



WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD MARRIAGE OR PARTNERSHIP?

SAMOAN CASE STUDY

2016

AUT

By Tagaloatele Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop, Koleta Savaii
and Eti Puni



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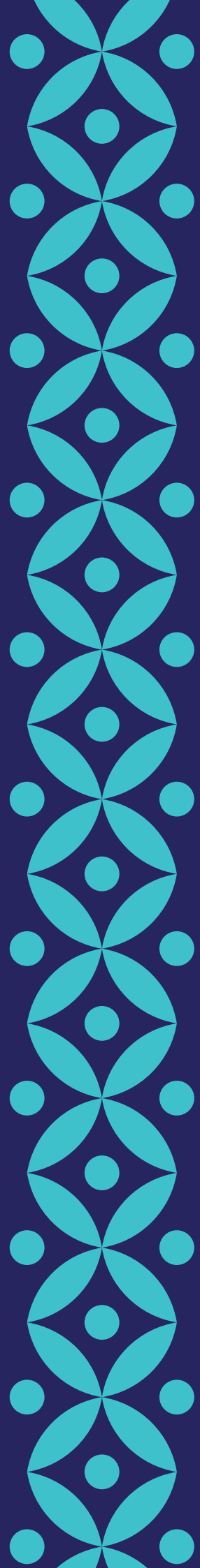
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01



INTRODUCTION



INTRODUCTION

Family violence is a major challenge to the quality of life and wellbeing in New Zealand for Pacific peoples (Fanslow, Robinson, Crengle, & Perese, 2010; Paulin & Edgar, 2013).

When launching new family violence measures in September 2016, the Prime Minister, John Key, reported that the police responds to 110,000 family violence call outs a year, which he labelled as “unacceptable” (Jones, 2016). His next comment, that “kids are present at nearly two-thirds of these”, was a chilling reminder that family violence is becoming normalised and that significant numbers of children are witnessing, learning and probably experiencing violence-related behaviours.

The New Zealand Government and other providers have invested heavily in a range of social, educational and economic programmes to reduce family violence. More recently, the focus has turned to exploring the relationship between Pacific cultural beliefs and practices, and family violence under the umbrella of the *Nga Vaka o Kāiga Tapu: A Pacific conceptual framework to address family violence in New Zealand* (Ministry of Social Development, 2012).

The ethnic-specific *Nga Vaka o Kāiga Tapu* frameworks for Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Tokelau and the Cook Islands (Ministry of Social Development, 2012) highlighted a number of traditional protective practices for each Pacific group. Importantly, the extensive community discussions involved in developing these frameworks were a timely reminder of a community’s responsibility to work towards addressing violent behaviours.

In 2015 the Ministry of Women and the Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs jointly funded a project to examine Samoan people’s understanding of the primary prevention of violence against women and girls – *A malu i ‘āiga, e malu fo’i i fafo: Protection for the family, protection for all* (Ministry of Women, 2015).

The research examined the primary prevention of violence against women and girls within the fa’a Samoa (Samoan

culture) and the protective elements underpinning Samoan principles, such as the *vā tapuia* (relationships), *feagaiga* (brother–sister bond), *fa’asinomaga* (identity as Samoans) and *malupuipua* (shame and controlling violent behaviours).

The study reported here was undertaken under the *Nga Vaka o Kāiga Tapu* programme and addressed the intentions of the *Nga Vaka o Kāiga Tapu Family Violence Research Plan (2013-18)*. The primary purpose was to improve information and evidence in the Pacific family violence arena and generate Pacific knowledge about social and kin relationships. The secondary purpose was to provide capacity building for young Pacific researchers, thus building the Pacific research community. Two early career researchers, Koleta Savaii and Eti Puni, were recruited to the team. Both are fluent Samoan language speakers and brought their own gendered fa’a Samoa understandings to the study. Both have since enrolled in Masters’ thesis research on topics related to family wellbeing.

AIM

The aim of the study was to set a platform for understanding family violence by painting the contours of harmonious marriages or partner relationships in New Zealand from the experiences of Samoan males and females, who are or have been in a partner relationship for up to ten years.

The study used a strengths-based approach to increasing our understanding of family violence and was influenced by three beliefs:

- Violence cannot be studied in isolation but sits firmly within ideals of family, family wellbeing and gendered roles.

- Acts of violence are relational. We need to know what people identify as violent and non-violent behaviour.
- The starting point for strengthening marriages or partner relationships is whatever is working well now.

The study concerns concepts of family and marriage relationships. The traditional Samoan extended family is the source of identity, support and avenue to social, political and economic participation. Marriage is a legal relationship between spouses with the accompanying primacy of the nuclear family unit. Marriage, as a legal relationship, was introduced in Samoa after the contact years at a time when the fa'amatai extended-family ideals and practices prevailed.

Thus, at the heart of this study is the question of how these kinship-focused ideals operate in Samoan marriages or partner relationships in New Zealand today. They are issues of cultural conservatism, shifts and resiliency in new lands and new times.

The research questions for the study were:

- What makes for a harmonious marriage relationship and how were these behaviours learned and practised?
- Is violence acceptable in a marriage relationship?
- Do fa'a Samoa ideals, such as the feagaiga, protect women from violence?

STRUCTURE OF THE REPORT

This report is presented in six sections (S1 to S5) as follows:

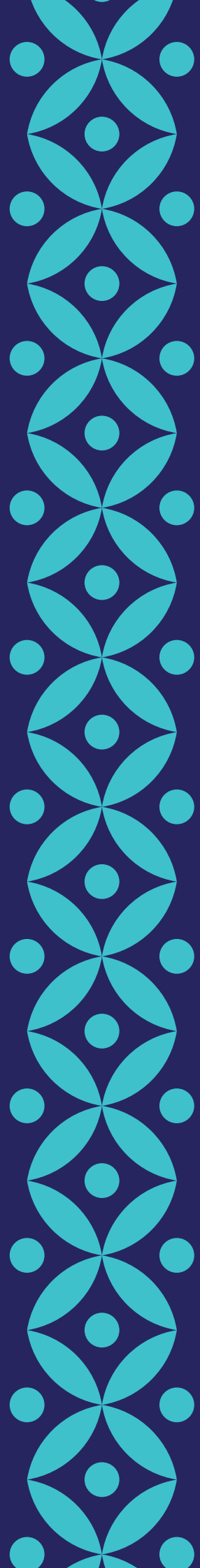
- 01 Introduces the study and sets out the aim of the study and the research questions
- 02 Outlines the research methods used
- 03 Provides the contextual background to traditional Samoan family, gendered roles and marriage
- 04 Presents the findings under each research question and other emerging questions
- 05 Offers some concluding comments.

While the language used in the talanoa (interviews) was a mix of English and Samoan, this report is written mainly in English.

02



**RESEARCH
METHODS**



RESEARCH METHODS

This section outlines the research process and details the procedure, participants, methods of data collection and analysis, and provides some reflections on the research process.

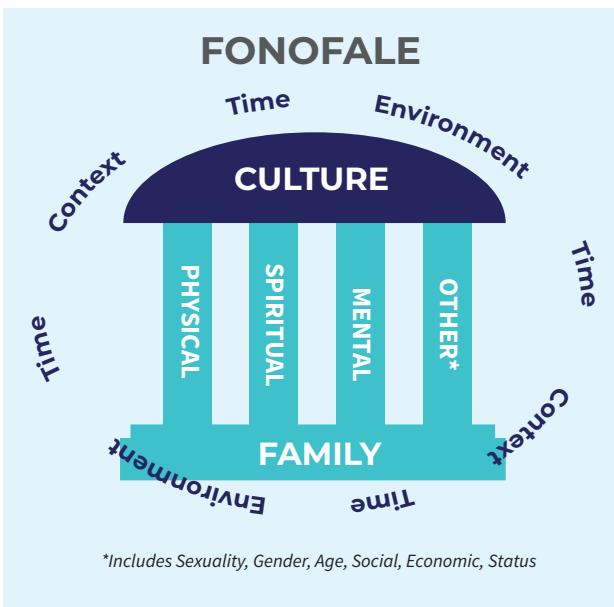
RESEARCH PROCESS

The study took an appreciative-inquiry, strengths-based approach (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005) and was conducted through the lens of a Samoan worldview. This is represented in the Fonofale model of health (Pulotu-Endemann, 2001) shown in Figure 1.

The fonofale captures the cultural platform of the fa’a Samoa – the relationships between spiritual, social, economic and physical elements of culture and family. It also places these relationships within the context of changing times and places, very relevant for this New Zealand-based study.

Ethical approval for the study was gained from the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee.

FIGURE 1. THE FONOFALE MODEL OF HEALTH (FROM PULOTU-ENDEMANN, 2001, P. 3)



PARTICIPANTS

The participants of interest were males and females who self-identified as Samoan and had been in a marriage or partner relationship in New Zealand for at least ten years. They did not have to be in a marriage or partner relationship at the time of the study. Participants for the study were sought by distributing invitations through Samoan community groups.

In total, 21 people agreed to participate: ten males and 11 females. Table 1 shows the profile of the participants in terms of age, ethnicity of their partner and the composition of their household.

TABLE 1. PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS

PARTICIPANT ¹	AGE (YEARS)	ETHNICITY OF PARTNER	HOUSEHOLD
M1	60+	Samoan	3 generations
M2	60+	Samoan	Nuclear
M3	60+	Samoan	Nuclear
M4	60+	Samoan	3 generations
M5	60+	Samoan	3 generations
M6	60+	Samoan	3 generations
M7	<35	Samoan	3 generations
M8	<35	Other PI	3 generations
M9	<35	Other PI	3 generations
M10	<35	Other PI	3 generations
F1	50–55	Palagi	Nuclear
F2	50–55	Samoan	Nuclear
F3	45–50	Palagi	Solo
F4	50–55	Palagi	Solo
F5	50–55	Samoan	3 generations
F6	44–50	Samoan	3 generations
F7	40–45	Samoan	Nuclear
F8	45–50	Samoan	Solo
F9	50–55	Palagi	Nuclear
F10	40–45	Palagi	Nuclear
F11	40–45	Samoa	Nuclear

¹ M = male, F = female

Six of the male participants were younger than 35 years old and four were 60 or more years old. The females were a more homogenous group, being 40–55 years old. The partners of seven female participants were of Samoan or other Pacific ethnicity. Four females were separated at the time of the study and one had since remarried. The actual length of time participants had been married was difficult to determine, especially amongst younger males who said, “We lived together for x years first.” The make-up of the household (extended, nuclear, solo) is treated with caution because, while not “living in the same house”, it is likely that most families organised as extended families on a daily basis. At the time of this study, most female participants were in higher paid employment than their partners.

DATA COLLECTION – THE TALANOA PROCESS

Data was collected using the talanoa process (Vaiotele, 2006). The talanoa were semi-structured conversations, guided by a set of conversation starters that then followed the interests and views raised by participants. A guideline of questions was prepared, piloted with group discussions and then amended. See Appendix A for the talanoa guidelines. The talanoa were carried out in the participants’ language of choice (Samoan or English). Each interview was scheduled to take one hour, however most took longer.

We had planned to gather data through individual and group talanoa. However, we were not able to conduct group talanoa due to the practical and time constraints of recruiting participants and scheduling focus groups during the short period of the study. Therefore, only individual talanoa were carried out. Thirteen talanoa were conducted face-to-face and a further eight were completed via an online open-ended survey. Appendix B shows the participants who responded to a face-to-face interview and those who responded to an online survey.

DATA INTERPRETATION

Each of the talanoa were transcribed and then discussed in our team meetings to identify the main themes within each research question and within other emerging questions or issues.

REFLECTIONS ON THE RESEARCH PROCESS

The research team is confident that the research process was adequately robust and the findings make a valuable contribution to Samoan family wellbeing research. Factors that contributed to this view included:

- The benefits of a Samoan research team researching with Samoan participants. Researchers, who had an understanding of Samoan protocols, behaviours and meanings, carried out the talanoa. Talanoa with older participants were mainly carried out in the Samoan language and all participants used Samoan terms and phrases.
- As was appropriate, a male interviewer conducted interviews with men and a female interviewer conducted interviews with women. Due to timing constraints, one female interviewer carried out interviews with two men. This did not appear to be a constraint as the data collected was extremely honest, lengthy and rich.
- Online surveys. Face-to-face talanoa is the preferred method for interviewing Pacific people. However, of the 20 invitations to complete an online survey, seven responses were received. Again, this did not appear to be a constraint as the responses were well expressed, very honest and showed evidence of deep engagement and thought.
- Composition of the sample. We have taken into account the differences in the male/female age profiles that may have influenced the experiences shared.
- Timing. The study was planned to take place between February and August 2016. In hindsight, the study was over-optimistic in scope for this length of time. Factors that were more time consuming than anticipated included: gaining ethics approval, capacity skills building and scheduling focus groups.
- Reaction of the participants. All participants welcomed the chance to share their experiences and most interviews went well over one hour. Most participants said that this was the first time they had shared or “even thought about” this aspect of their lives and some said that they were going to talk with their partners about points raised. One participant described the talanoa as a “quite liberating and reflective experience.” Another said, “[It’s] been good to get this out, almost like counselling.”

03



**CONTEXTUAL
BACKGROUND**



CONTEXTUAL BACKGROUND

This section gives a brief contextual background to this study and an account of the traditional Samoan family, gendered roles and marriage. It is presented for interpreting aspects of cultural conservatism, shifts and resiliency. As noted, marriage as a legal concept and institution was introduced in Samoa in the post-contact years.

Currently, Pacific peoples comprise over 7% of the New Zealand population and is predicted to increase to 10% by 2026 (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2016). Samoans form almost half (48.7%) of the Pacific population. Like other Pacific communities, the Samoan population is marked by its youthfulness and diversity in relation to the length of time they have lived in New Zealand, the increasing number born in New Zealand and the increased multi-ethnicity due to intermarriage. The composition of Samoan families in New Zealand includes an increase in nuclear and solo-parent families. How these and other changes influence Samoan family and family relationships in New Zealand today is at the heart of this study.

Migration stories relate the continuous interplay of homeland ideals and practices with those of the new lands (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi, 2003; Macpherson & Macpherson, 2009). The endurance and negotiation of customary ways to new times and places, and the creation of new ways are beautifully outlined in these words, adapted from the Health Research Council of New Zealand (2014):

For generations our peoples travelled and set up small communities in new lands, built on our shared beliefs and knowledge whilst adapting to new times and places and maintained links with the homelands – for spiritual nourishment, identity and security. (p. 4)

New Zealand’s Samoan community is often described as a family-based people who ‘give priority to the spiritual’ in every activity. Why is this so? Briefly, the Samoan worldview sees a relationship between the spiritual, human and resource elements of land, sea and the cosmos. The Gods (spiritual) created all living things; they appointed matai (chiefs) to be their representatives on earth and allocated to them the stewardship (pule) over physical resources to be used to ensure the family good ‘as in the past, in the present and to the future’.

Tui Atua (2007) writes:

The indigenous Samoan, time-space, the va-tapuia (relationships) and its origins are unequivocally linked to God Tagaloaaalelagi, the Absolute, the Creator Progenitor, the source of all biological life. (p. 1)

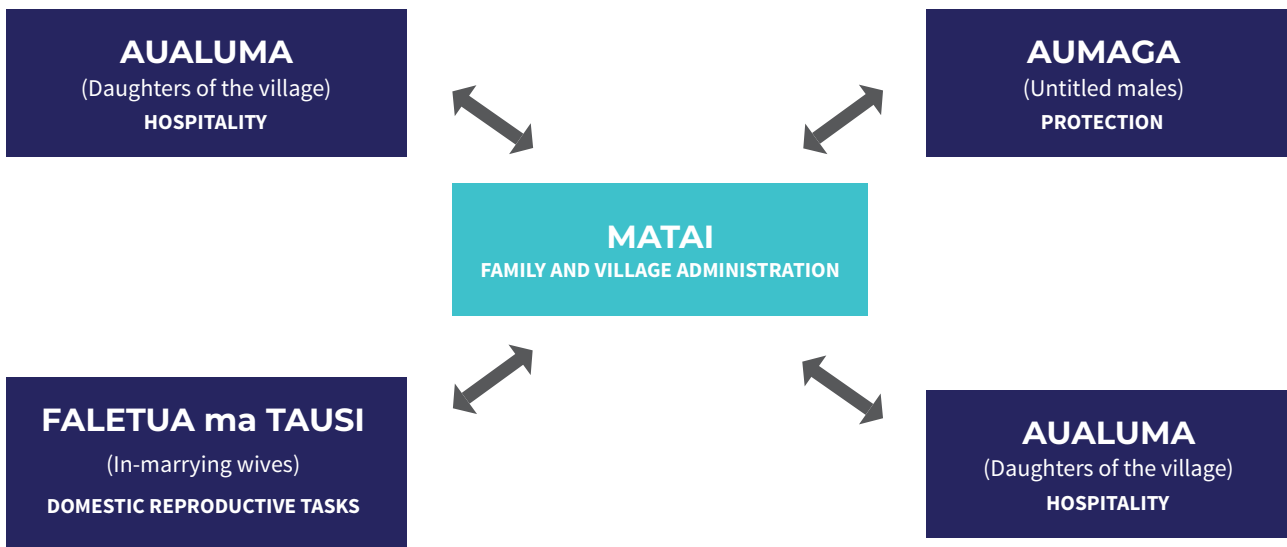
From these creation beginnings, a complex nationwide system of chiefly rankings and relationships evolved, each geographically located and with four maximal lineages at the apex (Meleisea, 1987). In these systems, identity and place became firmly entrenched in the family and consolidated in the family gafa (history) passed down through generations. Notably, over 90% of land in Samoa is still in customary tenure and is for the use of family members whether they live in Samoa or overseas.

THE FA’AMATAI-CHIEFLY SYSTEMS

The fa’amatai is the major institution and form of governance in the fa’a Samoa (Figure 2). Fana’afi (1986) describes the fa’amatai as the sociological wheel on which the fa’a Samoa rests. The goals of the fa’amatai are to maintain and enhance the family good, and family members have a duty to work together to achieve this. Every action and behaviour has the potential to enhance or lower the family status (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991, 1996). Marriage unions or liaisons were (and still are) a major strategy in raising family status and the sacred daughters of the village played a central role in this (Schoeffel, 1997).

The fa’amatai features an ideological separation of sacred and non-sacred (material) and a complementarity (or reciprocal relationship) between the two. The presence of both elements is necessary for the rightness of every action, from ceremonial events to daily life events, such as marriage unions (Tuvale, 1918).

FIGURE 2. THE FA'AMATAI (ADAPTED FROM FANA'AFI, CITED BY FAIRBAIRN-DUNLOP (1991))



Family members (non-sacred) elect the family chief (sacred), who holds the pivotal role in the fa'amatai. The family chief also sits on the fono o matai – the village decision-making body. While families may call their males and females matai by their families, the role is still considered to be a male one. The 2011 census found females held 11% of matai titles (Ministry of Women, Community and Social Development, 2011).

A second ideological separation in the fa'amatai is between sisters (sacred), who sit in the aualuma, and brothers (non-sacred), who form the aumaga. The relationship between brothers and sisters is conceptualised in the feagaiga sacred covenant.

A third separation is between sisters (sacred) and in-marrying wives (non-sacred). Freeman (1984) reported a system of institutionalised virginity prevailed in Samoa and was practised in public defloration ceremonies where brides demonstrated their chastity. According to Freeman (1984), Latai (2015), Mead (1928), Schoeffel (1997) and Shankman (1996), the sacredness of the daughters of the village was due to their virginity and reproductive powers, and that wives lost their sacredness through marriage.

Sisters, brothers and the feagaiga

The group that held the highest status in the village were the aualuma (daughters), whose sacredness needed to be protected at all costs. Female sacredness was defined not only by their shared divinity with the gods but also their role in reproducing life.

The act of giving birth to life gave females their identity, role, responsibility and designation (Lupe, 2007). While the ability to make life is sacred and shared by both female and male, Suaalii-Sauni (2010) states that a “female’s ability to carry and ultimately give birth to life, distinguishes her responsibility from that of her male counterpart” (p. 100).

All daughters were valued but the taupou (ceremonial virgin) was the role model for all daughters. The taupou was usually the daughter of the highest-ranking chief and signified the chief’s political authority and the prestige of the village. It was in the aualuma that daughters learnt the protocols and art of hospitality, including how to weave the ie toga (fine mats), which were (and still are) Samoa’s measina (wealth)

imbued with the sacredness of their makers and the events marked by their exchange. In these predominately oral societies, ie toga were the symbols and validators of events and agreements, including the ifoga (forgiveness) ceremony.

The aumaga (untitled men of the village) were the village's strength, responsible for food production, labour and protection, and were viewed as the future family leaders. A brother's duty was to protect his sisters, as in the brother-sister relationship of feagaiga. Sisters were the ioimata (centre point) of their brothers' eye. In turn, sisters honoured and supported their brothers. A myriad of complex rules and behaviours developed to mark the brother-sister separation, such as those relating to sexual talk and behaviours in the presence of sisters, and prohibitions against the sharing of clothing.

Sisters and wives

While sisters were the highest status group in the village, the faletua ma tausi (wives) were the lowest. A wife had no entitlements in her husband's village. Her role was to serve her husband's family, just as he did. On the death of her husband or the break of a liaison, it was expected that the wife would return to her natal village to the care of her brothers and family (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1998).

Children

In the fa'a Samoa extended-family system, all family and community members had responsibility for the care and wellbeing of children, which is in stark contrast to the nuclear family model. Ritchie and Ritchie (1983) used terms like "many parents" and "peer parenting" to describe Polynesian parenting practices, and "child caretaking" to describe the practice of older brothers and sisters being tasked with looking after younger siblings.

Marriage

Traditionally, marriage was viewed as a union between families (rather than individuals) and as a strategy for cementing and forging new political alliances (Tuvale, 1918) as well as a means of social mobilisation (Bennett & Wanhalla, 2016). Sisters (and the ie toga they made) held a major role in these relationship-building activities (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 1991; Schoeffel, 1987). The following abridged account of Samoan courtship demonstrates this:

If it comes to the notice of the Orators of a village that there is a Taupo (virgin daughter of a High Chief.) in another village from whose family they will obtain many fine mats should she be married to one of their chiefs, they discuss the matter and approach a chief of their village and a conversation on the following lines takes place. "Get ready, O chief, our Moega (party who make proposals of marriage to a lady) will go to the Taupo" (mentioning name.) It does not make any difference whether the Chief is already married. If so the Orators will say "O chief, throw this old women away, she has lived with you for a long time and she has nothing more to give you. ... Send her back to her family and find a way to render null and void your marriage with her, you have had children by her- let us go to the Taupo who has many riches - let us get some fine mats for the Orators." What the Orators wish will be brought about irrespective of whether the chief is an old man who should not marry a young girl or not. ... The whole village, chiefs and common people go on this visit and they take many pigs with them to provide a feast for the village of the Taupo and their own people. ... The orators of the party and also the chiefs talk to the Taupo and explain the reason of their visit. The Taupo and her parents and the people of the village then discuss the matter whilst the visiting party wait in the village for a day or two for the answer. The first answer given is "Faatau saili" - which means "Look for another girl to be your wife and the Taupo will look for a different man to be her husband. This is tantamount to saying that the wish is refused. The party departs and waits for a week or two and then returns with further presents, this time with more food than on the first occasion. If the village of the visiting party is distant from the village of the Taupo they will probably rest in some village handy to the girl's home and from there prepare for the different visits they pay to the Taupo. Occasionally a marriage party is quickly received by the Taupo and she agrees to their request but the majority of such requests have to be made four or five times before success is attained and on each visit the food presents must be given. It is very seldom that less than two such visits must be paid. Notwithstanding the fact that the girl expresses her unwillingness to become the wife of the chief of the visiting party, the Orators of the party will continue their efforts and they rely on the influence of the Orators of the Taupo's village to assist them to gain their ends. Should the visiting party continue their efforts and treat the people of the Taupo's village to large quantities of food, the Orators of the Taupo's village will hand the girl over to become the wife of the chief. They will appoint one Orator to stand before the visiting party and he will exclaim "O la outou ava lena." (This is your wife.) (Tuvale, 1918, p. 2)

Christian teachings and the contact experience brought many changes, such as the introduction of marriage as a legal process, monogamy, the nuclear family model of mother, father and children, and shame being attributed to children born out of wedlock. Missionaries also attempted to increase the status of wives to be above that of sisters (Schoeffel, 1987).

This brief account shows how identity, status and access to, and use of, resources rested within the family in the fa'a Samoa. It also shows the intricate system of spiritual, social, economic and physical relationships that this involved.

04



FINDINGS



FINDINGS

The findings are presented under each research question by the themes identified. Participants' quotes are used to illustrate the views expressed and are attributed using the code names for individuals listed in Table 1.

For example, M1 refers to Male 1 and F1 refers to Female 1. Shaded boxes are used to highlight connecting points across the themes. A short summary is presented at the end of each set of findings.

Generally, participants' responses were a mix of ideal views and personal views that drew deeply on their own experiences.

WHAT MAKES FOR A HARMONIOUS MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP AND HOW ARE THESE BEHAVIOURS LEARNED AND PRACTISED?

Three main themes emerged in participants' responses to this question: expectations of a partner, what makes for a good marriage, and challenges experienced and how partners dealt with these. Each theme is presented in turn.

Expectations of a partner

Participants most frequently mentioned commitment to faith and family as the ideal qualities in a marriage partner. They used the terms *church*, *spirituality* and *faith* interchangeably. Females and males, especially the older males, held similar views.

Church and God is a big part of our lives ... the foundation. (F7)

Being a Godly person. Families should be Christianised because that's where good things are borne out. A person, who prays, goes to church, reads the bible and prays for the bible to speak to her, will gain an understanding and be able to apply these things in her own life. [She] should know and understand the bible, she must be Christian and she must love. (M1)

My expectations? They would have to love my family. My family is everything [and] that comes with a whole lot of other expectations. To love my family means that we will share the same beliefs and the same values. We don't have to be exactly the same in what we do; my wider family [cousins], because we're like brothers and sisters and we're part of the package. [If] we disconnect with our family [we become] disconnected with our culture, disconnected with the church. [So] Christian, hardworking and honest. (F8)

Love and respect for me and my mother. (F1)

As the talanoa proceeded, more personal qualities came to the fore. Females mentioned "being able to laugh together", "someone who inspires me and has a positive outlook" and "someone who shows respect, love and reciprocity to others."

Others expressed these views:

I looked for things that I had loved from my dad ... someone who was funny because my dad was a bit of a jokester ... maybe young girls take things from their fathers ... so, if that Dad is a hard man or he's detached, that's when they might see this as normal and look for that in a partner. (F7)

Actually, we didn't have any expectations ... [the] bottom line [was] we loved each other and wanted to be together. (F8)

"Not taking us for granted" and "communication" ("no man caves") were other points raised:

Sometimes our men [think] ‘I’ve got her ... I don’t have to work hard to make her stay because I’ve got her’. Our Samoan men need to know that women ... keep them satisfied holistically ... it’s not just sex ... maintain the relationship at a level so they don’t get bored [and seek another partner] (F2)

Open communication [is important]. Despite what else is happening around you in terms of your family[’s] financial situation and other obligations, as long as there’s a commitment to work together, everything will be okay. There’s always tomorrow. (F1)

This pattern of looking back and then looking to the future became more marked with solo parents. F8 and F3 had this to say:

[I wish] I’d listened to my granny. She said, ‘don’t marry him [afakasi – one Samoan parent and one palagi parent]. They’re different’. She was right! (F8)

I should have watched how he treated the females in his family before we married. (F3)

Box 1 shows how childhood experiences influenced expectations of marriage and a marriage partner, as well as how childhood experiences normalised perceptions of power and violence.

BOX 1. INFLUENCE OF CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES ON EXPECTATIONS OF A MARRIAGE PARTNER

I grew up in X [rural village] where the fa’a Samoa is very strong. The relationships I saw were that the woman is subservient and the man is head of the family. I didn’t see myself as a supporter and that influenced me a lot. I thought, ‘I’m doing all this just to be somebody’s backup?’ [and] ‘Why are we always the supporter and why are we always in the background? If we were equal [he] wouldn’t beat me up’. Because almost every man in my village was beating up their wife, we were told, ‘don’t butt in, it’s not our business’. And so my expectations were very simple. I wanted to be treated with respect [and] the majority of the men I knew were violent. So my thing was, I’d like to meet a Samoan man that wouldn’t punch me in the face. (F10)

What makes for a good marriage?

Participants’ responses to this question were again a mix of ideal views and personal qualities and relationships. These discussions also reinforced the place of the spiritual element in marriage relationships:

Marriage is a Sacrament. You give it to the Lord. I was brought up in the church. I’ve always been raised that marriage is kind of like a do or die thing ... not all marriages work. I don’t have a perfect marriage, but we work damned hard to make sure it works. We work on it because we have a history together ... we [are] comfortable with each other at the moment. (F6)

The way I play my role is ordained by God. Spirituality is a major factor [that] dictates the way I treat my wife. (M1)

For F7, the spiritual element was not solely an ideal but a practice as expressed in her account of “God is the middle of our marriage.”

Well [marriage] is not all a bed of roses. We always find that we go back to God. [One will say], ‘I think we need to do a lotu’ and that brings us back to a sense of peace, because you know you can get caught up in your own ‘I’m right’ – no I’m right’. If we are out of touch [with each other] it’s being out of touch with God. We even laugh and say, ‘It’s not very palagi!’ God in the middle! (F7)

All participants said that marriage was not easy, describing it as *hard* and a *steep learning curve*. Interestingly, F9 described marriage relationships as an evolving process – a view underpinning many other comments made:

I love married life but you have to give a 100% all the time. (F2)

Relationships ... evolving with who I am now and who I’m becoming. (F9)

As respondents shared challenges experienced and how they were dealing with these, words such as, *love*, *affection* and *getting to know and understand each other* gained in prominence:

Love is important because when you love one another, you will sacrifice and make compromises. There are times when [what] you want and your partner wants differ but love enables you to make allowances for your partner's sake and your marriage. (M2)

The love side kind of changes ... growing with another person and you share your life with the other person, ups and downs and the Hollywood marriages – it's not true. (F7)

Each one has their own strengths based on their background, beliefs, values and upbringing. These are very hard to change during their lifetime whether married or not. It cannot be changed within five or ten years, and spending more time together extends knowledge and understandings of each other. None of these characteristics can be seen in the first meeting or second, it takes more time to learn and to know these elements if the final decision is made to get married. Respect develops intimacy and spending time with each other, sharing and listening to others' concerns and feelings. (M6)

We have learnt a lot about each other, good and bad, even with health issues. A steep learning curve from my working class Samoan roots living in South Auckland and my husband from a middle class palagi family. I suppose it's about compromise and trying to understand each other. (F1)

M2 joked that his wife continually stressed *relationships, relationships, relationships*.

She [wife] says that [relationships] to me many times: when we talk, when we go to bed, when we have an argument, when we have family times. [She says] a family with good relationships is a family that will get along – these lead to mafutaga lelei. (M2)

Challenges and how they are dealt with

What people see as challenges and how they face them give important insights into marriage experiences, expectations and aspirations. That said, these participants had a realistic understanding of the challenges of married life in New Zealand today:

Everyone's too busy (studying, careers, business) and if we're not careful, our partners will end up feeling neglected. ... Modern technology allows 'other' options that our partners can turn to if our marriage is not solid, instead of turning to each other and talking things out, e.g. pornography, dating sites. (F2)

Having kids growing up (and learning) much knowledge ... kids not obedient to their parents, different rules/laws are different. In Samoa you can talk to your kids and may smack there. Not here. (M2)

Not easy today. People are isolated from their usual ways of connecting physically. Arriving in New Zealand was a huge transitioning from a peaceful, low and slow-moving life compared to New Zealand [and] had a great impact. Financial struggles and male–female power relationships. [It's] hard being a partner today. (M5)

Financial pressures were a main factor influencing the ways marriage challenges were framed and addressed. All female participants were employed at the time of the study and so two-income families were the norm. However, F1 was the only female to indicate that she shared spending responsibilities with her husband:

We both take responsibility for different things ... and for our children. There are no joint accounts in our family. I follow my parents' example ... you are in charge of your own money. My husband tells me this is unusual as palagi couples have joint accounts in New Zealand. (F1)

A significant finding was the way participants faced marriage challenges. Their actions were very much directed towards respecting, maintaining and negotiating their relationship with their partner, not as an articulation of rights.

Other issues discussed included: who is head of the household, whether priority should be given to the extended family or the nuclear family, and parenting. Each issue is discussed in turn.

HEAD OF HOUSEHOLD

Whether consciously or unconsciously, most participants held fast to a belief that the male was the head of the family. Some were moving towards a more shared ‘headship’ style, while F4 ‘blasted’ what she termed “male sense of entitlement and chauvinistic behaviour.” Notably, F4 was a strong advocate for children’s rights too.

Males are expected to lead [in Samoa]. In New Zealand, [it] is being equal and not domineering. I have never had a Samoan partner but from what I have observed, there seems to be an expectation that men would lead in [the] marriage partnership and make the decisions. There also seems to be a lot more tolerance by women of men’s bad judgements, sense of entitlements and chauvinistic behaviour. (F9)

[We must] remind men and women that men are not God’s authority on earth. Work with religious institutions to shift their patriarchal views of family [and] society. Develop mechanisms to help women to own property of their own, so they are not trapped in harmful relationships. (F4)

The relationship-based approach to head of household challenges is captured well in F7’s comments:

If you think about it the Samoan way, he goes, ‘Remember I have to be the head of the family’ and you know me being the strong woman, I go ‘Yeah whatever’. But when I look back in terms of our faith, the bible and lotu, it’s actually true, because that’s what I believe as well. When you have too many people trying to be the chief at the top, then how does it work? So there are things that we do try to do traditionally, we try to remember that he is the husband we abide by that too ... but [sometimes he says,] ‘You know sometimes you have to help me be that leader when I need to take charge of things and I’m like learning as well’. And I’m like, ‘Yes you’re first!’ but it’s a mix of both really. We talk and we try and work things out together and then at other times he is the leader and as a husband and head of the family, we try and do that too. He learnt from his father, a very strong Samoan man, [and] a dominating figure in his house ... and on my side, my mum was the strong dominating one too. (F7)

Leadership questions became even more complex when both partners were matai, as was the case with two female participants. However, again there was an eye to maintaining the partner relationship or as F6 noted, “a tempering of my views” to the other:

In the fa’a Samoa, women have a designated role as do men, but with the modern times you have women matai. Now a tulafale is meant to serve in the interest of the family. But if a brother and sister who are both matais clash, then what? Where is the va? Where is the feagaiga? Which hat do we wear? Are we her brother or are we her equal because we are both matai? Do you see the issues? (M6)

[In my own extended family] I make most of our decisions. They all wait for my input, as I am a matai for my family. [In my immediate family] I respect my husband as the head of our family. I have to remember that he is also a matai ... often now, I temper my views. I didn’t before, then I realised I was diminishing him in the children’s eyes. Now [if children raise an issue] I say, ‘Let’s talk about it’ and then we come back to the children. No matter what, my husband is the head of our family. I defer to him. (F6)

Some of the strains in balancing roles and loyalties are seen in F5’s honest, almost despairing comments that follow. Also evident is her increased dependence on her natal family rather than her husband:

Being a matai has advantages and disadvantages depending on how the person applies their status and responsibilities. As a mother and wife, certain roles are performed both inside your own immediate family, extended family, community village and church. A woman has to become multi-skilled. Some men become dependent on the wife, if she can execute these duties responsibly and well. And they become comfortable with the status they play outside the family – as a matai. [Then] they do not act upon their own roles within their own family but believe the wife must play all these roles, at their convenience. Women butt out, but to avoid this, she turns to her own family for support to avoid stress and depression. Family? Too much. We have to adjust and look after our own. He can’t just keep doing his family. What about my family and our family? (F5)

EXTENDED FAMILY OR OUR FAMILY?

Views about decision-making morphed almost seamlessly into a quite serious questioning of who should have priority – the extended family, as in the fa’a Samoa, or our family? This is reflected in Box 2.

BOX 2. EXTENDED FAMILY OR OUR FAMILY?

In New Zealand, [Samoan] men are placed out of their comfort zone, forced into roles and responsibilities as a means for survival. There are family expectations they must perform [as part of their matai]. But in New Zealand, he has no taulelea [young men] to pass on his decisions to action, [there is] only our young children [who] are dependents. The husband may find this frustrating. Then [at work] he is working under an employer with rules that are different from ones he is used to – a consensus/ fa’afaletui situation, where he is part of the decision-making. In the home, he may not be comfortable as everything depends on money. He earns little, [is] not good at sharing and he cannot reciprocate. Women are forced to be very good at problem solving within a marriage. [Yet] his expectations of you [are to stay the same] – the norm. When I ask him to help out with children, he says, ‘No’ but then turns around [and] helps extended family projects. (F5)

M7’s view was:

I think when people shift in terms of context. Like coming from Samoa to New Zealand, I guess the focus changes for families, and the responsibility becomes that you have to look after your immediate, your core family – yourself, your wife and your children – whereas in Samoa, we live in the village context, so you might live with your family, but because we live so close to each other, everyone can see each other’s house, we can walk across to the other aiga and have something to eat there, so you know that circle of life sort of thing. I think that’s missing in terms of [the] New Zealand context because that’s not the culture here. You have to work to survive. It’s money. Financially, you have to make sure there’s food on the table, your power bill gets paid. So your focus shifts and it focuses on your core family. We have to make an effort in New Zealand to have our [wider extended] family meet; people live in all different areas.

F5 asked the question that was uppermost in the minds of many parents and elders today, “How can New Zealand-born children understand the feagaiga ideals and practices?”

My daughter asked, ‘Why do we have to give money to Auntie [the sister of her father]?’ Obviously, I value the feagaiga [but] she does not understand. I explain, she understands. But [it] still doesn’t mean she’s going to adhere to it. (F5)

PARENTING

How we raise our children was another theme returned to repeatedly. Clear evidence of rethinking parenting practices was evident and answers were characterised by looking back to the past and also to the future:

[There’s] no such thing as family planning. That’s a palagi thing. Palagis do family planning because they are individualistic. It’s just the husband and the wife who plan everything based on the resources they can both afford. Us Samoans, we don’t plan because we have our extended families, who we can rely on. Besides, in Samoa, even if you don’t work, you know you have your plantation, the sea and your pigs and chickens that you can fall back on. So that’s why we don’t plan how many kids to have. Also, if you look at the bible, it says that the birth of a child is not something that is up to us. It is God’s choice and that’s why we call it a gift. So I think, it’s only a person who doesn’t believe in the bible who will plan these things. (M3)

Children? A gift, [a] blessing from God ... but we need to be able to financially support them so they can have the best we can offer. [My children] will never know what poverty is. (F5)

[There are] many differences and quarrelsome matters between us in dealing with family fa’alavelave ... women’s roles, children’s problems. I sometimes disagree on some of the ideas and thoughts I hear and have begun to reflect on ways to share these things but not in front of the children. (F6)

All respondents stated the desire for a close relationship with their children, which had not been the pattern in their own lives. Remarks, such as “We don’t have to do the same things as our parents” prefaced many of the conversations on parenting:

I try to apply how I was brought up from my parents ... to make decisions on what I think is good. But it depends now, because it has to be in line with New Zealand and also life in Samoa. New Zealand really [hastens] the changes in people's living. Depends on the way technology is viewed [but also] the ways youth now perceive they should be brought up. (F8)

Roles had to change ... time, adapting. Two competing ideals. We try our best to observe the fa'a Samoa principles but we have to adapt to here. (M3)

My husband and I both work together on what is going to work best [for the kids]. Though sometimes I feel that his liberal views and ways are too lenient, whereas our Samoan ways are strict, firm and will protect our children. (F1)

Participants openly shared changes in the ways they were parenting, which they said had gone unnoticed until now. Touch (or the lack of touch) was raised a number of times²:

[My father] didn't touch me at all, not like the kids at school. He was a hard man, detached. [We learnt] engaging with our children, the importance of hugs, touch. My dad showed love through discipline. (M5)

One time when I was sick, [that was] the first time I can remember my mother touching me gently, wiping my brow. (F8)

[When we were young] I never saw my mum or dad talking through any disagreements. Maybe they did in a different way, because my parents (and we) prayed a lot together. And so, when I think of communication, my mum and dad did this in their prayers as a family. They would pray and say, 'Faamagalo mai a'u'. And then after lotu, things were nice and peace came back to the house. A lot of Samoan couples don't sit around and discuss their feelings but you hear it in their prayers, like for God to help the other and lead the family. (F6)

We had no voice. My parents didn't ever converse with us. The only time they talked with us was to get this and get that. No conversation. (M6)

Talking and listening to children was also raised: Younger males said their ideas about parenting had changed hugely when they had their own children. They talked about touching, talking with their children, laughing together and going out with them. M5 said:

With my own son, I try to maintain a friendship bond with him because, in my day, my dad and I did not have a close bond. He was distant and I was afraid of him because he was sauā [cold. He] hit to discipline but also to show his love. But every child needs a mother and a father. They need a good family environment and a good family routine so that they can be disciplined and not end up on the streets. (M5)

Interestingly, and it may be the way discussions flowed, only F4 talked about children's rights and framed them within the ideal of family relationships:

My love guides what I do or don't do. It also propels me to say sorry when I have done wrong. My upbringing from my mother and grandparents are heavy influences. I also have religious values and am a strong believer in children's rights. (F4)

Summary

Maintaining fa'a Samoa ideals of spiritual and family was uppermost in these participants' perceptions of marriage partners and of marriage relationships. At the same time, the participants questioned how these ideals could be practised in New Zealand today – balancing what was best for their families now and in the future with the benefits of investing in activities that affirmed the prestige of the extended family. Discussions indicated that these participants were taking responsibility for, and negotiating the realities of daily life today. This was seen in the small shifts in partner relationships with each other, their children and the extended family. These shifts featured a relationship-enriching style (as in the fa'a Samoa) rather than a claim for rights or entitlements. In this process, females showed a greater understanding and resilience to changing times than males. Female resilience was framed within a desire to maintain the fa'a Samoa and their status as daughters (feagaiga) within the fa'a Samoa.

² As was found by Fairbairn-Dunlop, Paterson, & Cowley-Malcolm (2005)

IS VIOLENCE ACCEPTABLE IN A MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP?

Answers to this question were a resounding “No!” – violence of any form had no part in family life. With the exception of two female participants, all had witnessed and experienced violence in their early years. Most referred to violence as physical violence. However, F6’s comment that “My mouth is my weapon. ... My way of retaliating is my tongue” was a strong reminder of the multifaceted nature of violence⁴.

Most responses showed a growing resolution and firmness to deal with violent behaviours:

Many men believe violence is part of life. on the rugby field or at a bar is acceptable. But not against women. A) God made Adam stronger than Eve. B) Only men with no respect for his family and village tend to beat their wife. To have a name, ‘wife beater’, amongst peers is a great dishonour. C) Women are the ‘advisers’ to [the] husband. The male might make decisions but only after consultation with the wife. The wife plays a very important part in family discussions ... only idiots will beat their wives. (M6)

There is no place for these things in relationships. [This] happens when both sides do not listen to each other and do not want to understand about what is going on – the what, where, who, when and why. [There should be] no hiding of what you’re doing, money. We should talk to females, making sure they feel secure and all right. (M1)

Very importantly, while M6 stood firmly against violence, he was also highly aware that “violence is deep inside me”:

I managed to leave home early because of schooling. Left my village for Apia and then Apia for overseas, eventually to New Zealand. So violence did not become an integral part of my teenage years. I also found God and my horizons changed. I now know there are other ways of recovering from tension. However, I know that [violence] is deep inside of me because of my experience with my father but I try not to let it out. (M6)

M6’s fears were echoed by F8, who emphasised the cumulative and long-term effects of family violence and the different public and private faces of family relationships. See Box 3.

BOX 3. THE CUMULATIVE CYCLE OF VIOLENT BEHAVIOURS

We were the punching bags. But I think my parents were trapped in a very unhappy marriage – married so young, disillusionment, him bashing her, and then bashing us. Father [was] a social creature – public appearances were that everything was so amazing. Front face ‘all lovely’, at home it was hell, horrific. I wanted them to act like they did when others were around. I wished our extended family had intervened. No one of my family helped us; they just left us. Don’t talk to us about the safety of the family and looking after each other. They must have known but didn’t help my mother (she went to a refuge). But she did say ‘I’m not going back to him’.

[Later] I asked my mother why she didn’t stand up to him ... why she let him hit her. She said, in the beginning she used to fight back and when she complained to her mother, her mother said, ‘Take it’. I later found her mother’s husband had also hit her. In the old days, mum could pack up house and go home. Women had an active part in where they wanted to reside and whether they were going to take it or not. The children would always be linked to his village. But where she resided was up to her and the children. [Mothers] had a lot more choice and a lot more empowerment on where children and women went.

My sister and I stepped up when we were eight or nine and became the adults of the family – caregivers. And we perpetuated violence on our younger brothers. We were very hard on them because that’s all we knew. We didn’t know how to protect them, how to nurture them. But when we became parents, we made a conscious effort not to, but while my sister stopped hitting her own children she kept hitting our brothers. (F8)

It is clear that F8’s family had not protected this mother or her children and eventually her need for help was met by an external agency.

³ Cowley-Malcolm, Paterson, Fairbairn-Dunlop, Gao, & Williams (2009) and Paterson, Fairbairn-Dunlop, Cowley-Malcolm, & Schluter (2007).

⁴ Fairbairn-Dunlop (2001)

On a more positive note, participants shared ways they were attempting to manage violent behaviours. These were a mix of 'traditional' family-centred solutions through to what was sometimes described as 'not cultural' or new ideas, such as counselling and time out. These responses signify strengths and starting points for further actions to address family violence.

Most participants mentioned the family evening lotu (prayer time), highlighting the view that family violence must be addressed within the family:

These are very important to me, because no matter where a boy and a girl is during the day, they know they will have to be home at this time for the lotu. And during the family time, you do the prayer and you also read out a verse from the bible, a daily bread, and you elaborate on it for their understanding. Or you might even tell a story. So that's why family home meeting time is crucial, as a time for passing on knowledge and information to your children. (M6)

Change has to come from within. Attitudes, values and beliefs have to be taught at an early age. Respect for each other. Change within the families is the starting point. I am not sure how we can do this. Our children are exposed to different types of violence every day and if it comes from us parents it will take a long while to deter it. (M4)

We need to set examples to be role models to make a change for the best, especially for our children, so they don't repeat the cycle of violence. We need to teach other ways of dealing with life's challenges and we need to learn to communicate better. (F1)

'New' ways included the following:

[He shows violence by] throwing things, slamming doors. Now we sit down and talk. I suggested counselling. He refused, didn't want to pour out our frustrations, said it was culturally inappropriate. (F6)

Whenever me and my wife fight, I jump in my car and drive off to find somewhere to cool off. Like I go to play pool at my friend's house. And afterwards, I return home and my anger is gone. (M3)

I witnessed violence in my parents' marriage. I would never tolerate that for myself or for my children. I became my parents' marriage counsellor. Thanks to me, my parents were still together in their old age. (F1)

Summary

All participants had witnessed or experienced acts of family violence in their childhood years and these experiences have had a lasting effect on their lives. They were emphatic that there was no place for violence generally, in a marriage, or in family relationships. While they discussed externally generated strategies to manage violent behaviours they were more confident in family-led strategies, which drew on fa'a Samoa ideals of prayer and respect for the family institution.

DO THE FA'A SAMOA IDEALS, SUCH AS THE FEAGAIGA, PROTECT WOMEN FROM VIOLENCE?

Three themes emerged from the talanoa: understandings of the meaning and boundaries of the feagaiga, whether the feagaiga protects wives and all women, and relationships as the protective ideal for the future.

Notably, females chose to focus on their role as feagaiga (sisters) in the talanoa and not on their status as wife. This suggests they prized their status as feagaiga and their relationship with their brothers and their family of birth more than their place as a wife.

The feagaiga

Most participants had heard this term. However, females and older males had a deeper understanding of its meaning and application. Males said:

For the feagaiga, it is the brother's role to 'puipui' (protect) his sister and it is the sister's role to 'tausi' her brother. (M1)

The sister is seen as the pupil of the eye. Think about it. You don't want to lose your eyesight. To me, if you lose your sight, life is not worth living. So Samoa and Samoans from the early days have always taught that the main focus for any young man is to protect his family members, tautua and serve – especially our sisters. If something happens to your sister, the pupil of the eye under your protection, what is the purpose of living? You have failed. (M7)

The brother calls his sister his feagaiga and he is supposed to protect her. This is very important. He has to look after her, take care of her and in any Samoan family all the goods of the family are for the sister. She is her brothers' priority at all times and they will always put her first. That is why any girl who comes from a family of many brothers is the luckiest in the world because she will be well protected and spoiled, and that's why sometimes fights arise between the brothers and other boys in the village who talk to the sister, because the brother often gets overprotective of his sister. (M8)

While there are different expressions of feagaiga, M1 pointed out that relationships were the common denominator:

The context of feagaiga dictates the mores and expectations of a relationship. Remember the emphasis is put on the different context of the relationship. At the end of the day, feagaiga really means relationships. There are different forms and contexts for feagaiga. For example, another word for a faifeau is faafeagaiga. The sacred relationship between a brother and sister is feagaiga too. There are different contexts to feagaiga but it could be applied to any relationship. When a man and a woman marry, Samoans tend to say, 'O lea ua osi la feagaiga'. (M1)

Female participants discussed the genesis of the feagaiga and the spiritual ideals they saw as being integral to this, including the intergenerational mix of gendered and family bonding this implied. Females displayed a real pride in their place as feagaiga:

Feagaiga has a spiritual context. You know how you refer to the faifeau as the feagaiga, in that way, that's all protective. They're meant to protect the spiritual side of a person and that's exactly what the feagaiga should be. Le va lea between the brother and the sister. It protects wellbeing through [behaviours, such as] alofa, fa'aaloalo ma le tautua. [These things] highlight how the feagaiga should be practised. (F9)

My granny? Her daughters are basically her. The bond between mother and daughter is so close that the mother transfers everything on to her daughters and has the same expectations. The children belong to the mother, although she [daughter] is married whereas her son's children belong to his wife's family and the wife's family influences their values and beliefs. (F8)

Females described the boundaries of the feagaiga in this way:

We sisters always know where the boundaries are. Like, for example, how we hang our clothes, our undergarments. It's not in the proximity of brother and not sharing clothes. Don't wear t-shirts and things like that of your brother. (F6)

You learn from your mum and dad the feaus (duties) but also behaviours (usitai) [and] words (fa'aaloalo). When families or guests come over you know what to do ... even when you're little and when you're a little bit older, you know how to place yourself in those different contexts. And how you should be as a young Samoan teine. (F7)

[We learnt] what you're allowed to do and what you're not allowed to do. You know things that are sa (forbidden) that you can't talk to your sister or brother about. (F9)

And males talked about how they viewed their relationship with sisters:

I have never crossed the boundary. I know where my limits are when we face sisters. Never scream, smack or hurt them. I only rebuked them when I found out something that I needed to say for their own good and for our protection and safety. Now when we get older I still have that experience of closeness to them but things are slightly different now as they are old and each has a husband. I still have the same feeling of closeness but the gap is there because she has a new family. Coming together for fa'alavelave. Yes, we always have the experience of closeness. (M2)

The feagaiga can meet differences according to how brothers and sisters know and understand each other. There are times that our sisters scolded us for the many things that they saw as unnecessary in their eyes, where to a brother it was important. I actually shared a lot with my sisters. We played together respecting each other. Sometimes we argued, shared chores. Sometimes we shared food, ate together. (M1)

Most believed the feagaiga boundaries had become relaxed and blurred not only in New Zealand but also in Samoa:

Unlike the past, there are no gender-based clothes today [and] we now see sisters and brothers wearing the same t-shirts, drinking together and often partying together with the parents. Often they end up having an argument. [We] must know where the boundaries are. (F6)

My family practises it even though a lot of my uncles get pissed off at my mum when it comes to the fa'amatai stuff. My mum is a matai now. I guess, now that I think about it, the respect for her is probably due to the feagaiga. (M9)

At the moment, there's a lot of disagreement between my mother and her brother. I spoke to my mum about it, because one weekend my uncles came home and they were so disrespectful. I said to my mum, 'You know Mum, in terms of the feagaiga, that's not right'. She said, 'You're right, in the feagaiga the brother is supposed to cater to and take care of the sister'. But, I guess people are influenced by different things. (F6)

“When does the feagaiga stop?” was a highly debated question and drew responses ranging from “never” to “until my sister gets married, then the husband takes over.” Ideals of sacredness and purity again featured significantly in these talanoa:

The feagaiga never stops! (F9)

The feagaiga stops when my sister finds a husband. I am no longer the one that protects her, that role is transferred over to the husband. If my brother-in-law beats his wife then it's their issue that they must work through. (F3)

Like my grandmother said when I was a rebellious angry teenager ... that while I was living with them, my purity was my grandparents' responsibility. My social standing was their responsibility and spiritual standing was their responsibility also. Until I get married then all those responsibilities get transferred to my husband. (F8)

Could the feagaiga protect wives and all women?

Quite unexpectedly, serious discussions emerged on the question of whether the feagaiga could be a protective mechanism for all women. All participants had similar views on this. Comments related to the differing origins and ideals of the feagaiga as a sacred cultural or family covenant as against what they termed ‘the legal contract’ of marriage. These views are expressed in Box 4.

BOX 4. FEAGAIGA: COVENANT OR LEGAL CONTRACT?

Males said:

[The feagaiga] is just for the sister. Sometimes we use that word informally, like slang in our conversations – my wife is my feagaiga, but it’s a formal word like a legal definition that is used to describe my wife because when you make those vows, you also sign that legal agreement. And we have translated that into Samoan as a feagaiga. (M6)

Look at it this way. Feagaiga is like a contract. When you buy a new house, Samoans would say, ‘Ua saigi le feagaiga o le faatauga le fale’. When you get married you are committed to a contract that you will love, care and protect your wife. [The] same goes for your sister. (M5)

[Feagaiga is] blood and family, at least to us. It’s a protective factor – e mafai o ga alu le fafige lona aiga – and don’t lose face. A sister can return to her family and not lose face. (M1)

Females said:

It’s a different type of love that you have in that relationship. You can’t faatusa (equate). We are talking about ‘blood’ and ‘not blood!’ The difference is blood! (F3)

I don’t see my husband as my feagaiga. [Of course] marriage has depth, but not the depth of blood. I don’t see our relationship as a feagaiga. I always see feagaiga as, o le mea na a le tuafafige ma le tuagage, but things are changing. (F6)

Females referred repeatedly to the sacred, reciprocal bonds of the feagaiga, that brothers always knew their sister had their backs and vice versa. F6 used the example of the saofai (chiefly title bestowal ceremony) to explain this. She outlined how, in the saofai, it was the sister’s place – not the wife’s or a wife’s family – to ensure their brother was immaculately and appropriately dressed, and that the finest ie toga and other goods were available for the exchanges marking the occasion. F6 saw this as sisters reaffirming and nurturing their relationship with their brother and in doing so, fulfilling their duty to their family and district. In a similar vein, by accepting the matai title, brothers were also sealing their loyalty, protection and love to their sisters, their family and district:

Even now, whatever the sisters want, my uncles will always do things to please them because they know that their sisters will always have their backs and I’ve seen this in the fa’amatai. Since all the big titles are held by men, when there are saofa’i’s (bestowal of titles), the sisters prepare the brothers la’ei (clothing) and they will bring all their finest mats to make sure their brother looks good because now he is promoted to look after the welfare of the family and the district. (F6)

F6’s further comment that “no feagaiga–no fa’amatai” warrants further study as it implies that the sister–brother relationship not only sits within, but is validated by the chiefly systems. Furthermore, the non-observance of the feagaiga also signals an erosion of the fa’amatai.

These points aside, views expressed on whether the feagaiga protective ideals could transfer to wives and other women were again a mix of ideals and practices. The ideals:

If a man respects the feagaiga with his sister, then he will respect women in general. This will offer protection to his wife. (F7)

The feagaiga emphasises the importance of any female. A wife is the sister of a brother. As long as you are Samoan, it doesn’t matter where you live, the feagaiga applies. (F2)

My cousins, even though they are married to other nationalities, I can see that’s the way they relate to their wives. (F9)

We should always respect our sisters but not just stop there. Respect should be given to all women whether Samoan [or] palagi. (M3)

With respect to practice, male responses were along the lines of “should do, but don’t.” Females had less to say on this point:

It's a covenant between a brother and sister. It's a protective thing but the problem is that many Samoan guys I see forget that. I know of guys that respect their sisters but tend to abuse their wives. See that's the problem. They forget that their wives have a sacred covenant with their brothers. I am a brother and a husband. The one thing my parents kept telling me was that my wife is a child and sister of her family. (M5)

It is present but not as strong as it once was. I mean, even nowadays you hear stories of guys abusing their sisters and wives. I guess that's the most extreme. In my day, feagaiga was an important thing. Even in Samoa today, feagaiga has changed, which is sad. I think globalisation plays a big part in it. (M6)

Feagaia conflicts with other fa'a Samoa values

Many participants were of the view that the feagaiga actually conflicted with other Samoan values, such as the va (relationship). For example, the act of marriage signified a va between husband and wife, and at the same time heralded a va between the two families – the family of the bride and the family of the groom. These across-family relationships must be respected:

Marriage is a union of two families – a building of the va. And so, it is inappropriate for brothers to intervene because they also now have a relationship with their sister's husband (brother-in-law) and their sister's husband's family. Marriage is not simply a husband and wife but a va between families. (M2)

Another view was that brothers should not interfere in a marriage relationship because “by beating the husband you were actually beating your sister.”

If you love your sister and you beat up her husband, you have to remember that she loves her husband too. So if you beat up her husband, that means you are beating her too. That's not love. (M6)

Finally, a few responses suggested that the feagaiga could be a contributor to family violence:

In my experience, the feagaiga can contribute to family violence because brothers and other family male relatives have given their sisters' boyfriend or husband a hiding for hitting their sisters. Like, I've seen it happen heaps aye. Man, we gotta remember that our wives also have a sacred relationship with their brothers. Men should respect women with or without feagaiga ... Samoan or not. (M4)

Is the feagaiga a protective factor in New Zealand?

The place and relevance of feagaiga in New Zealand life today was a question raised by many:

For us growing up in New Zealand, I think it's still there to a degree and I think part of that is that Samoans or New Zealand-born Samoans not knowing the full context of what that is, and because we live in a different context to Samoa, sometimes that can be misunderstood. [But] when I go back to Samoa, my cousins who are around the same age, it's 'missed' (not understood) by them as well. So, I don't know if it's a generation thing. There's a misunderstanding and I guess a lot of the changes as well from outside with globalisation, I find that a lot of my cousins in Samoa don't respect that va. So it's not just us here in New Zealand, which is sad. (F7)

Times, location and the environment have changed. In my time, you would see that feagaiga was strong and closely guarded. But today, no more. I feel that in our efforts to try and mix into New Zealand society we have lost the true meaning of feagaiga. But I guess that is to be expected. In Samoa, you are constantly surrounded by Samoans who think and operate the same way you do. So feagaiga, in general, was present in almost, if not all families. In New Zealand you are in an environment where kids are mixing with not just Samoan or Pacific kids. They are mixing with every other ethnicity. They are exposed to new ways of thinking. I feel for the young generation because I know it's hard to balance fa'a Samoa and the world. They're two competing ideals. (M1)

Most participants noted changes they had witnessed in the family unit, roles and expectations, including a shift from the extended family to the practice of almost semi-autonomous families. They asked did the feagaiga have a place in these changing structures?

Has the husband and the wife relationship taken over the feagaiga relationship? I think [marriage] is more a Western concept of what the priority relationship is. Of course, we work hard to honour our marriages but as a Samoan, I don't think that's the pivotal relationship that we base things on. It's still the feagaiga, [but] whether it's held to that same degree now, that's another question. Of course there's a different relationship there. I think it's something to discuss. (F7)

Things have changed. [Today] we often hear people [parents] saying, 'It's up to the girl and her husband' but 30 years ago it wasn't like this. (M2)

Have you heard the saying these days, 'It's you and your choice'? That's what parents are doing these days. And that is why parents hardly interfere or involve [themselves] in the girl's life [because she went out and got her own husband]. So parents, they say no one took your hand. It was you who freely chose your own husband. So whatever happens it's your choice but our house is always open to you to return if you're tired of having a husband. (M3)

Relationships as the protective ideal for the future

Participants suggested, "Let relationships be the protective ideal, rather than the feagaiga." Relationships were already the norm and, "the way to go" in the future:

What I see more of these days is that parents place more emphasis on a better relationship between siblings. Always look out for each other. They would always say, 'If something happens to us, all I want to know is that the respect that you have for each other will be there'. We never named it feagaiga but we practise its principles. (F7)

On this point, M4 suggested that a reconfiguration and widening of the concept of feagaiga would assure its relevance as a protective mechanism:

Let's take the feagaiga to the next level of respect, [to] respect for all. (M4)

F3 felt that the feagaiga had already changed significantly for New Zealand-born Samoans:

I think the New Zealand-born Samoan version of the feagaiga between brothers and sisters has been usurped by service to other men and to the church. (F3)

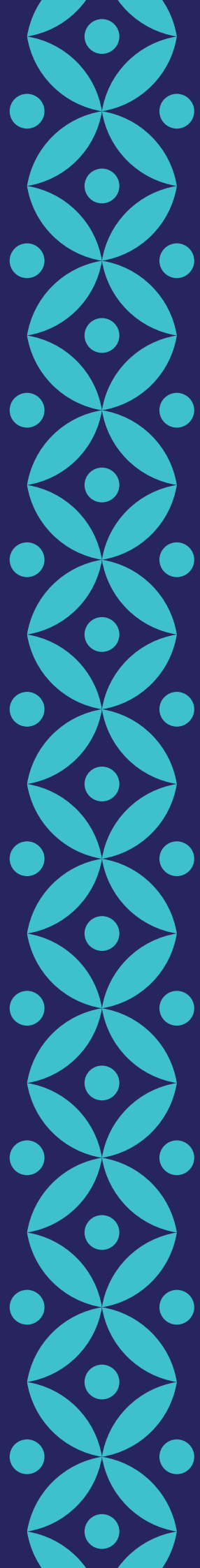
Summary

Participants made a distinction between feagaiga as a sacred covenant and marriage as a legal contract. This suggests that the feagaiga is not and cannot be a protective ideal for all women. In addition, an erosion of the fa'amatai will impact on the protection that sisters have always enjoyed as feagaiga and women's identity, role, responsibility and designation (Lupe, 2007). Partners are taking more responsibility for maintaining their own harmonious family relationships rather than relying on their extended family. This raises the possibility of an increased reliance on external support mechanisms in the future. Finally, a valuable suggestion is that the feagaiga be reconceptualised as a general relationship model that is inclusive of all people and circumstances.

05



CONCLUSIONS



CONCLUSIONS



THROUGH TAKING A STRENGTH-BASED APPROACH TO THIS STUDY, WE HAVE INCREASED OUR KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING OF SOME OF THE PATTERNS OF SAMOAN MARRIAGE OR PARTNER RELATIONSHIPS IN NEW ZEALAND TODAY AND IDENTIFIED SOME INFLUENCING FACTORS.

The most significant finding was the enduring importance of fa'a Samoa ideals of faith and family as goals and shapers in the lives and decision-making of these families. At the same time, changes in the ways families are organised today suggest that there is a shift in thinking away from the traditional extended or kinship concept of family to a more nuclear model.

Partners are taking more responsibility for, and negotiating for themselves, the realities of daily life in New Zealand today. They are doing so in ways that are best for their family now and for the future. By referencing their behaviours to their remembrances of past times and "how I was raised", participants noted quite significant changes in partner relationships and relationships with their children.

They also questioned the extent and nature of their relationships with their extended family members who are now quite widely dispersed. Notably, shifts in the behaviours of partners featured people-focussed and relationship-nurturing styles rather than claims for individual rights or entitlements. The increasing independence of the family unit, seen in comments, such as "It's you and your partner", may foreshadow an increased family reliance on external support systems.

Despite strongly articulated statements that violence has no part in family relationships, some participants held a lingering fear that "violence is within us."

Preferred strategies for managing violent behaviours were based on



family and faith, such as prayer and family talks. However, some considered the effectiveness of other new and ‘not culturally appropriate’ strategies, such as counselling. The female participants in this study showed greater resilience than males to understanding and responding to life changes. On the one hand, female resilience was underpinned by their constant (and immediate) concerns for family wellbeing. At the same time, these females showed considerable pride in their place and identity as feagaiga (Lupe 2007) and the mutually reinforcing family, community and national status that this brought.

The lengthy discussions about the feagaiga as a protection against family violence were very compelling and reinforced the importance of exploring how traditional, context-specific activities could be applied to contemporary times and place. The distinction participants made between

feagaiga as a sacred covenant and marriage as a legal contract suggests that the feagaiga does not, and never will extend to protect all women and children.

Furthermore, because the feagaiga sits within the fa’amatai governance ideals and practices, any changes or weakening of the fa’amatai has the potential to also impact on the valuing and practice of feagaiga, whether this is in the diaspora or homeland communities. Many participants, particularly younger males, had less of an understanding of the genesis or practice of the feagaiga as a sacred brother–sister relationship.

However, all participants saw a connection between the fa’a Samoa and relationships. The suggestion that the feagaiga be reconceptualised as a generic relationship model warrants further research.

06



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07



APPENDICES



APPENDICES

APPENDIX A

Talanoa Guidelines

1. PROFILE

Gender, place of birth, education, length of time in New Zealand

Marriage – when, where, length of, partner (Samoan/non Samoan), number and age of children

Hopes for the future (individual and family) and factors that will influence achieving these

2. MALE/ FEMALE ROLES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Knowledge of traditional ideals and practicalities (feagaiga), brother/ sister, sister/ wife

How do these apply today? Relevant? Have there been changes? (For better/ for worse)

Factors influencing

3. MARRIAGE

What is your view of marriage?

What makes a good marriage? (Bad marriage)? (And contributing factors)

Do you think there are/ should be male/ female roles in marriage? (Sharing, complementarity, division of labour)?

How are decisions made? (Re spending, children's education, church attendance, discipline)

4. FAMILY VIOLENCE

What do you know about New Zealand laws on family violence? Are they needed?

Have you witnessed violence in your family/ other families? Discuss (physical, verbal...)

Is family violence okay? (Sometimes, never, always) What (if any) actions justify family violence?

What do you do if you get really angry with your children (husband/ wife)?

What do you do when you are really happy with your children (husband/ wife)?

5. CHILDREN'S EDUCATION/ SOCIALISATION

What are the key learnings you are passing on to your sons/ daughters regarding family/ gender relationships? How are you doing this? Do these differ by gender?

What are the best/ worst things your children might do?

6. OTHER

APPENDIX B

PROFILE OF PARTICIPANTS WHO WERE INTERVIEWED FACE-TO-FACE OR WHO COMPLETED AN ONLINE SURVEY

FACTORS		FACE-TO-FACE INTERVIEW		ONLINE SURVEY	
		Male (n=8)	Female (n=6)	Male (n=2)	Female (n=5)
Age Group	21–29	6			
	30–39		3		3
	40–49	1			2
	50–59		3	2	
	60+	1			
Relationship status	Married	6	5	2	2
	Committed relationship	2			
	Divorced		1		1
	Solo				2
Years married	1–5 years	8			
	6–11+ years		6		5
	30+ years			2	
Partner's ethnicity	Samoan	5	5	2	2
	PI	3			
	Palagi		1		
	Other				3
Education status	High school	5	1		
	Tertiary	3	5	2	5
Employment status	Full-time	7	2	1	5
	Part-time		4	1	
	Not in paid employment	1			



Pasefika Proud embodies a vision of strong and vibrant Pacific children, young people and their families. Wellbeing for Pacific families occurs when all aspects of the individual and collective are in balance, co-existing with environments, kinship and support systems while recognising mana and tapu.

Pacific cultures are strengths that can be used positively to promote and enhance resilience within Pacific families.

Pasefika Proud mobilises Pacific individuals, families and communities to take responsibility for the issues they are facing, find the solutions and take leadership in implementing them.

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