Impacts of religious faith on the mental wellbeing of young, multi-ethnic Pacific women in Aotearoa

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ABSTRACT

Introduction: Using a multi-faceted approach from the disciplines of Theology and Pacific Studies, the three key areas of investigation included how young Pacific women perceived images of God and faith; how it impacted upon their mental resilience and their responses to mundane and significant life events; and explored their personal constructs of mental wellbeing.

Method: Qualitative group interviews (Talanoa), with 64 research participants aged between 17-24 years old; identified with multiple ethnicities, with at least one being Pacific; identified as Roman Catholic with varying degrees of faith practice; and were based in Auckland, Aotearoa. The Praxis Model methodology was employed throughout the research process and speaks to the interdisciplinary nature of the project. Intersectionality theory was utilised as the lens to view each research participants’ multi-layered self-identities.

Findings: Out of the 64 participants, 82% (n=52), generally agreed that their image of God aided a positive state of mental wellbeing, five women were unsure and six stated, that it was something else in their faith practice which primarily supported their mental wellbeing. Part of the reason women felt their image of God offered hope for their future, derived from their belief in an afterlife beyond physical death, which they felt, reduced anxiety about their family members who had died or faced sickness and trauma throughout their lives.

Conclusions: There is a need for more denomination-specific and culturally responsive foci around mental wellbeing, therefore recognising the unique experiences of faith traditions and the challenges faced by multi-ethnic young Pacific women.

Key words: mental wellbeing, Pacific, theology

INTRODUCTION

This article is based on findings from an unpublished doctoral thesis in the disciplines of Theology and Pacific Studies which explored how images of God impacts upon the mental wellbeing of young, Catholic, multi-ethnic, Pacific women in Auckland, Aotearoa, New Zealand. Its multi-faceted approach involved three key areas of investigation which included how these women perceived images of God and faith; how it impacted upon their mental resilience and their responses to mundane and significant life events; and explored their personal constructs of mental wellbeing. This discussion specifically focuses on one area of the larger study, that being, the research participants’ positive images and perceptions of God.

The study found that of the 64 research participants, 82% (n=52), considered that their imagery of God enabled them to maintain a positive state of mental wellbeing. The definition of ‘images of God’ in this research was characterised by how an individual visualises God, and/or by name and title. The study used a Catholic understanding of the integration of
spirituality and religion, where spirituality is defined as a personal expression of Catholicism and shared community life, with an ultimate goal of a deep relationship with God beyond physical death. The main themes to emerge from talanoa (conversations, discussions) with study participants regarding images of God and mental wellbeing, included: a sense of self-worth and hope in the afterlife, as opposed to experiences of suffering on earth in current times; and finally, having a personal relationship with God. It is hoped that the findings of this research will open up further conversations and assist with communication within families; help inform youth worker practice; provide more accessible information for communities and churches; assist faith-based policies around mental wellbeing; and be adaptable across various Christian denominations.

METHODS AND OBJECTIVES

The overarching research question for the wider study asked – ‘How do young Pacific females’ images of God impact their spiritual and mental wellbeing?’ This was underpinned by three main areas of inquiry: how young Pacific Catholic females’ images of God affect their responses to positive and negative life events; to what extent family relationships are connected to young, Pacific Catholic females’ images of God; and the self-identity of young, Pacific Catholic females in the church and wider society.

There were 64 research participants in total, whom met the following study criteria: aged between 17-24 years old; identified with multiple ethnicities, with at least one being Pacific; identified as Roman Catholic with varying degrees of faith practice; and were based in Auckland, Aotearoa.

The 2018 Aotearoa Census found, that the median age for Pacific peoples in Aotearoa was 23.4 years, with over 60 percent residing in Auckland. This is strong rationale to centre this research around the youth population in Auckland and be of relevance for the community it seeks to serve. Furthermore, in terms of defining ‘multi-ethnic’ individuals, research participants were asked to report if they identified with one or more ethnicities, including at least one Pacific ethnicity. If participants, for example, self-identified as Aotearoa-born ‘full’ Samoan, and equally identified as being from Aotearoa, they were included in the research. Qualitative group interviews (talanoa), lasted between 60-120 minutes and inquired of the women’s family background, experiences of her faith and Catholicism; her use of social media and religious online content; and the interplay between faith and mental wellbeing. The focus groups ranged from having two to six participants who were grouped together on the basis of their availability. University of Auckland Ethics Committee approval was obtained for the research project, 26 September 2016 (Reference number 018046).

The Praxis Model methodology was employed throughout the research process and seeks to the interdisciplinary nature of the project. The Praxis Model of theology requires the researcher to examine relevant parts of the Bible and Christian tradition in relation to the issue. It emerged in the 1950s-60s as a process for Latin American theologians to grapple with unjust political oppression and the poverty local people faced, ensuring that some practical action could be taken as a result. Prior to the study participants being interviewed, thirteen images and titles for God from both the Old and New Testament of the Bible expressed in 59 various passages were chosen to be analysed given their common use in Catholicism. Scholarship from theologians in Aotearoa and the Pacific on images and titles of God were also reviewed. In addition, Intersectionality was utilised as the lens to view each research participants’ multi-layered self-identities. This theory emerged in the 1980s when lawyer Kimberlé Crenshaw explained that Black women often faced a ‘double-discrimination’ in everyday society: they were discriminated on the basis of both race and sex. Intersectionality points to the fact that an individual will have many intersecting social identities and these reveals how the individual may experience privilege or victimhood within systems of discrimination and marginalisation. Since Intersectionality is entrenched in a feminist and People of Colour framework, it was considered appropriate for the study. A young multi-ethnic Pacific woman has many strands to her identity: her culture, family, environment, as well as physical, mental, and spiritual health. For some, if these are not strongly interwoven, it is likely her mental wellbeing will be impacted. By combining the use of the Praxis Model and Intersectionality, it helps to illustrate the importance around how churches and Pacific families talk about God and how these impact upon their mental wellbeing.

BACKGROUND

Religion and spirituality have a clear effect upon the mental wellbeing of Pacific peoples. International scholarship alludes to various case studies of the interconnection between mental health, medical sciences, religion and spirituality. Garsen et al. undertook a meta-analysis of 181 longitudinal studies between 1990-2019, with regard to the relationship between religion,
spirituality and mental health. The study examined public religious activities such as church attendance, private religious prayer, support from church members, the importance and commitment of religion to an individual’s life. It also sought to identify the extent of a sense of religious identity, and the use of positive religious coping strategies, which included, seeking spiritual support and having a sense of meaning in one’s life. A poignant finding from this study, was that the bond established between young women and their parents and caregivers in their adolescent years, is also reflective of their level of religious interest. If this bond is strong, and the level of religious interest is simultaneously high, these may act as a protective buffer against mental health challenges. Evidence suggests that seeing God as an attachment figure; visualised through an individual’s God-image, is also often reflected in the type of bond developed with parents and caregivers.

It is more than an illusion but a means to process and manage existential fear and adversity in everyday life. For example, having an image of God who has a plan for one’s life and is demonstrates an unconditional love, regardless of one’s mistakes, it is more likely to instil a sense of hope in the future for an individual.

Typically, studies of images of God, particularly in Theology and Medical Humanities, brings to attention, an individual’s religious coping strategies to manage stress, and/or how an individual comes to make sense their own identity and ways of developing and maintaining meaning in their lives. Krause and Ironson argue that an individual’s image of God is a foundational source of all their other religious practices and involvement.

It is considered, that how one perceives God, influences how one chooses to relate to others. For example, an individual who images God as stringent and punitive, is more likely to regularly pray to God for forgiveness and more likely to be judgemental of the actions of their fellow congregational members.

A study of 139 Vietnamese migrants to Canada of Catholic, Protestant, Jewish and atheist backgrounds found, that images of God were related directly to higher levels of mental resilience as well as being a predictor of mental resilience. Furthermore, Wilt and Exline, compiled responses from 142 undergraduate students in the Great Lakes region of the United States on mental health and gratitude and perceived closeness to God. Participants from this study felt a greater gratitude to God for a benefit following a stressful event, rather than eliminating the stressful event; for instance, attaining a good grade from a stressful tertiary education examination, rather than easing the stress throughout the examination process. In this case, it was highlighted that God would journey alongside an individual during stressful life events, thus enabling the individual to be mentally resilient and trusting God would support them. The study also found that higher levels of gratitude to God strongly correlated with less experiences of depression, increased hope and a greater overall sense of positive wellbeing. The way an individual visualises and names God, when offering prayers of praise and gratitude, may be paralleled to the extent to which they feel supported during stressful events.

**FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

**Impact of images of God on mental wellbeing**

Research participants were given the opportunity to describe characteristics they felt best encapsulated who God was to them. As earlier mentioned, if one does not have a positive relationship with parental figures in their lives, they would often not have a positive image of God. The 2018 New Zealand Mental Health and Addictions Inquiry Report defines mental health and wellbeing for Pacific peoples as encompassing: “a holistic approach of reciprocity, respect, belonging, genealogy, and relationships with all entities – Atua, the land and environment, ancestors, cultures, languages, family and others, collectivism – elements that protect and strengthen family and individual wellbeing.” For the demographic of this study’s research participants, the lack of a positive relationship with both God and parental figures, results in two aspects of their identity being out of kilter, thus, negatively impacting upon mental wellbeing.

After participating in *talanoa* about participants’ family background and their experiences of Catholicism and images of God on social media, the focus groups were asked whether they thought their images of God helped them maintain positive mental wellbeing and in what ways. Out of the 64 participants, 82% (n=52), generally agreed that their image of God aided a positive state of mental wellbeing; five women were unsure and six stated, that it was something else in their faith practice which primarily supported their mental wellbeing.

Part of the reason women felt their image of God offered hope for their future, derived from their belief in an afterlife beyond physical death, which they felt, reduced anxiety about their family
members who had died or faced sickness and trauma throughout their lives.12

**Personal Images of God**

Positive images of God varied as indicated in **Table 1**.

**Table 1**: Positive Images of God

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Image of God</th>
<th>Number of responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ubiquitous</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Father</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Love</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creation</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forgiving</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All-powerful</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friend</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No visual or name</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Saviour/Protector</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family member</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Imaging God as ubiquitous, that is, as the Father, Love itself and in Creation, were the most common responses. Seeing God as ubiquitous – as a part of everyday life in the people, places and situations they encountered was believed to be a positive experience as they felt as though God was active, alive and supporting them constantly.

“I work on a medical ward and our patients are from Emergency or ICU so they’re really sick people. Every week we have deaths on our ward. Going to work for me, seeing all these vulnerable people, and at the moment we have this prisoner on the ward, that’s how I see the Lord when I see all these people. I thank Him for family, good health, giving me another day to live.” – Pauline, 24 yrs, Samoan/Chinese.

For Pauline, God was ubiquitous in her employment, in the ‘vulnerable’ people of all walks of life she was supporting, as well as in her own family life. Despite either negative or positive life events occurring, study participants maintained that mental wellbeing would not be negatively impacted, as it was believed, that all situations ultimately leads to positive psychological, social and spiritual outcomes, given that God is ubiquitous and purposeful.10

Naming and perceiving God as a Father was the preference of 13 of the research participants. They shared that they had strong relationships with their own biological fathers. However, one participant who was raised by a single mother, disapproved of having to refer to God by a male pronoun.

The participants acknowledged that there are diverse meanings of ‘feminism’ and ‘feminist’ between western and Pacific worldviews. They felt in Aotearoa, that the western individualistic approach to feminism, was hugely prevalent in society.21 In their experiences, participants had positive relationships with male figures in their families and also felt that identifying with God as ‘Father’, was typically the way people referred to God in worship and in their everyday lives.

“When I think of God, like He just reminds me of my dad. You know, because out of my parents, I’m mainly close with my dad. And I feel like I have comfort, if God was a man, in comparison to God being, I don’t know a female. Even though today there’s always like a big conversation about gender and everything. For me, I find comfort in my dad I guess and I feel like that’s the kind of relationship that I want to maintain.” – Tiana, 19 yrs, Tongan/Samoan/Wallis & Futuna.

In Tiana’s worldview, having a stable and positive relationship with her biological father was synonymous with her relationship with God – and therefore meant, she felt more mentally secure and supported with the day-to-day mundane activities she engaged with. However, among those who referred to God by the use of a male pronoun, it occurred to them, that it did not matter whether they called God by a male or female pronoun.

“I always question that. God – what does he or she look like? It’s so weird saying ‘she’. It’s more common in our families to refer to important people as ‘he’. There’s our dads, grandads as leaders in our family. God in the Bible, that God is love and a part of everyone. So everyone has God. Gender doesn’t matter.” – Lusia, 24 yrs, NZ born Samoan.

Luisa did not take a firm stance on whether God was called by a male or female pronoun, as she believed each person is created in the image of God.

There were 12 women that maintained that God was a loving God or embodied love itself:

“One thing about God that gives me hope is His love pretty much. That’s a very big word when it comes to God. He’s got unconditional love. Because you don’t realise how much he loves you until you go
through things in life and after going through difficult times and realising that you may not be perfect, and you may have veered off the path, He still loves you at the end. And no matter what happens in your life, there's always hope for the future because He's the one that will be guiding you. His love is all I need.” – Karlina, 22 yrs, NZ raised Fijian

“I know that if I want to know Christ, I have to be as honest as I can with him. That way he can not only shine a light on my own problems, but he can help me heal. Because you have to tackle those really dark dark moments in your life to bring some sort of light and truth to it. I used to talk about how I used to even swear at God, and people used to ask why I would do that. I say ‘Well it’s my way of healing and if you don’t say it out loud, he already knows it’s in your heart. You might as well say it so he can say ‘its ok, I love you’.” – Susana, 18 yrs, Tokelauan/Wallis & Futuna/Rotuman

The type of relationship with God and images expressed by both Karlina and Susana, resonates with Nguyen et al. research on secure attachment to God; which often results in faith maturity as well as lowered anxiety and depression.7

Whilst people’s God image may be defined as ‘corresponding’ and similar to an individual’s relationship to their parents or caregivers, it can also be ‘compensatory’ and filling a gap in their attachment and relationship with their parents or caregivers.23 In other words, if women had a distant and broken relationship with their parents or caregivers, a ‘compensatory’ God-image enables women to see God as a parent figure. It was unclear if Karlina and Susana’s images of God were ‘corresponding’ or ‘compensatory’ regarding their relationship with their parents, however, they did demonstrate a secure attachment to God. Both Karlina and Susana spoke about navigating different experiences and times in their lives where they felt God helped them, and consequently feeling more at peace.

Finally, nine women described God as Creator or present in the created natural environment.

“If you’re going through a hard situation, cause my image of God is nature, I just look outside and I’m like wow this is pretty. It just empowers me. It’s nice to look at and I just feel better.” – Apaula, 20 yrs, NZ born Samoan

“My image of God in the clouds, having this open relationship with God is most definitely positive for mental wellbeing because I know I can talk to him. I’m able to get things off my chest and he talks to me through people. It gives me hope for the future because as I grow, my relationship will grow with God and that image will change but in a positive way.” – Ruci, 19 yrs, Samoan/Fijian

“The God that is important to me now is the image of God who is Creator, source of life like those things. I see that everywhere and when I see each person I try to see like oh wow God made that, that’s amazing or like today in Psychology we were looking at the structure of eyes, like wow that’s so amazing who designed that? I’ve been watching a few videos lately where God is the intelligent design behind the creation of the world and the Big Bang and the science vs God debate. It just makes me really appreciate nature even more, just how beautiful everything is like God made this like this didn’t come from nothing. The more I think about it, the more I think of God as a mother, just life-giving, nurturing, loving.” – Zoe, 24 yrs, NZ born Tongan

There is some overlap here between, eco-therapy as a holistic healing practice, eco-theology, and images of God and mental wellbeing. Eco-therapy, often studied in the medical humanities, takes many forms such as nature walks, gardening and other horticultural work, as well as mindfulness meditation in green spaces; with the view, that allowing people to connect with nature, helps them cope better with physical and mental health challenges.14 Conversely, eco-theology urges a renewal of respect for the natural environment in light of climate change, with the understanding of God as ‘Creator of the universe’ and it is humanity that has pillaged natural resources.15 From adolescent behavioural issues, to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, to recovering cancer patients and chronically mentally distressed patients; the benefits of eco-therapy has been studied extensively from the 1980s to more recent evidence around anxiety in the COVID-19 pandemic era.16 Benefits include boosting self-esteem and resilience, pain reduction, increased tolerance and stress reduction.

Both study participants, Apaula and Ruci, alluded to nature in metaphorical terms to describe God. For instance, when they felt the need to pray about a particular situation, they could also visit an outdoor green space which, for them, resulted in a reduction of stress and helped shift their moods to a positive mind frame or state.
Zoe described God as the Creator of the universe, whom encapsulated a more feminine image. Zoe was the only woman to refer to God as ‘Mother’, and one of three women, that not only studied Theology, but was also raised by a single mother. The hope that each of these three women had for their futures stemmed from their beliefs that the natural environment, which they could easily interact with was gifted to humanity by God, through the process of evolution.17

It is clear, that the most common images of God, according to research participants, were Ubiquitous, Father, Love and Creator, all of which have significant value for their mental wellbeing. These findings also reiterate the need for more culturally nuanced and gendered approaches to mental wellbeing and religiosity and spirituality in the context of Aotearoa.

Recommendations

Results of this study also suggest the need for more denomination-specific and culturally responsive foci around mental wellbeing, therefore recognising the unique experiences of faith traditions and the challenges faced by multi-ethnic young Pacific women. It would be beneficial, if further investigations around positive images of God were undertaken accounting for various age groups, gender identities and Christian denominations within the Pacific population in Aotearoa New Zealand. A strengths-based approach and the promotion of more positive images of God, may help to inform local church communities more effectively with the use of evidence-informed information of ways of discussing mental wellbeing within their own environments.

CONCLUSION

The women in this study were able to weave together the different strands they believed were common experiences for Pacific women and offered their own definitions of mental wellbeing in order to describe how images of God were important to their mental wellbeing. Further, eco-therapy and eco-theology are examples of recommended integration of religion in the mental health and clinical studies as well as practices to improve Pacific mental health and wellbeing. A limitation of the study is its niche demographical focus. It would be advantageous in future research explorations, to compare these findings with responses from other Christian denominations, among other religions, other ethnicities, a range of age groups, as well as seeking male, and gender diverse responses. While more research needs to be undertaken in the area of religion, spirituality and mental wellbeing for Pacific peoples, this study provides a starting point for church communities to assess how God is spoken about, and for mental health providers to consider how to incorporate churches into future mental health initiatives, engagement and programme planning.

Conflicting interests

None

Acknowledgements

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