Samoan youth and family relationships in Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

This paper examines the findings of data from two Health Research Council of New Zealand funded research projects, a quantitative survey (Adolescent Health Survey) and an in-depth qualitative study (Youth Mental Health Promotion) conducted concurrently in South Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. In an attempt to focus on the strengths of family relationships, we analyse accounts from young Samoans about their families and the role their families play in their lives.
Findings suggest that most Samoan young people living in South Auckland are happy with their identity as Samoans and their knowledge and understanding of their Samoan culture. Participants in both studies indicated that they had positive, loving and caring relationships with their parents, siblings and other family members. Furthermore, family relationships were perceived to be strongly influenced by the values, structure and practices of the Fa'aSamoa. (PHD 2006 Vol 13 No 2 Pages 17 - 24)

Introduction

Adolescent health research has repeatedly demonstrated the 'protective function of caring and connectedness in the lives of youth, particularly a sense of connectedness to family' (Resnick et al, 1993). These protective factors clearly 'relate to the consistency and quality of care and support the young person experiences during infancy, childhood and adolescence' (Howard et al, 1999). Libbey et al. (2002) report data from a longitudinal study which indicates that young people with strong and healthy relationships with their families are less likely to engage in risky health behaviours such as substance abuse and drink-driving.

Generally numerous studies have demonstrated that family relationships are fundamental in the positive health and development of young people (Blum, 1998; Resnick, 2000). A young person's physical and emotional well being is influenced by the relationships they have with their family members, and the effects of these relationships on health tend to extend to later stages of life (Howard et al, 1999).

In New Zealand's diverse, multicultural society the range of lifestyles, values and beliefs present families with many challenges in maintaining and nurturing these important relationships. For public health promoters and others with interests and responsibilities for the wellbeing of young people, it is extremely important to have a detailed, research-based knowledge about the dynamics of families.

In order to grasp a fuller understanding of the nature of family relationships and its impact on the wellbeing of Samoan young people, we need to examine these issues from the social context of a Samoan *aiga*.[2] Furthermore, understanding the heritage of a young person's culture is the beginning to an understanding of their ways of living in New Zealand which embraces and centres on collectivity (Afeaki, 2000). To date, data on the nature of Samoan family relationships in New Zealand have tended to focus on information gathered from Samoan parents, with little from the perspective of Samoan young people (Schoeffel and Meleisea, 1998; Schoeffel et al 1996; McCallin et al. 2001)[3]. Alefaio (1999) in a study on the impact of family environment on Samoan ethnic identity concluded that the relationships between young people and their family, particularly their parents are strongly influenced by *Fa'aSamoa* values and family structure. Our paper supplements this body of knowledge by adding the voice and experience of youth directly into the research record in a way which seems invaluable when youth health and wellbeing are the key interest.

The present paper seeks to provide such knowledge in relation to Samoan families and draws together findings from two independent studies: one, a national survey and the other, a qualitative study that collected data from young people resident in South Auckland during 2001. From these data sets we have extracted material relating to families provided by Samoan males and females aged between 12 and 27 years. These are bought together to provide an insight into these young people's perceptions of the families they live in and the

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cultural context within which they sit. In particular, it seeks to emphasise youth discourse in an attempt to contribute to the development of theoretical frameworks for better understandings of Samoan youth voice in metropolitan settings today.

Methods

The quantitative data from the Adolescent Health Survey (AHS) were gathered from young people aged 12-18 years in a national survey of adolescent health and wellbeing conducted in 2001 (Adolescent Health Research Group et al., 2003). A cross-sectional, anonymous, self-reported survey was conducted, incorporating 523 questions in a multimedia computer assisted self-interview (M-CASI) format. Questionnaire items relevant to family dynamics and functioning were identified and extracted for the subset of participants of Samoan participants from South Auckland schools. The data were analysed using SAS version 7.1 and percentages of students reporting high/positive relationships to parents and family are reported.

The qualitative data of the Youth Mental Health Promotion (YMHP) project (Edwards et al., 2003) was collected from young people aged between 12 and 24 years who self-identified as Maori, Samoan and Pakeha, living in the South Auckland region of New Zealand in 2001. In-depth interview data using the "lifestory" approach (Anae, 1998; Olson and Shopes 1991.) was collected from 30 Samoan young people in equal numbers by gender, spread across an age range from 13-27 years. Participants were contacted by snowballing from multiple start-points drawn mainly from schools, personal networks and church groups in South Auckland. Most participants lived in urban/suburban locations including Mangere, Papakura, Otara, Manurewa, Papatoetoe and Otahuhu. Data were transcribed verbatim and analysed using discursive methods.

The AHS is the first nationally representative sample of South Auckland Samoan secondary school students and it includes an ethnically diverse group of Samoan students. Although this survey has gathered data from a large sample of participants, there is a limitation in that the responses were not in detail. Further limitations include instances where participants may have different interpretations of what the questions meant as well as the limited reporting categories available in the answers.

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the relatively small numbers that can meaningfully be drawn into such research. In this case we have chosen to emphasise age, gender and ethnicity at the expense of other variables but it is clear that there is nevertheless a range of experiences of other environmental factors. By focusing on Samoan young people, the qualitative study has allowed for more extensive and in depth sampling and thus more coverage of this group. The focus has provided for intragroup comparisons (e.g. NZ-born/island-born; young/old) and generational issues, as well as writing ethnic-specific youth experiences and voices into the research record.

Findings

When examining Samoan relationships in any context, a discussion of the significance of cultural identity is imperative as it determines the roles, obligations and connection/relationships within *aiga*, culture and community. Le Tagaloa (1997) describes the importance of identity and/or places of belonging for a Samoan person in her work in '*O le Faasinomaga*' (Le Tagaloa, 1997). This perspective presents three elements as *fa'avae* (foundations) of one's cultural heritage and/or existence. Traditionally, these three elements included connection and belonging to; an *aiga* and/or matai (chief) heritage; ownership and connection to land and property; as well as knowledge of the Samoan language.

Through migration to New Zealand and affiliation with their new home environment, the traditional elements discussed in '*O le faasinomaga*' (Le Tagaloa, 1997) have been adapted to one where chief and family heritage is maintained through practices of *Fa'aSamoa*, belonging to a church group and speaking the Samoan language. In particular, knowledge of the language, knowledge and adherence to the *Fa'aSamoa* have all been identified as not only key components of ethnic identity which affect the way New Zealand born Samoans perceive themselves but also as a pathway towards being accepted and recognised by their Samoa born peers as being Samoan (Aiono Iosefa 2003; Anae, 1998; Fuatagaumu 2003; Heather-Latu 2003; Mailei 2003; Sialavaa 2003).

Acceptance and recognition by other people as being Samoan was important for a large number of participants in both the AHS and YMHP projects. In the AHS more than 80% of the students (males 88%, females 77%) reported that it was very/somewhat important for them to be recognised by other people as Samoan. Furthermore, 97% of males 97% and 86.4% of females 86.4%) expressed that they were proud of

being Samoan and that they felt comfortable in Samoan social setting (males 65%, females 75%).

Similarly, most young people in the YMHP project indicated that they were proud to be Samoan, and to be recognised by other people as being Samoan:

"People look at me and they think straight away they just say are you Samoan?...oh I thought you were Maori or something...it makes me feel real bad... like no offence but its like...I'm a Sa to be Samoan is kind of cool " [Veli, age 19]

Participants who were born in New Zealand or who were of mixed ethnicity reported feelings of alienation and pressure from their Samoa born peers to 'prove' how 'Samoan' they were. These two groups of participants thought it was important to become involved in their customary cultural practices, and fluent in the Samoan language. By doing so, participants felt a sense of identity and belonging to their Samoan heritage and peer groups.

Fa'aSamoa

Traditionally, the Samoan social structure is based on the *nu'u* (village) and the essential social group and most important component of the Samoan social structure is the *aiga*. *Fa'aSamoa* – the Samoan way, is a complex structure of values based on family and kinship relationships where responsibilities and obligations, service, respect, and identity are practised through reciprocity and interaction during cultural and family activities. These cultural and family activities called *'fa'alavelave'⁴* demonstrate relationships between *matai* (chief) and *aiga potopoto* (extended family), parents and children, sisters and brothers and their obligations and service towards each other. Furthermore, these activities maintain close connections and obligations and provide support networks between members of the family and the whole extended families. The *Fa'aSamoa* concept of *fa'aaloalo* (respect) is embedded within the value systems of the *aiga* and provides an insight into the nature of the relationships between Samoan young people and their parents, their siblings and members of their extended *aiga*.

Several New Zealand studies (Aleifaio 1999; Anae, 1998; Fogarty, 1992; McCallin et al. 2001; Schoeffel and Meleisea, 1996; Schoeffel and Meleisea, 1998 Tiatia, 1998; Tupuola, 1993) have highlighted the tension and conflict many Samoan young people growing up in New Zealand experience when balancing their fa'aSamoa values of respect and obedience with the mainstream New Zealand belief that they should have personal

freedom to make choices. These studies also emphasise that for many Pacific parents, family life is dominated by a struggle for control over the hearts and minds of their children. The struggle is against 'unfamiliar libertarian values about choices and freedom which they fear may encourage their children to think they can disobey their parents, adopt new lifestyles, abandon church-going, reject their obligation to serve their parents and repudiate other cherished cultural values and practices (Meleisea and Schoeffel, 1998).

The AHS asked questions about the student's level of understanding and knowledge of their *fa'aSamoa* values. *Fa'aSamoa* values included their ability to understand and speak Samoan as well as their satisfaction with their knowledge of things Samoan. More than 90% of the students reported Samoan values were very/somewhat important to them (males 97%, females 96.4%). Most students 78% (males 84%, females 75.1%) were satisfied/very satisfied with their knowledge of things Samoan.

The student's ability in understanding and speaking Samoan were viewed highly, with 71% of both males and female students described their ability in understanding Samoan (males 66.2%, females 73%). More than half (51%) of these students described that they could easily have a conversation in Samoan/ fluent speaker of the Samoan language (males 46%, females 52%).

> **The essential social group and most important component of the Samoan social structure is the aiga**

In the YMHP study all participants felt that upholding the values and practices of *Fa'aSamoa* is paramount. In general, participants identified *Fa'aSamoa* values as including respect and obedience, with a few commenting on the importance of gender roles within Samoan society. These were distinguished from what were considered by participants as being the cultural practices of *Fa'aSamoa* such as *faalavelave⁵* customary protocol and knowledge of the language. While most participants acknowledged that *Fa'aSamoa* values such as respect and obedience dominated their personal lives, many participants reported that they did not physically take part in cultural practices, such as performing the *ava* (kava) ceremony, or displaying of *ie toga* (fine mats) at *faalavelave* or other occasions. However, all participants identified knowledge of the language, knowledge of and adherence to the *Fa'aSamoa* as being important to their identity as Samoan young people:

"There's no use ...saying that they are Samoan if you're not involved in the Fa'aSamoa..."   [Sala, age 20]

Relationships with siblings

The relationship between siblings mainly sister-brother relationship is discussed by (Shoeffel 1995) in its traditional context. The origin of this relationship is inherent in the term *'feagaiga'*[6] a more formal and polite term referring to the *va fealoaloa'i* relationship between sister and brother, *ali'i* (high chief) and *tulafale* (orator)[7]. Traditionally the sister-brother relationship is a *mamalu* (sacred) one where strict avoidance is 'enjoined upon sister and brother in family life and adolescent siblings are supposed to avoid all but the most necessary interaction' (Shoeffel, 1995). Since contact with the Western world another important characteristic of the sister-brother relationship is based on the division of labour where the light and indoor chores are for girls and the heavy, outdoor work for boys.

The AHS included a question on relationships where family members who the young people lived with including siblings. Most students report that these family members including their siblings (males 83.1%, females 64.4%) cared about them some/ a lot.

Similarly, most participants in the qualitative study reported close bonds with these family members (including siblings). Many of the participants considered their siblings as their greatest source of support, comfort, protection and help:

"I couldn't really talk to my parents...but I can communicate with my little brother at that time he was the one I can talk to...I can tell him things that I couldn't tell my mum and dad..." [Sina, age 27]

A few participants in the qualitative study reported strained relationships with their siblings when they were younger with physical and verbal fights being a common occurrence. Many attributed this to their young age and not 'knowing any better'. However, several participants reported that as they 'matured', their relationships with their siblings improved greatly and many discussed the close, supportive bonds they now shared with them.

Relationship with Aiga

The concept of 'collectivity' has been described as being central in defining the feature of Samoan family relationships:

"Unlike the nuclear family of Western society, Samoa's social existence is collective and corporate. Family life extends out beyond the nuclear family, incorporating uncles, aunties, both sets of grandparents and many cousins. Therefore children are thought of as belonging not only to their parents but also to the wider kin group

and in the case of Samoans, to the village community, inclusive of the church" (Taule'ale'ausumai, 1997, p. 166)

Therefore, the ideology of *aiga* demands that members of an *aiga* are responsible for each other – individual obligations and duties are contributions for the family as a unit or whole rather than individual benefits. Members of an *aiga* are expected to contribute towards the necessary production of food, shelter and other personal, familial, village or church requirements. Furthermore they look after each other and maintain kinship linkages through family activities.

> **More than 80% of students reported their extended families (who did not live with them) cared about them some/a lot**

The AHS asked questions about the nature of the relationships and interactions young people have with other relatives. More than 80% of students reported their extended families (who did not live with them) cared about them some/a lot. In addition to this, more than 30% of students reported their extended families visited them several times/everyday and most days (males 34%, females 50.4%).

Very few participants in the qualitative study reported seeing their *aiga* on a regular basis. For the most part, participants would only see their *aiga* on special occasions such as family funerals, weddings, birthdays, *to'onai* (feast) or reunions. Several participants reported that issues such as distance impacted on their ability to keep in touch with extended *aiga*. For example, Jackie aged 16 reported that when she was younger and living in Samoa, she spent a lot of time with her *aiga* because they were living next door to each other. In New Zealand, Jackie reported that 'everybody lives too far away' and therefore would only see each other at family functions or Christmas time. Similarly, 13 year old Filipo reported that although his parents were separated and he lived with his father, he spent more time with his mother's *aiga* because they lived closer to him. One participant who had just recently migrated to New Zealand positively recalled how easy it was to socialise with friends and family growing up in a Samoan village, compared to living in New Zealand:

" we never had kindergartens...not us we had friends and family...playing together we had that group relationship...and mums would go to the river...heaps of mums would bring their little kids around like me when I was little...all the a'oao's [student ministers] wives and kids ...all go to do the washing down at the waterhole... and all the kids would just play in the waterhole...just a big family relationship bang right from when you were little" [Winston, age 18]

A few participants reported that their *aiga* were sometimes great sources of pressure. Pressures included financial obligations for *faalavelave*, setting a good example for younger cousins, personality differences and the pressure to do well academically for the whole family. Despite the lack of contact they had with their *aiga* and these pressures, most participants reported that they had positive relationships with them and would look forward to occasions where they would see each other again. Many participants spoke of close relationships with their cousins and the positive support networks within their extended *aiga* especially during difficult times such as the death of a loved one.

Relationships with parents

Most students 90% (males 89.4%, females 90%) reported that they were looked after by their parents/siblings and that their parents/siblings cared a lot/some about them. Likewise most participants (96%) reported that they felt close to their mum and/or dad most of the time/sometimes, with 54.3% of Samoan students reporting that they were happy with their relationships with their parents. Most student 74% (males 79.2%, females 71%) get to spend enough time with their dad or someone who acts as their dad and about 82% spent enough time (males 87%, females 79.3%) with their mum or someone who act as their mum.

> **Despite their feelings of frustration and anger all participants reported that the parental control they experienced in the home, particularly in terms of educational aspirations was attributable to their parents' unquestioned love and support for them**

The AHS study asked two questions on whether students felt their family understood them and communicated with them. A higher percentage of male students (78%) felt that people in their family understood them some/a lot compared to their female counterparts (47.2%). When asked if they talked about their problems with anyone in the family, only 47.4% of females compared to 53% of male students tend to discuss problems with their family members. Likewise about (65%) of male students report that their family encouraged them to have their own ideas or beliefs compared to (59%) of females.

For most of the participants in the qualitative study, parents are central to family. Furthermore, the *Fa'aSamoa* notion of 'respect' defines the relationship between child and parent. As the child, participants accepted that they were not allowed to do certain things such as questioning their parents' or elders' authority. Participants automatically understood the importance of upholding this value and were generally aware of the consequences for failing to comply with cultural norms, as well as support from their *aiga* for appropriate behaviour.

"yeah that's Fa'aSamoa respect your parents don't answer them back...although I don't really agree with that one don't answer them back...this is Fa'aSamoa you can only go so far..." [Leo, age 25]

Most participants reported on the large amount of control that their parents exerted over them. This control extended to all the different areas of their lives including who their peers will be, their spiritual values, their cultural values, their money, their leisure time and the value of schooling. Participants felt that the parental control and obligation to obey and respect parents was 'normal' for Samoan children. For the most part, participants accepted their obligations to their parents, but tended to resent the restrictions imposed on their freedom. With limited room to negotiate or compromise with their parents, many participants expressed feelings of pressure, anger and frustration at not being able to voice their own opinions in decisions affecting them.

Despite their feelings of frustration and anger all participants reported that the parental control they experienced in the home, particularly in terms of educational aspirations was attributable to their parents' unquestioned love and support for them. Indeed, many participants were able to connect the parental control with their parents desire for them to be able to live a life without financial struggle with many parents attributing academic success to economic success. For many participants:

"yep...good job, big money...they don't want their kids or me to suffer they want me to get a good job" [Mario, age 13]

In the YMHP data most participants reported that they found it difficult to talk and communicate with their parents especially when their opinions differed from that of their parents. This was due largely to participants' notion of the *Fa'aSamoa* value of *fa'aaloalo*. For the most part, participants interpreted *fa'aaloalo* as obeying their parents and do not speak out against them, because they feel that to speak out against them even in important issues would be disrespectful:

"cos they're your parents, you can't really talk to them...I think all Samoans know that...they're your parents and you can't really...talk to them...you have a limit with them not like...some other Samoan parents are raising their kids to be...their friends at the same time but in the islands once you have parents that's it they're your parents you can't...you have to respect them...if you do talk to them about problems ...that means you don't have respect for them" [Sina, age 27]

However, several participants agreed that as they have grown older, their parents have become less controlling of their affairs and that they were increasingly able to voice their opinions in family discussions. This was seen as being a positive development for participants as they have become more involved in the decision making process of the family and personal affairs, and an acceptance by their parents of their perspectives and opinions:

"as you get older things are better…its not a major change its just that with things that you were pissed off when you were younger you know have changed because they sort of respect us a lot more now because we've got our own lives…and even though we don't agree with the faalavelaves and the Fa'aSamoa they can still see that we're still making an effort to give…my parents are at the stage where they cannot force us to do anything anymore…they've just come to accept how we feel…but if this had been happening back then when we were young I don't think we would have had a choice." [Sala, age 20]

Discussion

The findings indicate that family culture and relationships are heavily influenced by fa'aSamoa values and practices. In particular, values such as respect and obedience play a major role in defining the relationship between parent and child. Young people understood their obligations, consequences for breaching obligations as well as support for appropriate behaviour. Although many expressed the tensions between what they wanted and what was expected of them, they were able to express their understanding of fa'aSamoa in their own terms. Most participants reported that they understood the love their parents had for them and they valued fa'aSamoa.

Findings from this data suggest a few changes in the way Samoan young people in New Zealand relate with their families. The elements proposed in the traditional 'fa'asinomaga' perspective has been modified by Samoan families in New Zealand to one where identity and collective relationships are maintained through matai (chief) and family heritage, church and community activities and the use of the Samoan language. Of particular importance is the increase in the connection for many of the participants to a church group. In this context the church is used to maintain identity and the continuation of collective relationships among Samoan people. It has also become an essential forum for interaction and a place of belonging for Samoan parents and a socialisation agent for Samoan young people in New Zealand.

A further change was found in the relationship between siblings. Traditionally in Samoan culture, the sister/brother relationship is mamalu (sacred) as shown in the practice of sister/brother avoidance. The English term 'avoidance' used by Western scholars to define the traditional sister/brother relationships does have a negative connotation attached to it. Therefore in the context of this paper, we have used the word fa'aaloalo (respect) relationship to discuss aspects of this relationship. The fa'aaloalo relationship in its traditional context placed boundaries between brothers and sisters, male and female cousins. These boundaries demonstrated respect, protection and loving relationships between siblings and included the use of language around home and in the public arena where confrontation was unacceptable. Data from participants especially from the qualitative study suggests that the practice of this traditional fa'aaloalo relationship has transformed into a 'best friend' or mentor relationship. Despite physical and verbal arguments between sisters and brothers this transformation provides young participants with a sense of closeness, protection and great comfort in sharing with their siblings.

Unlike the aiga in Samoa, the aiga in New Zealand are geographically spread over long distances. Therefore, the traditional roles and functions of the aiga to collectively interact and socialise during everyday activities, shelter and nurture aiga members, particularly young people, has become more difficult to practice. For many participants in the qualitative study, interaction with their aiga was restricted to special occasions such as weddings, funerals, birthdays and family reunions. To a certain extent, because of this, the closeness that young people in Samoa develop with their aiga in New Zealand is replaced by friends at church and school and connections to their friends' families. For the survey about half of the students reported seeing their relatives by visiting each other on a regular basis.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to existing research findings by adding more knowledge on family relationships for Samoan young people and what they need and value in this area. Furthermore it emphasises changes in attitudes, practices and behaviour experienced by young people as new ways of connecting and relating to their family and culture. The changes highlighted the need for further in depth investigation identifying positive aspects of these changes and how it will impact the wellbeing of young people, let alone maintain their cultural identity. Furthermore, raising the awareness and understanding of families, community and churches about the values of these changes to the lives of Samoan young people

> **Traditionally in Samoan culture, the sister/brother relationship is mamalu (sacred) as shown in the practice of sister/brother avoidance**

may be a beginning to positive changes in attitudes and practices for a culturally safe journey to the future. Strong connection to family both nuclear and extended have been described as impacting positively on the well-being of young Samoan people in this data. The importance of the connection and support of family relationships is vividly illustrated in one of the Samoan proverbial sayings *'A gau le poutu e le tali le poulalo'* meaning in this context; *'if this connection/relationship failed an aiga will not be strong enough to stand on its own'* (personal communication with Samoan orator), thus emphasising the statement by Macpherson (1974) that *'outside the aiga the risk of failure, the risk of anomie, or loss of identity, is great'*.

> The practice of this traditional fa'aaloalo relationship has transformed into a 'best friend' or mentor relationship

Acknowledgements

Bibliography

Footnotes

1 Samoan custom, Samoan way of life, Samoan language

2 The Samoan term for family which is used to describe kinship in all it's dimensions (Meleisea and Schoeffel, 1996). In most cases, the use of the term aiga by participants referred to the extended family network as distinct from the nuclear family.

3 However, there are a number of writings that do incorporate some discussion on Samoan family relationships in New Zealand in the course of attending to other Samoan focussed topics (Pitt and MacPherson 1974, Krishnan et al 1994, Macpherson et al 2001)

4 Significant occasions or events when support from the family is expected. Support can be in the form of labour or goods or money. For example, a funeral or wedding.

5 Milner GB (1966) Anything that interferes with normal life and calls for special activity. In this study, this referred to a wide range of events e.g. weddings, funerals, church functions etc

6 Milner GB (1966) presents two definitions of feagaiga (1) the term for a formal or informal contractual agreement of any kind (2) a particular contractual relationship between two parties in two contexts, those of religion and kinship

7 For a more in-depth account of the feagaiga relationship see Schoeffel (1995).

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Furthermore it emphasises changes in attitudes, practices and behaviour experienced by young people as new ways of connecting and relating to their family and culture