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# **The production of precariousness and the racialisation of Pacific workers in the Australian horticultural industry**

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# Research Project

## Research Team

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**Partner Organisations:** Sunraysia Mallee Ethnic Communities Council (SMECC) & Mallee Sports Assembly

## Funding Sources

Australian Research Council Linkage grant (2015-2019)

La Trobe University Research Focus Area – Transforming Human Societies (2014-2018)





- **Interviews and surveys:**

**Pacific Islanders (mostly Tongans, Fijians, Cook Islanders, Solomon Islanders and Ni-Vanuatu)**

- 104 households, covering 300 household members (includes 4 non-Pacific spouses)
- 93 semi-structured interview participants

**Stakeholders**

13 representatives from health services, the Victorian Department of Health and Human Services, the education sector, community organisations, service providers

- **Focus groups and workshops:** (Numbers are total individuals, some of whom participated more than once)

**Pacific Islanders**

- 8 focus group sessions with high school students (16-18 years old): 13 students
- 5 focus group sessions with young adults (18 years old-37 years old): 18 people
- 3 workshops with members of the Pacific Islander Advisory Group: 14 people

**Stakeholders**

- 2 focus group sessions with high school principals and teachers: 18 people

# The main argument

Many analyses of migrant work have highlighted migrant status as source of precariousness - in Australia (Boese et al 2013), Canada (Fudge 2012) and the UK (Anderson 2010)

Examples of precarious migrant status: temporary visa; irregular visa status

BUT: Experiences of migrants from the Pacific and their children born in Australia highlight another source of precariousness in employment: racialisation

# Pacific Islanders in Sunraysia: workforce in horticulture industries

Australian citizens and permanent residents, including Australian-born children of migrants

NZ citizen, special category visa holders including Cook Islanders

SWP participants

Irregular migrants



# SWP participants' precarity and settler's observation

Semisi: 20 year old man, once participated in the SWP, left the employer after experiencing periods of no-income and low payment (\$150 a week)

2<sup>nd</sup> generation Tongan woman who lives with Semisi

“We have a lot of overstayers here and it's some of the reason why there is a lot of overstayers here, is because stupid programs that contractors have bringing people from Tonga and they bring them to come work and then they, of course they cheat them, then they take off”.

→Diaspora communities' observation: Being an 'overstayer' might be better?

(e.g. free movement, more autonomy??)

# Both irregular migrants and settlers experience precarious work

## **Irregular migrant (a Tongan woman in her 40s)**

Alisi: They didn't give us the right money. Sometimes they told us to wait, and we wait and wait and wait.

Interviewer: When you had problems like that, what did you do?

Alisi: We can't do anything because we are overstayers. We feel bad, but that's it. We can't do anything, we don't go anywhere, we don't tell anyone anything

## **Settler (a Tongan woman in her 30s)**

Mele: Last year the farm that we work for, there's always an issue with the payment. It's always late and the hours is always wrong...

Interviewer: When there's a problem, what do you do?

Mele: We just don't ... We just don't return back to that farm ...I mean, bottom line like you're out. There is no like something that will protect you from ...

# Both irregular migrants and settlers experience OHS breaches

## **Settler (Cook Islander woman in her 40s)**

“They're spraying and you're outside ...They'll be spraying at another patch but it travels to where you're working ...The chemical is so strong. It just gives you headaches ... Because the chemicals just flies. Especially on windy days ... that's the other thing about working on the farm. Like you could be in a different patch and it could be spraying somewhere else. Because the sprays are up here, they'll still travel to where you are.”

## **Irregular migrants (Fijian woman in her 50s)**

When I first started working like I find it very hard. I really find it very hard. First day it was really, really, it was very hot because that day it was 42 degrees.... Then we were running out of water when we worked there and the place where we work was very far from our cabin. We couldn't walk back to get water.

# Cook Islander youth's experience

Interviewer: How much do you get paid hourly?

John: It's ... we ask but they don't tell us.

Interviewer: What do you mean?

John: Like ... I ask so many times ... like, "How much do I get paid hourly?" ... to the ... our employers there ... "Oh, ask this person" and then that person would say, "Oh, ask that person." And then it's just ... you just ...

Interviewer: Oh, so you don't know?

John: Nah, none of us do.

Interviewer: So you get paid ... :

John; Yeah, I get the pay slip but it doesn't say how much we get on it.

Interviewer: Does it make you worried?

John: A little bit but when I think of it, I come from the islands. I'm pretty much thankful for anything. If it's ... I don't know, I'm just thankful I have a income. And I have something to put aside for myself.

# Then...

Why do settlers and second-generation Pacific people still work on farms?

One of the common phrases that appeared in interviews and focus group discussions

‘It’s not about choice’

# Stereotypes: Pacific people as farmworkers

- **Media**

- Unlike Australian and backpacker employees, workers from the Pacific are accustomed to tough manual labour in rural areas and have the mental and physical stamina needed to undertake the work. (*Shepparton News* 2017)

- **First generation migrant**

- They [Australians] know that we are hard-working people, but I think they meant in the farm. I think that's ... I don't know, but the stereotyping. "Oh, she is a Pacific Islander, she's really good at picking fruits." (Tongan woman in her 40s)

- **Australia-born youth**

- [When] we don't do schoolwork and we muck around, they'll be like, "Oh, you're going to end up in the grape farm, grapevine back in the farm or something. [Teachers say] "If you don't use your brains, you're going to end up in the farms". (Cook Islander man 17)

# Tongan settler's experience

Sometimes I have the idea maybe because of the race, who I am as a Polynesian, as a Pacific Islanders. I was really qualified and I had the skills ... but just being turned away. Most of the work that I've applied for didn't have any chance of having an interview. I was just straight up being told thank you for applying but you're not suitable for any job. Was very frustrating... I was trying to do other courses so I can get my foot to paid work. I've done a certificate II in community services, and tried to get into some work in an area but I couldn't. I thought I'll and see if I can do another certificate 3 in teacher's aide. I did that for 6 months. When I did my placement with the school they offered me to work [two years ago] ... I [had] tried to get into the retail area like shops. Same thing, they just looked at me and maybe they think my age is getting and maybe they think that I'm not capable of doing anything good, but I have been trying so much. I've tried so much as long as I can get employed. I even applied for the dry-cleaners. (Tongan woman in 50s)

# Second-generation

When I look for heaps of jobs and then they sound happy on the phone ... But then when I go to the place and they see what I look like. Like Islander, and my skin ... yeah probably my skin ... But that's what I feel like. Sometimes when they look at my skin and my ... I'm an Islander, they go like, "Oh", they act like, "oh yeah, we want you for this job" but like they don't really wanna ... Like, they sound happy on the phone but when we come there they don't really sound happy. Like they didn't want us. Or they go, "Oh, I didn't know you were Islander". Because I don't really sound like ... My family don't really sound like Islanders on the phone so, yeah ... That's to me ... Cause I called heaps of places and they sound happy, but then when I go there they don't sound happy ... They probably think of Islanders as lazy and that. So that is probably one of the reasons. But some reasons probably cause ... yeah, the skin colour is different to them. (19 year old Cook Islander man)

We're known to be people who can't be trusted, just because of our class, gangs, violences ... we're not educated, we didn't finish school, we're known to be pickers ... It's hard because we try to make it there. Even though our photo is not in our resume, but our name says it all ... They can't employ you, they can't pronounce your names. They rather get someone whose name is easier to call and [they're] not scared of. (21 year old Tongan woman)

# Exclusion from support and funding

“We're in a bit of a conundrum at the moment ...We have to kind of look to go exploring for supports for our Pasifika students, where I know exactly who to call if I need support for Koorie students in multitude of areas. I know who to call within the department of education. I know who to call for our EAL students who are from Muslim backgrounds or from, you know. That's much easier for us to target”. (High school Principal)

“I don't think the community acknowledges or recognises that some of our Pacific Island people are very similar to our people that come from Afghanistan or something ... They've grown in a country that has no wars, but it does, they come from a language background that's not English, they come from a lack of maybe no education”. (High school teacher)

# Conclusion

- Pacific workers' case studies demonstrate that precarious employment conditions (e.g. wage theft and poor OH&S) in horticultural work affect Pacific people across and beyond different legal statuses
- Racial stereotypes about Pacific people normalise their exploitation and restrict their opportunities as jobseekers outside the horticultural sector.
- Support between Pacific people on different migrant statuses partly emerges as only source of support
- To understand Pacific people's experiences of persistent precariousness, it is important to look beyond migrant status and understand how the racialisation of farmwork impacts their employment experiences within and beyond the horticultural sector.