

# Voicing the Unspoken: Breaking through the Barriers of Mainstream Institutionalized Deafness to Pacific Therapeutic Practices

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*This paper explores the development of two significant cross-cultural research projects in Pasifika psychology. Both projects were designed to speak into the "silent space" of unexplored Pasifika practices and needs in the field of mental health.*

## The principles of cross-cultural research

The publication of Derek Freeman's *Margaret Mead and Samoa* (1983) and Linda Tuhiwai Smith's *Decolonizing methodologies* (1999) problematised the involvement of European researchers in analyzing the cultural dynamics and value systems of indigenous people in the Pacific. These and similar works drew attention to the ways that power can be misused in research and interpretation, the misconstrual of unfamiliar worlds, and the tendency of European researchers to colonize indigenous peoples by stealing their intellectual property and cultural treasures for use, and misuse, in the European academy. Pacific peoples can become decolonized only by "reclaiming indigenous perspectives, knowledge, and wisdom that have been devalued or suppressed because they were or are not considered important or worthwhile" (Helu Thaman, 2003, p. 2). Pacific peoples have endured decades of disempowering research, with little social or economic improvement in their health and education (Vaiioleti, 2006, p. 22).

Cross-cultural research teams comprised of pālagi and Pasifika researchers are obliged to take these issues seriously if their research results are to have validity. The literature on cross-cultural research sets out a number of principles that should guide cross-cultural teams. One of the most important is that *the voice of the participants should be preserved*, and that research data should not be twisted by the importation of the researchers' agenda and concerns (Bishop & Glynn, 1999, p. 103). Battiste (1996, as cited in Umulliko Indigenous Education Centre, 2005, p. 2) argues that "Indigenous researchers

cannot rely on colonial languages and thought to define our reality. If we continue to define our reality in the terms and constructs drawn from Eurocentric diffusionism, we continue the pillage of our own selves." In a cross-cultural research team, this raises interesting questions which argue against equality of team members, but for equity, and for the regular privileging of the indigenous voice over the European academic voice.

A second principle is that cross-cultural research be *participant driven*. The participants must find the research topic culturally meaningful, and decisions must be distributed equally among the researchers and the participants, with both sharing the research agenda, initiating and articulating the research questions, guarding the autonomy of the participants, and interpreting the meaning of the data (Gibbs, 2001, p. 679). This principle underpinned 'The Afakasi Project' from its inception, as well as characterising the development of *Penina uliuli*.

A third principle is that everything must be *negotiated with cultural consultants, sanctioned and checked by them and then returned to the participants*, however symbolically. This included decision making in determining the research process; joint participation in conducting the research process; participating in reflexive processes in the analysis and interpretation of research data; and co-presenting or checking the presentation of the results in the form of publications. Integral to the effectiveness of these processes were the relational dynamic of *whakawhanaungatanga* that has been described as a "culturally constituted metaphor" for conducting research (Bishop, 1996, p. 215)—in our group, a

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sense of connectedness with, and deep respect for, one another—and the *talanoa* (a Tongan term) or democratic process that took place not only face to face in group meetings, but also by means of frequent email discussions that included the Hawaiian members of the writing team for *Penina uliuli*.

Two different ways of returning things to the participants were part of our joint work. Sometimes the materials were returned orally, as in the final *fono* of ‘The ‘Afakasi Project’. At other times, they were returned in writing, as with *Penina uliuli*, a project devoted to the wellbeing of the greater Pasifika community, and in which the Pasifika authors of the collected essays could see their own wisdom and knowledge displayed in print form, but with themselves named as the sole resource. In this way, something was “left on the ground”, rather like the Māori *wero*, wherein a gift is shared in the midst of a challenge that its meaning be correctly recognized.

To these, we added a fourth principle: that pālagi researchers had the right to enter into a cross-cultural research partnership not because of their academic credentials and interests, but because *the researchers had done “the hard yards”*. This was interpreted to mean that they could not be like “snowbirds,” who fly in and out when it suits them. It meant, rather, that the pālagi researchers had to have deep prior working relationships with the indigenous members of the cross-cultural team, who could verify their credibility and trustworthiness for the others, a sense of cultural protocols (or at least a willingness to learn), the ability to listen and respond when they were being corrected, and a true sense of humility and gratitude in the face of the cultural treasures which were being shared with them.

During the research, a fifth cross-cultural principle emerged: that the *European researchers must accept that they will never understand fully*. This principle became evident as the pālagi researchers were forced to engage the radical otherness of the Pasifika co-researchers and research participants. This is in line, however, with the writings of Linda Tuhiwai Smith: “It galls us that Western researchers and intellectuals can assume to know all that is possible to know of us, on the basis of their brief encounters with some of us” (Smith, 1999, p. 1). Indigenous people must always be honoured as those who are the creators of

their own cultures and nations, and their rich insights and experiences cannot be fully comprehended simply through participation in a joint, cross-cultural project.

### **The development of *Penina uliuli***

The genesis of *Penina uliuli: Contemporary challenges in mental health for Pacific peoples* (Culbertson et al., 2007) was a conversation in which Margaret Agee and Philip Culbertson, both pālagi faculty members at the University of Auckland, shared their frustration at the scarcity of published materials in Pasifika mental health that were suitable for use in the classroom, and that would replace Philip’s earlier, out-of-print, edited book on counselling issues (1997). They dreamed together of a collection of essays by Pasifika writers that would be a valuable resource for students training in mental health, theology, counselling, and cultural studies. In the project, they wanted the Pasifika authors to be able to speak for themselves, without their voices being filtered through a European agenda. Consequently, they decided that their tasks in such a project would be to “hold the space” and “hold the process”, to facilitate experienced Pasifika writers and encourage inexperienced Pasifika writers, and to project-manage the manuscript from conception to publication with an international publisher. In essence, they chose to fall silent, so that Pasifika voices could fill the heretofore silent spaces.

Inherent in their intention to “hold the space” was an understanding of the significance of relationships and of the *va*, defined by Melanie Anae (2007) as the space between participants that is not empty but which creates relationship and holds them together in a context that is meaningful and that enables meaning to be found and created together. From the inception of the projects, their task has in part been comparable with Anae’s (2007) concept of *teu le va*, or tidying up the space, so the work could proceed through observing relational arrangement protocols, cultural etiquette, and proscribed and proscribed behaviour that reflect moral and ethical underpinnings that have guided our collective practices.

Joining them in this task was Cabrini Makasiale, a Fijian-born Tongan who works as a psychotherapist

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and cultural advisor with Relationship Services in Auckland, and with whom both Philip and Margaret had a long working relationship. Approached to be the Cultural Consultant for the project, Cabrini became one of the book's co-editors as well. A list of potential writers for the project was drawn up, and those nominated were invited to an initial fono. This was conducted according to Pasifika protocols, including the hospitality of food and drink, a blessing of the project by a Pasifika minister, the singing of hymns in several languages, and an open discussion about what it would mean to participate. Subsequent meetings followed a similar pattern. Over the full year during which the writing group met, some participants withdrew, and others took their place. The proposed publisher eventually suggested the inclusion of some Hawaiian writers, and this pan-Pacific gesture was greeted with delight by the group participants.

Early on, the group sought a metaphor which would give focus to the project as a whole. Philip and Margaret had challenged each of the writers to "find a topic in mental health that you are passionate about, and speak your truth." But soon afterwards, the question was raised in the group, in response to this challenge, "How can we find our own voices and yet disagree with each other?" As the group discussed this problem, the Pasifika *fale* began to emerge as a metaphor for being different and yet connected, for being individuated and yet in relationship. The inspiration for this metaphor was probably the *fonofale* method, as developed by Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann (2001).

The foundation of the *fale* was understood to be "the past we cherish, the present we live in, and the future we anticipate" reflecting a collective desire to respect the past but also to challenge practices that were destructive or unhelpful, in order to build for the future. The poles of the *fale* were described as each writer's "unique identity, genealogy, life experience, belief system, and connection with a culture or combination of culture." The space of the *fale* was the group's own inter-dynamic *va*, "where a family can come together with its own way of doing things, and do that in a mutually owned, shared space." The values within such a *va* include openness, historical relationality, respect, careful listening, hospitality,

and process. The roof of the *fale* was conceptualized as "our pan-Pacificness," as well as the shared experiences of marginalization and colonization. As one participant summarised, *Penina uliuli* is intended to be as open "as a *fale*, where there are many entrances and exits and almost limitless opportunities to engage the complex spaces." Further details of how this metaphor was developed and amplified are included in the "Introduction" to *Penina uliuli*.

The salient points arising from this two-year, cross-cultural process of producing a book together were summed up by Nua Silipa as:

- The value of the Pasifika consultant to ensure a "decolonized" process, context and outcomes;
- Being a symbolic "bridge" between the *pālagi* and Pasifika worlds;
- The role of fluency in more than one language, by both consultant and participants;
- The indigenous need for the *pālagi* doorway;
- Reciprocity (Pasifika wisdom and *pālagi* tools);
- The genuineness of the collaborative relationship created by mutually caring about one another.

In this sense, *Penina uliuli* is indeed an example of a participant-driven research project, designed to benefit the Pasifika community as a whole by "telling the truth" about the mental health needs of that community, and to identify the best modalities with which to address these needs. It meets the criteria set forth in Battiste's (1996, as cited in UIHEC, 2004) "indigenous research agenda", in that the project is overtly political, highly emotive, concerned about the survival of indigenous peoples and cultures, driven by a purposeful dream, and shaped by strategic purposes and activities.

### The value of case-study methodologies

*Penina uliuli* showcased the original work of 19 Pasifika writers—primarily Samoan, Tongan, Niuean, and Hawaiian. This diverse collection of essays examined important issues related to mental health among Pacific Islanders through the topics of

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identity, spirituality, the unconscious, mental trauma, and healing. Also illustrated in some essays are ways of working with mental health clients that are more Pasifika-friendly than some of the widely-assumed approaches in the European world. An essay by Seilosa Patterson illustrates, through case excerpts, the adaptation of British object-relations theory for use with Polynesian clients. Cabrini Makasiale argues the importance of “interpathy” in Pasifika counselling, and illustrates her point with a case study in which the metaphor of rocks and the rain is used effectively. Fia Tupou uses an extended case study to demonstrate how the traditional Samoan value of *mea-alofa* served to bring healing to a client diagnosed with severe mental problems.

Makasiale uses the theories of David Augsburger (1986) to explore the difference between sympathy, empathy, and interpathy. Augsburger writes: “Interpathy is the ability to enter a second culture with all its strengths and weaknesses as equally valid as one’s own... Interpathy carries with it a respectful, dynamic inter-relatedness that makes possible the transcendence of cultural limitation” (p. 14). Makasiale rephrased Augsburger’s point as meaning “(The client’s) experience becomes both the frame and the picture,” as opposed to the European approach, in which the health professional’s experience is both the frame and the picture. Her motto, then, for effective mental health care in a Pasifika context is “Meet me where I am before you invite me to a new place.” As well, she challenges mental health professionals to realize that “If you know only one culture, it probably means that you know no culture.”

Fia Tupou’s *mea-alofa* model understands some forms of mental health treatment as the giving and receiving of intergenerational gifts of love and respect. The *mea-alofa* model, inspired by the work of Webber-Dreadon (1999) and Seiuli (2004), presumes careful observance of Samoan cultural protocols, and works best when both practitioner and client are bi-lingual, and so it is designed to be used by Pasifika providers with Pasifika clients. It also presumes the involvement of the whole family unit, at least in the last phases of the counselling process. The value of the *mea-alofa* approach is that it brings together the client’s physical, emotional, familial, and

spiritual attributes. It thereby envelops a Samoan client holistically.

### The evolution of ‘The Afakasi Project’

At the mid-point of developing *Penina uliuli*, the group chose to address the issue of what was missing from the book that needed to be said. Remembering a previous conversation about identity politics, one of the participants suggested that the topic of ‘afakasi identity could be a significant inclusion, as an area of experience that seemed to her cloaked in silence. Several of the women who were themselves ‘afakasi volunteered to participate in a group discussion, with Margaret as facilitator, to contribute to developing an essay in which their identities could remain anonymous. Breaking the silence with one another in this way was such a rewarding experience, that everyone decided to put their names to the essay as co-authors.

Out of the conviction that this needed to be taken further, a participant-driven, qualitative research project evolved (Gibbs, 2001). With Philip and Margaret, the original group became a research team of Pasifika and pālagi co-researchers, with the inclusion of two Samoan ‘afakasi male colleagues, and Nua Silipa as cultural consultant and independent data analyst. Later, three more Pasifika consultants became involved to assist with the youth phase of the project. All decision-making was collaborative, including negotiation of the research agenda, questions, method, and process. Permission to undertake the project was obtained from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee, and a grant was obtained from the University’s Staff Research Fund.

The initial discussion had reflected the characteristics of a focus group (Krueger & Casey, 2000), and retrospectively served as a pilot. This method was therefore chosen as a culturally appropriate, collective process of data gathering, providing participants with an audience for the telling of their stories, through which shared meanings were created. Gender-specific groups of late adolescents (18-24 years) and older adults (30+ years) were facilitated by pālagi/Pasifika pairs of same-gender researchers, and each group met for 2-3 hours. The 60 participants included 19 adult women (4 groups); 8 adult men (2

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groups); 20 young women (3 groups) and 13 young men (3 groups).

Pasifika members of the research team recruited participants through personal contacts and snowballing. As “insider researchers” (Tupuola, 2006, p. 293), they bridged the gap between the research team and the researched by inviting prospective participants to separate fonos (one for the adults and a subsequent one for the young people) to explain the project further, meet the others involved, divide into focus groups according to geographical convenience, and collectively decide when and where the groups would meet. They also co-facilitated the focus groups.

Transcripts were analysed using grounded theory methodology (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), working closely with the participants’ language and concepts. Opportunities were given to participants to review and comment on the summary of themes, according to the principle of host verification (Miles & Huberman, 1984), and analysis was also checked by the independent analyst on the research team.

Having began with a fono, a final fono was planned for all participants to serve as a kind of envelope for the focus groups, as well as an opportunity to “give back” to the participant community by reporting the emergent themes from the research. At all fonos, and at focus group meetings, hospitality was provided in the form of a warm welcome, sharing in a light meal, and the provision of petrol vouchers to acknowledge

participants’ contribution to the research process in terms of time and travel expenses. Through every aspect of our approach, our team thereby attempted to minimize the potential for cross-cultural research to become “re-colonizing” (Quanchi, 2004, p. 4).

Although the field work for The ‘Afa’asi Project has been completed, the processes of data analysis and writing up the results for publication are ongoing. The first article, based on the men’s discussions, is listed in the references below (Culbertson & Agee, 2007), and more are to follow.

### Conclusion

In her presentation at the 2007 NMPPS conference in Hamilton, Seilosa Patterson used the image of a baby, something miraculous and new, born of the past but looking to the future, to depict the spirit of these projects. Just as the cry of each newborn breaks the air with a unique new sound, so we hope to break through the barriers of mainstream institutionalised deafness to Pacific therapeutic practices as we bring forth new voices and fresh points of view through our book, and call on others to recognise the importance of acknowledging the effects of complex cultural heritages on identity and wellbeing. While we ourselves have heeded the voices of our predecessors and contemporaries who have guided our work, we believe that our work together contributes to our collective capacity to give voice to the unspoken, and to enable the voices of Pacific practitioners and researchers to be heard.

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