

Original Research

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Bula vakavanua and the spiritual disruption of elder abuse: A Fijian perspective

Sandra Thaggard,¹ El-Shadan Tautolo²

ABSTRACT

Introduction: This article used a cultural lens to explore issues of elder abuse from a Fijian perspective. Fijian tradition of respect for the older adult is a priority and any mistreatment is viewed as a spiritual disconnection and most injurious to God, the land and the people; their ancestral foundations and traditional customs.

Methods: The Fonofale model, as a pan-pacific approach was employed as a methodological paradigm to explore elements of abuse within a larger study of 50 Pacific Island elders from Pacific communities of Aotearoa, New Zealand. This article examines perceptions of abuse as seen from a Fijian perspective.

Findings: The findings argue that all forms of abuse; physical, psychological, financial or neglect are seen as a spiritual disconnection to the very foundation of what it is to be Fijian, referred to as *bula vakavanua* - the Fijian way of life.

Conclusion: Practitioners with the possibility of confronting situations of abuse may benefit from a cultural awareness programme, addressing the many different ways that abuse may be construed from within a culture other than the dominant one in society.

Key words: elder abuse, respect, Fijian, socio-cultural, spiritual values, vakarokoroko, vanua, dela ni yavu, bula vakavanua, fonofale paradigm, talanoa, New Zealand, Pacific.

INTRODUCTION

The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines elder abuse as “a single or repeated act, or lack of appropriate actions, occurring within any relationship where there is an expectation of trust which causes harm or distress to an older person”.¹ The phenomena of elder abuse is a serious issue that can lead to physical injury, financial hardship and mental health decline, and may have long-term psychological consequences.²⁻⁴ Current Age Concern New Zealand statistics record one in ten people over 65 reporting abuse.⁵ However, with many cases unreported, prevalence is extremely underestimated; the WHO indicates that only 4% of abuse is reported worldwide.¹

An estimated 14,445 people in Aotearoa, New Zealand identify as Fijian - a number that has doubled between the 2001 and 2013 Census, and over half of this population live in Auckland.⁶ There is little research available regarding the incidence of elder abuse or the perspectives of

older people who experience or encounter abuse in Fijian communities. As a starting point, this study seeks to understand how abuse of the elderly is viewed by Fijians living in Aotearoa, New Zealand. Fijians in this study are *lewe ni vanua* (people of the land), the indigene known

Corresponding author: Sandra Thaggard,
sandra.thaggard@aut.ac.nz

1. Senior Nursing Lecturer, School of Clinical Sciences, Faculty of Health and Environmental Science, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

2. Associate Professor, and Director, Pacific Island Family Study, Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand.

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also in contemporary terms as *taukei*, the ethnic group native to Fiji, who speak Fijian and share a common history and culture.⁷ As such, exploring issues of abuse within such traditional cultures requires careful and constant acknowledgement of unique cultural and spiritual structures.

The elders in a Fijian community are referred to as the *qase ni vanua*, and from a socio-cultural and spiritual context, all elders are historically held in high regard and considered sacred for they have ancestral links to the afterlife. Fijian elders carry the *mana* (divine power) of the people and serve as a connection to genealogy and the very foundation of the *vanua* (land) and their *dela ni yavu* – which embodies the concept of the self in relation to the land as the essential extension of one’s self and identity.⁷ Given this spiritual relationship, elder abuse is not overtly tolerated, and the perception of abuse among Fijians is one of horror, the repercussions of which are to be feared for they have a spiritual impact upon the abuser.⁸

The concept of *vanua* is an encompassing one; it is the totality of a Fijian community.⁹ *Vakavanua* meaning ‘customary’ or ‘the way of the land’ involves old supernatural beliefs related to kinship and honour of parental obligations that have continued to evolve and absorb Christian doctrine. There is therefore, within this ethos, a sense of the supernatural bond between people and nature; between life and death, critical to a close relationship between people and the land.⁹ Spirits that inhabit a cosmological world, although invisible, are part of everyday life with the belief that the “spirit world has control over the mortal world”, therefore “as people get older and nearing the end to enter the spirit world, they are increasingly treated with sacredness”.⁷ In this light, there is an understanding that abuse of elders is seen as an act of extreme betrayal of their values.¹⁰

The Fijian model for life - *bula vakavanua* is built upon respect and honour to the concept of *vakaturaga*. *Vakaturaga* represents characteristics of love, honour, kindness, hospitality, and deference to others. As well as a soft gentle manner and the supreme principle - an attitude of respect to others, often manifested in the way that an individual or group responds to other people. *Vakaturaga* is the code of conduct, borne through actions and behaviours that merge with Christian beliefs. For Fijians, *vakaturaga* provides the reverence and respect to follow cultural protocol, to maintain a sense of

well-being to their kin and to the land - to their respective *dela ni yavu*, this is the spiritual life force of their *bula vakavanua*. The highest form of cultural insensitivity is not displaying *vakaturaga* to those in authority and to elders.¹¹

As part of a larger study into current perceptions of elder abuse within Pacific communities in Aotearoa, New Zealand, this study explores the views of a group of Fijian elders. Findings highlight the reverence and importance of *bula vakavanua*, the disruption of which appears to form the basis of all perceptions of abuse. Furthermore, the findings point to the importance of considering culturally specific interpretations of abuse.

METHODS

Participants

Participants were recruited as part of a larger cohort of 50 Pacific Island elders for the Pacific Elderly Abuse Research Project. This was a purposive selection of inclusion and 12 Taukei (4 males, 8 females; 60 - 70 years old) were interviewed in two separate focus groups consisting of eight and four participants.

Participants resided in West, and South Auckland; all are employed professionals and maintain traditional roots to their homeland. The participants are leaders with high social and cultural standing within the Fijian community in New Zealand.

Procedure

This research utilised a theoretical lens within the Fonofale Model, where the Samoan *fale* (home) with four *pou* (posts) represents the important values and beliefs of family, culture and spirituality.¹² This model is widely accepted and adaptable to all Pacific Island cultures. The foundation of the Fonofale represents the family; the roof and surroundings represent the context of time; and the *pou* comprise the spiritual, physical, mental, and any other important connecting factors. The model thereby encircles cultural values and family traditions with identity and community as a continuous interactive flow.

The elements of the 4 *pou* were explored in a *talanoa* (discussion) during the focus groups. Otsuka¹³ refers to *talanoa* from a Fijian perspective as oratory characteristics that

involve verbal negotiations with deep traditional roots. It is dialogic, fluid, and allows for open consultations to occur, involving the transferring of information, or co-construction of knowledge through talking, exchanging ideas, and finding out how people are feeling or thinking about a topic without any coercion. *Talanoa* was deemed an appropriate framework to capture the cultural, spiritual and emotional views regarding abuse within the *Taukei* population.

Focus groups were held in Auckland, New Zealand, and were opened and closed with prayer in accordance with cultural protocol. A semi structured questionnaire was used to guide the *talanoa* process, with questions such as “can you tell me what you think elderly abuse is,” are you aware of anyone in your community that is experiencing abuse?” Data was recorded then transcribed by a professional Pacific Island transcriber.

Data analysis

Braun and Clarke¹⁴ propose a six-phase guide to thematic analysis which was adopted in this study. This approach to thematic analysis gives precedence to the participant’s voices, and its findings provide a social construct where the narratives evoked through the *talanoa* give meaning to the elders’ social experiences. An inductive analytical approach was used to identify patterns of meaning interpreted within the Fonofale model of health. The dimensions of the Fonofale overlaid all the data, from gathering and analysis to ordering of emergent categories and themes that correspond to the dimensions of the Fonofale.

Ethics and Anonymity

The Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee approved this project (reference 19/176 17). Anonymity was guaranteed and participants gave their informed consent. Participants were assigned a number to maintain confidentiality throughout data collection and transcription, and these numbers are used throughout this paper to identify narratives. Data was transcribed and sent back to the participants for verification. Two participants were central to the drafting of this article to ensure that all sensitivity to cultural protocol was correctly identified and credible.

RESULTS

This study represents the Fijian participants’ views of elder abuse within their communities. The patterns of meaning identified cultural, spiritual, emotional and financial abuse, however cultural and in particular spiritual abuse were the major themes that ran through all of the participant’s narratives. Throughout each *talanoa*, a spiritual context bound together all the themes from a Fijian perspective culminating in the perception of abuse as a disrespect of *vakaturaga* and harmful disruption to *bula vakavanua*;

Our life force is blended together with our elders and our life force, is built upon the dela ni yavu this is our model for life. That's why I think our sense of abuse is much broader than financial, physical, sexual. It's actually spiritual and cultural. When you start to lose your sense of kin your identity is diluted. (3)

The importance of community living and kinship circulate the ever evolving cycle of life as understood through the Fijian *bula vakavanua*, and the consequences of disregard for *bula vakavanua* are well known;

If you understand the concept of life and death... birth and death...they go hand in hand like yin and yang. If we don't look after our elders properly then the spiritual connection of the afterlife can affect you. (2)

The threads of this cycle are disrupted when young people are not taught the essence of *vakaturaga*. This may be either through omission or a lack of role models. It is thought that *bula vakavanua* is passed down from one generation to the next, by looking, learning and imitating¹⁵. The influences of money and an increasingly individualistic lifestyle are also important in this realm;

We know that there are some elders that are not looked after with food and the things they need, but that is very wrong. You hear about the financial abuse of taking their money, about the young ones of drugs that come around and ask for money. (12)

Abusive actions by the younger Fijian generation that were not taught the ways of *vakaturaga* and the spiritual inflow or backlash that can occur

when this protocol is not adhered to or understood were noted by the participants;

The young ones don't understand, either not taught or don't care that it's so important to look after our old people because the blessings continue to flow back. People who abuse the elderly don't understand that. When you abuse the elderly that connection will affect you for the rest of your life. The consequences will come tenfold. What we believe is that the elderly and us are one. What we do to them affects us spiritually. So we have to look after them. (12)

Respect, especially for elders who carry the *mana* of the *mataqali* (tribe) is an expected and valued trait within *bula vakavanua*;

One priority we always set aside is to have a respect for them. Right or wrong in Fijian perspective you have to respect them. Regardless. The reason is because they carry the mana for the family, the inheritance of the earlier generation. They have the knowledge that they can pass onto us. (5)

Respect and obedience are actions and nuances in vocal tone and conduct. Honour, although considered an internal attitude of respect, honourable actions should convey courtesy, and reverence, accompanied by appropriate obedience and attention to their needs. The threads of abuse extend into disrespectful actions, attitudes and behaviours;

Laughing behind their back or giggling amongst themselves and laughing at them not with them is disrespect. Making fun or speaking harshly or being dismissive, or not giving them their food first. (7)

Further examples highlighted the tyrannical and covert nature of the abuse, “look at the way you walk..... - a joke like that, that's abuse too” and “Respecting our elders mean we don't make fun of them even if they can't hear. Even if it is unseen or not heard by them. The unseen is still abuse”. (5)

This lack of respect violates the essence of *bula vakavanua* and in this context is certainly considered abuse. The participants saw these behaviours as shameful and attempted to address them;

Even though they can't hear you. It's like a sin. They don't hear it...it's hidden.....if we see the children doing that.... We say shush! Don't say that have respect. Then we remind them to say the proper things. Remind our children you can joke about things as long as you laugh with them but don't laugh at them. (1)

There was a suggestion of loss among the participants for the cultural code of conduct no longer acknowledged by many young Fijians brought up in New Zealand;

When we address them as an elder we use 'kemuni' to address them. It is the code of our language. Kemuni, or plural kemumi. It is expected for you to know this, elders will expect this and it is not what we see so much in the young. They are not taught this. (8)

Much of the traditional conduct is based on the biblical scripture “Honour your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the Lord your God is giving you” (Exodus, 20:12). Fijians see no difference between honour, obedience and respect, for to respect is to honour and the following excerpts relate how taking care of your parents is integrated into cultural conduct of *vakarokoroko*, meaning reverence and honour;

Cultural protocol begins with the bible, Mo vakarokoroko rau na tamanu kei na tinamu, me dede kina nomu bula. Respect is a reverence, respect is a vakarokoroko and these are part of our value, and our elders are always acknowledged or Vakarokoroko taki. (10)

Furthermore;

Abuse is also not attending to ceremonial duties. Not giving gifts to grandparents is considered cultural abuse. (11)

DISCUSSION

The main theme identified from the participants' narratives was the abuse of *vakaturaga* and the Fijian model for life; *bula vakavanua*. This theme carried over into all areas of attitude and behaviour and manifested as disrespect. Disrespect for cultural protocol, disrespect for

not taking care of their elders needs, disrespect for their welfare and disrespect in the manner of addressing them.

Vakaturaga is the protocol for respecting others and respect, honour and reverence represent their spiritual and cultural values with connections to their identity, their *mataqali* and their *vanua* and as a Fijian; their place of belonging - *dela ni yavu*, and their social fabric - *bula vakavanua*. Fijian elders – *qase ni vanua*, are carriers of wisdom and oral history, therefore they are the custodians for knowledge of a *vanua*. Elder abuse has spiritual ramifications upon all members of the *mataqali*, and the wider *vanua*, with spiritual tentacles that reach far and wide to disrupt the *bula vakavanua*.

Highlighting the importance of examining and defining abuse within a cultural context, Dong¹⁶ argues that when disrespect is categorized as psychological abuse or neglect, its meaning and significance as a culturally specific form of abuse are missed. Disrespect is hidden in Chinese and other traditional cultural contexts, where the value of elder respect does not have a meaning equivalent to that in Western society. While those from such cultures may recognise disrespect as unacceptable, it remains invisible under the generic western categories of elder abuse.

The spiritual and psychological domains within the Fonofale provide significance of the weave of mental, and physical well-being and spirituality. Biblical ties are echoed throughout the participants' narratives and the views of elders are portrayed as a representation to, and connection with the spiritual realm. Reciprocal expectation for the care and respect of elders, is that children will live long, blessed lives. Batibasaqa, Overton and Horsley⁹ state that the *vanua* concept of the relationship between people and nature has been "challenged, weakened and lost because of western and religious influences due to colonization" (p. 103). Whereas I would argue that these concepts if understood and taught well by their elders would be strengthened for Fijians, who have successfully integrated western and religious concepts, and where colonisation did not in my opinion weaken the ties to land and identity and genealogical connections. The concept of *dela ni yavu* is not unique to Fijian culture, for Maori have their *tūrangawaewae*, loosely translated as a place to stand, a place of identity and belonging.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The term elder abuse covers a wide range of behaviours that include physical, sexual, psychological, and financial abuse as well as neglect. There may be fear that disclosure could have retributive action resulting in more abuse. Practitioners in training for abuse may benefit from a cultural awareness programme, addressing the many different ways that abuse may be construed from within a culture other than the dominant one in society. The findings from this study suggest incorporating a socio-cultural centred approach when working with people from Pacific cultures during the screening process for abuse. In light of the detrimental effect disrespect has upon the older adult and their culture of origin, it may be wise to consider disrespect as a form of spiritual abuse, and the screening tool could incorporate question such as, 'how important is spirituality in your culture?' and 'How does disrespect make you feel?' Older Fijian adults may refuse to disclose their own experiences of mistreatment due to strong cultural norms of shame, face-saving and keeping family problems within the family, but they may instead report being in spiritual distress. Spirituality plays a vital role in the Fijian culture and disrespect causes a spiritual disruption not only to the victim of abuse but to the whole family.

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