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Hybrid cultural identities and Cook Islands tertiary students in a cross-cultural contact zone:

A case study approach

A thesis

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Abstract

This thesis focuses on how cultural identities of Cook Islands students are renegotiated in 'the Conch', a dedicated Pacific student space at the University of Waikato. Of particular interest is the significance of the Conch for identity formation and cultural maintenance for Cook Islands students. Additionally, processes that facilitate or hinder intercultural relations at the Conch is investigated. This research adopts an ecological approach to research in addition to Pacific methodologies to explore the complexity of hybridized identities, experiences of intercultural encounters, and how a sense of belonging is established in the Aotearoa Cook Islander student community. This case study showcases the complexities of identity construction, the nature of group membership, and the fluidity of culture. The key themes of cultural continuity, power dynamics, and perception of minoritisation are further discussed. Essentially, enacting cultural identity remains a fluid and dynamic process.

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Chapter One: Introduction

In our increasingly interconnected world, rising numbers of Cook Islanders migrate and adjust to the sociocultural norms of Aotearoa where they face new challenges to their cultural identity. Due to the Cook Islands' unique position as a self-governing country in free association with Aotearoa, Cook Islanders enjoy New Zealand citizenship, open travel, and labour and education opportunities. Efforts to settle into new settings can indeed be aided by the positive social relationships provided in the home, but can also be hindered by an interaction of personal factors, relational factors, and societal factors such as dedicated resources for the migrant settlement process. The diasporic landscape invites myriad new ways to conceptualize and express one's Pacific identity. Although more Cook Islanders reside outside of their '*Ipukarea* (homeland) and have to negotiate and adapt to a vastly diverse multicultural social landscape, these changes raise important points on the fluidity of Cook Islands cultural identity in negotiations of place.

This thesis will investigate how cultural identities of Cook Islands students are renegotiated at the Conch, a dedicated Pacific student space at the University of Waikato. My research questions are: what is the significance of the Conch for identity formation and cultural maintenance of Cook Islands students? What facilitates or hinders intercultural relations at the Conch? I will explore the complexity of hybridized identities, experiences of intercultural encounters, and how a sense of belonging is established in the Aotearoa Cook Islander student community. By adopting an ecological approach to case-based research and employing Pacific methodologies, my thesis is a humble offering to the body of research on Cook Islands hybrid identities that have emerged as a result of migration and intercultural interactions, and to contribute to the dialogue on how Pacific students can be collaborators in constructing contact zones in a culturally sensitive way.

Identity and Cultural Continuity

Assertions of identity, especially cultural identity, are typically concerned with the declaration of differences and boundaries drawn between others. For Pacific islanders, a regional identity, an effort towards a sense of community and unity within the diversity a Pacific community presents is directly in line with tenets of community psychology. Migrant research into the Pacific diaspora highlight the cultural practices members of the Pacific community have adapted from their homelands in order to promote a sense of cultural continuity and a sense of wellbeing within their diaspora contexts (Faleolo, 2020). It stands to reason then that the importance of cultural continuity to Pacific migrant settlement begs inquiry into the notion of interdependence and the construction of places to promote solidarity, mutual understandings, and personal wellbeing (Kelly, 2006). The adaptation of the Pacific cultural identity into new contexts invites research into how places succeed or fail in meeting the psychological needs of its community members. Cultural identity has been considered a protective factor for Pacific peoples against acts of discrimination, thus demonstrating the importance to encourage the enactment of cultural identity in Aotearoa (Kapeli et al., 2020).

Liminal Spaces and Hybrid Identities

A multicultural society like Aotearoa provides a host of spaces where intercultural contact is commonplace, and increasing encounters can contribute to a blend of existing cultural practices and new interpretations of cultural practices (Somerville & Perkins, 2003), thus shaping the trajectory of a culture. This cultural hybridisation reshapes Cook Islander identities into an amalgam of different cultural identities, which has implications for initiatives where cultural competency is integral to its success. Locales to articulate cultural identity, and indeed a hybridised cultural identity, remains a vital part of migrant settlement in the host society; a notion that has since become a priority in the tertiary education setting.

This matters because cultural competency as a determination for funding scholarships in itself is a vague term given the cultural contestations around the definition of culture in a multicultural space. The differences in the social landscape for born and homegrown Cook Islanders and the generations of overseas born and/or raised Cook Islanders poses questions about how cultural practices are cultivated, moulded and passed on to the next generation in these contrasting environments.

An Ecological Approach

Historically, research on Pacific island people have taken a deficit focus to mental health and wellbeing. Contrary to this, community psychology urges a strengths-based approach in addition to consideration of the context of the individual. Adopting an ecological understanding of people within their environment gives rise to themes of prevention over treatment, interdisciplinary collaboration, and the promotion of diversity (Moritsugu et al., 2013). The cornerstone of the ecological perspective is the concept of interdependence, which is adopted from ecological biology and its study of the concept of the ecosystem in which all organisms are dependent on (Kelly, 2006). In relation to community psychology, interdependence links the shared experiences of individuals and places to provide a worldview of events, people, and places (Kelly, 2006). The notion of interdependence encourages inquiry into the ties between people and places in order for the professional (in my case, an aspiring professional) to become an asset for members of the community. This creates a uniquely intellectual and emotional endeavour for the professional to understand how connection is developed, nurtured and evolved.

Cook Islanders in Diaspora: The Conch

The Conch is a dedicated Pacific student space at the University of Waikato that aims to cater to the Pacific student body by providing cultural support and a community space. It serves as a contact zone, a social space with ample opportunity to interact with other cultures,

in which Pacific students interact with other Pacific students. However, a space intended to accommodate the many diverse Pacific island cultures can also have the potential to inadvertently homogenize Pacific island people, thus marginalizing the smaller Pacific island groups. This is a theme I intend to investigate through my research questions. The Cook Islands student body is one such minority Pacific Island group that is further made up of migrant Cook Islanders and New Zealand Cook Islanders. Without adequate understanding of the dynamics of Pacific intercultural relations, the fluidity of cultural identity, hybrid identities, and inadequate resources to facilitate resolutions for intergroup tensions, then there is risk of conflict and the alienation of minority Pacific Island groups. In contrast, contact zones can be sites to facilitate (re)settlement and inclusion when it is inclusive of the interests of all migrant communities (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Therefore, being inclusive of the interests of each migrant Pacific island student groups brought to light through a culturally sensitive approach like *talanoa* would be more effective at facilitating settlement into student life.

Chapter Two: Literature Review

Pacific island cultures are often erroneously homogenized in attempts to classify a vast area of ocean that spans thousands of islands (Vercoe, 2013). Labelled "a term of convenience" by Pasikale and George (1995, p. 24, as cited in Tamasese et al., 2010), Pacific Island people were categorised into three main groups: Polynesian, Melanesian and Micronesian. These categories were based on Eurocentric notions of racial acceptability (D'Arcy, 2003). Hau'ofa's (2008) Oceanian perspective on cultural identity rejects these long-held and contested worldviews of the region while creating a new all-inclusive cultural identity for all who live and consider the region their home.

Through a Western lens, this proposed regional identity is no different to the Pacific Island people label, however Hau'ofa (2008) further explains that an identity that is grounded in something as vast as the sea should instead envelop the additional identities we have; an

identity that even exchanges between Pacific cultures through voyaging still left the complex political and social systems of each island group untouched (Vercoe, 2013). Instead, an Oceanian perspective recognises the hybridisation of cultural identities through the ever-growing cross-cultural matrix of diverse ethnic cultures that interact and call this region home.

Cook Islands Culture Through The Years

The retention of these distinctively diverse Pacific identities is one part of the dialogue on the various cultural maintenance practices related to the Cook Islands identity. The Cook Islands is made up of 15 islands that were unified under British rule as a single nation following its missionisation, which exerted heavy influence over traditional systems of governance and customs (Crocombe et al., n.d.). Peu Maori in Cook Islands culture has since undergone some reawakening from the 1980's through to the nineties as the country increasingly established national commemorative events, strengthening and mainstreaming cultural awareness in the curriculum and in government initiatives. Effects of postmodernity saw the Cook Islands identity reconstruct itself into what MacCannell describes as "ethnicity-for-tourism" (1992, p. 158, as cited in Clifford, 2013). This sentiment is also currently seen in modern debates in the Cook Islands regarding traditional expressive forms such as music and dance, which (Alexeyeff, 2004) argues as symptomatic of anxiety about authenticity, globalisation, cultural ownership and loss. Although the aforementioned adopt a damning position on Cook Islands cultural revival, tourism has arguably led to a sociopolitical and economic boom for the Cook Islands; providing resources to increase political stature and dialogue on social issues such as gender equality in political leadership (Newport, 2017). However, adherence to and acceptance of norms and practices have diminished over the years as the country gradually adopted new norms in adapting to modern living and its conveniences. The 1990's especially saw a shift towards a free-market approach which

arguably contributed to the gradual loss of traditional customs, like local community sharing of goods (Alexeyeff, 2008). Stringent economic reforms recommended by aid agencies in the Cook Islands that they were beholden to (Alexeyeff, 2008) saw neoliberal principles dominate the Cook Islands Maori psyche, which led to significant job losses and an exodus of a large portion of the population.

The theme of loss versus revitalisation is an ongoing debate in many island nations impacted by colonisation and neoliberalism. An example of revitalisation that is often seen as a bastardization of a once elite textile is the tivaivai, sometimes spelled tivaevae, a symbolic and culturally significant textile that has seen an innovative revitalisation in the form of machine-created pieces. Traditionally created by painstakingly hand-sewing, making concessions with traditional production of an iconic Cook Islands Maori symbol can be seen by some as in line with commercial imperatives (Horan, 2013).

Hau'ofa's (2008) popular dialogues further illustrate the effects of loss or weakening of cultural identity in the Pacific region. One could then argue that the interaction between Cook Islanders as constituent of an Oceanian cultural bloc and the hybridization of its cultural identity is a weakening of identity. This is disconcerting considering Indigenous perspectives of health point to cultural identity as a necessity for the health and wellbeing of indigenous people (Pulotu-Endemann, 2009). In contrast, ecological principles posited by Kagan et al. (2020) illustrate the fluidity of culture. Therefore, a counter-argument would emphasize the hybridization of identity as an evolutionary process in the emergence and growth of cross-cultural identities whose natural progression toward greater multiculturalism is, perhaps as Hau'ofa alluded, a response to the globalising reality of the region which further adds to the complexity of cultural identity in global citizenship.

Cook Islands Diaspora In Aotearoa

The 2016 Cook Islands census saw a 2% decrease since 2011, with a total population of 17, 434 with the highest concentration being on the island of Rarotonga (Cook Islands Statistics Office, 2016). The latest New Zealand census showed 80,532 Cook Islanders reside in New Zealand with a median age of 21, with 83.1% of the Cook Islands diaspora in 2018 reported New Zealand as their birthplace (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). It is important to note that reported birthplace does not necessarily indicate whether an individual would socially identify as Kiwi or Other themselves. As Hau'ofa put it, "Our diverse loyalties are much too strong for a regional identity ever to erase them." (Hau′ofa, 2008, p. 42). This sentiment is similarly echoed by some Pacific islanders born in New Zealand, as shown by Mila-Schaaf's (2012) study on strategies of second-generation Pacific islanders in Aotearoa, to negotiate challenging environments. The issue of being deliberately misrecognised (Wacquant, 2008) by members of ones' own cultural group is commonplace between second-generation Pacific islanders and island-born counterparts. Inability to speak one's mother tongue, in this case Cook Islands Maori, in most cases lead to confrontation and isolation. However, it's important to note that many overseas-born Pacific islanders enact identities that may have not been authenticated as Pacific (Mila-Schaaf, 2012).

The young median age of the Cook Islands diaspora suggests tertiary environments may be a likely space where Cook Islanders will frequent and interact with the social milieu of New Zealand. Literature on the Cook Islands diaspora is sparse, and a common pitfall of studies on Pacific wellbeing and identity is the homogenisation of Pacific populations; when Cook Islanders only make up less than a quarter of the total Pacific population in Aotearoa (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). This is further noted by Puna and Tiatia-Seath (2017) who stress the importance of culturally-specific policies and strategies to Pacific ethnic suicide prevention, which disproportionately impacts young Pacific people (Ministry of Health,

2019). Academic underachievement are known to affect Maori and Pacific more than European New Zealanders (Statistics New Zealand, 2018). In 2018, 33.1% of the Cook Islands population in Aotearoa were in tertiary studies compared to 20.1% of the European New Zealand ethnic group, with only 6.4% having a Bachelor's degree or above compared to 13.3% of the European New Zealand ethnic group (Statistics New Zealand, 2018).

Hybrid And Hyphenated Identities

With majority of Cook Islanders residing and being born overseas, a focus on hybridization and hyphenated identities is pertinent to understanding the diaspora experience to help inform culturally-specific strategies to achieving positive health outcomes. Hybrid identity in Pacific literature is gaining traction as Pacific and non-Pacific alike become cognizant of the many struggles associated with the diasporic experience. Bolatagici (2004) expands on hybridity as existing in Bhabha's notion of the third space (1991, as cited in Bolatagici, 2004), in which a non-essentialist notion of identity exists. Moeke-Maxwell (2005) adds that hybridity in itself is emancipatory, as it liberates the individual from dislocation due to existing simultaneously in different cultures. Wendt (1996) similarly describes 'between-ness', le va, as the separate space that relates and combines identities, but rejects the term 'hybrid' to favour 'blended', as research on hybridity is based on colonial theory of 'half-caste' vs 'full-blooded'. Bucking this boycott, 'half-caste'/'afakasi identity research by Culbertson and Agee (2007) describes the experiences of young Samoan men who identify as 'afakasi living with multiple identities, and the sense of belonging that resulted in simply carrying out cultural practices and rituals.

In contrast to 'afakasi, a common hyphenated identity amongst Cook Islanders, and likely other Pacific diasporas, are 'island-born' and 'New Zealand-born' which highlights locale rather than ethnicity. Manuela and Anae (2017) posit that the different needs of these two cohorts require 'ethnic enhancement' initiatives that target Pacific ontologies and

epistemologies. It is common for Pacific people to express their identity in hyphenated terms, such as Tongan-Maori, Samoan-Niuean, and other combinations. Tupuola (2004) describes these hybrid identities instead as 'edgewalkers', in support of cultural continuity rather than a creation or hybridization of cultural identities. Hyphenated identities in the Pacific population is fast becoming a topic amongst Pacific scholars, however there still remains a tendency to homogenise all Pacific peoples.

Another notion of hybrid identity in Pacific cultures is also that of cross-dressers, popularly known as fa'afafine or raerae in the Cook Islands. Alexeyeff (2007) examined this intersection of Western and local ideas of homosexuality. The complexities of overlapping identities has seen Western ideas adopted and hybridized.

Hybridized Contact Zones

Contact zones in migration studies describe the social spaces in which migrants have ample opportunity to interact with other cultures. Theorized by Pratt (1992, as cited in Tamaira & Fonoti, 2018) as a space whereby cultures converge and interact, tension and power imbalance also presents an obstacle to meaningful dialogue. An example of this is Wang and Collins' (2016) study on the experience of emotional dissonance in Chinese migrants in New Zealand resulting from unsuccessful intercultural exchanges. Barriers to intercultural encounters outlined in this study identified strategies that migrants employ such as acquiring new attitudes and behaviours, and home-making in order to bring a sense of home in public spaces (Koch & Latham, 2013). It is important to note that the participants from this study were fluent in English and already familiar with New Zealand culture, which suggests a deep-seated perception of difference and anxiety surrounding creating a new life in Aotearoa. In contrast, regrounding (Ahmed et al., 2003) is described as a process of empowerment that allows migrants to reorient their lives by generating a sense of home through objects and habits.

Examples of emotional dissonance is also echoed in Culbertson and Agee's (2007) study that showed afakasi Samoans hesitating to abide by cultural protocols and greet other Samoans in social situations, or to simply pass by. This emotional dissonance experienced by the participant in question was fuelled by the belief that sense of belonging must be "earned" (Culbertson & Agee, 2007, p. 87). Intercultural exchanges are increasingly becoming commonplace for Pacific cultures in Aotearoa, especially in what is described as zones of festivilization of Pacific cultures (Mackley-Crump, 2013). An example of this hybridized contact zone is the annual Pasifika Festival in Auckland, a city with a high concentration of Pacific peoples in Aotearoa. Borrowing from Hau'ofa's metaphor, the many Pacific ethnicities that converge in this space are as a sea of islands; a kinship network in displays of "intensifications of the connection between place and identity" (Duffy, 1999, p. 1, as cited in Mackley-Crump, 2013). Pacific festivals serve as a nexus between colonial, indigenous, and international cultures. It is important to note how different forms of contacts can occur especially in international Pacific festivals, as these are dynamic contact zones that see international audiences, Pakeha, and intergenerational Pacific islanders alike. Intergenerational contact is especially important for the Pacific diaspora, as this provides access to important oral history (Bendrups, 2008).

Sense Of Community And Belonging

All Pacific cultures are inherently community-oriented with great emphasis placed on relationships, as reflected by the networks of Pacific cultural, sports, and religious organisations. Sense of community is also a core value of community psychology, which acts as an umbrella term for sense of belonging, connectedness, and interdependence (Jimenez et al., 2019). Connectedness or social inclusion as a social determinant of health in the Pacific population are not reflected in national health surveys in Aotearoa. Social determinants of health are environmental factors that influence wellbeing at the personal and collective level

(Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Sarason's (1974) concept of psychological sense of community asserts that psychosocial problems and isolation are more likely to follow when the needs for support and connection are not met (as cited in Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). Durham et al. (2019) conducted a study on the significance of place for the Pacific diaspora in Australia, which reported that spaces for celebrating one's culture and access to culturally responsive education were regarded as essential by Pacific participants for health and wellbeing. It is worth noting that this particular study was conducted in Logan City which has the highest concentration of Pacific people in Queensland (Queensland Health, 2011). Locales like this offer many spaces for intercultural contact due to the sheer concentration of Pacific people, in contrast to other urban locations that may not offer many contact zones.

For young Pacific people, cultural club organizations in the education setting is a common space for Pacific to participate in cultural practices and are presented with opportunities to form connections to fellow Pacific of diverse ethnic and generational backgrounds (Ward et al., 2010). Such examples may include sports arenas, gymnasiums where social sports are held, and dedicated Pacific student associations in universities. In the current study, the setting for my case-based research takes place in a physical space dedicated to Pacific students at the University of Waikato. Accommodating the complex backgrounds and realities that Pacific students enact their identities in is no easy task in the construction of a Pacific place in the tertiary setting. For Cook Islands students, the history of immigration and colonisation, hyphenated identities, and adaptive processes employed to cope with new environments is a reality faced by members of the Cook Islanders diaspora in their bid to create a sense of belonging through various contact zones.

Chapter Three: Methodology

This chapter outlines my approach to the research and how that approach was designed to ethically capture the experiences of the participants, shed light on their

understanding of their own cultural identity and its ongoing role in their lives, as well as seek to engage myself and each participant in critical reflection. Of central concern is understanding the role of the Conch as a contact zone for intercultural interactions, identity formation, and a location to enact cultural maintenance practices. Firstly, I declare my position in the research. The value of Pacific research in academia is then discussed, ethical considerations are clarified, and the research process is explained.

Not quite islander, not quite white: Positioning Myself In The Research

I was born in Rarotonga, Cook Islands to a fair-skinned Mangaian mother and Rarotongan father. I am not what you may think a typical islander looks like. I am fair-skinned, burn easily in the sun, and struggle to understand my mother tongue and cultural customs. I am not a member of a congregation, nor am I knowledgeable in Cook Islands cultural activities. Yet I spent my formative years in the Cook Islands and maintain close connections with family members who are staunch members of our Cook Islands communities abroad.

These are not unique characteristics for Pacific children of the 90's, but a distant aftershock of colonisation in the Cook Islands when raised by parents who were smacked in school for speaking their mother tongue. Raised primarily by my mother in Rarotonga until I left the islands at the age of 14 for my secondary education, I have always been acutely aware of the liminal spaces I have fit myself into in order to pass for white. 'Not quite islander, not quite white' is a phrase I jokingly used to describe myself well into my early 20's until I pursued postgraduate studies. I recall a gentle conversation with a Pacific mentor who urged me to discontinue using the term "Plastic Islander" to describe myself, even if in jest. Studying towards a decolonial psychology through community psychology has been a confronting journey for me as I came to terms with my own colonised mind.

Growing up in Rarotonga as a fair-skinned local afforded me the benefits of favouritism amongst family members, teachers, storekeepers, bus drivers and the like. Having a child of a lighter skin tone was something of a status symbol in my extended family, alluding to colonial ancestors who ushered in the age of supposed enlightenment and Christianity. As a child you do not recognise this problematic trend amongst older generations of Cook Island Maori. For older cousins with darker skin who grew up in the Cook Islands, their living situation often meant more chores and more hidings. Growing up with these supposed privileges amongst my peers, however, was another story. The favouritism sometimes fostered resentment, and my lack of proficiency at my mother tongue and cultural practices were often met with derision. The rejection led me to seek refuge with other white-passing islanders and attend a predominantly white private school, while secretly yearning to connect with my culture. I began orienting my assignments in my undergraduate years towards researching cultural identity. Now a university-educated indigenous person, I feel driven to understand how cultural identity is nurtured and used as a source of strength in the Cook Islands community.

Valuing Indigenous Research

Historically, research on Pacific people have largely been viewed through a Western lens using a deficit perspective. This dominant approach of mainstream psychology draws upon philosophies and samples from Western, Educated, Industrialised, Rich, and Democratic (WEIRD) societies (Henrich et al., 2010). This form of research has borne many prejudices to be accepted as universal truths, effectively silencing and marginalising the diverse range of Pacific voices in their own field. The renaissance of pre-colonial indigenous culture, however, has led to an essentialist reconstruction of pre-colonial culture that Hokowhitu (2010) labelled an ontological blunder in the search for indigeneity in the ‘pure past’.

Decolonisation features heavily in indigenous research, as it actively seeks to expose often misinformed and damaging prejudiced understandings of indigenous cultures and societies (Smith, 2012). The Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith comments that challenging western ways of researching calls for the decolonisation of methodologies in order to allow indigenous knowledges to have a voice. For example, indigenous notions of wellbeing, such as whānau ora, are receiving further recognition in New Zealand in light of the collective negative outcomes in Maori mental health (O'Hagan et al., 2012). In decolonial theory, alternative knowledges are re-inserted into text so indigenous people can produce alternative histories (Hokowhitu, 2010).

The process of decolonisation is a mantle held by researchers to pare away at the dominant standards of academic methodologies, understandings, and agendas that have historically invalidated diverse Pacific worldviews. Decolonising methodologies has made way for the inclusion of otherwise non-academic concepts to indigenous research, such as tapu (sacred), and other such topics to be dealt with sensitively and with respect. Having a critical understanding of underlying assumptions in WEIRD psychology that set the tone for the driving force behind such research practices is key to deconstructing ethnocentric discourses.

Pacific Research

Pacific research models seek to show the essence of a particular culture's practices, beliefs, or concepts. Placing culturally significant values at the centre of the research process maintains the cultural relevancy of the research. Although Western research paradigms are often considered the standard by which research projects should go by, the goal for Pacific research is to shed light on the diverse Pacific worldviews put forth by Pacific, for Pacific (Anae, as cited in Te Ava, 2011). One of the advantages identified in Pacific research

conducted by a person of Pacific background, is the knowledge of cultural values and protocols, which assists in both knowledge distribution and networking.

Acknowledging underlying values as a part of cultural responsivity is a vital part of Pacific research. This is in direct opposition to the emphasis in WEIRD psychology for scientific objectivity and neutrality. Using culturally appropriate values and models help identify ways for researchers to develop a relational approach to doing research that emphasises the building of connections, as opposed to 'drive-by' research that prioritises the data extraction of sensitive information only to disappear to discuss the studied the aforementioned population (Kral, 2018). This relational approach demands time to build connections between the researcher and participant in order to integrate indigenous knowledge within an appropriate philosophical framework that correctly aligns with the values of Pacific people. Constructing a culturally sensitive framework that is based on a philosophy inherently Pacific in nature adds to the credibility of the research strategies employed by the researcher (Sanga et al., 2004).

Research models employed in Pacific research are designed to be relevant in the Pacific context. Building upon and developing indigenous Pacific knowledge, that is appropriate and relevant to the people concerned, is a significant and sensitive way of ensuring that the knowledge being produced has contextual validity. In the context of Cook Islands models of research, the tivaevae model contextualises indigenous knowledge in a culturally relevant way as it consistently aligns with Pacific research guidelines that suggest best research practice for Pacific people (Te Ava, 2011). The tivaevae model provides a holistic approach to research that encompasses Cook Islands cultural values that emphasises relationships and connection. Indigenous methodologies frame Pacific contexts that embrace a Pacific sense of collectivism to consider the individual as a part of the whole rather than in isolation.

Ecological Theory

Community psychology emphasises an ecological approach to understanding people within their context through collaborative social action in order to empower communities (Jason, 2016). In contrast to WEIRD psychology, community psychology has been attentive to values important to self-determination that provide a foundation for transformative change (Nelson et al., 2014). My thesis is centred around the ecological approach to understanding the human experience. Ecological theory provides a framework to assist in understanding how the characteristics of the community plays a central role in how people interact and relate with each other (Kelly, 2006). Four principles underpin an ecological approach to understanding the inherent undercurrents of social systems: interdependence, the cycling of resources, adaptation, and succession.

Interdependence is central to the practice of community psychology as it helps practitioners to be more attentive to the interconnections and synergies within interdependent systems (Jimenez et al., 2019). Understanding such complexity is an integral part of studying the human lived experience, an undertaking that instead links such experiences with various people and places (Kelly, 2006), as opposed to reducing lived experiences to statistical variables. In relation to my study, the notion of interdependence shares similarities to key cultural values of the Cook Islands such as reciprocity and relationships.

The ecological principle of the cycling of resources refers to how communities identify and use existing resources in their communities. Resources can include skills, information, and social support networks that encourage social cohesion. These resources sustain communities in a cyclical manner to provide a sense of continuity and can be instrumental in the design of effective social settings (Kagan et al., 2020). For example, membership of student associations in tertiary environments can offer additional

opportunities to nurture social support networks which can demonstrate the importance of collaboration and social bonds to education outcomes.

Adaptation is the third principle of Kelly's (2006) ecological theory that refers to the way environments shape the behaviours of individuals and how, in turn, their environments also begin to change due to the individuals that dwell within said environments (Jason, 2016). This principle suggests that systems and individuals must adapt to changing conditions in order to cope within an ecosystem (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). For example, in Aotearoa, Pacific families have adapted to their environments by coping with the stigma of poor housing, social welfare dependence, poverty and poor health outcomes.

Succession is the final principle of ecological theory that plays an important role in understanding how communities change over time. Moreover, succession refers to the fact that communities are in a constant state of change, and this process further changes the requirements for adaptation. Succession involves a long-term perspective that demands consideration of the historical context surrounding a problem and the planning for a preferred future (Nelson & Prilleltensky, 2010). This invites the researcher to evaluate the systemic change already in motion prior to intervention and draw implications of the effects of coping processes (Kelly, 2006). The combination of these four principles assists me throughout the research with a dynamic understanding of the relationship between individuals and their environments, which draws attention to the adaptive processes Pacific students employ to cope with their tertiary environment and reconciling their cultural identity.

Tivaevae As An Indigenous Research Methodology

The tivaevae model (Futter-Puati & Maua-Hodges, 2019) is the methodological model that underpins this research. It is a holistic model that has guided my thesis process in a culturally responsive way from the initial data collection, analysis, and the interview process. The tivaevae is a large canvas that is decorated with patchwork cloths of varying

patterns, sizes, and colours to stitch onto the larger canvas, thus creating a story. This evocative piece of Cook Islands culture is often ceremonial and are traditionally hand-crafted to be gifted away. It takes more than one person to stitch the tivaevae, with hours of labour and painstakingly stitching each piece of fabric. Just as each patchwork stitched together creates the collective whole, each participant's story has been interwoven with my personal story to represent a bigger picture, with patterns emerging of vibrant colours. Ultimately, upon stepping back from any completed tivaevae, it becomes one's celebration of culture.

This indigenous approach centres the stories of the participants in a meaningful way that provides a space for their life stories to be told. As a Cook Islands model, it is a culturally appropriate and relevant method to engage with my topic in a meaningful way for both myself and the participants. Themes, practices, and approaches common to Cook Islands people's understandings will allow for the focussing of the narratives of the participants in meaningful conversations. As a Cook Islands researcher, the construction of the tivaevae that is my thesis represents the teaching and learning of Cook Islands genealogy and knowledge (Te Ava & Page, 2020).

Applying the tivaevae as a research model places Cook Islands values at the centre. The hallmark of indigenous paradigms is that people are placed at the centre, thereby creating a methodology and research outcomes that are more meaningful to the people (Smith, 2012). For example, In New Zealand, Kaupapa Māori has been labelled as an indigenous transformative praxis successfully embodying Maori values that serve to empower Maori to take action (Smith, 2000). Similarly, using the tivaevae model to highlight Cook Islands values and emerging patterns across life stories may serve to empower Cook Islanders.

The tivaevae model is comprised of five core values: taokotai (collaboration), tu akangateitei (respect), uriuri kite (reciprocity), tu inangaro (relationships), and akairi kite

(shared vision). The spirit of collaboration, of the village women coming together for a shared passion and love for sewing, is similar to myself asking to join in stitching my life story with that of my participants, as we share our love for our culture. The value of respect, as the village women worked together and respected each other's creativity, work ethic, and acknowledgement of each other's cultural knowledge. Tu akangateitei was important for me to embody as I was entrusted with the personal journeys of my participants, who will one day pass on the traditions and knowledge of Cook Islands culture. Similarly, reciprocity was omnipresent throughout my research project; as my participants shared in their suffering and triumphs with me. Accordingly, my contribution is to represent their stories in the academic context as sensitively as possible to offer a meaningful interpretation. Valuing the relationship formed with my participants, their history and genealogy, was key to representing their stories respectfully. Having a shared vision of the personal journey my participants and I shared was vital to maintaining a relationship built on mutual respect. The tivaevae is a validation of cultural knowledge, pride, and spirituality that is shared amongst Cook Islanders.

Ethical Considerations

Prior to carrying out data collection, permission to undertake the study was obtained from the School of Psychology Human Research Ethics Committee of the Division of Arts, Law, Social Science and Psychology, University of Waikato. Once research approval was granted, participants were recruited through the Waikato University Cook Islands Students Association.

Cultural protocols such as the exchanging of genealogies and the offering of refreshments prior to discussing the research were adhered to when interacting with my participants. Each participant was explicitly told their participation was voluntary, and they reserved the right to withdraw after two weeks from receiving their interview summaries.

They were also assured that they could withdraw from the interview at any given moment, and abstain from answering any questions they were not comfortable with. As well as being included in the information package each participant received, the nature and aims of the research were reiterated, and confidentiality was assured throughout the interviews. Lastly, pseudonyms were used to conceal and protect the identity of each participant.

Research Design

Talanoa

Talanoa was used as a Pacific research method to guide and facilitate interviews with participants. Although Talanoa is Tongan in origin, it holds similar values that are present across the Pacific when engaging with others in the spirit of exchange, resolution, and common interest. Talanoa is similar to an ‘uipa’anga ‘uri’uri manako in Cook Islands Maori, which translates to a consultative meeting where ideas are ‘turned over’ to air different perspectives. All stakeholders get together as equals in a formal or informal setting to discuss issues, and everyone has the opportunity and right to voice their concerns.

Malie and mafana are concepts developed by Manu’atu (2000) as aspects of talanoa. Malie refers to the upliftment of spirits that comes about from the state of connectedness and enlightenment participants experience through the mutual sharing of emotions and stories in the talanoa setting. Mafana refers to the satisfaction experienced by participants as a result of the talanoa, which then naturally draws to a conclusion when these states of malie and mafana are no longer felt during the dialogue after no new information is introduced (Manu’atu, 2000).

This also has similarities with the principles of ‘uipa’anga ‘uri’uri manako in the Cook Islands, where this natural conclusion is also considered a mark of respect for the other person’s time. These principles are also present in ‘akono’anga Maori—Cook Islands Maori customs and protocols that dictate ways of being and relating. Cultural protocols were closely

attended to during the entirety of my engagement with my participants, such as: establishing a relationship to preface the journey, offering a pure (prayer) to mark the opening and closing of our uipa'anga (meeting) when they desired, and ending the interview with informal conversation and kaikai (food).

Participants were invited to bring any significant artefacts to our talanoa to help facilitate dialogue. Participants were also notified that I may request a follow-up talanoa if rapport building and going through the research overview took up majority of their time in the first interview and some questions were not covered, or valuable points they made were unable to be elaborated on due to time constraints. Unfortunately due to COVID restrictions, follow-up interviews were not possible due to lockdown laws. These follow-up talanoa were intended to explore key themes that came about in the initial talanoa, to allow their stories to form the basis for a case study.

Case Study

I chose to do a single case study because this research seeks to understand a specific context with no intention of being generalisable to all Pacific diaspora, but can still inform our understanding of similar examples at other locations (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). The case study has origins in evaluative research as well as the social sciences (Creswell, 2007), and can enrich our understandings of particular circumstances and social issues. Constructing the study typically involves the collection of a variety of information through observations and interviews, with this accumulation serving as sources of insight for researchers on macro-level events and its relationship with the micro-level lives of the individual (Hodgetts et al., 2010). It is also my objective to capture the context in which Cook Islands students find themselves in at the Conch at the University of Waikato by assessing the interconnectedness of the multiple levels of influence on their lives. Case studies are constructed to investigate a particular context in order to offer insights on underlying processes and produce nuanced and

practice-oriented knowledge about specific contexts (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012). In this way, developing a case study from results of my current research is intended to explore the connection between socio-cultural structures in specific situations like the Conch, and the adaptive processes employed to cope with changing contexts.

Reflexive Autoethnography

As a tool for shedding light on the researcher's position within the research, reflexivity is considered best practice and a fundamental skill for critical community psychologists (Kagan et al., 2020). Our beliefs and background shape how we make sense of our surroundings and interact with others. This can also affect the assumptions we create as we conduct research and analyse data. A reflexive attitude led me to constantly consider how the researcher impacts and is impacted upon by practice. Therefore, it was vital that I monitored my position in the research before initial data collection, and throughout the research project as I wanted to create an academic piece that was authentic to myself and the participants' stories.

Whilst shaping the topic of my research, I examined how my beliefs and life story led to my interest in cultural identity, how it led me to the particular research approach I chose, and even the questions I sought to ask during the talanoa. Keeping a journal of my thought process pertaining to my thesis as well as personal experiences helped me to reflect upon my research direction and thoughts about my topic. I also incorporated my interpretations of the input of professionals and personal communications with others I came in contact with.

Further beyond reflexive praxis, I wanted to maintain a research approach that was compatible with Cook Islands cultural values, practices, and concepts throughout the entire duration of this thesis. Autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000) entails that the researcher engaging in narrative analysis is intimately and inextricably related to a particular phenomenon as they seek to understand cultural experience (Ellis et al., 2011). Writing about oneself as a form of critical inquiry embedded in theory and practice was integral to my

thesis journey. My personal reflections as an insider, a Cook Islander who has lived within and outside of the Cook Islands, is included within the narratives of my participants in chapter five. These personal accounts that were shared with me often led me to examine my own personal experiences, and often generated internal dialogue as well as cognitive dissonance that lasted well beyond the interactions I had with my participants. This delicate process involved personal monitoring and self-assessment, as well as appropriate cultural guidance to ensure the safety of both myself as the researcher and the participants.
My reflexive autoethnographic accounts in chapter five also make transparent my views and assumptions.

Participants

Eight Cook Islands students at the University of Waikato engaged in talanoa with me. They were all undergraduate students at various points in their degrees, aged 18 to 43. Two participants were raised in the Cook Islands and migrated to Hamilton for university, one was raised in Australia then migrated to Tokoroa for college, one was raised in Australia then migrated to the Cook Islands, and four were raised in Tokoroa.

Participant Recruitment

Recruitment for participants commenced after ethical approval for the research was granted. I contacted the president of the Waikato University Cook Islands Association (WUCIA) to canvas student participants and generate initial conversation about this project. Each potential participant who expressed interest was given a copy of the information sheet (see Appendix 1), and it was up to them to make further contact with me to confirm interest. Participants were also recruited through a snowball technique. Once a participant had confirmed with me to participate, the consent process commenced and the participant was

informed of their rights to privacy and confidentiality, the withdrawal process (see Appendix 2), and were given a background information form (see Appendix 3).

The Talanoa Interview

The talanoa interviews used a semi-structured interview schedule (see Appendix 4) arranged at a time and place where the participants felt most comfortable. Using a semi-structured approach enabled a more flexible flow to the conversation, with probes made when necessary to redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand.

Before each interview was recorded, I checked that each participant had read through the information pack and I highlighted their rights as a participant. Each participant was then asked to sign a consent form after a thorough understanding of their rights was established. I then began an informal conversation in the hopes of putting the participant at ease and providing reassurance that the interview process could be as informal as they liked. I felt that placing less emphasis on formal introductions and the stark boundary of *researcher-participant* would enable the conversation to flow more organically. Once a sense of rapport was established, the audio-recorder was turned on. A summary of the interview sent to the participant for approval.

Chapter Four: The Conch Case Study Analysis

This chapter outlines the findings and analysis of my case study of the Conch. As a place constructed for Pacific students at the University of Waikato, the Conch acts as a nexus of cultural continuity and change for Pacific students. This chapter focuses on prominent themes that arose from an ecological perspective of the accounts of participants living in Aotearoa as migrants, and their experiences of the Conch, a Pacific space provided for them at the University of Waikato. The Conch is a physical space on campus that acts as a community hub for Pacific students by providing a relational space that nurtures a sense of belonging and community (Hemi et al., 2021).

Contact zones: Identity construction in diaspora

Size matters

The construction of identity in contact zones reflect cultural values, social worlds, and ethnic heritage for many indigenous peoples in diaspora. The Conch is an open spaced medium-sized room with a kitchenette attached that is intended to cater to the Pacific student body at the University of Waikato. It is located in the middle of campus situated on the ground level of the Student Centre. It provides seating and desks around the edges of the room, with cultural artefacts representative of the diverse Pacific cultures at the university decorating its walls. The seating of the room is flexible in order for students to reorganise its layout as they see fit.

As such, the size of this Pacific space has been a point of consternation for some participants. Despite the constraints of the physical dimensions of the Conch, the space has continued to be utilised by other Pacific student associations for studying and cultural practices. One participant preferred to utilise other available spaces on campus for events that involved mingling with other Pacific students. The following quote from Tiare highlights the lack of space in the Conch and the rationale behind relocating Pacific student events:

> *…its great, it's a space, but we're Pacific, we're not exactly a small group. So sometimes, actually all the time, the seven AGMs we've had in there this year, it all spilled out outside. People had to take chairs outside… a lot of my students don't like going into the Conch. It's such a small space and a lot of the students are coming in and out, there's talking, bringing food, being noisy…*

For Tiare, hosting the Cook Islands students association's (WUCIA) annual general meeting at the Conch meant members of other Pacific student associations in attendance could not be accommodated. Despite the Cook Islands students associations' own members

attending comfortably, Tiare understood the importance of fostering social bonds between other Pacific cultures and regarded their attendance as a show of solidarity. After attending a Samoan student association's meeting in an alternative space on campus, Tiare decided to relocate events thereafter to an alternative space on campus to accommodate the expected attendee overflow. Maru echoed Tiare's sentiment regarding the lack of space in the Conch, and further clarified that she used it exclusively as a pitstop between classes where she sometimes engaged with other Pacific students while passing time. Below is a quote that highlights her experience at the Conch on such occasions:

> *...I reckon as long as you speak, they're all fine. People are nice and they're vibing, but I think everyone's just doing their own thing, you know. When they're there, they're just trying to get their work done…*

For Maru, the Conch presented a respite from the cafeteria or library where students frequent between classes, choosing instead to relax in a Pacific space and enjoy intercultural encounters as they happened organically. Few participants shared brief anecdotes of their experiences at the Conch, with all participants ultimately admitting to underutilising the Conch in favour of the university library or their own dwellings.

A minority within a minority

The Pacific student cohort at the University of Waikato is made up diverse communities, a wider collective indicative of the multicultural society that Aotearoa presents. The majority of participants who admitted to not frequenting the Conch claimed it was for reasons of social anxiety regarding the space, detailing instead the perceived tension between the Cook Islands student community and larger Pacific communities. Below is a quote from Tini on her perspective of the Conch as an explanation for its underutilisation by the Cook Islands students community:

...I think the only problem is that sometimes you feel kind of left out because you're a small group in comparison to the big ones… but you kind of just walk in and you feel kind of put off when you walk in it. Just that feeling that you just don't belong there in a way.

As a member of one of the smaller Pacific student associations, Tini felt like a part of a minoritized group in a Pacific space. Maru similarly reported sometimes feeling left out due to the difference in Pacific group sizes, with other participants echoing similar sentiments to feeling "put off" when entering the Conch. For many participants, the Conch did not represent Pacific values of community nor the Cook Islands value of *taokotaianga* (unity) but instead a place of tension, thus leading to some participants adapting to other environments. Below is a conversation between participants in a group talanoa discussing their shared experience of an exchange with other visitors of the Conch, and demonstrates the interweaving of attitudes towards the Conch and cultural values:

Punanga: I honestly don't go to the Conch at all like we just went yesterday for opening of Cook Islands language week.

Purotu: But it was empty when we went and not gonna lie, if someone was in there I probably would have went, like, waited outside. It's like a weird vibe.

Punanga: Even when people would come in there when we were setting up they didn't want to come. And they wanted to leave even though we said, oh, just come, and we haven't started yet, or you're welcome to stay. They just felt shy or like they were interrupting.

For Punanga and Purotu, the Cook Islands language week not only represented a university-wide celebration of te reo Maori Kuki Airani, it was also a chance for Cook

Islands students to demonstrate important cultural protocols such as acts of hospitality. This is similar to the Māori cultural concept of *manaakitanga* which highlights the importance of attending to the needs of others as a basis for building reciprocal relationships (Johnson et al., 2013). This account from Punanga and Purotu sheds light on the reticence to engage with other visitors of the Conch outside of their own Cook Islands community, citing a 'weird vibe' to indicate perceived tension in the presence of members of other Pacific student communities.

In contrast, Marino believes the tension felt between the participants and other Pacific students at the Conch are based on cultural misunderstandings due to not frequenting the Conch so as to become familiar with other Pacific cultural protocols. Below is a quote on Marino's explanation for reactions of other visitors in the Conch:

> *I don't say I agree with that, I mean they probably are looking at you because you are a new face in the place. Like, they've never seen you before. Whereas most of those people go there every day or like they always go there during breaks in class, and so that's how they meet the other people in there. Like, they use the space often and I feel like for us, if we wanted to be more involved, it's our, we need to go in there and use the space and let them know that we're here…*

Despite admitting to not visiting the Conch frequently, Marino is still aware that most Cook Islands students avoid the Conch due to experiencing social exclusion from other Pacific groups. Other possibilities for the avoidance or underutilisation of the Conch were alluded to by few participants, citing reasons of needing computer access that the library provides, or noise levels when large groups of students socialise in the Conch. Other explanations beyond those offered by participants may include home life pressures such as tending to family relationships or working part-time jobs.

Although Maru stated earlier that other visitors at the Conch were likely simply too busy to take notice of others, she remarked that there are possible improvements to be made to improve intercultural relations. Below is conversation between participants on their experiences of social exclusions and how it differs from Cook Islands cultural customs:

Maru: That would be different if that was the other way around. Instead of really quiet we'd be like, oh come come come, grab a plate, grab a seat!

Maeva: If it was Cook Islanders: hi, what are you doing? Here, come!

Nane: What's your name? You see, that's just the Cook Islands culture to be welcoming.

The divide felt by participants and their Pacific counterparts in the above group talanoa was a further remark on the aforementioned social exclusion experienced in the Conch. Comparing Cook Islands protocols to other Pacific cultures that participants were not familiar with indirectly revealed underlying tensions and the lack of a sense of belonging and community in the Conch.

Recreating the village

Group dynamics: Social cohesion and Village Elders

The Pacific values of collectivism and reciprocity are just two examples of cultural values that form the foundation of many Pacific communities. Tertiary student associations mirror these cultural values to form a collective hub for many Pacific students. Majority of participants had salient experiences of intercultural tension at the Conch, despite majority of participants admitting to limited experience of the Conch. For some participants, these brief intercultural encounters in the Conch also marked their first experience of the Pacific space.

In a group talanoa, Nane admitted to visiting the Conch prior to our upcoming talanoa for the purpose of gathering information in order to participate in our talanoa. Below is an example of the dissonance she experienced relaying her experience of the Conch in the talanoa to align with dominant views expressed by other members of the Cook Islands students community:

> *...I think it's also out of respect for our elders ... that was his opinion so I felt that I had to back him up because he is a Cook Islander, I want to support my people. So if he feels that's what's happening then I'm going to back (him) all the way, but that was based on having no personal experience.*

For Nane, participating in our talanoa was akin to partaking in a village consultation like an *uipa'anga*, in which community members meet in the spirit of fellowship and a common goal. Typically in such gatherings, a leader in the form of an *orometua* (minister) or elder would often lead the discussion. For participants like Nane, agreeing with an older member of the community was akin to honouring cultural values of respect and cooperation, and is an example of power dynamics in group settings. Groupthink, or a single-minded perspective, offers an alternative explanation in which a diversity of opinion is absent due to a stronger desire for group harmony. Similarly, a single dissenting voice in the group talanoa with Nane and others marked a slow change of opinion that ultimately led to all participants agreeing that their collective limited experiences in the Conch was leading to stereotyping. The group cohesion displayed in the aforementioned examples led to negative opinions being adopted prior to the talanoa, then reversing through the exchanging of thoughts and emotions in the group talanoa.

Cultural continuity: artefacts, protocols and place

What makes it Pacific?

As a Pacific space, the Conch features cultural artefacts to represent the Pacific student body. A physical space that reflects recognisable aesthetics and elements that allows students to connect with systems and processes they are familiar with can increase a sense of belonging and empowerment, thus facilitating their overall learning experience (A. Aporosa, personal communication, November 8, 2018). Collectivist cultures like Pacific cultures value the importance of relational connection which often forms the foundation for many Pacific students (Chu et al., 2013). Pacific spaces can therefore create learning villages for students who have arrived from various Pacific nations or local communities by providing a familiar environment. Some participants were dismayed to find a lack of Cook Islands artefacts present in the Conch, arguing that it contributed to the lack of neutrality of the space and led to some ethnicities having dominance as Tini quoted earlier in this chapter. However, one participant argued that the lack of cultural artefacts was indicative of the reluctance of members of the Cook Islands community, with Maru stating further that "*we're not bringing anything… probably no one to volunteer to give up something*". This supposed hesitation to relinquish a cultural artefact to a Pacific space as a means to share a piece of cultural identity can suggest a lack of social cohesion and solidarity between Pacific groups. Despite participants discussing their possession of various Cook Islands artefacts, none showed a desire to share these pieces of their cultural history in a Pacific space that Tiare believed welcomed "*certain cultures who feel that the Conch is their territory*.". For these participants, relinquishing culturally significant artefacts to a perceived opposing space also raises questions about the security of the Conch, or the fact that the university has not provided such cultural artefacts for the Conch to further foster a sense of community and belonging.

Food and the process of Re-Membering

Most of the scholarship on Pacific people and food or diet tends to have a deficit focus on nutrition, health outcomes and physical health. For many Pacific islanders, food is symbolic of the relationships with the land and other people (King et al., 2010). Participants like Marino recognised the connection between food and social cohesion as a vital part of community-building within and between cultural groups. Below is an excerpt from a talanoa regarding strained intercultural relations and a participant's long-term suggestion for fostering intercultural social bonds as well as increasing the utilisation of the Conch for cultural continuity:

> *Marino: I just thought food. Food would bring anyone—anyone—from everywhere. I think food events are the ones where I see the most diversity. I'm trying to think of something that would interest (us) because I find that our people are a little bit difficult to encourage to come to stuff…*

For Marino, shared food consumption serves to not only improve attendance but more importantly intercultural relations in the Conch. Additional participants similarly alluded to the relationship between food and positive intercultural relations, demonstrating how identities and values are reflected in food preparation and consumption. An example of this is in an account shared by a participant:

> *Nane: I was the only Cook Islander there but I became friends with the Filipino and the Samoans and we ended up having this huge as lengthy conversations comparing our cultures, comparing foods, we would go around and compare and just talk for hours and hours about our own culture…*

For Nane, conversation around food preparation and consumption served as a bridge between other Pacific cultures that organically led to other conversational topics to do with

ethnic backgrounds and identities. Although this occurred outside of the Conch, Nane reflected on this intercultural encounter as an opportunity for community-building and a demonstration of Cook Islands cultural protocols. Similarly, Tiare alluded to the provision of food as an important cultural protocol when serving as hosts, in the example of student association meetings.

Chapter Summary

This chapter explored prominent themes that arose from talanoa with participants regarding their attitudes towards the Conch, cultural identity, and intercultural relations. These accounts led to inquiries into how identity is constructed and maintained in diaspora, as well as the impact of group dynamics and groupthink on participant accounts. Additionally, the importance of cultural continuity for a sense of belonging in the Cook Islands community was explored to shed light on the context surrounding the accounts of participants of this study. A physical place to enact social worlds and cultural protocols provides a sense of cultural continuity that the Conch seeks to provide for Pacific students.

Chapter Five: Discussion

Reconsidering Key Issues

Throughout the Conch case study analysis we can see the importance of cultural continuity for migrant settlement and a sense of belonging. Throughout this thesis we adopt a new definition of success that differs from Eurocentric notions of success to include sense of community, solidarity, and social bonds in the Pacific community. As covered in chapter 2, Pacific people typically come from subsistence-based communities where deeply-rooted cultural values persist in their everyday lives. Coming from a collectivist culture, Pacific people are typically known for their high levels of in-group social bonds. This chapter returns to concepts covered in previous chapters and relates this to my analysis through the

discussion of key themes in chapter four while interweaving my own narrative and that of participants to create our own tivaevae.

Talanoa "White Lies" and Group Cohesion

> *In the world of talanoa, story dies without telling and conversation; telling becomes an attempt to control when one does not respect the story or give room for conversation; and conversation is empty without story and telling. In talanoa cultures, there is no separation between story, telling and conversation. They interweave in talanoa. (Havea, p. 325)*

The above quote by Havea describes a concept that I have found difficulty in articulating throughout my thesis. A Pacific concept that goes by different names depending on what island in the Pacific you may come from, but a concept that many Pacific islanders are familiar with all the same. As is expected of my preparation to become a clinical psychologist in my undergraduate education, adopting a reductionist and individualistic approach to harvesting data in a Western setting is what I was trained to deem best practice. This chapter can be best described as the mistakes I have made as a novice researcher studying the relationship between cultural identity and place during the COVID pandemic, and the humbling lessons I have learned from my participants when physical distance and power impact connection and authenticity.

In chapter three I do my best to articulate the meaning of talanoa from an academic perspective. This differs to the intrinsic understanding that Pacific people have of the meaning and importance of talanoa, with additional alterations to suit the Pacific setting the researcher and participant find themselves in. For example, Vaioleti (2006) details necessary

principles to abide by for Tongan researchers that determine how to behave when interacting with all Tongan people for richer research quality. In my search for a satisfyingly categorical definition of talanoa, I failed to heed warnings of experienced Pacific researchers when it comes to the practicality of talanoa in research.

Fa'avae (2016) offers a critique of talanoa, detailing the strengths and difficulties in employing talanoa in Pacific contexts and the common novice mistakes. The White Lies of talanoa is briefly touched upon to describe the concealment of the whole truth from the researcher. Otsuka (2005) argues that the act of concealment resulting in white lies, were a result of participants wanting to please the researcher when the researcher-participant relationship lacks trust, care and empathy. Although the term concealment has negative connotations, Fa'avae (2016) instead regards the purposeful act as a means of self-protection. Historically, research on Pacific people has adopted an individualistic perspective that focused on negative outcomes, pointing instead to various markers of poor health outcomes rather than adopting a strength-based approach. Rather, it is expected that Pacific research participants associate the idea of concealment with protection from negative interpretations of readers with whom they have no relationship (Fa'avae, 2016).

In relation to my own study, concealment of whole truths in talanoa during the isolating and alienating throes of the pandemic should not have come as a surprise to me. As detailed in chapter four, a group talanoa and its power dynamics is the perfect example of Otsuka's (2005) white lies; the researcher-participant relationship, as well as between participants. Given the uncertainty surrounding COVID lockdowns in early- to mid-2021, I admit to rushing through participant recruitment and not paying heed to fostering relationships with participants beforehand as is the Pacific way. I am ashamed to admit that the added pressures of grades, homesickness and the threat of lockdowns contributed to the

insidious shift from focusing on fostering relationships with participants to viewing participants as data points and obstacles to the completion of my degree.

For many participants, the quality of the researcher-participant relationship contributed to the presence of talanoa white lies. Instead, more details came to light towards the end of the talanoa when participants would discuss amongst themselves and I would simply observe their responses without interruption or prompts. More surprisingly was the details that came to light following the data collection period and write-up of the research when my relationship with participants continued and deepened to reveal truths that brought into question their previous responses. When the lockdowns of 2021 first came about, the idea of the Digital Conch as a topic point became of interest to me in relation to my research questions. The notion of the continuation of the tenets of the Conch in the ether that is social media was emphatically encouraged by participants. My focus on data harvesting obscured researcher-participant power dynamics that in turn influenced participant responses to become more agreeable as participants saw fit. Through nurturing participant relationships I was invited into their realities and contexts, finally understanding my subtle influence as researcher on the eagerness of my participants to 'provide data'.

The notion of interconnectedness in community psychology points to the importance of adopting a contextual focus to understanding individual narratives in order to understand the social networks within which people are situated in. Moreover, interconnectedness is illustrative of indigenous worldview and the consideration of Pacific cosmologies in Pacific research is crucial to understanding indigenous worldviews (Hodgetts et al., 2020). Strong social bonds signals higher levels of social cohesion in communities, which has been linked to better psychological wellbeing due to the social support systems in place (Lee et al., 2022). In relation to the current study, the observable social ties between participants reinforced a sense of solidarity and community within the Cook Islands students cohort at the university

of Waikato, lending to Fa'avae's explanation of talanoa white lies as a means of protection from negative interpretations of readers.

Identities, Culture and Place

> *I was born to be a bridge. All I see are connections. I bridge between time, people and places. (Rokonadravu, p. 60).*

The above quote is from an Oceanic collection of poetry that embodies the disruptive act of being Pacific in the literary landscape. A diverse range of writers brought together to talanoa on Pacific worldviews, the above author gives rise to the notion of the past and future merging to become her present. This is the reality for many Pacific migrants in Aotearoa and beyond who reside, or are born, outside of their home country. For my participants, the theme of cultural continuity in the preservation and presentation of their cultural identity not only meant the presence of culturally significant aesthetics and artefacts in their everyday lives, but also the bridging of worlds shared with their families, Aotearoa, and their homeland.

The concept of place-based identities draws on the notion of the interconnected nature of the human experience of connection to settings and groups (Hodgetts et al., 2020). As described in chapter four, participants demonstrated a strong sense of affiliation with the university campus and its Pacific body, with some participants demonstrating a sense of 'insider' status when engaging with other Pacific students over cultural values, histories, and pastimes. In relation to the Conch however, participants had not developed an affiliation with the place nor the social groups that visit, despite agreeing on their group membership status as Pacific students. Similar to my participants, I acknowledge my group membership as a Pacific student at the university of Waikato, but the absence of affiliations to place and social groups have led me to occupy liminal spaces that provide a sense of cultural continuity.

Instead, place-based identities as Cook Islanders were demonstrated by participants who described other social settings where their sense of cultural identity felt the strongest, such as church, towns, and dormitories in which they had cultivated a strong sense of belonging in and affiliation with place and group membership; environments where all aspects of identity were supported. Place-based identity is claimed as a social construction based on the physical reality and subjective connections between people and places (Peng et al., 2020).

Utilising a case-based study approach and talanoa provided the principles to lay the foundation for nurturing researcher-participant relationships and uncover nuanced knowledge of the context specific to participants and their place identites. Although my own values interfered with some of the Pacific methodologies outlined in chapter three, the knowledge produced with participants when researcher-participant relationships deepened suggests the importance of time and proximity to better understand the particular locations in which participants conduct their lives (Hodgetts & Stolte, 2012).

I admit that I am unfamiliar with the Conch, preferring instead to study at home throughout my postgraduate studies and largely keeping my social life to a minimum. My social tendencies have otherwise stunted my sense of affiliation and connection in Aotearoa, where I have a smattering of extended family members as opposed to the nuclear family members I left behind in Australia and the Cook Islands. A sense of community experienced by participants was felt in contact zones that shared similarities with the Conch, in which intercultural encounters was both commonplace and welcomed. These place-based identities are developed over time through engagements and participation in particular settings (Hodgetts et al., 2020).

Participation in Diaspora: Engaging in Cultural Practices and the Pandemic

We do not spurn individualism; we choose

to give priority to the collective. (Hau'ofa, 2008, p. 85)

Chapter four demonstrated how participants enacted their cultural identities through participation in culturally significant acts that ranged from acts of hospitality, traditional dances, and language. For some participants, enactment of cultural identity was associated with a sense of community most notably felt when returning to their respective hometowns and family. The mere act of participation in cultural activities as a means of connection to heritage, family, and culture is a means of engaging with identity, comparable to what Hall (1990) described as a means of becoming and being in regards to identity (as cited in Mila-Schaaf, 2012). The theme of cultural engagement was prevalent in chapter four when participants described various cultural activities they participated in that they associated with sense of identity. The degree of engagement in cultural activities ranged from bystander level to active participation, however the distinction between active and passive engagement was not a point of contention for participants in describing identity engagement or sense of belonging. To put this into perspective, previous research into Pacific wellbeing and language often cited bilingualism as a hallmark of high levels of self-esteem for Pacific peoples, yet recent Pacific studies suggest fluency in a Pacific language does not necessarily determine life satisfaction (Matika et al., 2021).

It is also important to note the impact of the pandemic on conducting research during a health crisis. Prior to the COVID lockdowns in 2021, the threat of contracting the COVID virus was a reality faced by participants that had rippling repercussions when many came from multi-generational households of at-risk individuals. The extended COVID lockdowns of 2021 on the university campus limited access to services provided at the university campus for a large portion of 2021 until restricted use of such facilities were introduced later in the year. Due to COVID restrictions and the small size of the Conch, social distancing was not possible for students. For many students, including myself, the threat of contracting COVID

and spreading it to at-risk family members and friends was too great a risk, thus ceasing possibility of participants utilising the Conch after the data collection period. Despite the thinness of data to answer my initial research questions of the relationship between the Conch and cultural identity, the richness of the talanoa with participants shed light instead on the impact of group dynamics on intercultural relations, the importance of fostering care in the researcher-participant relationship, and the value of cultural continuity for sense of belonging and community engagement.

Concluding Remarks

Research on Pacific people has historically adopted an individualistic approach that removes the individual from their context. Considering the participants in this research, we can see the importance of group membership and sense of belonging within the Pacific student body at the university. In relation to the Conch, we saw participants experiencing feelings of disconnect between place and membership, as we saw members of this smaller group within the Pacific student cohort associate feelings of being minoritized in the Conch. Moreover, the effect of high group cohesion in the Cook Islands student cohort found many participants subscribing to secondary accounts of experiences of ostracism, despite having limited experiences with the space. This suggests that the underutilisation of and lack of intercultural engagements within the Conch for Cook Islands students is related to the social bonds shared within the Cook Islands student body, which begs further investigation.

The impact of power dynamics between researcher and participant, as well as between other Cook Islands students, saw the presence of ‘white lies’ throughout talanoa sessions that some participants acknowledged and further articulated this act as a show of solidarity with other Cook Islands students who had experienced social exclusion. The implications of these findings suggest future research into the relationship between cultural identity and Pacific spaces to better understand the impact of in-group dynamics on intercultural encounters

between Pacific groups in tertiary settings. Ultimately, this thesis has served to offer further insights into the value of relationships in indigenous research, and its impact on the transparency of participant responses.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Information sheet for potential participants

School of Psychology
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences (ALPSS)
Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand 3240

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Hybrid cultural identities and Cook Islands tertiary students at the University of Waikato

What is the purpose of this project?

The aim of this research is to explore how the Cook Islands cultural identity is impacted in a multicultural space for tertiary students at the University of Waikato. I am wanting to understand the experiences of how Cook Islands students relate to students from other Pacific cultures, and how a sense of belonging is created in the Aotearoa Cook Islander student community. I will be asking Cook Islands students to give their general views on cultural identity, intercultural relations, and feelings of inclusivity.

Who are the researchers?

My name is Corrine Matepi-Webb and I am a post-graduate student with the School of Psychology at the University of Waikato. I am doing this research for my Masters thesis, and my supervisors for this project are Dr Ottilie Stolte and Dr Apo Aporosa. Our contact details are at the end of this information sheet, and you are most welcome to contact any of us for further information regarding this research project.

Why am I being asked to participate?

You have been identified as a Cook Islander living in Aotearoa and studying at the University of Waikato. By hearing about your experiences and beliefs, I hope to understand the role of the Conch in facilitating intercultural relations and encouraging cultural practices. This research projects aims to identify the significance of the Conch for Cook Islands students.

What will I be expected to do?

I would like for you to take part in a talanoa with me. This interview will take place in a venue where you feel most comfortable (e.g. your home, a café, the university library) at a time convenient for you. You may also bring along any significant artefacts (e.g. pareu, pare rito, ukulele) or a support person to our talanoa. The interview will take approximately 1 hour.

What happens to the information that I share?

The interview will be recorded then transcribed by me into written form. I will then send you a summary of what we discussed in our talanoa, for you to comment and give feedback should you wish to do so. I will also include information on how to withdraw your interview from my research should you desire. Your feedback will be taken into account, and you have two weeks from receiving the interview summary for you to withdraw from the research without penalty. Your identity will be anonymous in my research, and I will omit any specific names, places, and events that could possibly lead to your identification. This research will become publicly accessible once published as my thesis, and possibly submitted to academic publications and conference presentations. You may also receive a summary of the results of my thesis if you wish (you may request this on the consent form). All consent forms and information will be secured at the University of Waikato up to five years after my thesis is submitted, after which all data will be destroyed.

What rights do I have?

If you decide to participate in my study then you have the right to;

- Choose if you would like to bring along any culturally significant items to our talanoa
- Choose if you would like to begin the interview with a pure and/or papa'anga
- Contact me and my supervisors to ask for more information
- Request a summary of the results of my research
- Decline answering any question you do not wish to answer
- Withdraw from the study up to two weeks after receiving the interview summary
- Your privacy and anonymity will be respected by me throughout our talanoa interview and after the research is completed.

Contact Information

Corrine Matepi-Webb (researcher) cew19@students.waikato.ac.nz

Dr Ottilie Stolte (supervisor) ottilie.stolte@waikato.ac.nz

Dr Apo Aporosa (supervisor) apo.aporosa@waikato.ac.nz

Student Support

There are a wide range of supports available on campus offered on-campus and online

Student Health Service: Medical clinic, Counselling, Mental Health, Health Advice, Violence Prevention https://www.waikato.ac.nz/students/health/

Local mental health crisis numbers:

- 1737 (free 24/7 counselling phone line, available to call or text)
- Waikato Mental Health Crisis Team 0800 50 50 50
- Bay of Plenty Mental Health Crisis Team 0800 800 508

Regular wellbeing courses: in health, study stress, self-care and healthy relationships: https://www.waikato.ac.nz/students/health/2020-trimester-b-workshops

The Wellbeing Hub: Drop-in space and wellbeing activities for students https://cms.its.waikato.ac.nz/sportandwellbeing/wellbeing

Computer Support: For any computer issues contact the ITS helpdesk at 07-8384008 help@waikato.ac.nz or visit the self-help page https://www.waikato.ac.nz/ict-self-help/getting-started

Moodle help: https://www.waikato.ac.nz/teaching-and-learning/student-learning/help-with-technology/moodle-for-students/

The Library All students can benefit from the resources and tutorials offered by the Library

https://www.waikato.ac.nz/library/resources

http://www.waikato.ac.nz/library/study/classes/about-tutorials

1. **Student Learning Service** offer an awesome service there to help all students to improve their study skills
2. Drop-ins – everyday from 10am to 2pm in The Library M.2.32
3. Consultations – online and F2F in W.G.50

www.waikato.ac.nz/teaching-and-learning/student-learning

Te Aka Matua can be contacted via email kaiawhina@waikato.ac.nz or students can drop into room JK.2.02, in either groups or individually.

Pacific Student Support staff can be contacted via email fass-pacific@waikato.ac.nz

International student support staff can be contacted via email fass-international@waikato.ac.nz or students can drop into room K.2.19, in either groups or individually.

Accessibility Services offer support to all students with an impairment. Please view the following link for further information and clarification of the services available https://www.waikato.ac.nz/students/accessibility-services/contact-us

The WSU Student Support and Advocacy Service A free and confidential support service to help students with the challenges and conflicts including, academic concerns, financial problems, and flatting issues. https://wsu.org.nz/support-and-advocacy/

This research project has been approved by the Human Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences. Any questions about the ethical conduct of this research may be sent to the Secretary of the Committee, email alpss-ethics@waikato.ac.nz , postal address, Division of Arts, Law, Psychology and Social Sciences, University of Waikato, Te Whare Wananga o Waikato, Private Bag 3105, Hamilton 3240.

Appendix 2: Consent form

CONSENT FORM

Research Project: Hybrid cultural identities and Cook Islands tertiary students at the University of Waikato

Please complete the following checklist. Tick (✓) the appropriate box for each point.	**YES**	**NO**
1. I have read the Participant Information Sheet (or it has been read to me) and I understand it		
2. I have been given sufficient time to consider whether or not to participate in this study		
3. I am satisfied with the answers I have been given regarding the study and I have a copy of this consent form and information sheet		
4. I understand that taking part in this study is voluntary (my choice) and that I may withdraw from the study up to two weeks after receiving the interview summary without penalty		
5. I have the right to decline to participate in any part of the research activity		
6. I know who to contact if I have any questions about the study		
7. I understand that the information supplied by me could be used in future academic publications		
8. I understand that the interview I am participating in will be audio recorded		

9. I understand that my participation in this study is confidential and that no material, which could identify me personally, will be used in any reports on this study if I choose		
10. I wish to receive a copy of the findings Email address:_____		

Declaration by participant:

I agree to participate in this research project and I understand that I may withdraw at any time. If I have any concerns about this project, I may contact The Secretary of the Human Research Ethics Committee (health) of the University of Waikato (humanethics@waikato.ac.nz)

Participant's name (Please print):

Signature: Date:

Declaration by member of research team:

I have given a verbal explanation of the research project to the participant, and have answered the participant's questions about it. I believe that the participant understands the study and has given informed consent to participate.

Researcher's name (Please print):

Signature: Date:

Appendix 3: Background information

School of Psychology
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences (ALPSS)
Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand 3240

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

Name:

_____

_____

Preferred Pseudonym (if any):

_____

_____

Age Range (Please Circle): 17-24 / 25-30 / 31+

Gender Identity (Please Circle): Female / Male / Non-binary / Rather Not Say / (Not Listed) Please Specify:

_____

_____

Countries/Places You Have Lived:

_____

_____

_____

_____

Cultural Heritage:

_____

_____

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Country/Place Your Family Is Based:

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General Health Issues:

General Interests:

Appendix 4: Interview guide

School of Psychology
Division of Arts, Law, Psychology & Social Sciences (ALPSS)
Te Wānanga o Ngā Kete
The University of Waikato
Private Bag 3105
Hamilton, New Zealand 3240

THE UNIVERSITY OF WAIKATO
Te Whare Wānanga o Waikato

What is the interview about?

The interview will be about your general experience of how your sense of cultural identity is affected in a Pacific student space at the University of Waikato (ie. The Conch). Below you will find the conversation guide, which will serve to guide the talanoa, but not limit our conversation. Please feel free to share your experiences, and be reassured that there are no right or wrong answers.

Conversation Guide

Prompts:

What does cultural identity mean to you?

How do you hold onto your sense of cultural identity in Aotearoa?

Probe: For example, are there any cultural practices/activities you do to help you feel more connected to your culture?

Prompts:

What are some opportunities for Cook Islanders to interact with other cultures at the Conch?

How has interacting with other cultures affected your cultural identity?

Prompts:

What are your understandings about other Pacific cultures in Aotearoa?

Probe: How do you feel other Pacific groups have settled into Aotearoa?

What do you think influences Cook Islanders to interact with other Pacific cultures at the Conch?

Probe: Do you believe friends, family, religion, media could play a role in people's decision to interact with other Pacific cultures?

Prompts:

What do you think a multicultural space looks like?

Probe: If you were in charge of organising activities in the Conch, what would you do for intercultural relations?