

Reflections of a Practitioner: Purely a journey of the heart

Siautu Alefaio

32 years ago a man from the villages of Manunu (Upolu) and Fagamalo (Savai'i) and a woman from the inner-town village of Matautu tai-Apia (Upolu) gave birth to their middle child and only daughter, Siautu Tiomai Alefaio. The man left a prominent position in the police department's CIB in Samoa to become a factory worker in Hellaby Meats of Mt Wellington, New Zealand. The woman, a beautiful dancer in Aggie Grey's dance troupe and also an upcoming photographer at the age of 12, left all her aspirations of education to attain a job in order to make enough money for the prospective dream of 'making it big' in the 'land free-flowing with milk and honey'—Aotearoa New Zealand. For some years Aotearoa was exactly that, with money enough to bring over all their other siblings and eventually their mothers.

My father (now a Parish minister of a Presbyterian church) and mother (an Early-Childhood educator) both self-sacrificially gave up their own hopes and dreams to pursue a bigger one—of prosperity for future generations. As a registered psychologist I have seen many journey stories similar to mine, and it is my own hope and dream that our contribution as people from "Le Vasa Pasefika" (vast ocean of the Pacific region) will inevitably pave the way for future generations to embrace all that they are and become all that they have been called to be.

Changing Tides

Diaspora has been related to the historical movements of the dispersed population of Israel. "The term diaspora carries a sense of displacement; that is, the population described finds itself separated from its national territory; and usually it has a hope, or at least a desire, to return to their homeland at some point, if the "homeland" still exists in any meaningful sense".¹ Pacific diaspora is a way of understanding the movements or scattering of people through the Pacific region. Spickard (2002)² explains Pacific diaspora is thousands of years old and people have been moving around the Pacific for a long time.² The history of Pacific migration is identified as always being a "diasporic movement". A movement changed by the encounter with European and American and colonialism, which had the effect of channeling migration along the sinews of trade and empire. The effect today being the vast numbers of Pacific people who now live in a place very different to where their ancestors lived. This can be seen most predominantly in Aotearoa New Zealand which has the largest number of Pacific peoples among the industrialized nations.

Traversing the seas of the Pacific Ocean, diasporic movements have brought waves of change that are felt vividly in the hearts of the generations growing up in places 'far different from where their ancestors lived'. The descriptive journey stories of experiences living in two worlds, the Pacific world and the palagi (European) world, became more significant to me as a young adult finding my way through life in a tertiary institution. These stories prompted me to undertake a Masters thesis exploring Samoan young people's perceptions of their identity in the context

of their families and communities and the process of adjustment that occurs when differences between the values and beliefs of the host culture are encountered. The study particularly focused on the impact of family structure and family environment on the ethnic identity of Samoan young people in New Zealand. The experience of walking in different cultural worlds has been investigated in many countries, mostly where the host culture is the dominant western culture, governed by eurocentric ideals and cultural norms.^{3,4,5} Certain issues and challenges are commonly experienced by ethnic minority groups in transition within mainstream cultural environments. Tupuola explores these prevailing issues for Samoan youth through positing a positional difference through her paper Pasifika Edgewalkers.⁶

I undertook a thesis study⁷ exploring Samoan young peoples' ethnic identity. Most notable in this study was the importance of nurturing the generation of Samoan youth in New Zealand by assisting church and families, as these were the contexts described as most important for strengthening a sense of belonging and identity. The struggle uncovered is about issues of the heart, of identity and belonging. Their identity development is inevitably influenced by the values and beliefs of the host culture, which challenge and compete with their Pacific cultural worldview. As one young person aptly described;

"Our story is different.... our story is about family, about church and that's why it's gonna change...."
(Alefaio, 1999, p. 51)⁷

The diasporic journey of Pasefika is therefore born out of an historical migratory past filled with hopes and dreams of a new utopia – a new way of living, a better life with a hope-filled, expectant future. Today however, we encounter, on a daily basis, issues such as abuse, teenage pregnancy, suicide, drug and alcohol use, violence and crime. Pacific peoples are disproportionately represented in these areas of concern. Within these areas of concern the vast majority of Pasefika people will encounter ‘helping professions’ such as psychology. It is a discipline which has historically been devoted to understanding the human ‘psyche’ or ‘soul’. Most of this body of knowledge however is derived from European contexts. It has been my experience and observation that the encounter with psychological methods, practices and philosophies struggle to make sense in ‘our everyday’.

The world-view of Pacific nations which lie within the vast ocean of the South Pacific is yet to be uncovered in the realms of psychology. It is vital that their unique perspectives are sought and their voices heard. The unearthing of this raw material will contribute and enrich our understanding of diversity, and help to unite our region with an identity uniquely our own.

A Practice Journal Snack-bite: O se Fa’ata’ita’iga

A growing frustration emerged for me as a practitioner of psychology from what seemed to me as having to “clean up other peoples mess”. Cases specifically of children, youth and families that were of cultural backgrounds from the Pacific nations constantly eluded my mainly ‘European and Western import colleagues’. Year after year I bore the brunt of cases that had previously been worked on by other practitioners but had resurfaced due to ongoing

concerns. I note here that in no way am I positing that I have all the answers. This is just the beginning of an exploration of concerns that have arisen for me as a result of the practice.

The more cases I picked up the more I realised what I deemed as ‘common-sense’ in practice was not necessarily ‘practiced’. Here began my journey of unpacking what I deemed as common-sense. I realised common-sense was my simplistic languaging of what I did not learn through my training as a psychologist but rather what I inherently learned through the Fa’aSamoa (Samoa way of life), which essentially for me was the nurturing of my heart. My practice of psychology was heavily reliant upon ways of ‘knowing, being and doing’ that were nurtured through my socio-cultural heritage of Fa’aSamoa. There were relational ways of engaging with people that were the essential key elements of the way I chose to work when engaging clients, regardless of what cultural background they represented. This became the basic tenets of my practice which differentiated what I was ‘doing’ in practice in comparison to my colleagues. This core component of my work became what I termed cultural engagement. Therefore psychological assessments became culturally-engaged psychological assessments, reflecting the core component of work that was being performed.

The table below outlines a Galuola case study of a Pasefika client. The case highlights an approach which focuses on engagement of the relationship as paramount in any assessment process. It also provides alternative viewpoints in the psychological interpretation of the ‘narratives’ of those who seek our help. Often times the assessment is based on the ‘scientific practitioners’ objectified learning mainly from manuals that have not considered indigenous and other nations worldviews of human development.

Case Study: Galuola - A new wave of psychological practices

<p>O le o sulu mai e fia mau se Fesoasoani (Person in need of help):</p>	<p>Samoan female, 45yrs, Mother of 2 children (divorced and in de-facto relationship with new partner). Self-referral.</p>
<p>Fa'afitauli/Presenting concern:</p>	<p>Family issues affecting her, difficulty coping at work (in a distressed state).</p>
<p>Engagement: Fa'afeiloaiga Tatalo Amata: Opening Prayer & Welcome</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fa'afeiloa'i atu i le faletua ua sulu mai e mau se fesoasoani. Fa'ailoa atu lo'u nei tagata, aiga ma le matafaioi o lo'o aveina nei. • Welcomed and greeted client. Answered clients questions of family village connections in Samoa. Reciprocal conversations regarding clients own family. 	<p><i>Herein lies the difficulty for Western practitioners recognizing familial connections and giving of one's own family background is an area of contention in the practice of psychology as the 'objectivity' of the 'science of psychology' is likely to be viewed as being compromised.</i></p>
<p>Presented myself as simply available to listen and help where I can. Safety issues addressed (Unless harm to self or others is evident, all is held in confidence).</p>	
<p>Initial presentation:</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Always crying at work, had past suicidal feelings (no action taken). • Had typed out feelings: sad, depressed, angry, frustrated, leading to thoughts of wanting to end it all – could see no way out.
<p>Tala'aga o le fa'afitauli: Allowing the client to 'talanoa' – 'just talk'</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Talanoa/Client story. Moved to Main city for work opportunities (born into a rural community with deeply embedded Fa'aSamoa values). First one in her family to move away. • In the move to the Main city, husband left and formed another relationship. Her family (parents and siblings eventually moved up to Main city and moved in with her – living situation unbearable. Siblings always drinking/fighting – parents away at work, mother defending siblings behaviour, always making excuses for them. Father one day had enough with siblings behaviour and violent exchange occurred – siblings moved out. • Client moved away into her own house – siblings also found their own place, only parents at the original house. Both parents on different shifts barely seeing each other – client just down the road from them, would always cook and leave food for parents each day. Decided to ask parents to move in with them – as a result siblings were present at family gatherings again, as these evolved around the parents. • Not the 'ideal family picture' she envisaged. Understands her mother and father work hard – can no longer tolerate siblings' behaviour. Has watched Dr Phil shows and quoted how families should relate to one another. 	
<p>Galuola: A new way forward (Re-concile one's own identity – lagimalie)</p>	
<p>Upu e fa'amalosi agaga: Encouragement for the spirit</p>	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All this points to client as 'trail-blazer' – pioneering a new way forward for her family – which takes strength and courage, but is often a lone, unpopular journey. • Reality: Cannot change family – but can accept family as they are, and acknowledge her input, place and purpose. Which in essence is being 'in harmony – lagimalie' with 'all that is our life'. <p style="text-align: center;">Tatalo Fa'ai'u: Closed in prayer</p>	

The 'ideal family' in the Western world is often perceived as one which thrives on goals for independent living, self-sufficiency and eventually retirement in a retirement village on one's own. This is far removed from the picture or real life illustration of lives lived in the nations of the Pacific. In Samoa for example, village life is the epicenter of the nation. People groups are formed in villages which are governed and ruled by Matai (Titled-Chief) systems. The systemic goals of life are for fostering interdependence, living to support whole aiga/family, sufficiency for whole aiga/family, and eventually growing old and being cared for by the aiga/family. The transportation or exporting of this 'way of knowing, being and doing' is prevalent in most Pacific nations people regardless of where they go.

Indigenous worldview

Human development is highly motivated by boundary-setting tasks that protect the 'self'. The whole concept of 'self' though is highly contradictory to the ways of indigenous and non-Westernized cultures. Dr Catherine Love (1999),⁸ outlines the dominant influence of Euro-American psychology. Love purports the "challenges to the hegemony of Euro-American psychology by indigenous and minority group people is based on the well-supported proposition that psychological theory and practice are socio-culturally constituted and bound" (p1).

According to Love (1999).⁸

"Psychology is predicated on culturally determined conceptions of self. Culturally constituted conceptions of self are so fundamental and taken for granted that they operate beneath the level of conscious awareness most of the time...assumptions about the nature of the self, the other, and the world around are the building blocks for the construction of coherence in cultural narratives. They provide the parameters for discursive frames which, in turn determine what constitutes "commonsense", and coherence or incoherence, in discourses around psychology, mental health and illness, intelligence, and so forth...'Understanding' requires that we 'stand under' a particular and requisite discursive frame."

Love (1999)⁸ highlights, Euro-American psychologies propose an assumption of self that is known as "self-contained individualism" (p3). This is based upon the

"virtual separation of mind and body, the inclusion or exclusion of soul and spirit, conceptions of reality and truth, the presumed location and etiologies of "psychological" characteristics and conditions, and a myriad other related, often implicit, assumptions

within psychology's dominant discursive frame" (ibid).

A model of *whanau* (family) well-being using *Te Wheke/The Octopus* as both symbol and framework developed by Rangimarie Rose Pere, is presented by Love (1999)⁸ as an illustration of an indigenous (Maori) understanding of well-being, based on an "ensembled individualistic conception of self".

The Te Wheke framework resonates well with this historical statement from the Samoa cultural context **"Samoa ua uma ona tofi" – "Genealogy defines us"**. Samoa inhabits the 'relational context' meaning who we are is defined by where we come from. Our familial context or genealogy defines our 'being' or 'person-hood'. Samoa's current Head of State Le Afioga i le Ao o le Malo, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi explicates this further through his address entitled;

"Sailiga o le lagimalie...O le fliemu i le mau faalelotu a Samoa a o le'i taunuu le Tala Lelei" (2006)⁹

The title of this address refers to the "search (or quest) for lagimalie (relationship between you, the environment – trees, plants, sea, weather, people) before the arrival of the Good news". According to Tamasese (2006),⁹ "o Tagaloa na usu gafa ona maua ai lea o le tagata. O Tagaloa o le atua usu gafa ae le o se atua fau tagata (Creator)" Tagaloa (god of Samoa before the white man came) is a relational god. Our discovery or understanding of ourselves is through a relational god. Samoa legends define us according to our relationships with one another. It signifies an understanding of self that lies outside the realm of the "self-contained individual".

As a practitioner of Samoan descent finally I am able to draw on literature that resonates and lies in harmony with ways of 'knowing, being and doing' that propound a worldview similar to that of Pacific nations people. It is propelled forward by research being undertaken by peoples of Pacific descent who themselves become proponents for advocacy and change. This is evident in the study "Ole Taeao Afua, the new morning: a qualitative investigation into Samoan perspectives on mental health and culturally appropriate services".¹⁰ "Fa'afaletui" a Samoan concept that describes a method which facilitates the gathering and validation of important knowledge within the culture (p302) becomes the term to describe the collective research methodology brought to the researchers by the participants of the study themselves. In this study, the Samoan self was described as a relational self and mental wellness as a state of relational harmony, where personal elements of spiritual, mental and physical are in balance.

"We can view ourselves as whole beings. In other words, the spirit, the body, the will [loto]. When I say, you and me, I am talking about the whole person. There is a physical side, mental and spiritual (sides). I include the spiritual because there is no Samoan person who exists outside of a spiritual existence".¹⁰

Indigenous and non-Western peoples' literature speaks to the 'HEARTS' of people, they call for the awakening of our 'AGAGA' – SPIRIT. As a practitioner of this 'thing' called psychology I realise that we are afforded too much credit for a way of 'being, knowing and doing' that in some ways is doing more harm than good towards indigenous and non-westernized people groups'. Love (2001),⁸ is clear in her predication that:

"Euro-American psychology has been an instrument of colonisation, bringing assimilationist and anti-indigenous tools to bear on non-Western peoples....In Aotearoa/New Zealand attempts by Euro-American psychologists to sensitize, increase awareness in, or multiculturalize their practice have met with suspicion from Maori. The suspicion is founded in long experience of colonization, oppression, racism, and the appropriation of valued resources, most recently intellectual property resources".

We would fare well as non-westernized people groups, indigenous to the nations of the Pacific to listen to the experiences of our indigenous Maori tipuna, for in doing so we will heed their warning to:

"not ask whether individual psychologists are culturally sensitive but more importantly about whether psychology is culturally sensitive".^{8,11}

"Fofu e le alamea le alamea"

E fofu lava e le alamea le alamea is a metaphorical expression located within the environment of Samoa in reference to the starfish they refer to as the "alamea". This particular type of starfish (alamea) is poisonous. When alamea poisons something or someone on the alamea can then suck out its own poison, nothing or no-one else can do this.

I use this particular proverbial expression 'e fofu e le alamea le alamea' as a metaphorical expression of the poison – "oppression, repression and suppression" injected through colonial conquests. That can only be 'sucked out' by the colonial conquerors themselves. In the practice of psychology this may look like the **ACKNOWLEDGEMENT** and **RECOGNITION** that there is 'poison' located within the practice that needs to be 'sucked out'. Poison such as; 'science of psychology' being more highly prized than the wellbeing of the people we are serving, limiting 'science' to an understanding located only within an objectified measuring tool of western knowledge, allowing evidence-based practices to dominate the understanding of safety instead of allowing the people and community the space to heal together".

When the practice of psychology 'sucks out' the poison of dissonance, arrogance and pride, perhaps only then will the si'osi'omaga (environment) – that which lies within our own nations of the Pacific, speak to us. We will remove the poison of Euro-American practices of psychology that cannot wholly treat issues that are of no relevance to their way of 'being, knowing and doing'. There are taulasea (healers) and ways of healing that lie deep within our lands. I suggest there are healing balms that come only from the lands through which we were nurtured, perhaps this will be encountered upon our return diasporic journey.

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