

Negotiating the relational vā in the University: A transnational Pasifika standpoint during the Covid-19 pandemic

Dion Enari and Jacoba Matapo

Abstract

The Covid-19 global phenomenon has significantly disrupted economic, political and social systems at all levels. For Pasifika¹ peoples, the impact of Covid-19 has exacerbated inequities that have long existed within the order of capitalist and neo-liberal ideologies. Higher education has been a home for such discourse, privileging western knowledge systems that inform the nature of teaching and learning, and the so-called image of the ‘individual’ student or academic. This pandemic has shown how Pasifika people are not merely ‘individual’ but are inter-relational beings, permanently entangled with broader collective entities such as aiga (family), lotu (church), and fanua (land/place).

This article emerged from an online talanoa between Pasifika academics during the time of national social distancing. From the talanoa process, we interrogated issues arising from our current experiences of research and teaching during the global pandemic. Covid-19 discourse presents unpropitious assumptions about the ‘crisis’ from an anthropocentric notion of humanity. As Indigenous academics, we reject such assumptions.

The Pacific relational-self (personhood) is pulled into this ‘crisis’ rhetoric, as universal terms are taken up by institutions. We contest the term ‘distancing’ through an Indigenous Pacific ontology, grounded upon inter-subjectivity, the relational vā, wisdom and love. From a transnational standpoint, innovative practices with the relational vā have emerged and are explored as ways of being to counter the generalisation of ‘social-distancing’ as a universal notion.

Key Words: Transnational Indigeneity, Pasifika education, relational vā, talanoa, decolonise

¹ The concept of Pasifika was coined in the mid- 1990s as a terminology grouping together Pacific Islands peoples living in New Zealand (either New Zealand born or migrant). The term Pasifika has been reconceptualised by Pasifika to represent a symbol of unity rather than a homogenous grouping of Pacific Islands peoples (Samu, 2006). Pasifika ethnicities include (however, are not limited to) Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue and Tokelau (Leaupepe & Sauni, 2014).

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Methodological considerations: Talanoa

Talanoa is a method that helps co-construct knowledge through conversation (Clandinin et al., 2006, cited in Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017). Vaioleti (2006) explains that talanoa requires a deeper level of participation from the researcher rather than an observer only approach, which affirms our intent in this theoretical and phenomenological position piece. As Samoan/Pasifika academics and researchers, we engage in a co-construction and critique of the recent Covid-19 events and the complexities in which we have had to both navigate. By way of talanoa we have drawn upon our lived experiences and critique of master narratives that continue to perpetuate deficit theorising (Matapo & Baice, 2020) of Pasifika people's engagement in the university. Through talanoa, we privilege our shared Samoan epistemology, which encapsulates collective ways of being and relating, whilst also providing alternative thinking in the Covid-19 global crisis. Furthermore, Vaioleti (2006, p.24) adds "Talanoa, is mostly oral and collaborative, and is resistant to rigid, institutional, hegemonic control". Talanoa, a relational praxis, is at the heart of our Pasifika researcher engagement, meaning that conditions to engage fluidly in talanoa are adapted through a virtual online platform (Aanae, et al., 2001; Enari & Matapo, 2020).

Entering the conversation of 'crisis': A different perspective of resilience

As Samoan/Pasifika academics, we have been sceptical of the ways in which Pasifika peoples and Pacific Island Nations have been represented in mainstream media (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020). In New Zealand, Pasifika peoples have been presented as more susceptible to the virus, due to already poorer health outcomes. We have also been represented as vulnerable, because of the intergenerational family members in our households, such as a grandmother living with her

children and grandchildren in one house (Ministry of Social Development, 2016). In Australia, Pasifika communities have been portrayed as a group who are incapable of having our own systems and procedures to combat Covid-19 (Enari & Faleolo, 2020). The Pacific Island homelands have also been portrayed negatively. Early media coverage of Pacific Island nations displayed the region as a vulnerable area that depends on global intervention to survive (World Health Organisation, 2020a).

In spite of this, Pacific Islands have done well in following their own protocols to avoid transmission of the virus, with 17 Pacific Island nations remaining Covid-19 free (World Health Organisation, 2020b). At the time of this publication, Pacific nations such as Samoa, Cook Islands, Niue, Kiribati, and Tuvalu have had no cases. The early diligence of Pacific Island governments and the collective effort of community, governance and leadership has contributed to this positive outcome. Many transnational Pasifika communities in countries such as Australia and New Zealand have also done well to remain Covid-free throughout the pandemic.

Although Pasifika people have shown great resilience during this period, we are still defined by local and global ‘crisis’ discourse (Enari & Fa’aea, 2020; Enari & Matapo, 2020). These narratives still marginalise our voices, our position and our ways of being as Pacific peoples. Crisis-discourse perpetuates fear as a motivation for social action, rather than emphasising the collective aspirations to achieve a collective goal. What must also be called into question is the essentialised humanist position that is privileged in this crisis-discourse. For example, is it still the middle-aged, middle-class, English-speaking, democratic white male that represents the universal notion of ‘human being’? As Pasifika people, our mere existence is premised on our

constant interconnectivity with our aiga (family), lotu (church) and fanua (land) (Martin, et al, 2020).

The experience of another human-crisis is not unfamiliar to many Pacific peoples; it has confronted subjectivity of being through colonisation, where historically the so-called universal-man (representative of humanist anthropocentric ideology) imposes itself on the other (Matapo, 2018). Examples of imposed ‘crisis’ conditions within the Pacific include nuclear bombing, the spread of the Spanish flu, land disposition, annexation, culture and language bans under the guise of formal education (Mallon, Māhina-Tuai & Salesa, 2012; Nabobo-Baba, 2008; Thaman, 2014). These historical events are deeply charged politically and epistemically and have had negative intergenerational consequences, such as language loss and the devaluing of Pacific Indigenous knowledge systems (Thaman, 2014). Even during times of global pandemic, we reject individualistic notions of self (Enari & Rangiwai, 2021), which also means adapting alternative modes of connection, such as the digital vā.

How do we mitigate the constraints of social distancing for Pasifika peoples through the digital vā ?

The concept of vā (relational space) is one that is shared across the Pacific (Muliaumaseali’i, 2017). It is through this space that interaction and intra-action emerges between peoples across environment and time (Ka’ili, 2005). The upholding of the vā is constituted upon the agency and mana of those who engage with one another (Matapo, 2018). Through the vā, conditions for cultural exchange, communication and new knowledge generation emerge, luckily, these new learnings also continue in the digital space.

Covid-19 has not stopped this community from being connected. Instead, through the digital vā, Pasifika people have been able to remain interconnected with each other. They have also been able to use the digital vā in creating online businesses, storytelling and exercise forums. Through the digital vā, Pasifika people are able to communally engage in educational learning and teaching (Matapo, 2020). Our communities have a history of using the digital vā to teach our Pasifika languages, cultures and knowledge systems. The isolation period has meant an increased usage of the digital vā to teach and learn among our people. In essence, Pasifika people in education are not social distancing, but in fact, socially *connecting*, at a physical distance (Enari & Matapo, 2020). Some even believe the interaction among Pasifika has increased during the pandemic due to the more time people are spending at home. We are using this pandemic to collectively learn in ways we previously wouldn't before. Examples of collective learning due to Covid-19 include university students watching lectures with their parents, siblings and extended family, with all family members at home.

It is important to understand that the respect and humility required in the physical vā is also expected in the digital vā. Similar to the physical vā, Pacific People must ensure there is harmony among all who are involved, ranging from teachers, students and the wider university and communities (Enari & Taula, 2021). When engaging in the digital vā, it is important to ensure that technology does not strip the essence of what is presented (Tielu, 2016). Instead, it must be used as another avenue to respectfully facilitate exchange.

Since its inception, the digital vā has (re)shaped the way Pasifika people remain interconnected with one another. It is not merely the use of pre-programmed technology by Pasifika people. Instead, it is an indigenisation of the digital space (Tielu, 2016). Through the digital vā Pasifika people have been able to (re)draw the digital space to reflect their realities (Franklin,

2003). Even through global pandemic, Pasifika people continue to (re)shape the digital vā in how they remain connected.

Negotiating the politics of Covid-19 through a decolonising agenda of education?

To understand Pacific Island people in formalised western education, one must first acknowledge its introduction to the islands. The remnants of colonisation remain in many of our education policies where notions of success are framed in Eurocentric ideals. As scholars who have traversed Eurocentric principals in education, we acknowledge the presence of these frameworks across the Pacific in Island nations such as Tonga, Fiji and Hawaii. As two Samoan researchers, we draw particular attention to the colonising regimes in Samoa. The original purpose of education in Samoa and other islands was to ensure its people internalised the values, philosophies and traditions of the missionaries and colonialists (Meleisea, 1987). The westernised education systems introduced by these foreign powers were carried out with a disregard for cultural knowledge (Tuia, 2013). Pacific Island peoples have a history of migration to New Zealand; however, it was during the 1950s that mass migration of Samoan people occurred in earnest (Va'a, 2001). The government also saw a second wave of Samoan migration to New Zealand in the 60s and 70s (Anae, 1998), which still continues today.

Australia also has long-standing Pacific ties, with migration to Australia from the Islands recorded as early as the 20th century (Faleolo, 2020). Large numbers of Samoans in Australia could be seen in the 80s, particularly in New South Wales (Va'a, 2001). Pacific Islanders have been able to use New Zealand as a stepping stone in their migration to Australia. Through the Trans-Tasman agreement, Pacific Island people with New Zealand citizenship have been able to live and work in Australia (Stanley, 2017; Faleolo, 2020).

Unfortunately, as Pasifika people migrated to countries such as the United States, New Zealand and Australia, their culture was not reflected within education institutions. Shujaa (1994) argued that school curricula continue the marginalisation of minority groups because the values and beliefs taught derive from the dominant society (Shujaa, 1994). The absence of Pasifika cultures in formalised education meant many had to leave their culture at home, causing disconnect for students who were taught Pasifika cultures and values at home, only to be taught western values at school (Kearney, 2011). This disconnect for many Pasifika students spawned educational conflict and confusion. Pasifika students were taught to prioritise collective wellbeing at home, and contradictory messages of individual achievement at school.

Sadly, the only time Pasifika students were able to display their cultures at educational institutions was during thematic events, such as the use of Samoan culture and language during a multicultural celebration (Ng Shiu, 2011). These actions further perpetuated the belief that Pasifika and Samoan culture were to be confined, and had no place within curricula.

When speaking of Pasifika education, reference must be made to the *vā* or relational space. The *vā* places an emphasis on nurturing relationships among one another and the harmony of communal life (Fa'aea, & Enari, 2021; Tagaloa, 2008), which influences how Pasifika people make everyday decisions (Muliaumaseali'i, 2017). Education for Pasifika people is communally constructed, validated and used for the betterment of all its members (Galuvao, 2016). Decisions pertaining to educational participation are also collective as they are decided as a family (Martinsen, 2017). According to Penn (2010) the church and aiga have helped Pasifika achieve academically (Penn, 2010). Knowledge is gained from interaction in the collective community through what they “see, hear, touch, taste, and smell” (Tagaloa, 2008; 130). Fortunately, some educational institutions have acknowledged the collective nature of

Pasifika peoples and now have outreach programs to engage their families and communities (Fa'aea et al., 2020; Fa'aea, 2011; Ng Shiu, 2011).

The increased presence of decolonising agendas in research, education discourse, academics and policymakers saw a rise in the importance of Pasifika knowledge in education. Specifically, in New Zealand, Pasifika education as a body of scholarship grew alongside national initiatives to integrate Pasifika Education Plans, from 2001 to 2017. Such plans focused on Pacific aspirations, their values and beliefs as ways to enhance success, and was designed for all education sectors.

Through the years of Pasifika education plan implementation, however, the curriculum itself remained relatively similar, meaning Pasifika education values, beliefs, and knowledge were again invisible (Samu, 2010). For Pasifika participation in education to be effective one must highlight the contrast in ethos between ministry-driven and Pasifika community-lead. There were initiatives in New Zealand that showed the positive impact of community-based Pasifika education, such as Pasifika Early Childhood education programmes established in the 70s by Pacific community leaders (Mara, 2001). The significance of culturally-based educational experiences in New Zealand early childhood education were valued by Pasifika peoples as a way of ensuring continuity of cultural knowledge, values, spirituality and custom (Leaupepe, Matapo & Ravlich, 2017). This drew upon principles of teaching and learning, grounded in Pacific cultural knowledge exchange (such as learning through dance, storying and sharing of intergenerational knowledge). We had to ensure our systems were liberating and non-assimilative (Meyer, 2001). Other initiatives in New Zealand also included bilingual education centres such as Aoga Amata (Samoan preschools), which are premised upon holistically nurturing the culture of its Pasifika students (Tagoilelagi-Leota, 2017; Wilson, 2017).

The increase of Pasifika people in America, New Zealand and Australia saw the birth of Pasifika initiatives in American, New Zealand and Australian tertiary institutions that drew on Pasifika knowledge systems to empower their students, as listed in the table below (see Figure 1).

FIGURE 1: Pasifika initiatives in tertiary institutions

American Institute	Pasifika Initiative
University of Hawaii	Center for Pacific Island Studies
University of Utah	Pacific Island Studies
University of Southern California	Pacific Island Student Association
Mount San Antonio College	Arise Program
University of California, Los Angeles	Pacific Islander Education and Retention program
Brigham Young University Hawaii	Jonathan Napela Center for Hawaiian & Pacific Studies
University of Washington	Polynesian Student Alliance
City College of San Francisco	Critical Pacific Islands and Oceania Studies
New Zealand Institute	Pasifika Initiative
Manukau Institute of Technology	Pasifika Development Office
Otago University	Pacific Islands Centre
Victoria University of Wellington	Pasifika Hub
University of Auckland	Centre for Pacific Studies
Waikato University	Pacific Student support
Massey University	MANATOA
University of Canterbury	Pacific Development team
Unitec Institute of Technology	Pacific Centre for Learning, Teaching and Research

Auckland University of Technology	Office of Pacific Advancement
Australian Institute	Pasifika Initiative
Griffith University	GPA (Griffith Pasifika Association)
Queensland University of Technology	QUTPA (Queensland University of Technology Pasifika Association)
University of Queensland	UQSPIA (University of Queensland South Pacific Islander Association)
University of Western Sydney	PATHE (Pacific Achievement To Higher Education)
Macquarie University	LEAP Pasifika
Australian National University	Pasifika Student Society

Institutions such as the ones listed above have been able to nurture Pasifika students through culturally appropriate support. Pictured below (see Figure 2) is the Griffith Pasifika graduation ceremony for Pasifika graduates in 2014.

FIGURE 2: Griffith Pasifika Graduation finale dance 2014



Indigenous Pacific knowledge to (re)imagine the University

When I look in the Mirror (Oseterika, 2020)

I know who I am, and what I am is a proud Polynesian.

I feel the mana and te aroha,

From my ancestors who lead me.

Wherever I travel I will always know, who I am and where I'm going

because I have the strength of my family behind me,

in my blood our rich culture is flowing.

Inclusion of Pasifika cultures and knowledge systems within universities are crucial, as they solidify and validate our peoples' place within the institution. It allows for a connection between the values we learn at home and school. Through the implementation of Pasifika ways of being and knowing, the university is able to capitalise on the strength of our collective knowledge systems. Cultural inclusion of Pasifika knowledge also allows for better understanding between Pasifika communities and the institution.

The need for Indigenous epistemologies, ontologies, cosmological understandings and philosophy must be considered in the university (and in broader global conversations). Implementation of Pacific Indigenous understandings can support the way in which Pacific peoples are governed—taking ownership of decisions made with regards to land, seas, people and knowledge (Vaai & Nabobo-Baba, 2017). This position is also relevant to the constraints of Covid-19 discourse that imposes misrepresentations of Pasifika peoples as only 'vulnerable' or disenfranchised.

Pasifika peoples have overcome and endured crises before, not only upon health, economic and social outcomes, but also the very fabric of culture, knowledge and being. This is why we must

consider Pasifika ways of being in future strategies and engagement in education, from a strengths-based position. In order for education programs to be truly effective, they must be continually and collectively negotiated with us, and by us. Through the digital vā we are able to strengthen our own worldviews and decolonise knowledge creation. We must ensure we are capitalising on the wisdom and collective knowledge of our Pasifika cultures in navigating forward. Even during times of crisis, we continue to reject western centric notions of individualism and privilege our continued collective interconnectedness. The epistemologies and stories of our forebears are evidence of their collective capacity to survive pandemics, including the disease of colonisation and its attack on Indigenous epistemology. We are here in education as Indigenous academics because of their reach. Ia manuia tatou lumana'i.

Authors

Dion Enari,

PhD Candidate,

Faculty of Society and Design

Bond University

Dion Enari is an Aotearoa/New Zealand born Samoan and a current PhD candidate in the Faculty of Society and Design, Bond University, Gold Coast, Australia. He is the Bond University 2018 3 minute thesis winner and holds the high talking chief title Lefaoali'i from Lepa, Samoa. His research areas include mental health, decolonising education, Pacific Studies, transnationalism and Indigenous studies.

Village affiliation – Lepa, Malaela, Safune, Vaiala, Nofoali'i

Jacoba Matapo,

Senior Lecturer,

Faculty of Education and Social Work,

The University of Auckland.

Jacoba Matapo is of Samoan Dutch heritage, born and raised in Aotearoa/New Zealand.

Jacoba has vast experience in tertiary leadership within ITE programmes and is currently the Associate Dean Pasifika and Programme Leader for the Bachelor of teaching (ECE) Pasifika specialisation at the Faculty of Education and Social Work, University of Auckland. Her research engages Pacific philosophy in Pasifika education research drawing on postcolonial, posthuman theory and questions how Pacific Indigenous knowledge as nomadic affirms an other-than-human positionality within education.

Village affiliation – Siumu

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