the forefront of recommendations, the study aims to better demonstrate the level of impact, as each faifāgogo represents their fellow va'aalo, la'au (tree), and fish. Thus, the third and final research aim, to find the overlapping vā within the perspectives to offer insights that could better the system, and therefore, the impacts on families, was achieved.

Furthermore, throughout this study, fa'afaletui was identified as a potential method for culturally appropriate FGCs. The recommendation to integrate fa'afaletui into FGCs comes with a critical warning—it is essential to genuinely engage with the purpose and principles of these traditional ways of being. Misappropriation risks reducing fa'afaletui to a superficial practice, stripped of its cultural significance and transformative potential. To avoid this, such cultural practices must be not merely adopted as a token gesture but are deeply understood and respected within their cultural context. Ultimately, the most impactful way to achieve this genuine engagement would be by relinquishing control of the organisation to iwi. Māori leadership, grounded in a deep understanding of Indigenous values and practices, would be best positioned to ensure that processes like fa'afaletui are implemented with integrity and respect. This approach would not only honour the cultural heritage of Māori and Sāmoan communities but also create a more effective and culturally attuned system for all families involved.

Future Research

Future research should continue to investigate the nuanced relationship between community support and external interventions, the impact of cultural and societal pressures on mental health, and the efficacy of current child welfare systems in Aotearoa. Future research should focus on evaluating the long-term impacts of non-punitive, family-centred approaches in child welfare, and the role of community-based support systems in reducing the need for external intervention. Investigating comprehensive cultural competence training for social workers and the integration of Indigenous leadership could improve engagement with diverse communities. Further study on mental health within Sāmoan communities, especially among youth, is essential, considering generational differences and the influence of traditional beliefs and social media trends. Addressing systemic failures in child welfare through Indigenous-led models and examining the feasibility of fully integrating Te Ao Māori principles could help rebuild trust and improve outcomes. Additionally, exploring innovative research methods, such as microfilm documentary and fa'afaletui, can empower marginalised voices and advocate for social change. Finally, the findings within the microfilm documentary should be further disseminated, especially the need for educating parents and parental engagement.

Limitations

The limitations of this study include the scope of faifāgogo experiences and the need for more comprehensive data on the long-term impacts of these systems on affected communities. Most importantly, families who have experienced the system were inaccessible due to ethical concerns and time constraints. This was augmented partially by including my experiences with the system, however, more current experiences should be captured to evaluate whether the critiques Dora and Frankie offered are also felt by ʻāiga in the current system. While my lived experience brought strengths to this study,

there is also possibility of limitations due to unconscious bias. Insider status in research can affect how the researcher reacts to the data, or how the co researchers interact with the researcher (Wilkinson & Kitzinger, 2013). To mitigate this, reflexive practices such as regular debriefing sessions were had to maintain objectivity throughout the research process. While my insider status seemed to put the faifāgogo at ease, there was potential for their responses to be influenced by knowing of my experience with the system. To minimise this, I maintained a neutral stance and assured participants of the study's focus on their unique experiences.

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Appendix A.

Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC)

12 July 2023

Deborah Heke
Faculty of Culture and Society

Dear Deborah

Re Ethics Application: **23/156 Sāmoan perspectives on Oranga Tamariki- a digital fāgogo.**

Thank you for your responses to AUTEC's conditions.

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 12 July 2026.

Non-Standard Conditions of Approval

1. Please include information in the Information Sheet about the photographs and the future use of film and potential distribution.
2. Please send through the revised flyer for the file.

Non-standard conditions do not need to be submitted to or reviewed by AUTEC unless requested but must be completed before commencing your study.

Standard Conditions of Approval

1. The research is to be undertaken in accordance with the Auckland University of Technology Code of Conduct for Research and as approved by AUTEC.
2. All public facing documents must have the AUTEC approval number and be of a high standard of spelling and grammar. Dates on the Information Sheet(s) and Consent Form(s) must be consistent.
3. Any amendments to the project must be approved by AUTEC prior to being implemented.
4. A progress report is due annually on the anniversary of the approval date.
5. A final report is due at the expiration of the approval period, or, upon completion of project.
6. Any serious or adverse events must be reported to AUTEC, this includes unforeseen issues that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project.
7. AUTEC grants ethical approval only. You are responsible for obtaining management permission for access from any institution or organisation at which your research is being conducted and you need to meet all ethical, legal, public health, and locality obligations or requirements for the jurisdictions in which the research is being undertaken.

The application number and title need to be referenced on all correspondence related to this project.

All forms are available online http://www.aut.ac.nz/research/researchethics

For any enquiries, please contact ethics@aut.ac.nz
(This is a computer-generated letter for which no signature is required)

The AUTEC Secretariat
Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee

Cc: cassidywildb@gmail.com; dion.enari@aut.ac.nz

Participant Information Sheet

This information sheet is for potential participants.

Date Information Sheet produced:

15/05/2023

Project Title

Sāmoan perspectives on Oranga Tamariki- a digital fāgogo.

An Invitation

My name is Cassidy Wild-Brooks, I am a Master's student at Auckland University of Technology in my second year of study towards my Master's degree. My father is Sāmoan Chinese, his mother was adopted as a child by her German school teacher in Sāmoa, and unfortunately passed away before I could meet her. I was put into foster care at 18 months old until I was five when my maternal grandparents took me in. I was eleven when I was put back into state care, living with many Palagi families before living with my father for a year. At the age of 14 I went flatting, as there were no safe spaces left for me. Therefore, I have always had a yearning to learn more about my gafa, and these experiences have fuelled me to help others in similar positions.

I would like to invite you to participate in what I see as a service to the community. I hope you are interested in contributing knowledge to this study and if you are, please reach out with your expression of interest.

What is the purpose of this research?

This project is a visual storytelling of Sāmoan experiences with Oranga Tamariki, focused on the questions: What are Sāmoan experiences with Oranga Tamariki? How can positive outcomes for Sāmoan families be amplified?

Sāmoan culture is anchored in the family and community teachings of Fa'a Sāmoa, which has varying degrees of successful translation in Aotearoa. Sāmoan New Zealand parents have scored lower on the nurturing scale and highest on disciplinary behaviours

than parents in Sāmoa. Studies have shown this is symptomatic of living in contrast to indigenous Sāmoan culture which entails having less extended family, being in lower socioeconomic communities, and having less time with their children. ’Āiga is a core component of Fa’a Sāmoa that transcends place of residency, however, research displaying the complexities of ‘āiga breakdown to the extent of child removal is lacking.

Research focusing on the psychological outcomes of Sāmoan families after intervention is limited to Oranga Tamariki reports through the Ministry for Children, which are child-centred and lack a holistic view of the family. In particular, documentation of the psychological effects on parents is exceptionally underdeveloped. A comprehensive search revealed that research focuses on the psychological effects on the children and foster parents, but rarely the biological family. In Aotearoa, this means information about the distress people experience is limited to families speaking out to media and news outlets. This is problematic, as news outlets are often tragedy-focused and can take the narrative out of the people’s hands.

Currently, state intrusion is significantly less researched for Sāmoan families, therefore unjustified intervention is currently unknown. This research aims to put the narratives in the hands of those who are focused on Sāmoan wellbeing and want to honour the families who have experienced the New Zealand foster system, in order to create a more productive landscape moving forward.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

You have significant knowledge or experience working with Sāmoan families that are facing/have faced Oranga Tamariki intervention and are invited to tell these stories to co-create a meaningful fāgogo moving forward. You are comfortable being filmed, are over 18, and can complete the interview in English. You are not a current employee of Oranga Tamariki.

How do I agree to participate in this research?

You must contact me via email to express your interest as an interview candidate. Please send your email to cass.wild.wild-brooks@aut.ac.nz with the subject line "Talanoa Expression of Interest" by the 6th of November 2023.

Your participation in this research is voluntary (it is your choice) and whether or not you choose to participate will neither advantage nor disadvantage you. If you are interested in participating, you will receive a consent and release form to complete before the research can begin. This form confirms your understanding of the use of recordings you will be in, and confirms that you want to be part of this project. You can withdraw from the study at any time. If you choose to withdraw from the study, then you will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to you removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, removal of your data may not be possible.

What will happen in this research?

Once you have received this information sheet, you will have 14 days to accept the invitation. If you accept the invitation, you will be asked to engage in a one-on-one interview with me that will take up to two hours. This time includes a supplied meal together with myself and my filming crew of two people.

You will be asked to complete a consent and release form before the interview may commence.

If you are local to Auckland, the interview may take place at one of the AUT campuses. Otherwise, we are scouting appropriate filming locations throughout Auckland and Wellington which may be better suited to you, which will be agreed upon between the participant and researcher.

The interview will be filmed, a small microphone will be attached to you, and my two crew members will be present with us (to operate camera and lighting/sound). You will be notified when filming starts and ends.

I will ask you some general questions about your work in the community, and how you came to be involved with Oranga Tamariki. We will focus a lot of the talanoa around Sāmoan culture, Sāmoan family structures, and Sāmoan wellbeing. We can talk about the translation of these things within New Zealand, both successful and difficult. The

content of the interview is open to what you want to focus on within this topic. I will talk to you about the themes my research is interested in (mentioned in my initial email), which you can expand upon. A major aim of this research is to advance Sāmoan voices in this space and time; therefore, you are not only a co-researcher and co-creator, but a storyteller, and I am your audience.

I might take some manual notes during the interview, particularly if I want to check I have the correct spelling of something, but I intend to remain engaged with you throughout the interview as your time is valuable and I want to make the most of the hour we have.

I will edit the video of our interview, meaning it may be weaved with other fāgogo and B-roll (cutaway footage). The research will consist of three episodes, each being around 3-5 minutes long. You will be emailed a draft version of all episodes you feature in, which you will have the opportunity to suggest edits, build upon, and approve over email. There will be three months dedicated to editing during this research. This will be the main period that the researcher will be collaborating with you to polish the co-creation of your fāgogo that you think is accurate. You will be consulted about whether you'd like to receive the finished episodes to use in your work, or another way for us to give this back to the community.

All interviews will be conducted before the end of November 2023. If you have not received a response to your expression of interest by this time, that means we would have reached our capacity for participants and cannot interview you due to time constraints. This will be communicated with you via email. I will not contact you to conduct any additional research. You may contact me at any point in the research process.

What are the discomforts and risks?

I am acutely aware of the discomfort speaking about Oranga Tamariki can create. You will be identifiable; therefore, I understand that there need be boundaries/off-limits in our talanoa to avoid or minimise any disadvantages you may encounter in your work for speaking about Oranga Tamariki. It is advised that the participant be aware that this research requires you to be identifiable and speaking on a contentious subject for the

community. There is possibility for backlash of your recommendations, depending on what you choose to share.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

You will not be expected to talk further about anything that brings you distress. You may discuss with me at any time before the interview things you are not comfortable with or able to disclose. These will be respected at all times. If you are uncomfortable answering a question, I will not pressure you into providing a response. If it would make you more comfortable to know why I am asking a question, I can offer my reasoning as to why I have included it.

The consent forms, which will state your name and contact details, will be stored securely in a locked office separate from the interview data, which will be stored in a separate locked office location. You have the option to not have your full name displayed on-screen.

If you express that you no longer wish to participate in this study at any stage during or after the interview, your responses will be excluded, and a new interview participant will be chosen from the remaining pool. If you wish to withdraw from the study before the interview is complete, the interview will be terminated without completion. It may not be possible to remove data identifiable as belonging to you after the research has been published.

You will be treated with respect and your contribution to this research is incredibly valuable to me and will be treated as such.

If you experience any discomfort, psychological or emotional distress, we recommend you access The Fono services, which are free of charge. They are accessible at https://thefono.org/lagiola/ **What are the benefits?**

This research is a visual storytelling piece, which offers participants the opportunity to tell their own experiences without the analysis of typical Western research. It is a tool for the weaving of our collective knowledge in this va- so that Sāmoan people have the power to choose what these experiences mean for the community going forward. You will have the opportunity to use the final version in your work if you choose, and brainstorm with the researcher how we can best give this back to the community.

When complete, the research will address a significant gap in the literature and contemporary media about Sāmoan experiences with Oranga Tamariki, and offer better ways to strengthen families in this space. The completed dissertation (videos and exegesis) will also be uploaded to Tuwhera Open Theses and Dissertations, an online repository available to members of the public.

How will my privacy be protected?

Filming will not take place at your work, home, or other private space of yours. Only information that has been agreed upon to be shared and connected with participant identity will be published for the purpose of this research only.

Your contact details will only be known to me and my two supervisors. They will only be used to communicate before the interview, for the draft copy and editing process, and to provide you with a summary of the results.

Your consent form will be stored in a secure location on the Auckland University of Technology campus for six years following the completion of the study. The interview data will be stored in a separate secure location for the same period. After this time has elapsed, this data will be destroyed. This is a requirement for ethical approval by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee. Being identifiable is encouraged in this research as it is seen as a way to celebrate the participant, and inspire and empower others.

What are the costs of participating in this research?

The process will take approximately two hours.

What opportunity do I have to consider this invitation?

You have until the 6th of November 2023 to contact me expressing your interest in being an interview candidate.

Will I receive feedback on the results of this research?

Once the videos have been analysed, a summary of findings will be emailed to the address you provide in your contact details. The final analysis is expected in mid-2024. A summary of the findings will be made available to you via the following URL link:

Is this project being funded?

An application to the Health Research Council is being submitted to help fund this research. The funds are simply to aid the researcher with tuition and living costs to allow her more time with this project. The funding agency is not part of the research and has no authority on the process of the research.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Professor Deborah Heke, deborah.heke@aut.ac.nz phone: (+64) 9 921 9999 Ext. 26512

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Executive Secretary of AUTEC, ethics@aut.ac.nz , (+64) 921 9999 ext 6038.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Please keep this Information Sheet and a copy of the Consent Form for your future reference. You are also able to contact the research team as follows:

Researcher Contact Details: Cass Wild, cass.wild.wild-brooks@aut.ac.nz

Project Supervisor Contact Details: Deborah Heke, deborah.heke@aut.ac.nz

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 8/7/2024, AUTEC Reference number 23/156

Consent and Release form

Project title: Sāmoan perspectives on Oranga Tamariki- a digital fāgogo.

Project Supervisor: ***Deborah Heke & Dion Enari***

Researcher: ***Cassidy Wild-Brooks***

This form is evidence of your consent to participate in this research.

- ○ I have read and understood the information provided about this research project in the Information Sheet dated dd mmmm yyyy.
- ○ I have had an opportunity to ask questions and to have them answered.
- ○ I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study at any time without being disadvantaged in any way.
- ○ I understand that notes will be taken during the interviews and that they will also be audio-taped and transcribed.
- ○ I understand that if I withdraw from the study then I will be offered the choice between having any data that is identifiable as belonging to me removed or allowing it to continue to be used. However, once the findings have been produced, the removal of my data may not be possible.
- ○ I permit the researcher | artist to use the visual recordings that are part of this project and/or any drawings from them and any other reproductions or adaptations from them, either complete or in part, alone or in conjunction with any wording and/or drawings for (a) the researcher's | artist's portfolio; and (b) educational exhibition and examination purposes and related design works as stated on the Information Sheet.
- ○ I understand that the videos will be used for academic purposes and will not be published in any form outside of this project without my written permission.
- ○ I understand that any copyright material created by the videographic sessions is deemed to be owned by the researcher | artist and that I do not own copyright of any of the videos.
- ○ I understand that upon completion of this research, I will have the opportunity to discuss and decide on the date and location/platform for a presentation of the videos.
- ○ I agree to take part in this research.
- ○ I wish to receive a summary of the research findings (please tick one): Yes○ No○

Participant's signature: .....

Participant's name: .....

Participant's Contact Details (if appropriate):

.....

.....

Date:

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 13 June 2023 AUTEC Reference number 23/156

Note: The Participant should retain a copy of this form

Confidentiality Agreement

Project title: ***Sāmoan perspectives on Oranga Tamariki- a digital fāgogo.***

Project Supervisor: ***Deborah Heke & Cecelia Faumuina***

Researcher: ***Cassidy Wild-Brooks***

- ○ I understand that all the material I will be asked to video is confidential.
- ○ I understand that the contents of the recordings can only be discussed with the researchers.
- ○ I will not keep any copies of the videos nor allow third parties access to them.

Crew's signature: .....

Crew's name: .....

Crew's Contact Details (if appropriate):

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Date:

Project Supervisor's Contact Details (if appropriate):

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Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on *type the date on which the final approval was granted* ***AUTEC Reference number*** *type the AUTEC reference number*

Note: The Transcriber should retain a copy of this form.

Appendix B.

Table 2.

Process of Filming

Process	Team member responsible	Notes
Camera set up	Shivani, Gabbi	
Laying of the mat	Shivani, Cass	Not applicable to Dora interview #1
Faifāgogo are welcomed into the space with ‘ula	Cass	Not applicable to Dora interview #2
Microphones attached to Cass and faifāgogo	Gabbi	
Camera and microphone testing	Gabbi, Shivani Cass	
Introductions; relaying what was shared in the talanoa before filming, stating the purpose of the research and using the tapa cloth as a metaphor for the faifāgogo; the process (journey) they have undergone to be celebrated by the community		Developed after Dora interview #1
Faifāgogo introduction	Dora, Frankie	Not applicable to Dora interview #2

Sharing of fāgogo	Dora, Frankie, Cass	Cass to come back to questions when a point naturally concludes
Closing statements	Dora, Frankie, Cass	
Film B-roll	Shivani, Gabbi	Not applicable to Dora interview #1 B-roll was candid; for Frankie we passed a rugby ball, for Dora's second interview we casually walked around and talked, and separately filmed her singing, for Cass we filmed in my garden.