

Fiscal and non-fiscal ideas of responsibility amongst Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane

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Abstract

This research draws on a longitudinal qualitative study with Samoan diaspora living in the Greater Brisbane area. Based on my PhD research, I examine how responsibility towards their family, their community, and themselves is described by the participants. I explore how participants enact responsibility to their households, which includes both financial and non-financial contributions. Second, I describe how participants enact responsibility towards their community, including extended family in Greater Brisbane and abroad, and how this results in either close engagement with or deliberate separation from the diaspora in Greater Brisbane. Third, I discuss how participants draw on the choices of their parents and other relatives to feel a sense of responsibility towards their future selves, being able to care and provide for their family and community.

Introduction

Australia has a highly multicultural population, and increased migration to Australia from diverse cultural groups, such as those from the Pacific Islands, will only make it more so (Batley, 2017). It is thus arguably increasingly important for social research, policies, and programs to take the diverse range of meaning-making processes into account. According to Batley (2017), who compared 2006, 2011, and 2016 Australian census data, those claiming Pacific Islander heritage has increased both in absolute and relative terms. By far, those who identify as having Samoan heritage make up the largest increase of Pasifika immigrants (Batley, 2017). According to the 2016 Australian National Census (ABS, 2017), in Greater Brisbane, those claiming Samoan ancestry account for approximately one percent of the population, with that increasing in certain areas, such as 2.49 percent in Ipswich (to Brisbane's west) and 2.17 percent in Logan and Beaudesert (to Brisbane's south).¹ Perhaps more pertinent is that these figures are rapidly increasing, with a 30 percent increase from 2011 and a 100 percent increase since 2006 across Greater Brisbane.

Despite this, there has been limited research in Greater Brisbane that examines cultural perspectives of responsibility, both fiscal and non-fiscal responsibility. Williams (2012) describes responsibility in terms of prospective (duties that are expected) and retrospective (duties that are failed to be fulfilled) responsibilities. Much of the Pasifika literature describes these prospective responsibilities as 'obligations'. Faleolo (2019) argues that these obligations can extend across transnational spaces, referring to especially to financial obligations to extended family members in the islands, and may influence migration decisions (e.g. taking a better paid job in Brisbane than a more prestigious but less well paid job in Auckland). Stanley and Kearney (2017) describes the tensions these obligations cause can cause amongst Samoan youth, particularly when they conflict with personal desires or goals (e.g. higher education attainment). These obligations are often referred to as *fa'alavelave*, which encompass monetary gifts but also the performance of social responsibilities for major life events such as births, weddings and funerals (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009).

¹ By Greater Brisbane, I am referring to the urban areas in southeast Queensland known as Brisbane City, Ipswich, Logan, Redlands and Moreton Bay. These figures were constructed using the ANCP1 and ANCP2 variables for the Greater Capital City Statistical Areas (UR).

The findings in this research working paper are drawn from PhD fieldwork completed between December 2018 and February 2021. During this period, I conducted repeat interviews with 16 Samoan diaspora currently living in Greater Brisbane. Some participants were only interviewed once, while others were interviewed up to 5 times during this period. While some interviews took place face-to-face (mostly pre-COVID), the majority were undertaken during 2020 via Zoom or telephone.

Responsibility to the household

First, I will explore how the participants enact feelings of responsibility towards the household. Literature often uses the terms 'family' and 'household' interchangeably, although these can have different meanings and compositions based on cultural or other norms. It has been well documented, for instance, that the term 'family' has different meanings to different cultural groups (Georgas, 2003; Lohoar, Butera, & Kennedy, 2014; Metge & Kinloch, 1978). Importantly, members of the same household might not be legally family members, and/or there may be material bonds and resource sharing amongst non-resident family members (Bianchi, Hotz, McGarry, & Seltzer, 2008). It is then perhaps not surprising that there is no 'standard' household composition for the participants. However, they largely consisted of extended family groups – parent(s), children (including adult children), grandparents, and sometimes adult siblings and/or aunts/uncles. Where this was not the case, it was often highlighted by the participant that this was unusual.

Importantly, however, the exact makeup of each household varies at different times, with family members (especially parents or adult siblings) often being transient – a phenomena Michaela Schier (2016) refers to as 'multi-local families'. Family life may span across national or regional borders, or there may be short physical distances between households. This circular spatial mobility, or family members providing (financial or non-financial) support despite scattered living arrangements, may be considered an important part of 'doing family' (Schier, 2016, p. 44).

The participants in my study often described personal sacrifice for familial gain, particularly in terms of contributing financially to the household. One participant, for instance, decided to take a "gap year" between high school and university to earn some extra money to help her family. She also described how her mother's encouragement to continue with higher education was different to the experiences of some of her friends, who were "told" to find work rather than continue study. The literature demonstrates this is a common situation, with many young adults from Pasifika families in the Greater Brisbane area feeling pressured to get a job to support families who are struggling financially (Chenoweth, 2014). Despite higher education still being promoted as a pathway out of poverty (McNamara, Harvey, & Andrewartha, 2019), the realities of day-to-day financial pressures mean that Samoan youth are often pushed into low-skilled employment, such as factory work, in order to immediately contribute income to the household (Stanley & Kearney, 2017). Even those that were able to pursue higher education, however, continued to financially support their families during their study. While some participants worked full-time, or close to full-time, hours while also studying, some paused their university education to help financially support their family.

The narrative consistently told to me by the younger participants (particularly those under 25) was that the funds were earned to help pay for household expenses, particularly rent, bills and groceries. Few of these participants indicated that they were working extra hours to earn income for their own extracurricular activities, and those that did so were quick to express that they were “lucky” and it was “not usual”, especially when they compared their situation to those of extended family members. Older participants indicated that their income was also used to support their household, which may include children and their own parents or other relatives (e.g. adult siblings), as well as family members outside the household.

Some of the younger participants often described that they felt responsible to financially provide for the household as their parents were unable to do so. Most participants indicated that their choices about employment versus higher education were directly related to providing financial support to their families. Yet, these choices were closely linked to cultural expectations, particularly around providing support for parents and extended kin, and while these may have been “tacit agreements” (Moen & Wethington, 1992, p. 239), they were not necessarily happy agreements. Other scholars, such as Nishitani (2020), argue that amongst Pasifika diaspora, providing financial support for family members is viewed as an expression of love.

While much of the discussion focused on financial contributions to the household, participants also discussed non-financial responsibilities. These primarily included caring for younger siblings. Siblings, particularly younger siblings, were often discussed in interviews, with participants expressing a strong sense of responsibility to ensure that they had the best opportunities available to them, particularly in school. Looking after older family members in the household was also identified as a responsibility, particularly amongst female participants. Older relatives, including grandparents or aunts and uncles, typically lived with family rather than on their own. Here it is evident that individual choices are constrained by cultural and familial expectations around responsibility and duty.

Responsibility to the community

While responsibility to the household was often intertwined with responsibility to family members, the participants also described responsibility to their extended family and the broader Samoan communities. Samoan cultures place high value on ‘family’, both immediate family members (i.e. parents, children, siblings) as well as extended family members (e.g. cousins, grandparents) (Faleolo, 2016; Stanley & Kearney, 2017), and hold a strong sense of responsibility towards them. This responsibility was often described in terms of financial obligations or *fa’alavelave*. However, this sense of responsibility also extends beyond kinship and into the broader Pasifika community. In particular, the idea of ‘family’ was often extended to include members of the participant’s church. This is not uncommon, as other research has found that Pasifika diaspora use the church as a way to obtain a sense of belonging (Stanley & Kearney, 2017). However, being a part of the church community also comes with additional responsibilities, particularly financial obligations.

Beyond church, participants described fiscal responsibility at a community level, in Australia, New Zealand, and the islands. These were typically referred to as *fa’alavelave*, which roughly translates as ‘obligation’ (Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009). However, *fa’alavelave* is more complicated than simply

'obligation'; it refers to the cultural rituals and gift giving associated with life course events, such as weddings and funerals. Historically, gifts such as food and mats were given at these events; however, more recently and particularly in diasporic communities in Australia and New Zealand, this has translated into giving cash. This shift from giving food to giving cash was described in different ways by the participants. For many second and third generation diaspora, *fa'alavelave* was often spoken of with exasperation.

Given that the Samoan population is over-represented in low socio-economic areas of Greater Brisbane (Batley, 2017), it is perhaps unsurprising that the impacts of *fa'alavelave* were frequently described as a source of tension for the participants. While seen as central to Samoan culture, *fa'alavelave* was described as both frustrating and uplifting. The emphasis was always on the interconnectedness and interdependence of community members; that you give but people will also give to you when you are in need. However, the collective nature of this process was often seen at odds with the more individualistic nature of broader Australian society. Indeed, some participants described deliberate processes enacted to separate themselves from the community in order to avoid cultural obligations.

The tension between meeting individual needs versus community needs was particularly apparent when discussing how to meet these financial obligations. The best way to approach *fa'alavelave* differed between participants, although typically second or third generation participants promoted the use of a savings account or similar to help plan for these expenses. However, many participants described situations where family members ended up in significant personal debt (e.g. by taking out payday loans with high interest rates) in order to meet financial obligations. This had an impact on other members of the household, who were often then upon to help pay the loans.

In addition to *fa'alavelave*, participants also described regularly sending funds back to the islands as remittances, a phenomenon that has been described elsewhere (see, for example, Connell & Brown, 2004; Faleolo, 2016; McGavin, 2014). Indeed, there is evidence that remittances strengthen cultural identity amongst Pasifika populations (McGavin, 2014). While this phenomenon (sending money 'home') is common amongst migrant groups (Baak, 2015), it's particularly prominent amongst Samoan (and other Pasifika) diaspora in Australia (Brown, Leeves, & Prayaga, 2013; Karunarathne & Gibson, 2014).

Responsibility to the future self

In addition to responsibility to the household, and responsibility to their family and community, the participants discussed – often explicitly – how they had a responsibility to achieve a 'better life' for themselves. The majority of participants were second or third generation migrants, and described their parents moving from the islands in search of a better life, particularly for their current and/or future children. The desire to 'do better' was often linked to being able to better provide for family and community, typically linked to earning more income and/or increasing their own knowledge.

The path to a 'better life' was thus often seen in the form of earning a higher income, generally obtainable through higher education and/or non-blue collar jobs. The life trajectories of their parents and/or other family members had a direct influence on the choices the participants made

about their education and employment. In particular, low-skilled work such as factory work was viewed as a 'failure'. For many participants, education – especially tertiary education – was seen as the path to a better life; a common strategy amongst lower socioeconomic households (Callander, Schofield, & Shrestha, 2012; Callander, Schofield, Shrestha, & Kelly, 2012; McNamara et al., 2019; Southgate et al., 2016).

Linked to higher educational attainment, citizenship was something that was raised often in terms of opportunities for a better life. Many Pacific Islanders living in Australia are New Zealand citizens, which has implications for access to welfare benefits and other benefits such as the higher education tuition fee loan scheme (currently known as HELP, typically not available to New Zealand citizens). Access to the benefits available to Australian (as opposed to New Zealand) citizens was something that was often raised by the participants, especially in relation to opportunities. This further demonstrates the impact of linked lives and family adaptive strategies on the life trajectories of Samoan diaspora living in Greater Brisbane.

Concluding thoughts

As can be seen from the above examples, responsibility plays out amongst the Samoan diaspora through their households, their communities and themselves. However, the tension between the individual and the collective was evident in how these responsibilities were described. The benefits of being part of the community, i.e. the collective, were considered central to the lives of the participants, particularly through support and a sense of belonging. However, belonging came at a cost, which many of the second and third generation participants struggled to justify. Nonetheless, these responsibilities were also discussed as a key part of culture and something to be valued and continued. Notions of reciprocity, in particular, need to be further unpacked and explored in this context.

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