

LIVING THE TOKELAUAN WAY IN NEW ZEALAND

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Abstract

Previous qualitative research with Pacific families has highlighted the lack of “fit” between the state housing stock and its occupants. The housing conditions of Tokelauan people living in New Zealand have a significant impact on their wellbeing and health. We carried out qualitative research in partnership with the Wellington Tokelau Association to highlight the impact of the built environment on extended-family living, and in particular the impact on young people in the household. We sought their views by carrying out 20 in-depth interviews with young people, born in New Zealand, who live with their Tokelauan-born parents and grandparents. In this paper we discuss their views of health and the serious difficulties created by inappropriately sized and configured housing, but also highlight what the young people see as the many advantages of extended family living: a strong sense of cultural identity, enhanced fluency in the Tokelau language and strong social support, even if some risky behaviours are the source of arguments. Almost all the young people saw the advantages of living in their extended family as outweighing the evident disadvantages and hoped to repeat the pattern when they had children, but in better-designed houses.

INTRODUCTION

Migration is a brave personal experiment, one that helps researchers understand the social impact of different physical and cultural environments. It also highlights housing differences and the effects on extended-family living (Howden-Chapman et al. 2000). For migrants, extended family living is often an important cultural and economic strategy to facilitate their adaptation to a new country. In the case of Pacific peoples, it also reflects the realities of the norm of lives in villages, where land is limited and owned collectively by families.

Tokelau is New Zealand’s sole remaining colony, which places Tokelauan people living in New Zealand in a unique position of being both New Zealand citizens and migrants. The citizens of Tokelau, the Cook Islands and Niue have access to New Zealand citizenship, which allows them a level of choice and not only encourages migration but -- aside from the difficulties of direct travel to Tokelau -- also makes for an easy flow of movement of people to and from the islands to New Zealand.

Tokelauan people have a unique relationship with researchers, having collaborated generously over many decades (Wessen et al. 1992, Huntsman and Hooper 1997, Howden-Chapman and Woodward 2001). In this qualitative study we explore the impacts of extended-family housing on young people’s wellbeing at a time of a unique cultural and historical

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nexus. All the young people we interviewed had the fortune of living with a generation of grandparents, who, having spent the greater part of their life in Tokelau, were the first generation to migrate to New Zealand but retained Tokelauan as their mother tongue. As the Western world encroaches on the way of life in Tokelau, exemplified by such changes as an improved transport system and internet access, this situation is unlikely to recur.

BACKGROUND

Tokelauan people are the sixth largest Pacific ethnic group in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand 2007b). The atolls, Nukunonu, Atafu and Fakaofu, were colonised by different religious groups, which affected their culture and customs (Huntsman and Hooper 1997). While outsiders might consider “Tokelauan” to be an adequate description, insiders would want to know which of the three atolls an individual Tokelauan is from in order to place them.

The Tokelauan community in New Zealand is centred in the Hutt Valley, where some of the earliest post-war state houses were built in Petone, Taita and Naenae (Viggers et al. 2008) and subsequently East Porirua. Many Tokelauans were encouraged to come to New Zealand in the mid-1960s when a severe hurricane in Tokelau coincided with the need for industrial workers (Pene et al. 1999). Since economic deregulation, their unemployment levels have been about three times that of the total population (Statistics New Zealand 2007b). Tokelauans are now one of the most socio-economically deprived Pacific groups.

Like the Pacific population as whole, the Tokelauan population is relatively young: the median age is about half that of the total New Zealand population (19 years versus 36 years). Tokelauans have a level of extended-family living almost three times higher than that of any other ethnic group (37% compared to 10% for the total population). Because our previous work has shown that Tokelauan teenagers were the age group most ambivalent about living in extended families (Howden-Chapman et al. 2000), we were keen to understand more about their views of the impact of these living arrangements on their wellbeing and language acquisition.

Although over two-thirds of Tokelauans are New Zealand-born, there has been a marked increase in those who can hold everyday conversations in Tokelauan (Statistics New Zealand 2007b). This differs from the common language pattern in migrant families, where the first generation is fluent in their native tongue, the second generation understands the language but is less fluent, and the third generation understands some of the language but prefers not to speak it (Starks 2006, Hulsen et al. 2002).

CROWDING AND HEALTH

Previous qualitative research with Pacific families has highlighted the lack of “fit” between the state housing stock and its occupants (Jera 2005, Cheer et al. 2002). We are aware from our previous work that many extended families live in crowded three-bedroom houses, in part to lower the rent per person (Baker et al. 2003). There have been policy debates about whether we should be concerned about this (Gray 2001). A former chief executive of Housing New Zealand told a Parliamentary Select Committee that some people chose to live in overcrowded houses, even when offered alternatives.² An extended family replied that

² 27 August 1998, “People chose to cram into state houses --chairman”, 27 August 1998, *Waikato Times*.

living in such close quarters meant that illnesses inevitably get shared and that they liked the company, “but not in a place this small” (Manukia, 28 August 1998).

Crowding is now regularly reported as a key progress indicator in the Social Report (see Ministry of Social Development 2008 for the latest). There is strong evidence that crowding increases the risk of close-contact infections such as meningococcal disease, rheumatic fever, tuberculosis and skin disease (Baker et al. 2000, Baker et al. in press, Jaine 2007, Das et al. 2007). Rates of these diseases for Māori and Pacific peoples are double those for Europeans (Baker and Zhang 2005). Crowding also increases the risk of being exposed to second-hand smoke (Howden-Chapman and Tobias 2000), which irritates the airways and increases the risks from infectious diseases. Tokelauans have the highest smoking prevalence of any Pacific group (Statistics New Zealand 2007a), although there are indications of emerging household rules about not smoking inside (Howden-Chapman et al. 2000).

STUDY DESIGN

After obtaining ethics agreement, we carried out both focus groups and individual interviews in as culturally sensitive manner as possible, accommodating both our participants’ and their parents’ wishes. Both the first and second authors are Tokelauan and the last author is Palangi (European ancestry). We were informed by current thinking about cross-cultural collaborations (Jones and Jenkins 2008).

After consulting with our community partners, the Wellington Tokelau Association, we interviewed 20 young people living in Wellington families that included grandparents. We sought a cross-section of young people from the three atolls who were living, or had previously lived, in extended families. Their ages ranged from 17 to late 20s and all except one were New Zealand-born. Two young people were still at school, eight were studying, three were young parents at home, and six were in work.

All the interviews except one were carried out in English. Interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed. We independently read the transcripts, thematically coded them and then discussed our themes.

“HOW DO YOU KNOW WHEN YOU’RE HEALTHY?”

We began by asking the young people what health meant to them. They shared a broad, holistic view. Many had absorbed, but not necessarily acted on, health education messages.

“Health means eating right, regular exercise and, yeah, just stick to walking because I hardly exercise.” (Young man)

“Health means eating healthy food, regular exercise like walking to keep healthy. Making music makes me feel good and happy.” (Young man)

Several young people included both Western and traditional ideas along with having an awareness of exposure to risks that could affect their long-term health.

“Good health means to me regular check-ups at the doctor to make sure you’re alright and when you do feel that something is wrong with you that you do go to the doctor ... Good health also means to me eating right, and it also means, in the family sense, good communication with each other -- that always keeps you healthy, state of mind stuff.” (Young man)

“Environment, healthy food -- vegetables, fruits, some Island food they’re quite healthy, exercise. Environment, as in air, because some people are sensitive to some smell, the air ... When you have smokers, that kind of environment.”
(Young woman)

“WE WERE BROUGHT UP BY OUR GRANDPARENTS”

The young people described the importance of living with their grandparents. Their presence epitomised the essential security of communal life. As children they had often shared their grandparents’ bed and continued to value contact with them as they grew up.

“Wherever the matua [grandparents] stay, that’s where everyone would end up.”
(Young woman)

“I think I was pretty much brought up by them, from day dot when I was born ... You know, the traditional Toke way, like the Māori as an example -- whānau -- children being brought up together, in that sense -- everyone is everyone’s parents, everyone is everyone’s Dad.” (Young man)

“I stayed with my grandparents since I was born right up until I was about 10. Since then I’ve been going over there during the holidays, not so much weekends, but sometimes after school, and I can remember is that I used to sleep with my grandparents when I was young, right up until I was about 7.”
(Young woman)

They describe full households, where grandparents live with parents along with aunts, uncles and cousins.

“At the moment I’m living at home with my Mum, Dad, Nana, my little brother, my Mum’s brother and his wife and their baby ... but I’ve also lived in Petone and the housing situation there was four bedrooms, Nana and Grandpa, aunty, uncle, great-grandmother and just heaps of cousins, about five or six cousins. But that house was like people coming and going and staying for a bit.” (Young man)

“I remember it only being a three-bedroom house -- me, Mummy, my sister and Nana in one room, and next door was my cousin and that was Nana’s room. The house was always full. It was like a train; everyone just kept coming and coming. It was good. I actually liked it -- the house being full and having family there all the time.” (Young woman)

“There were four bedrooms and there were six of us -- the grandparents, an aunty and an uncle and two grandchildren. On the weekend the children would get dropped off at the grandparents and stay the weekend. In the holidays, it would be more strongly, like everyone has more time to go there to stay.” (Young man)

They spoke of the advantages of living in the same house as their parents and grandparents and the pleasures of having their relatives to stay and sharing food. They liked the continuity of relationships and having people around all the time.

“That was a household full of people and all the adults and all grandchildren coming, always people in and out of the house, but there was also a lot of laughter and that’s what I can remember. There was always laughter there. All the adults in the lounge and the kids asleep around them. It was fun.” (Young woman)

“Grandma and Grandpa always had visitors. People were always coming over because Grandpa would massage, like a healer. We did have a lot of people come into the home, family and friends come over, have conversations, even their siblings, my grandparents’ siblings ... Sundays there was always people coming over after church just for a chat, cup of coffee and then they take off.”
(Young woman)

The living arrangements are often quite fluid, with lots of comings and goings between the parents’ and grandparents’ houses, particularly in the holidays, when garages were used as sleep-outs.

“No, my parents had their own house and the people who lived with my grandparents was one of my uncles and I think my aunt’s family -- at the time she had only two kids that were both younger than me and they stayed there. They had their room with the two kids and I slept with my Nana and Papa and my uncle had his own room ... It was only until I started growing up and now to this day we’ve got heaps of little ones now and the house is always packed during the holidays. There’s about 10 little kids running around the house and just the grandparents sitting in the chair just watching TV telling everyone to be quiet. If we do sleep over there, because I still got a room reserved there for me because I’ve always been there ... There’s [a] garage now. We put rooms in there and now people come and stay in there. So there’s heaps of room there now.”
(Young woman)

“IT SHAPED THE PERSON I AM TODAY”

There was a strong awareness of cultural transmission evident in the interviews. The young people spoke positively about what they had learnt from their grandparents. For example, two young men spoke of learning religious values and showing respect for their families.

“Like being around grandparents, they were hard-out speaking Toke to you so that’s how I learnt how to speak Toke, and practising the Catholic faith as well ... Like the customs as well, like respecting your aunties, you don’t swear, even though, like you don’t swear to your sisters or cousins, girl cousins, yeah just treating the females in high regard. So I learnt those kind of things being in a, sort of, overcrowded household.” (Young man)

“I thank them for bringing me up in that sort of environment because ... it shaped the person I am today, and being brought up in that sort of setting has made me see that family is key and family is the centre of your circle of life sort of thing. So you’ve got your family in the middle and then everything outside of that is. It’s important but not as important as the centre of the circle.” (Young man)

Grandparents were often responsible for reinforcing traditional values, which involved morning and evening prayers, church attendance and abstinence from alcohol. Interestingly, in at least one household smoking was deemed more acceptable than drinking alcohol.

“I just remember having a white and blue house and they used to yell at us from the balcony, across the whole street, you could hear her yelling our names out in Toke and all these kids would say, ‘Oh shame’. We had to come inside because it’s time for church.” (Young woman)

“Every Sundays you go to church, you don’t do anything else. It’s a day of rest but church, and even like we have Sunday school so grandma encouraged me to participate in that, so you had lessons during the week as well ... To me she

was, 'No drinking in the house'. She didn't mind the smoking because grandpa smoked but there was definitely no drinking. A lot of people had tried to say let's have a party at your place but she'll be, 'No, no, you go have a drink somewhere else', even her own kids." (Young woman)

Living with grandparents required flexibility, but despite some inevitable irritations, the young people liked living with their grandparents.

"I stayed with Nana while I was doing my course and mostly drove her up the wall. She used to hate it when I used to come home after 9 o'clock at night, but I used to tell her my course finishes at 9 pm. But those were the best years of my life living with my grandparents." (Young man)

Their grandparents had helped to keep them well and massaged them when they got sick.

"The only one time I remember being sick when I was living with grandparents would have been at the age of 4 or 5. It was like a fever and everything, and instead of taking me to the doctors, Grandpa gave me the full-on massage and he always believed that lemon and honey that does wonders too. Then I moved back home with my parents and I was always getting sick." (Young woman)

The young people felt that living with their grandparents had helped them learn how to identify with the Tokelau culture and customs.

"I would say if it wasn't for my Granddad, as well as my other grandparents -- Dad's side, I wouldn't have my identity I guess, and I am grateful for having lived it with them. And they've shared everything that they know, whether it be our family tree or whatever, and that was one thing that Granddad used to go on about and he'd take us right back. I just keep saying, 'God, I'm so thankful'. I just treasure those days with Granddad." (Young woman).

"They teach you what's important about life, like money is good, but it's not the main thing in life. They teach about how family comes first, not your friends, and stuff like that." (Young man)

The young people often had specific stories about what they liked. They described learning traditional cultural practices, and more often from their grandparents than their parents. Several young men were taught weather patterns and fishing, the hauato (strings to hold the tulumu, the traditional wooden box, together). Indeed, one of the reasons the Hutt Valley and East Porirua have been favoured settlements for chain migration from Tokelau is that both are close to harbour fishing. This is one activity that can continue easily in both places.

"They taught me a lot of stuffs, especially my granddad -- things like handicrafts, plating of the hauato. I got how to do that but I've forgotten how to do it now." (Young man)

"It was ... helpful when I went over there and they taught us about the land and fishing and stuff. Granddad is a really good fisherman when he was active but now he's just sitting at home. I think that's where I get my passion for fishing. Yeah, when he was younger he used to take me out." (Young man)

Some realised they had not taken full advantage of the opportunities available when they were younger.

"I mean, it didn't interest me back then as it did a few years later when he was too old to go out. I wish I paid a bit more attention ... like weather patterns and

stuff like that. I didn't really talk to him about it ... It would be really handy to know that sort of stuff, and not to have to look at the forecast ... I remember when we did used to go, it used to be a good day every time. It didn't use to be blowing a gale or anything like that." (Young man)

The young women were taught how to make handicrafts -- ili (fan) and lei (flower necklace). These were sometimes adaptations of Western crafts -- a "crocheting thingy". They were taught how to make special food such as puta (doughnuts). Both young men and women were taught fatele (songs).

"We got taught songs. She tried to teach me how to make a ili, but I struggled, and how to make the leis -- she tried to show me how to make those. I remember her trying to teach me how to make a ili. Even now she's trying to teach me how to make crochet thingy. Even making the puta, I want to learn how to make the puta like she does, but I don't have the knack or the kneading. That's why I always hang out with her because I want to make the most of having her around." (Young woman)

"I can't remember exactly how old I was when I lived with my granddad but I felt comfortable and had a good experience living with my granddad ... I learned a lot of fatele (Tokelau songs). He used to tell me stories and we used to have a great time singing those fatele together."

"I SEE TOKELAU NOW JUST AS A HOLIDAY PLACE"

There is a lot of travel back and forward between Tokelau and New Zealand (Wessen et al. 1992). Several young people thought that after visiting Tokelau they could live in two cultures, but New Zealand was their home.

"I enjoy living the Tokelauan way in New Zealand. I see Tokelau now just as a holiday place, only because there's no future over there, but my ideal will be the Tokelau way of living in New Zealand. It's all about the sharing -- you're just closer with your family that way." (Young woman)

In the girls' focus group they analysed the different expectations. They felt young people were more respectful to older people in Tokelau and that this was partly a consequence of a much smaller society. They also noted that their older relatives were much less stressed in Tokelau than in New Zealand.

"If someone in Toke tells you off, you listen. But over here if someone tells you it's like, 'Who are you?' My grandparents don't stress a lot in Toke. If my little cousin goes out they don't stress a lot because they know they've got aunts and uncles out there to look after them, but over here it's like, 'Where have you been?' and my grandpa is like hard-out with that rule -- girls aren't allowed out at night times, only guys."

When asked to choose the better way, the same young woman said:

"I would choose the Tokelau style. You have more respect for yourself and respect for others."

Interestingly, these girls also felt that young people grew up with less confidence in New Zealand, as well as listening less to older people. They categorised this as "bad" and the way children behave in Tokelau as "cool, good."

“The kids here, they are really shy and they tend to hold back, but in Toke it’s a different story -- once you’re told to do something, you do it, you have to serve. But over here it’s like the youngsters would rather be hiding ... And over there they know what to do and what not to do, but the kids here they just keep going. When you’ve got kids from Toke and they come here and they see us do what they don’t do in Toke, they think it’s wrong and when we go to Toke and we see what they’re doing it’s like different. It’s cool, good.”

“I always want to be there for my Nan.”

Having been taken care of by grandparents, the young people felt the responsibility to take care of their grandparents in turn.

“Discipline was amazing. She was very good at looking [after us], she has always been there for us, and that’s what I’m quite happy about and I always want to be there for my Nan.” (Young woman)

Their grandparents were also role models for the way they, in turn, wanted to bring up their children.

“Yeah, it’s like I’m trying to instil that into my son. The church thing isn’t working yet. I’m trying my best to raise my child, nurture my child in a positive environment. He loves his grandparents and every opportunity he would go and stay with them because he just loves it there and the fact and there are other kids there. He’s an only child and it’s kind of repeating a cycle.” (Young woman)

Some of the married young people felt that while they enjoy a special relationship with their own children, they still like to go back to their own parents, as their parents had done before them.

“I think I’m used to the crowded houses and I love it. I think if we were to move out and stay on our own it would probably take me a while to get used to. It would be lonely. My sister and her family, they’ve moved out and they’ve got their own property. They probably spend more time over here than they do in their own house, and they are forever here and that’s every single day ... So I can picture myself doing that same thing. I don’t think I could go anywhere without this family.” (Young woman)

“WHEN GRANDDAD MOVED IN I GOT TO LEARN THE LANGUAGE MORE”

Some of the language patterns discussed earlier were evident in the interviews. Their grandparents’ first language was Tokelauan.

“Yeah, [my grandparents spoke] just the one language. I mean they speak basic English but we communicated in Tokelauan. But my aunts and uncle they speak both, so there was also English in the house as well.” (Young woman)

Indeed, one of the major advantages of extended-family living, pointed out by several people, was that living and talking daily with their grandparents improved their Tokelauan.

“At home it was mixed. To Granddad it was just Tokelauan. Mum and Dad were English speakers, it was only Granddad that would speak Tokelau, unless a rellie turned up from the islands and didn’t know how to speak English, then we would have to speak Tokelau. That was another thing, that’s how we picked up the

Tokelauan language and that was through Granddad, living with him.” (Young woman).

The young people placed considerable value on being able to learn or continue to speak the Tokelau language.

“That’s why I want to teach my child its culture other than Māori and English. That’s why I’m glad Nana is still around and I want to have a child while she’s still around so that they can hang around her lots and still try and gain that.” (Young woman)

One young mother recognised the advantages of her grandfather only speaking Tokelauan, for three generations -- her parents, her and her baby.

“He’s been back and forth from just family around New Zealand, and he only speaks Tokelau to everyone at home, so that’s good ... It’s good because this one here, he’s learning how to speak Tokelau too, and he’s talking to Granddad, so that’s good.”

A young man, whom the interviewer complimented on his Tokelauan, also mentioned that the Tokelau language was predominantly spoken at home.

“I prefer the Tokelau language and it is very important to me as well as the culture. Yes, we always speak Tokelau language at home.” (Young man)

However, even when a number of other young people spoke about the advantages of living in a house with an extended family, a number of them mentioned that they still felt they missed out because while they might understand the basics of the language, they did not speak the language well enough to fluently join in the conversations.

“We do have conversations out of what he wants or what I want or what we’re doing at that moment, but they don’t really last for that long. I wish I could speak fluently then I could talk to him properly, or sometimes I have questions that I want to ask but I can’t. I don’t know how to ask.” (Young man)

“I’m not as good as what I used to be, but I can hold a conversation with her. But when Nana starts talking really really quickly, it’s like, ‘Huh?’ Or when she gets frustrated with you because you’ve used the wrong choice, the words aren’t the greatest.” (Young woman)

“THEY HAVE THEIR DOWNSIDE TOO”

While acknowledging the advantages of extended-family living, the young people also spoke about the disadvantages of living in a multi-generational household. Some had little free time, as they were required to look after their grandparents.

“They’re funny. You learn from them about the history of us. They have their downside too -- a lot of chores, a lot of work.” (Young man)

“Most of my time with them, just staying home. During the holidays I didn’t go out. I had to stay home and clean the house ... Do their teas and coffees and all that sort of stuff.” (Young woman)

When grandparents arrived from Tokelau, even greater adjustments were required, by both their children and grandchildren, who thereafter had less time for each other.

“My grandparents they live in the Islands. They always travel and they’ve been here for a month now and I think this is the longest they’ve stayed with us because my Grandpa is sick and they are going back soon. When they come over they always ... everything starts changing. My Mum is like hard-out stressed while my Grandpa is here. To me it feels like my Grandpa is like young, like [a] little younger than me because I always have to check up on him and he is always in the room, but when he’s in the sitting room he’s really quiet, and we always got to be like, “Grandpa are you alright, do you want anything?”, but he always says -- and it’s hard to communicate with him, because I think I’m the only granddaughter that doesn’t speak Tokelau to him and he gets angry when I don’t speak Tokelau to him. I think that’s the hardest -- is communicating.”
(Young woman)

The adjustment is not easy for the older person either, who must try to adjust to a different, Western, urban society. The same young woman speaking in a focus group continues.

“He doesn’t like this lifestyle here ... He doesn’t like the weather and he hates travelling in the cars. His exercise in Toke is swimming, but down here he can’t do that because he’s like stuck in the house. He walks to church and walks to his meetings in Toke and sits in the sun, but down here he’s always in his room ... [H]e hard-out misses his lifestyle in Toke.” (Young woman)

Nonetheless, they sympathised with their grandparents being grumpy at having to migrate.

“There are time when he wishes he was back in Tokelau and I feel sorry for him, but he says he wants to go back, but then again he doesn’t go back for some reason. His wife is over there. He can be grumpy some days and he has told us heaps of stories about when he was young, so that’s good.” (Young woman)

For young people who go away for a while and then return to the extended family, there is a shock at being re-immersed in family life.

“I tell my friends my family is my No. 1 no matter what -- they will always be here for me and friends may not be there for you but family will. I like being home, although we all have our ups and downs of bugging each other, but that’s just part of being a family ... Someone just yells at the other one and makes the other one cry or just go to your room and chill out.” (Young woman)

“My house right now, everybody, most of them are in the sitting room. The rooms are packed but the oldies have their own room ... In a way it’s cool, it’s fun but then, come to think of it, it’s kind of annoying at the same time, you want your own space.” (Young woman)

A number of young people had concerns about privacy, noise and smoking.

“We had bunks. They’d be in the sitting room -- it could be anybody, family members, crashers, but it was never an issue. We used to love having everybody over. We had party sessions down there. It was Dad, and he’ll bring his friends over. So the house would be all smoky ... We got to a stage where we didn’t enjoy Dad’s friends coming over. I would have loved to been able to hang out with Dad more sort of thing. We were all scared of him and sometimes it’s still like that.” (Young woman)

The young people were asked how they dealt with tensions and conflicts in the households.

“I like living in a large household, but when it gets too crowded, then I don’t like it sometimes. I usually go to my room and play on the keyboard and sometimes I talk to my Mum or Dad. I know it’s not healthy keeping any problems and it’s best to talk it over with someone.” (Young man)

Some young people spoke of how as they grew older they were better able to resolve family tensions.

“Because I’ve gotten older, I cannot talk back to my Grandma, but I can share how I’m feeling inside ... It sort of changed the dynamic of a full-house setting but in a good way, in a mature sort of sense.” (Young woman)

One of the areas of disagreement between generations was the sense of who was an adult was very different between Tokelauan and Western society.

“I think because I’m still seen as a child that it’s sort of resolved with the adults or with my parents and my grandma and stuff like that. I don’t know. The Tokelau mentality is anyone who’s under 35 and single is not classed as an adult. So I see that they still see me as a kid, like a 10-year-old, and that I can’t ‘better’ the dispute or the disagreement. So it’s still being resolved from the adults.” (Young man)

“WE CAN DO BETTER THAN THIS”

The young people spoke about the poor standard of their housing and how they coped with these issues.

“But I’ll never forget the home in Komata, the damp, the cold, that was horrible, and especially because there was quite a few of us. It was a good thing that most of us were in one room, the kids would be one room. We wouldn’t use up all the rooms. Summertime was good, you never really notice it. When it was hot it was really hot, but you had moments when it was cold. So we’d all be in one room just to keep warm.” (Young woman)

One of the disadvantages of the inevitable lack of space was that there was less dedicated space in the house for family activities, such as eating at regular mealtimes.

“There’s no set times to eat. They just eat whenever they’re hungry. Even if they ate all day, yeah that’s it. They don’t have like breakfast, lunch and dinner. Nobody really sits at the table together when it gets crowded, because it’s too small for everyone. It’s like sit in the sitting room or on the couches. So you pick and choose the time you eat unless everyone else is eating.” (Young woman)

When asked about their ideal house, some young people referred to marae-style housing; others favoured Western-style housing.

“My ideal house would be and I prefer a New Zealand design house and not so much the Tokelau style house -- you know where it’s like ... one huge room.” (Young man).

Some explicitly wanted to retain the idea of living in an extended family but knew that their current house was too small. One young man planned to go overseas, earn “heaps of money,” come back and extend his current family house.

“There’s still that homely feeling with like 20 people in the house but it’s ... I see a light at the end of the tunnel or like, we can do better than this.” (Young man)

The girls in the focus group in Porirua were aware of purpose-built Housing New Zealand Corporation extended-family housing and for them it fitted in general their view of an ideal house.

“Spacious. The house that you were talking about, that’s a really nice house because I’m close to them and that’s pretty [nice] that kind of space.” (Young woman)

CONCLUSION

Tokelauan people living in New Zealand are a culturally rich but socio-economically deprived population. They have maintained their pattern of living in extended families, despite the ill-fitting houses available to them and the ongoing problems of relatively high unemployment rates, crowding and risk behaviours such as smoking.

The young people interviewed for this study were nonetheless very positive about their experiences of living in an extended-family household. They valued the opportunity to learn and speak Tokelauan, and indeed the high levels of fluency in the Tokelauan community may well be related to living with their grandparents. Linguistic research has shown that contact with native speakers is a key factor in language maintenance (Hulsen et al. 2002). Moreover, children who are bilingual, particularly if this is fostered through a community empowerment model, have improved educational performance (Thorns 1988).

The young people enjoyed their grandparents’ attention and learning Tokelauan customs. Risky teenage behaviours, such as staying out late, smoking and drinking, were often curtailed by grandparents. Having benefited from their grandparents’ care, many inherited a strong sense of reciprocity and obligation to return ‘the gift’. Mauss (1954) described this reciprocity as a strong feature of Polynesian society. Or, considered through the instrumental lens of altruism economics, their parents and grandparents modelled unselfish behaviour, from which they hoped to benefit in turn (Stark 1999).

While the young people liked the general level of household activity, they disliked aspects of crowding, such as the lack of privacy that deprived them of time they valued with their parents, or space to quietly study. Their clear preference was to continue living with their extended families, but in properly designed houses that allowed both for communal activities as well as private activities, such as studying and sleeping. Housing New Zealand Corporation’s Healthy Housing Programme has already pioneered extending the size of the standard state houses to accommodate extended families, and we have worked with architects, Housing New Zealand Corporation and the community to design an exemplar extended-family house in Porirua. These projects show it is possible to have the undoubted benefits of extended-family living without the burden of infectious diseases and family stress.

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