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Exploring success amongst Pacific families in New Zealand: findings from the Pacific Islands Families Study

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ABSTRACT

An overarching objective of New Zealand society is to have an equitable educational, economic, and health outcomes for all citizens, including its Pacific population. In response to these ambitions, this study explored success and what elements are necessary for Pacific families to be successful in New Zealand. Focus groups were undertaken with 29 Pacific fathers and 27 Pacific mothers aged between 35-71 years. An inductive thematic analytical approach was used to code and identify themes from the data. Pacific methodologies, including the Talanoa and Kakala frameworks, were integral in the systematic process of data analysis. Four key factors were found to represent and constitute success for Pacific families: a connection with God, practicing and embracing Pacific cultural identity, family connectedness and lastly communication. Incorporating these key facets into social service provision to enable Pacific people to lead successful, productive lives and Pacific families to function successfully.

Key words: Success, Family, Pacific Islands, Culture, Identity, Connectedness

BACKGROUND

'Pacific people' is an umbrella term that represents a diverse group of ethnicities, each with their own language, cultural traditions, customs and beliefs.[1] They comprise approximately 7.4% of the total New Zealand (NZ) population. The Samoan group (49%) represents almost half of the total NZ Pacific population, followed by Cook Islands Māori (21%), Tongan (20%), Niuean (8%), and smaller populations from Fiji, Tuvalu, and Tokelau.[1] The Pacific population is relatively youthful, with a median age of 22 years compared to 41 years for European.[1] Almost two-thirds of Pacific people are born in NZ, and 37% identify with two or more ethnic groups, compared to 13% for European people.[1,2]

Pacific people (93%) are a highly-urbanised population group[1] which has flourished in cultural pursuits such as sport and art.[3,4] However, they are over-represented in terms of unemployment,[5] low income,[6] low educational attainment,[7,8] child poverty,[9] poor child health[10] and inadequate housing and poor living standards.[11-13] Over time, Pacific families have experienced incremental improvements in some areas including their educational status; however it is relatively low compared to their European counterparts [8,14] nevertheless research

is needed to describe what constitutes success in their eyes for their families living in New Zealand.

Concept of Pacific Families

Families can be based upon various foundations, such as legal relationships, biological and ethnic

ties and household composition.[15-17] Statistics New Zealand defines a 'nuclear family' as a couple, with or without child(ren) or one parent and their child(ren) who reside in the same dwelling.[18] This definition has been criticised as too narrow to capture the nature of Pacific families since Pacific notions of family extend further than the nuclear family unit common in Western societies.[11,19] Common Pacific concepts of the family include, 'api (meaning 'home') in the Tongan language, and the Samoan notion of aiga (meaning nuclear and extended family).

Koloto and Katoanga[19] define a Pacific family as one that is inclusive of at least one person of Pacific descent living in the family home and also considers the important notion of 'proximity of contact', meaning the physical location and closeness of immediate and extended family households as integral to Pacific ideologies of family.[19,20]

Wellbeing of Families

The wellbeing of families has been prioritised by various NZ government agencies.[21] Family wellbeing has been pragmatically described as the ability of families to function effectively within diverse, complex, transience environments of society and can be measured holistically.[22] Moreover, family wellbeing is perceived to encompass socio-economic indicators such as income, education, employment, housing, living standards and health outcomes of the family as a whole. [14,22-24] Several studies have examined wellbeing for all types of families in NZ, including Pacific households.[14,22-25] Cotterell et al. [14] described differences in family wellbeing in terms of income, employment and homeownership between Samoan, Cook Islands, Tongan and Niuean households between 1981 and 2006.

The findings indicated that median equivalised income increased for all Pacific households over this period, particularly for Samoan households, but single-parent Niuean and Tongan households were worse off economically than the other Island groups.[14]

Moreover, an increasing proportion of Pacific households worked more than 48 hours per week with parents working multiple jobs. In effect, Pacific households are more likely to have insecure economic positions.[26] There is evidence that homeownership is declining across all Pacific families, with approximately 56.8% of Europeans owning a home in NZ compared to only 18.5% of Pacific people.[27]

Issues with measuring family wellbeing

Family wellbeing is a complex phenomenon to measure particularly with evolving family types, size and cultural understandings. The Families and Whānau wellbeing conceptual framework (FWWCF) [21,22,28,29] was developed in an attempt to understand and measure the wellbeing of families in NZ. Grounded upon the ecological systems theory,[30] resource theory[17] and family systems theory,[31] this framework posits that for families to execute their function successfully, identifying and understanding the wider contextual influences such as economic, social, cultural, environmental and demographic forces surrounding families is important. The framework considers physical, material, emotional and social wellbeing factors that are vital and directly linked to how families effectively function.[21] In addition, the FWWCF is contingent on four 'domains of influence'. They include the safety and health of families, supportive family relationships, economic security and social connections to the community in which they live. It is understood that these factors interrelate and contribute to the wellbeing and successful functioning of families in NZ.

The FWWCF measure is to some extent, similar to Pacific notions of holistic wellbeing as captured in the Pacific Identity and Wellbeing Scale-Revised (PIWBS-R)[32] and the Fonofale Model of Health.[33] The Fonofale model and PIWBS-R are 'individualised' measures and do not measure family wellbeing. However, they are still valuable for our understanding of the wellbeing of Pacific families. The PIWBS-R measures a Pacific individuals' identity and wellbeing [32,34] and is based on six constructs informed by both the Pacific and international literature on wellbeing and identity. These constructs include, perceived familial wellbeing; perceived societal wellbeing; group membership evaluation; Pacific connectedness and belonging; religious centrality and embeddedness; and cultural efficacy. [32,34]

Similarly, the Fonofale model of health is informed by Pacific notions of health and wellbeing and is represented metaphorically by a fale (Samoan house).[33] The structures that form the fale encompass the different factors necessary for the health and wellbeing of Pacific individuals. The foundation of the fale symbolises the aiga (family). The roof represents an individual's beliefs and cultural values that are emblematically speaking, provide shelter and guidance to life. The four posts of the house depict spiritual, physical, mental and other aspects of an individual's life such as gender and

age, which figuratively form the link and strong bond between family and culture.[33] Surrounding the fale is the environment, time and context, all of which indirectly and directly influence health outcomes for Pacific people.[33]

Implications of what constitutes success on Pacific family's wellbeing

It is imperative to understand what constitutes success in Pacific families, holistically in relation to their economic and health development, educational aspirations and social spheres in life. Their notion of success will inevitably impact their families' wellbeing. If we realise the factors of success for Pacific families, this, in turn, could improve their overall family wellbeing and how they function in NZ society.

Despite a scarcity of literature pertaining to what constitutes success for Pacific families, recent international studies suggest that success in families is not only regarded as triumphs or achievement, but more notably, the ability of families to communicate well [35,36] and to spend ample quality time together. In fact, researchers have found that being committed to each other with the purpose of helping each other, emotionally, economically and when in crisis is an integral part of successful family functioning.[35,37,38] The importance of families sharing the same sentimental values, morals and religious beliefs [37,39] and acknowledging the importance of family structure and roles, [35,36] are also important influences on optimal family functioning. Using a qualitative design, underpinned by Pacific methodologies, this study explores how Pacific parents describe success, and what factors constitute success for themselves and their families living in NZ.

METHODS

Participant Recruitment

The Pacific Islands Families (PIF) Study is a longitudinal birth cohort study of Pacific families, whose children were born in the year 2000 in Auckland, NZ. A sampling frame of 100 Pacific mothers and 100 Pacific fathers who participate in the PIF Study was produced by the study biostatistician. The sampling frame excluded participants who were of non-Pacific descent and those who lived outside of Auckland. From this sampling frame, 60 potential participants (30 Pacific fathers and 30 Pacific mothers) were contacted by telephone and invited to participate in focus groups.

Researchers provided potential participants with a brief outline of the study over the telephone and then scheduled a home visit to ensure that participants were fully informed about the study before making any decision to participate. Researchers visited participants' homes with a participant information sheet, detailing the research aims, time, and focus group location. At the home, visit participants were given the opportunity to agree to participate or not. The team followed up those who agreed to participate with phone calls and reminder texts in the week before the commencement of the focus groups. Participants were assigned a scheduled focus group based on the date of recruitment and availability of mothers and fathers. If participants were unable to travel to the focus group location, a researcher provided transport to and from the venue.

Sample Characteristics

Of the 56 participants in the focus groups, 27 self-identified as being of Samoan decent, followed by 13 of Tongan descent, 11 of Cook Islands decent, 2 of Tokelauan descent, 2 of Niuean descent and 1 of Tuvaluan descent. In total, there were 29 male participants and 27 female participants (**Table 1**). Due to uncontrollable family and health events, four participants were not able to attend their allocated focus groups.

Table 1. Participant Code
Pacific Islands Families Study Participants

Participant Code	Ethnicity	Age	Gender
FCI60	Cook Islander	60	Female
FCI40	Cook Islander	40	Female
FCI47	Cook Islander	47	Female
FT35	Tongan	35	Female
FT38	Tongan	38	Female
MCI46a	Cook Islander	46	Male
MTv47	Tuvaluan	47	Male
MS47a	Samoan	47	Male
MS42	Samoan	42	Male
FS35	Samoan	35	Female
FS54	Samoan	54	Female
FCI48	Cook Islander	48	Female
MCI51	Cook Islander	51	Male
MS43a	Samoan	43	Male
FS46a	Samoan	46	Female
FT43b	Tongan	43	Female
FS44a	Samoan	44	Female
FS46b	Samoan	46	Female
FS40a	Samoan	40	Female
MS49	Samoan	49	Male

MS39a	Samoan	39	Male
FS40b	Samoan	40	Female
FT45	Tongan	45	Female
MT56	Tongan	56	Male
MS39b	Samoan	39	Male
MS43b	Samoan	43	Male
FS40c	Samoan	40	Female
FS50	Samoan	50	Female
FTk60	Tokelauan	60	Female
FS44b	Samoan	44	Female
MS46	Samoan	46	Male
MS43c	Samoan	43	Male
FS43	Samoan	43	Female
FS68	Samoan	68	Female
MS45	Samoan	45	Male
MS38	Samoan	38	Male
MT50b	Tongan	50	Male
MS43d	Samoan	43	Male

*We have used the codes shown to attribute quotations but note that we did not quote each respondent; thus, not all codes are used in this segment of the results section.

confidentiality was assured. For discretion, separate assigned rooms for mothers and fathers, provided a private and comfortable environment to have discussion.

Each focus group was facilitated by a gender-matched researcher of Pacific descent. Prior to asking specific focus group questions, a general question was posed to all participants: 'As a Pacific mother/father in NZ, what is a successful family to you?' Each focus group was digitally voice-recorded and the focus group facilitator took handwritten notes as well. The focus groups ranged from one to two hours in length. After each focus group, participants were thanked for their time and given a me'a 'ofa (gift).

Cultural Methodology

It is important to ensure research carried out with Pacific people is culturally appropriate to ensure accurate retrieval of Pacific voices (**Figure 1**). This study utilised elements of the Talanoa[40] methodological approach described by Vaioleti as "a personal encounter where people

Figure 1: Diagram of the interactions between the Kakala and Talanoa methodologies and HRC Pacific research guidelines
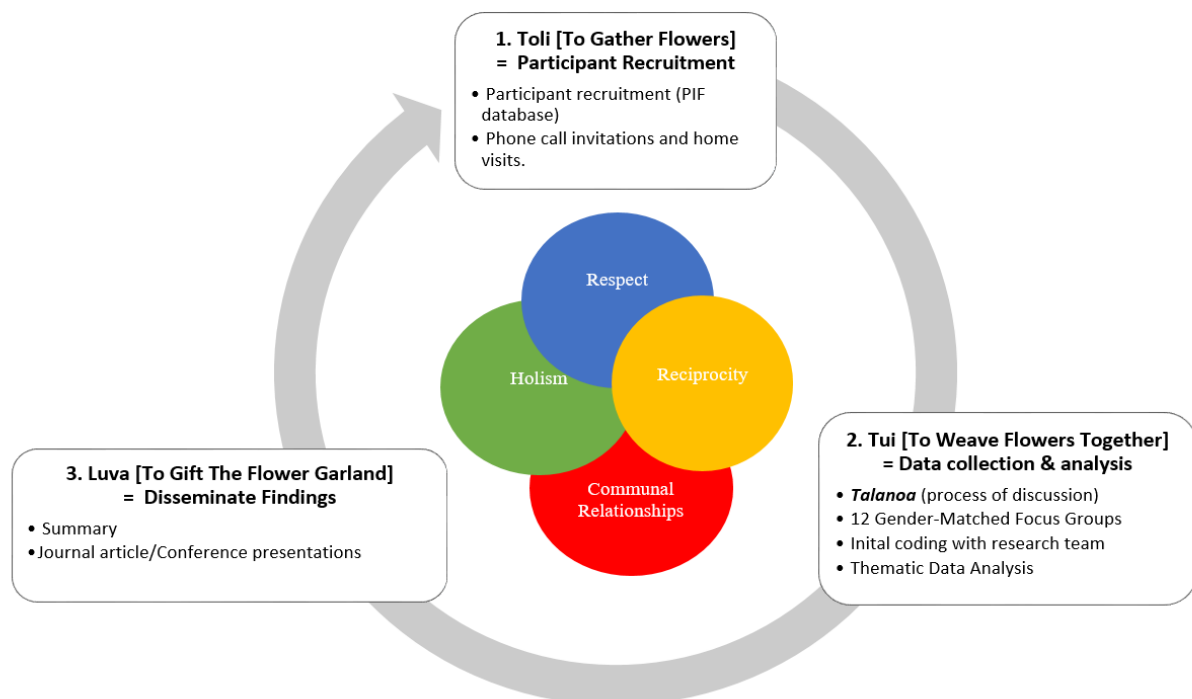
Procedure

A series of 12 gender-matched, semi-structured focus groups were carried out between November 2015 and February 2016. All focus groups took place at Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, NZ in the evening and dinner was provided. Before the focus group commenced, consent forms were signed and

share their issues, their realities and aspirations,"[40] and often likened to a conversation, an informal or formal talk face to face between people. Utilising the Kakala model's three stages of research Toli, Tui and Luva, the information gathered was synthesised appropriately, to provide real, accurate realities and experiences concerning the Pacific people who took part.[41] We drew upon these Pacific

methodological research approaches and the Health Research Council's Pacific Health Research Guidelines to ensure we were respectful of Pacific worldviews. Focus groups were facilitated by Pacific researchers who have experience in carrying out these data collection techniques with Pacific participants. An opening prayer and welcome pertinent to Pacific culture was said before each focus group, as well as a closing prayer in each specific focus group stream.

Data Analysis

An inductive thematic analysis was used to analyse the data.[42] The first step of data analysis required a verbatim transcription of the recorded focus group interviews. This was conducted by research officers (JF and DQ). The research officers reviewed the transcripts for initial coding to identify commonalities and recurrences of implicit and explicit themes within the data. Common phrases and ideas that stood out through the Talanoa formed the basis of findings. JF and DQ coded the data and found several key themes. JF then transferred each code and theme from the transcript to Microsoft Excel for further categorising.

Discussion with the wider research project team (DT – Principal Investigator and LI – Project Manager) permitted the themes to be revised and further refined. A final thematic code book was derived on Microsoft Excel. Drawing on grounded theory epistemology, our findings are grounded in the data itself rather than in pre-existing knowledge or theories.[43] The four themes that emerged from our data that constitute success for Pacific families is having a connection to God, practicing and embracing Pacific cultural identity, family connectedness and communication within families.

Ethics

Ethical approval was granted by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee (AUTEC) – Application number 15/311 Pacific Islands Families: Building Successful Families (PIF:BSF)

RESULTS

Connection to God

Majority of the participants interviewed, articulated that a successful Pacific family has a connection to and acknowledgement of God in the family. Growing up in church helped families in this study to focus on what was important and kept their families grounded. The connection to God helped parents in this cohort of participants raise their kids aligned with biblical teachings and values. They voiced that their families' success was linked to their connection to God.

"God is the main purpose for a successful family." [FT43b]

Practicing and embracing Pacific cultural identity

Embracing and practicing Pacific culture, traditions and identity were viewed as integral to Pacific families' success. Participants expressed the importance for their Pacific children to know their Pacific identity, especially given that their children (members of the PIF Study cohort) were born and raised in NZ. Several participants also found that speaking and understanding a Pacific language constituted success:

"…successful mean for them being secure in who they are, you know, I'm Samoan, I'm Tongan, I'm brown" [MT50b]

"…the Tokelauan language, it's very important for them. That's what I always tell my children…talk to their children in Tokelauan so they know the language, it's very important to know their own language, you know whether they came from, their culture" [FS50]

Moreover, a knowledge of ancestral and family history was also important for many Pacific families. Participants described the aspirations of their forbears for a better future, giving them and their children a purpose to strive and to succeed in NZ:

"I think with the history of knowing the struggles of your family, your culture, to being independent…no matter what Island you're from, seeing where their parents came from, the ancestors to be free…your history, so it strives you to be successful" [FS40c]

Family connectedness

Family connectedness in relation to working together as a family was a prominent theme in this study. Several participants in this study reported it was important that supportive relationships between individual family members (parents and their children) were fostered and maintained. In terms of family structure and dynamics, participants elaborated that working together, envisioned that roles within the family are to be respected. Where children are to attend and do well in school and

the parents are there to provide for their children's individual and familial needs. Working together to support each other's role within the family is imperative for a successful family. Particularly, for fathers in this study, putting food on the table and a roof over their family's heads constituted success for them.

"In my own experience to be a successful family or mother or father, means to work together as a family" [FS68]

"...just view ourselves as tryna make a living...just being able to put food on the table...being able to get their kids lunches ready for the next day...success to me is that basically, I can provide for my family as often as I want" [MS42]

Fostering communication within the family

Participants also asserted the importance of communication in enabling positive connections within the family. Several participants voiced their concern regarding deaths due to suicide in Pacific communities because of barriers that limits children's ability to communicate with their parents. Open communication and being engaged with their children by listening to them promotes success within Pacific families.

"Successful, like to have good communicate, communication with the family and also your fanau. Or our Children, or our mokopuna" [FS68]

"For me successful family is having my kids be open to me, that they're not afraid to tell me things that you know, that may feel that they can't share with others...for him to be able to talk to me about stuff that's really bothering him and I feel like a successful mum when you're able to talk to me" [FCI47]

DISCUSSION

Although understanding what constitutes success for Pacific families is essential to improving the overall wellbeing of Pacific families, the considerable diversity in culture and experiences amongst these families is part of the challenge in describing how they are faring, and what factors contribute to successful outcomes for them. This paper outlines a collection of narratives from Pacific mothers and fathers who participate in the PIF study, to help fill a gap in the knowledge base about what constitutes success for Pacific families in NZ. Four key factors for successful Pacific families, which emerged from the data were: having a connection with God, practicing and embracing Pacific cultural identity, family connectedness and the importance of communication.

Findings reveal that connection with God is essential to success for a Pacific family. Participants indicated that without faith in God and connection to a church they felt that they could not reach their full potential. In line with previous attempts to conceptualise or measure Pacific health and wellbeing, [33] we found a connection to God to be an important determinant of a Pacific person's wellbeing.

Participants reported that the values encouraged through religious beliefs provide support for individuals to function better within their family circle. In fact, literature associated with successful non-Pacific families reports similar endorsement of morals and values stemming from religious beliefs that underpin a successful family. [35, 36, 39, 44]

The vast majority of Pacific people (83%) affiliate with a religious denomination in NZ compared to 61% of European people.[45] Early Pacific migrants to NZ described their church as a village away from their native Islands, where language was preserved, Pacific customs were maintained, and a sense of community was felt.[46,47] These studies indicate religion maintaining a prominent position in the lives of Pacific people in NZ, and suggesting strong religious centrality and embeddedness as reflective of a Pacific individual's culture and identity. In contrast, the FWWCF measure does not identify a connection to God as an indicator of family wellbeing, implying a critical divergence between Pacific and mainstream concepts of family wellbeing in NZ. Essentially, any measure of family wellbeing that does not include a connection with God as a fundamental component is unlikely to fully capture Pacific notions of successful family functioning.

Our findings also suggest a strong sense of Pacific cultural identity is pivotal to developing and supporting successful Pacific families, with many Pacific mothers and fathers in our study placing substantial emphasis on embracing and raising their NZ-born Pacific children in the Pacific way. Pacific mothers and fathers in previous research have referred to Pacific cultural identity as a priority in successful family functioning, reinforced through cultural traditions such as dance and language being spoken.[3,46,48] In addition, participants in Manuela and Sibley's[34] study reported that two factors in their scale namely, 'Pacific connectedness and belonging' and 'group membership evaluation' constructs were critical for Pacific peoples cultural identity and overall wellbeing.

Several empirical studies have shown ethnic identity is associated with positive self-esteem and psychosocial wellbeing in young people, due

to feelings of belonging and positive attitudes about, and involvement with, one's ethnic group.[49,50] Further research suggests that the retention of Pacific culture is a protective measure for Pacific people's mental health and promotes their psychological wellbeing, recognising that Pacific cultural identity is beneficial to an individual and their surroundings (family).[51-53] Additionally, the link between ethnic identity and psychological wellbeing is stronger among Pacific people than among Europeans and Māori in NZ, because the latter groups are regarded by many New Zealanders as synonymous with the 'national identity' and can therefore draw upon this identity to bolster their wellbeing (an identity not available to Pacific people).[54]

Open and frequent verbal communication between parents themselves, with their children, and between siblings constituted success for many of the families in this study. These findings parallel previous research from the Families Commission[20] amongst Samoan and Cook Islands Māori families, indicating respect and communicating well within families were factors intrinsic to their family wellbeing. This research also suggested that quality time amongst family members helps to improve wellbeing for Pacific families.

Further Pacific research amongst families observed that withholding direct conversation between parents and children is sometimes seen as a sign of respect and has been taught and passed down from generation to generation.[55, 56] Withholding direct conversation subtly infers respect for older persons and also highlights the position of power. However, the invisible communication barrier between Pacific parents/elders and their children due to cultural beliefs has lessened over time due to the realisation that without open and frequent communication, families become threatened and prone to conflict and damaging outcomes.[57]

Inadequate dialogue between Pacific parents and their children has been implicated in mental health problems and suicide among Pacific youth in NZ.[57] Pacific mothers and fathers in our study emphasised the importance of talking with their children, encouraging communication, showing affection and appreciation of individuals within a family, factors which have been widely showcased in international literature as linked to healthy, successful families.[35, 36]

Some of our key findings are consistent with the domains of wellbeing captured in the FWWCF; however, specific aspects of this model may not accurately reflect the situation for Pacific families. For example, unlike the PIWBS-R and Fonofale model of health, the FWWCF does not include 'spiritual connection to God' and 'culture and traditions' constructs to specify and understand how these impact their overall family wellbeing. Measures of family wellbeing that do not include spirituality as a component are less likely to accurately capture Pacific notions of successful family functioning or similar. Spirituality is intertwined with Pacific culture and alongside church membership, helps Pacific families retain social connections, social support, fulfil religious desires, and maintain Pacific language and culture.

The strengths of our study allow for a rich, in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Researchers were of Pacific descent, allowing for open unconstrained Talanoa with participants. Thus, the findings provide a rich insight into family wellbeing and what constitutes success for Pacific families. However, it is acknowledged that the findings may not be representative of all Pacific peoples in New Zealand or elsewhere, with participants recruited from one metropolitan city in the North Island of NZ.

CONCLUSION

To conclude, Pacific families strive to succeed in all spheres of life. However, without knowing what constitutes success within these groups, it is difficult to assist them. Understanding, cultivating and acknowledging the factors that constitute success, as identified by Pacific mothers and fathers, is essential to helping Pacific families to succeed in their lives. In addition, key service providers can gain a better understanding of the Pacific families they serve and reorient their practices and support mechanisms accordingly.

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