Family-tree mapping and gender-based violence (GBV) in Niue: research method and intervention

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Gender-based violence (GBV) is a product and manifestation of gender relations that inflicts harm disproportionately on those who identify as women and girls. In the Pacific island country of Niue, there is a lack of research and attention on the issue. The aim of this research paper is to examine the use of the family-tree mapping method to research and interpret GBV in Niue with the goal of eliminating violence in social relations and promoting healthy relationships.

Methods: The research involved 14 family-tree mapping interviews using blended narrative-Talanoa methods. Guided by a genealogical approach, this family-tree mapping approach was piloted as a tool for in-depth exploration of how the family space functions around GBV. The research described in the paper did require ethics approval which was granted by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (reference 023589).

Findings: This family-tree mapping framework presents a new way of engaging with the issue of GBV in terms of research and intervention through family-tree mapping in a way that illuminates the dynamics around disclosure, accountability, education, and Talanoa/ gossip, but also protects the privacy of participants.

Conclusion: By making space within families through family-tree mapping to discuss GBV, local advocates and researchers can better understand the complexity and intimacy of family dynamics, uphold the imperatives for privacy and safety important to GBV research, and guide communities towards prevention and accountability.

Key words: gender-based violence, family tree, family violence, domestic violence.

INTRODUCTION

Gender-based violence (GBV) has been a key focus area for gender and development because, by World Health Organisation (WHO) estimates, up to 70 percent of women have experienced physical or sexual violence by men in their lifetimes. 1 In the Pacific, WHO prevalence studies report particularly high rates. In the Cook Islands, Samoa, Tonga, and Tuvalu, these prevalence studies indicate that 38-60% of women have experienced physical, sexual, and/or emotional intimate partner violence alone. 2

Pacific women have led change in many spaces related to GBV from community organising efforts in Papua New Guinea 3 to the Fiji Women’s Rights Movement winning legislation change.4 Individual women and children, their families, and communities in the Pacific who have lived with the effects of violence have developed various ways of managing, but the pressures and stresses are enormous.

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Public health research on Niuean in New Zealand provides guidance on how to conceptualise the spaces in which GBV is prevented and addressed. This research, as well as that at the University of Auckland's School of Public Health, is part of a larger initiative to develop a tool to consider the intricacies of family spaces. The mapping framework developed by Niueans, in Pasisi's research [15], Niue, is a vital resource for understanding and expressing gender. This methodology, known as the Niuean conceptual framework, is discussed in the research paper. The research took place over four weeks from 19 October to 15 November 2019 in Niue. Interviews were held from 14 family tree interview participants. Each participant was asked to select a participant, and if the selected participant could no longer participate, the participant was asked to select another. The council was asked to select two participants from each of the 14 villages. The research involved two parts: 27 family tree mapping interviews with a total of 32 participants and 27 family tree mapping interviews with a total of 32 participants.

The research design focuses on the positive aspects of family violence, which is in the spirit of Fakamuolomou, the Niuean conceptual framework. This methodology is important because, in Niue, gender is understood within family spaces, and the central theme of this research is that GBV is a major threat in many Pacific islands, and family spaces are crucial in terms of addressing GBV. The research design employs methods that employ surveys to capture the quantitative data on GBV. These studies provide valuable insights into the scope of the problem and protective factors but are not enough to craft effective interventions. Further, the small population on Niue poses challenges in using quantitative methodologies. In particular, protecting the privacy of individuals is a significant challenge.

In this research, the mapping framework is employed as a tool to access the richness of women's knowledge. Stories of how gender inequality is normalised are central to understanding the recurring narratives. In the Pacific, as well as in Niue, public spaces and the family space are crucial in understanding how GBV occurs. Studies of how gender and GBV are understood within families, including our elders, speak to the way we understand and express gender. In Niue, the Niuean conceptual framework is a major tool in understanding how gender and GBV are understood within families, including our elders, and speaks to the way we understand and express gender.
There was a total of 14 interviews ranging from 60-180 minutes, averaging 120 minutes. There were no age restrictions, but members of the village women’s councils were mainly women over 40. Participants were all between 40 and 80 years old with an average age of 64 years. At the start of the sessions, it was explained that the focus would not be on any situations or events whereby the participant was directly involved in violence. After each interview, participants were given a small gift and thank you card in reciprocity for their time.

During the interviews, we mapped their social family tree focusing on family members living in Niue (Table 1). We drew the family tree no more than two generations. This took 30 minutes on average in each interview. Similar methods have been used most notably in anthropology and psychology as well as in the process of post-mortems by the New Zealand Family Violence Death Review Committee. 18 Then, questions were asked around the areas of disclosure, accountability, education, and Talanoa/gossip in the family (see Table 2). Disclosure involves when and how the participant became aware of the situation. Education is about lessons shared within the family about relationships, gender roles, and GBV. Accountability refers to if and how the person who caused harm was held accountable. Talanoa/gossip in this use involves the gossip and discourse in the family around a specific GBV situation.

For the family-tree mapping interviews, the primary researcher used Doucet and Mauthner’s 19 Listening Guide to do a four stage review of each transcript. The first review involved a reflexive reading for immediate reactions and interpretations. The second review traced the participant and how she spoke about herself. The third review mapped her relations with others in the narrative. The fourth review was a conceptual narrative that wove all of those reviews together. In the practice of empathic apprenticeship, it was important for the goal of the analysis to learn about and understand the participant’s narrative.20 Through the research, this meant developing place-specific cultural competency and an attunement to participants’ talanoa.

This approach derives from the theoretical framework. The literature as well as the primary researcher’s positionality as a non-Pacific researcher, advised closely by Niuean collaborators, culminated in a narrative-Talanoa style for the family-tree mapping which is a hybrid of the Pacific research methodology, talanoa21, and a feminist narrative approach. 22 Talanoa is Pacific-specific “storying” 23, and many indigenous communities throughout the Pacific note that storytelling is a powerful methodological tool because “it facilitates the expression of experiences and fits well with feminist research methods and Indigenous oral history traditions”. 24

This aligns, in many ways, with a feminist narrative framework in which, as Somers25 has articulated, narratives allow the narrators many ways to draw from other societal narratives, including cultural practices and values, to construct something that is uniquely their own. Still, it is important to account for the ontological barriers for non-Pacific researchers to interpret Pacific talanoa.26 As such, the methodology employed in this research is not purely Talanoa. In order to honour Niue knowledge and ways of knowing, elements of the Talanoa approach including empathic apprenticeship, cultural competency, and relationships were prioritised.

RESULTS

There are numerous methodological and ethical challenges to publishing the findings of this research, as two authors are outsiders to the community in Niue. The small population of Niue means quotes and examples could easily identify participants. In response to this challenge, the family-tree mapping interviews were storied as a dialogue between the primary researcher and two women who had been interviewed.

The story28 was an imaginary composite of the narratives heard in the interviews and meant that individuals identities and stories were protected. However, it also provided critical nuances of some of the major themes including the meaning of marriage, gender roles and expectations, domestic violence within marriages, sexual violence and marital rape, and family education.

In this paper, we share learnings from the family-tree mapping approach and the potential application of the approach in research and interventions. In order to assist in using or learning from this method in the future, we will discuss some of the lessons learnt in using this approach. We will also share how this family-tree mapping approach can be used in both formal research and as an intervention to address GBV within families and communities.
These lessons come from field notes and reflections. At the end of each interview, the primary researcher asked how the interview went, leaving it open for the participant to share their thoughts. These lessons included the healing potential of interviews and the importance of valuing the participant’s knowledge of her own experiences. One of the major concerns with this approach was the possibility of retraumatisation if participants had experienced violence in the past. This is a common concern when conducting research on GBV, and the psychological research on the topic is mixed. Fontes argues that there are several risks even beyond psychological risk that can affect participants in the short and long term, and it is difficult to assess the full impact of GBV research on participants. However, others have described the potential therapeutic benefits of GBV research that involves qualitative interviews.

To minimise potential retraumatisation in these family-tree mapping interviews, there was plenty of space in the interview to avoid any of the participants’ direct experiences with GBV. However, some participants shared their personal experiences unprompted. While the

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<th>Table 1. Family-tree Mapping Interview Framework</th>
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<td>Phase 1. Family-tree Mapping</td>
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<td>Phase 2. Discussing Family Relationships</td>
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<td>Phase 3. In-Depth Discussion About Specific Situations (depending on relationship with participant)</td>
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<th>Table 2. Family-tree Mapping Interview Thematic Areas.</th>
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<td>Disclosure</td>
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<td>Education</td>
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primary researcher was initially concerned about this, the feedback from participants suggested that the interviews were more therapeutic than anything else. As one participant expressed when the primary researcher followed up a few days after the interview:

“I told my husband about the interview. I didn’t realise how therapeutic it would be. These were things all in the back of my head that I was able to let out.”

That being said, there will always be concerns about the immediate and long-term impacts of GBV research on interview participants. When conducting these interviews, the narrative-talanoa approach made it clear that the relationship and the person being interviewed was much more important than the data collection. This was both to produce rich information and to protect the safety and wellbeing of participants. Further, before and after the interviews, participants were reminded about their referral options for counselling which may be accessed for any reason and any point in time. They were also reminded that these conversations can raise experiences that have delayed emotions.

In their feedback, most participants shared that they felt they could open up. One participant said the primary researcher was easy to talk to because they seemed genuine and not like a “researcher.” That was the balance that was sought in the narrative-Talanoa approach. When it came to opening up and sharing sensitive topics, another participant said she was fine to talk about her family because everyone in the community already knew the stories about her family. Others, like the participant who shared the quote above, had not shared these types of stories with anyone but close confidants. While we are sure participants felt different levels of comfort with opening up based on numerous factors including their relationship to the primary researcher, this is the part of empathic apprenticeship that is crucial to unearthing participants’ realities.

Some participants shared their anxieties about saying the “right things.” One participant curiously asked, “did other people laugh as much as we did?” The interpretation of this feedback was two-fold. First, it reflected participants’ comparisons of their family to other families and curiosity about how their family measured up in Niue. The other interpretation was that it suggested participants believed there were “right things” to say in the first place. This is perhaps a shortcoming of the narrative parts of the approach which might have come across as too formal and not based enough on relationships which would have generated a sense of ontological pluralism, where there are no “right things” to say but only what is right to the participant.

**DISCUSSION**

One of the major challenges in GBV research is striking the balance between centering lived experiences with, at the same time, the participants’ wellbeing in discussing this sensitive topic. Examples of GBV research that balance these dynamics in the Pacific are common in recent arts based approaches like sociodrama in Samoa, community theatre in Vanuatu, and photo voice in Papua New Guinea.

In this research, the family-tree mapping methodology engaged in a familiar practice where a range of family relations are discussed while avoiding directly raising personal experiences with GBV. Some participants found a level of comfort to discuss more intimate details - either their own or that of members of their family but the level of disclosure was controlled entirely by the participant.

Insights from the use of this family-tree mapping method to study GBV suggest that it could be applied in other contexts as both a research and intervention tool. The strength of this approach is that it creates a space to talk about GBV that honours women’s knowledge and authority while centering the family as context for disclosure, education, accountability, and Talanoa/gossip. By building empathic spaces for understanding ourselves and relationships in the complex social webs of our families and beyond, we can better understand patterns of GBV across the continuum of violence.

In terms of research practice, the family-tree mapping approach is complicated in that the resulting data is crucially situated within the relationships discussed in each interview, and writing about those relationships with any specificity risks breaching anonymity. However, the data illuminates some of the dynamics of addressing GBV within the family space which is often rendered invisible in public policy. It comes at the high cost of needing to maintain privacy and participant safety.

This approach can be a powerful research tool for local advocacy efforts. Local advocates interested in women’s rights and reducing GBV in the Pacific, and potentially beyond, can find deeper understanding of the dynamics within families while also creating spaces for such discussion.
For Pacific researchers and advocates, feminist Pacific research methodologies\(^3\) point to the use of group Tālanoa which could create an opportunity to discuss GBV in a different way and collectivise the issue. Group sessions were not done in this research for logistical and time reasons, but a local advocate would be better positioned to facilitate these and pursue this line of inquiry.

Local advocates would also be in a strong position to apply the insights from the family-tree mapping to further community programming and interventions. The approach can allow advocates to collect stronger data that captures the often hidden family dynamics around GBV. It can also be a pathway for community organising to orient to the social unit of the family with the goal of shifting gender relations. As with anyone leading this type of research, there must be established trust, privacy, and safety for participants and advocates. Insiders can potentially face unique challenges in maintaining this privacy and safety.

For community outsiders conducting this type of research, community partnerships are needed to ensure the research will be useful and that it is designed appropriately for the community. Because this approach is highly context-specific, these relationships that guide the culturally-specific design of the project are an essential starting point. For all applications of this research method, multiple Tālanoa sessions with participants would be helpful in building researcher-participant relationships and digging deeper into participants’ felt and lived experiences.

There are several possible uses of the family-tree mapping interview as a tool for intervention. These include individual and group counselling and more decentralised practices of the approach. The potential for a counselling setting lies in the approach’s unique way of unpacking intergenerational family dynamics alongside an individual’s own relationships. While it may not be as helpful for clients dealing with personal experiences of GBV at that moment, it can help provide a framework for thinking about how the family is involved in incidents of GBV.

An important barrier here is that there is resistance to help-seeking through counselling in Niue because of privacy concerns. Counselling through faith-based leaders emerged as a common practice in fact-finding and family-tree mapping interviews. The use of family-tree mapping with faith-based leaders is another area for further exploration.

In terms of a more decentering approach, the family-tree mapping approach does not have to be a formal interview. The family-tree mapping approach is about using our understanding of our social families to critically contemplate relationships, particularly romantic and sexual relationships, and the broader family involvement and history while centering and valuing women’s knowledge and authority. Family-tree mapping helps us position ourselves in the network of family relationships and employ our values to guide a path forward on how to give meaning to our own experiences, and those of our family members, with GBV.

In applying this decentering approach, it could be a part of an awareness campaign demonstrating how to start such conversations. These conversations are not exclusively for women or one-on-one: however, expectations of respect, safety, and privacy must be established to build trust in the space and to minimise potential for harm. It is helpful to break down these conversations into the themes of disclosure, education, accountability, and Tālanoa.

These areas provide a framework for reflection on the past, contemplation of the present, and planning for the future. These questions do not need to come up formally and are not age-specific. While barriers to having these conversations is often a lack of disclosure or intergenerational respect, there are opportunities for learning about relationships and their gendered dynamics at any time even if GBV is not apparent. For example, if appropriate, a young woman could ask her mother about some aspects of her dating life when she was young. The conversation can expand to the daughter’s aunts and make space for curiosity where the mother and daughter can consider the family’s values as they measure up in different situations. Instead of gossiping about an incident of GBV, siblings or cousins can discuss the meanings that the community has given to the incident and how they might contribute to shaping those broader discussions.

When the family-tree mapping approach is applied as an intervention, ideally it should be led by local women’s rights advocates who have an understanding of cultural protocols who can ensure the cultural and ethical sensitivity of the programme. Part of this must be a determination about expectations of accountability, the legal implications of disclosure, and support for community accountability processes if needed. Being culturally-specific also involves the knowledge of historical trauma specific to the community in focus. Language is also a key concern. If this type of intervention were to be
used in Niue, it is essential that it is conducted in Vagahau Niue to capture the emotions and meanings for those participating.

CONCLUSION

While there are challenges to researching and addressing GBV, the family-tree mapping method presents several opportunities for addressing the enduring negative impacts of this problem. Spaces within families offer opportunities to support one another when they disclose experiences with GBV; to learn and educate each other about healthy relationships among all genders; to hold space for accountability in the community; and to critically consider how to respond and contribute to community discourses about GBV-related gossip. For many participants, engaging with family around this topic was familiar. Examples of disclosure, education, accountability, and Talanoa/ gossip could all be found in their stories. As we map it out together, we see how genealogies live through descendants and families, chosen and biological, and have always been spaces where our stories are shaped, together.

REFERENCES


