

Uputaua: A therapeutic approach to researching Samoan communities

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O le ala i le pule o le tautua

The pathway to leadership is through service

The predicted future growth of the Pasefika¹ population in New Zealand renders attention to the ongoing development of culturally sensitive approaches to health research, particularly those that are therapeutically anchored. This article discusses the Uputaua Approach; a contextualised contribution into the reservoir of theorising on Samoan and Pasefika research perspectives. The Uputaua Approach seeks to make important connection with Samoa cultural concepts, as a process of tautua (service) to Samoan people everywhere.

In 1947, the World Health Organization (WHO) provided a definition of health which continues as a benchmark for generalised 'holistic' understanding which states that: "... health is a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity" (Morice, 2006, p. 1). However, despite the advancement of medicine and health knowledge, there is still a significant gap which exists between an inclusive understanding of health proposed by the WHO definition and the realities of minority communities such as Samoans and other Pacific groups. This article examines a holistic view from a Samoan perspective. It also significantly features auto-ethnographic perspectives where the author draws from both personal observations and experiences to highlight these connections more explicitly.

When situated within a health and research paradigm, holistic means the attempt to address the totality of the person, especially taking care to address their spirituality and sacredness of their customs and traditions. In other words, beyond addressing the body, mind and social dimensions of a person, is the need to locate these within their familial, ancestral, environmental and divine connections. In the Samoan context, these connections are embedded in associated cultural imperatives traceable to the practices and functions of fa'asamoa or the Samoan way of life.

Pasefika Health Perspectives

Samoan and Pasefika communities have significantly contributed to greater understandings and meanings of holistic health beyond the western based ideas traditionally associated with its bio-medical orientations (Ministry of Health, 2006; Morice, 2006; Neimeyer, 2001). Resultant is the emergence of indigenous models of health and research perspectives that integrate a more inclusive approach akin to their experiences and worldviews. Of particular relevance are their contributions to encompass and champion traditional roots and paradigms, whilst at the same time, encouraging a bold transition into the current environment. For example, the *Fonofale Model* (Pulotu-Endemann, 1982) encourages health professionals to think holistically about their engagement with Samoan and Pacific communities, and to bear in mind the environment, the context and time constraints of such engagements. The Fonofale model has been instrumental in theorising the Uputaua Approach, particularly as the conceptual framework that aided its initial development. Like other Pasefika forerunners, Pulotu-Endemann's pioneering work in Samoan and Pasefika health paved the way for health and wellness perspectives like the Uputaua Approach to continue in the legacy. By using these important foundations as a launching pad, the Uputaua Approach

has further developed and added to its ideas, particular being mindful of therapeutic outcomes when engaging in clinical settings, client assessments or health research. This is a unique and significant component of the Uputaua Approach.

In acknowledging the work of Pulotu-Endemann as foundational in Pacific health and research circles, however, this article will solely focus on the Uputaua Approach and its applications. The approach, as being culturally grounded and contemporarily situated is where the Uputaua Approach seeks to offer a point of difference beyond the means of health and research support for Samoan and Pasefika cohorts. While the Uputaua Approach is primarily contextualised using Samoan examples, some of its cultural and therapeutic concepts may find similarity or connections with other Pasefika or indigenous settings who share similar worldviews, whereby then, the Uputaua Approach could be a useful comparative resource.

Uputaua Approach

The Uputaua Approach utilises the metaphor of the *faletalimalo* (Figure 1), a modern Samoan meeting house specifically built for receiving and welcoming guests, as its conceptual framework. ‘Uputaua’ comprises two Samoan words (*upu* and *taua*) combined to form Uputaua. In English, *upu* means ‘word’ or ‘a saying’ (e.g., *o le upu moni*, meaning, the word of truth, or, *o upu fa’amaoni* meaning, a faithful saying) and *taua* is used when making reference to something that is deemed ‘sacred’ or ‘important’. Therefore, when *upu* and *taua* are combined to form *Uputaua*, it can then be understood to mean ‘words of wisdom’ or ‘sacred conversations’. ‘Approach’ denotes the concept of advancement towards a proposed space. In Samoan context, the proposed space is commonly referred to as the *va fealoalo’ai* or the relational space which various parties respectfully negotiate. Approach also signifies the ‘manner’ of

advancement or positioning one adopts when engaged within this sacred space.



Figure 1. A Modern Faletalimalo located in Malie, Samoa.

In counselling therapy, client needs assessment and health research, Uputaua Approach recognises the important skills involved in facilitating *talanoa* within the conversational space, the needed role of wisdom in crafting speech and the use of respectful language as negotiated and exchanged in the process of *fa’atalatalanoa* or “purposeful and deliberate talk” (Te Pou, 2010, p. 3). Furthermore, the Uputaua Approach provides a supportive guide for the clinician, health professional and researchers to be reflective of their role throughout the engagement processes. It is acknowledged that other negotiations are plausible outside of the contexts explored in this article. Although the Uputaua Approach is primarily built on the notion of ‘sacred conversations’ or ‘talking therapy’ (Te Pou, 2010), it also recognises and acknowledges that the healing journey for Samoan, like their Pasefika cohorts, is far more encompassing to include the embrace of their environment, ancestral wisdom, associated rituals, and spiritual beliefs both of religious and traditional orientations.

A Gift from the Ancestors

Anae (1999) suggests that “we are carrying out the genealogies of our ancestors ...over time and space” (p. 1). With this premise, the ideas presented in the Uputaua

Approach are firmly traceable to ancestral forerunners. It is a *meaalofa* (gift) handed down by the *tua'ā* (ancestors), such as my grandmother 'Uputaua' Leiatuaalesā Tuilaepa Seiuli; to whom this approach accredits its title. Uputaua, or *tinā* (mother) as her grandchildren referred to her, left a profound impact on those she cared for. Safety and security were the hallmarks of her caring nature that provided a secure refuge in times of trouble. Her kind and gentle words and warm affirmation nurtured a strong sense of confidence that minimised any harm, real or perceived. The values she endorsed and displayed provided the emotional strength to be brave and strong when chaos or despair loomed. Uputaua left behind a sacred *meaalofa* reflective of her love and life which is being passed onto others. This living legacy solidifies, supports, and knits us together through time and space. Her gift finds significance when as a counsellor and researcher, I engage with people in 'sacred conversations' or actively participate in 'wise collaborative counselling' within the relational and sacred therapeutic space. Like grandmother Uputaua, there are significant moments in my counselling and pastoral work

that I am called into this sacred space, to be a co-holder and a co-collaborator of people's lives. What a privilege!

The next section outlines the key features of the Uputaua Approach. However, as important as it is to offer another perspective in our endeavours to support the work with our communities, there is a realisation that such efforts can also be a two edged sword. That is to say, it can be misused, misrepresented or misunderstood and therefore be potentially harmful rather than be helpful. It is my purpose to not repeat these same mistakes. With this in mind, I proceed with sensitivity and cautioned provided by the Health Research Council (2004) which urges:

The path that leads to a new vision of research has been paved with good intention and some bad practice. There are many barriers to doing Pacific research. ...while there is a legacy of mistrust, there is also a new vision that has the energy to propel us into the future. (p. 7)



Figure 2 . Uputaua Therapeutic Approach.

Uputaua Therapeutic Approach.

1. Roof – Ola Fa’aleagaga (Spirituality)
2. Land – Tu ma Aganu’u Fa’asamoa (Culture and Customs)
3. Foundation – Aiga Potopoto (Family, Kin and Relationship Network)
4. Internal Boundaries – Le Va Fealoaloa’i (Relational Space)
5. Left Frontal Post – Ola Fa’aletino (Physical Wellbeing)
6. Right Frontal Post – Ola Fa’aleloto (Social Wellbeing)
7. Left Rear Post – Ola Fa’alemafaufau (Psychological Wellbeing)
8. Right Rear Post – Ola Fa’alelagona (Emotional Wellbeing)
9. Neighbourly Boundaries – Tausi Tua’oi (External boundaries)
10. First Step – Meaalofa (Gifting Process)
11. Second Step – Loto Fa’atasia (Collaborative ‘we’ approach)
12. Third Step – Mana ma le Mamalu (Maintaining honour and dignity)

Ola Fa’aleagaga or life according to the spirit represents the roof or the covering that maintains safety and governance for Samoan people in the context of their *aiga* (kin and relationship network), their *nu’u* (village), the *atunu’u* (nation) and *ekalesia/lotu* (church/religion). Although spiritually are often equated with Christian or religious worldviews, it is important to note that Samoan people have also maintained deep rooted understandings and practices of spiritually from their genealogical beginnings (Fraser, 1891; Kramer, 1901; Suaalii-Sauni, Tuagalu, Kirifi-Alai, & Fuamatu, 2008). The perspective that the person is never just a manifestation of the physical, social and emotional characteristics, but together with these attributes, is the belief in an inherited spiritual connection to *Tagaloa-a-lagi* or Tagaloa-who-lives-in-heaven (Kramer, 1901; Tui Atua, 2004). These divine connections strongly emphasises that as spiritual beings, we are inseparable and are therefore divinely connected to the physical and the natural, as much as to the spirit worlds and the cosmos, which in turn forms an important part of Samoan people’s pre-Christian existence.

This is clearly articulated through the use of various terminologies that connects the physical and the natural with the divine. For example, the Samoan words *ele’ele* and *palapala* means blood. These are also the same words that are used to mean earth or

dirt. The Samoan word for land/ground is *fanua*, which is also the word used for the placenta. In Samoan customs, the *fanua* (placenta) belonging to a child once born is generally buried in the *fanua* (ground), particularly a sacred ground such as in-front of the church or some other sacred land (*cf.* Tui Atua, 2011). This practice may find variation in the different villages or districts throughout Samoa, or be replaced altogether.

Since early missionary contact, Samoan people have prescribed predominantly to the core beliefs of Christian teachings and practices (Taule’ale’ausumai, 1997; Va’a, 2001). In recent times, the church has become “...as an important institutional referent for Samoan ethnic identity” (Kallen, 1982, p. 104). In other words, Samoan churches serve as the hub of cultural growth and religious life for its communities (Ablon, 1971; Anae, 1998). Nevertheless, Samoans have maintained spiritual connections beyond the church doors, reflected by their special bonds with their fellowman, their physical environment, their ancestral heritage, their understandings of life and death cycles, and finally, the *tapu* (sacredness) and *mamalu* (dignity) associated with the non-physical world. In this context, the imperatives connected to the role of spirituality are much more expansive and inclusive for Samoan cohorts, beyond the realms of Christianity or religious affiliation.

Tu ma aganu'u fa'asamoa or the cultural context represented by the land is important in contextualising the Samoan way of life to health research and therapeutic perspectives. Within this context, one is expected to understand and assume appropriate etiquettes when considering cultural practices inherent within such concepts as the *va fealoalo'ai* (relational space), *feagaiga* (covenant relationships) and *tautua* (service). It is therefore prudent to ensure that 'the understanding and practice of things Samoa' is not assumed to have transpired, but must be taught and caught, thereby providing it in written and verbal formats to all sectors of Samoan society.

The verities of fa'asamoa cultural rituals and practices generally discussed to mean 'the Samoan way', refers to the traditional customs of the Samoan people (Lima, 2004). These perspectives, generally linked to historical practices of ancestors or family history, present the realities that form an integral part of Samoan social identity (Mallon, 2002; Meleisea, 1995; Mulitalo-Lāuta, 2000; Sahlins, 1985; Va'a, 2001). The initial work of Pratt (1911) defines fa'asamoa as "acting according to Samoan customs" (p.131). Tui Atua (as cited in Field, 1991) took this a step further by pointing out that fa'asamoa is more accurately defined as:

...a body of custom and usage inclusive of a mental attitude to God, to fellow men and to his surroundings. It is a collection of spiritual and cultural values that motivates people.... It is the heritage of people... Fa'asamoa provides individuals, the aiga and the nu'u with an identity...with carefully defined, but unwritten roles and rule. (p. 20)

The fa'asamoa instils values and principles that govern life for most Samoans, spanning from a child, to the *matai* (chief) who resides over the family affairs or village council. Likewise, Anae (1995) contends that fa'asamoa refers to a social, economic,

historical and moral structure that defines Samoan people. Fa'asamoa therefore plays a crucial role in the formation of one's identity and of self-governance. When considering all these perspectives, fa'asamoa provides the solid base for the building work of the Samoa family, cultural values, spirituality, religion, customs, beliefs, and identity to be practiced, negotiated, maintained, reciprocated and passed on to future generations. Additionally, fa'asamoa as a way of life, provides an important context to view one's cultural heritage; a set of structural principles for ordering one's social life; provides guiding principles for one's behaviour; a solid foundation to underpin one's ethno cultural identification, and a moral praxis in achieving relational harmony with God, the gods, the environment and one's fellowman. As Mulitalo-Lāuta (2000) points out, fa'asamoa is the "total make-up of the Samoan person" (p. 15).

The cultural context moreover represents one's *tulagavae* (similar to the concept of *turangawaewae* in Maoridom) such as one's significant place of belonging, one's ancestral connections and cultural birthplace. For the many that are now located in Euro-urban settings, the cultural context represents a re-negotiated identity that includes the ethnic diversity resultant from their diasporic experiences. Significant in this cultural context is the provision of required space for the children of the diaspora to feel that they too, have as much right to returning home to their ancestral homeland, and to reconnect with their *tua'ā* (ancestors), as their parents. Because of this diversified identity, the cultural context is a fluid and evolving concept dependent on where one's aiga or community is situated (Pulotu-Endemann, 1982). Culture is not one of rigidity and of concrete absolutes, but a living and breathing organism significant in shaping of the Samoan identity. Reciprocity is the key feature of understanding the basis of this significant relationship with the cultural identity. In fact, the flexibility found

within this cultural context provides space to utilise traditional ideas, as well as embracing contemporary knowledge and understandings to support Samoans in their advancement, identity and healing journeys.

Aiga Potopoto or family, kin and relationship networks, serve as the foundation of the faletalimalo. In the Samoan context, the aiga provides a crucial role as the foundational component that connects, support and elevate Samoan people with their spiritual responsibilities, physical characteristics, social relationships, emotional wellbeing, psychological functioning and economic viability. It is within the context of the aiga that the Samoan identity of 'self' is germinated, nurtured, matures and replicated. Gender issues, sexuality, roles and responsibilities, learning, observing and activity, all find their purposes and meanings within the context of the Samoan family. Furthermore, other roles associated with *matai* (chief, family leader) and other statuses (minister, elderly), *feagaiga* (covenant relationships), *taule'ale'a* (untitled men), *aualuma* (unmarried women) and *tama'iti* (children) are important functions of the aiga, and therefore find their place, identity and belonging under the nexus of the family unit. A Samoan proverb reflects this sense of belonging which says; *o le tagata ma lona tofi*, which means, each person has his or her designated role and responsibility. This idea further reflects the importance of the Samoan aiga in defining and designating roles to its members.

In the current context, the makeup of the family could contain traces of both the traditional makeup, as well as a diversity of other ethnic mixes. In adopted countries like New Zealand and America, the extended family in earlier migration periods extended to include any Samoans in the locality or city. Therefore, important consideration of the contemporary *aiga potopoto* (extended family network) in diasporic locations would not only be focused on the family and kin,

but the ethic structure of the family network that are re-modified and readjusted to suit current community. Such important considerations need to validate the complexities of cultural variants that exist within each and every family or community group. The functions of existing and emerging family networks are closely linked to the boundaries that exist in the *va fealoalo'ai* (relational space).

Le Va Fealoalo'ai or relational space as signified by the internal boundaries of the faletalimalo are important because they serve to protect the aiga, while at the same time, maintain safety parameters with people outside of the family construct. These internal boundaries encompass, but are not exclusive to, the practises of *aga'alofa* (love/charity), *fa'aaloalo* (respect/deference), *agaga feasoasoani* (support/helpfulness) and *fealofani* (relational harmony) (Mulitalo-Lāuta, 2000; Seiuli, 2010). A well-known Samoan expression that reflects the importance of safeguarding the internal boundaries advocates; *'Ia teu le va.'* This means, one must always remember to 'cherish, to nurse, to nurture, and to take care of the relational space, firstly within one's family, and then with the wider Samoan community to whom one belongs (Pereira, 2011). Tui Atua (2003) captured the essence of connectedness and belonging within the relational space for Samoan people where he says:

I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share my tofi (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my

belonging (Tui Atua, 2009, p. 80).

The va is an important space that needs to be '*tausi*' (nurtured) and '*teu*' (put in order or into its right place) so that the likelihood of the space being '*soli*' (trampled) is avoided, particularly when one is considering engaging a family or community. According to Wendt (2006, p. 3), the va is "...the space between, the in-betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates." When considering the importance of relationships that are negotiated and fostered within the relational space, in its proper context, the va fealoalo'ai helps Samoan people understand their proper connections with one another, their world, their ancestry and their spirituality. However, it is also acknowledged that meanings may change or be renegotiated, as relationships and the contexts of these relationships also shift and change over time.

Pereira (2011) emphasises that the lack of people's awareness and understandings of the paramount responsibility and duty that exists to nurture and take care of the va, has led many (both Samoan and others) to *soli* (trample) the sacredness of the relational space. Consequently, the trampling of the space has led to the breakdown of communication between parties, or the refusal and withdrawal of some to further participate in any conversation, until the sacredness of the space has been restored and healed. The efforts to heal the va is represented by the notion of '*teu*', that is, to restore it back to its respectful place and purpose. If the va is deemed unsafe, the prospect of achieving any helpful or beneficial therapeutic outcomes is almost nil. Therefore, the Uputaua Approach premises on the important role to take care of the va.

Ola Fa'aletino or the physical aspect of life is represented by the left post of the faletalimalo. The reason for their frontal positioning is due to the straightforwardness in which it takes one to notice these apparent

characteristics when engaged with Samoan or Pasefika communities. For example, the Samoans physical presence, like their Pasefika cohorts, is often easily recognisable, such as their towering stature, their strong sense of loyalty, their happy attitude, and their unique language. Samoan worldviews have always been regarded as holistic, inclusive and relational. Figel (1996), a Samoan author, concludes that identity and the interpretation of the self is fundamental in the way Samoan people perceive themselves and make meaning of their world around them. She writes:

'I' does not exist. 'Myself' does not belong to me because 'I' does not exist. 'I' is always 'we'. 'We' is part of the aiga, the village, the church, the youth group, the school... (p. 135)

Within the physical sphere is the notion of reciprocity, meaning, we are all connected and are a part of the larger tapestry of life, not the centre of life. All things are living, sacred and related (Morice, 2006). As a result, we are inseparable and inescapably a manifestation of the greater whole (Tui Atua, 2009). Therefore, it is our duty and responsibility to both use and nurture our relational ties with the physical, social and spiritual world we live and exist in. This is an important part of our legacy.

Ola Fa'aleloto or the social dimension makes up the second frontal post of the faletalimalo. The Samoan social self is better understood along the 'socio-centric' dimension which Geertz (as cited in Mageo, 1998) defines as, "...the dramatis personae, not actors, that endures; in the proper sense, they really exist..." (p. 5). Samoan people are often referred to as some of the 'friendliest', 'accommodating', 'warm' and 'happy' people in the world. Samoans are relational people and have abundant social connections. It's often heard said that you can hear a Samoan person's laughter before you see them. Similar with their Pasefika cohorts,

Samoans people's social values are ones that emphasises collectively sanctioned and endorsed actions and responsibilities. By this, one's calling is for one to stand resolute at one's appointed post in the role of *tautua* (to serve), not of one's self independent of others, but in close community.

There is a Samoan saying: '*A e iloa a'u i Togamau, ou te iloa foi oe i Siulepa*' which means; "if you do me a good deed in Togamau, I will reciprocate in Siulepa" (Tui Atua, 2009, p. 5). When *fa'asamoa* is positioned within the important role of *tautua* (service), the reciprocal performance of the customary responsibilities is motivated by the knowledge that if performed with the best possible motives, then it will be reciprocated in time and in kind. In essences, these prescribed expectations and actions are purposed to offer extensive support to within the family or community network when the *fa'alavelave* (emergencies or disruptions) occurs. Ablon (1970) observed that social support structures amongst the Samoan communities in West Coast America contribute to the alleviation of emotional distress overall compared to the general population. For Samoans communities, the extended family structure with its adhering patterns of behaviour and responsibility provides the stabilising force for personal and social life cycles.

Ola Fa'alemafaufau or *psychological wellbeing* is represented by one of the rear posts. *Ola fa'alemafaufau* is essentially concerned with the impact of thought processes and decision making on the ability of individuals and families to cope on a day to day basis. From a counselling perspective, personal observations reveal that although *ola fa'alemafaufau* (life according to the mind) is a vital component in the makeup of the Samoan self, it can be overlooked, pushed to the back or neglected altogether. It is imperative that these are not ignored or discounted because of its vital role in the holistic pathway to wellness. Furthermore, unrecognised psychological stressors can lead to mental

health challenges and difficulties in the long-term.

For instance, the *Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey* highlighted that although the stigma attached to mental health related illnesses has subsided for general population, it is still a challenge for many Samoans and Pasefika groups to accept it when one of its member is diagnosed with a mental-health illness (Ministry of Health, 2006). For some, mental illness can still be interpreted as a 'curse' to be cured 'spiritually' or the consequence of a negative or shameful action that needs to be hidden or ignored (Te Pou, 2010). It is my experience that the attribution of such stigma has led to the fearfulness of some Pasefika people to talk openly about their psychological capacity. This then leads to further isolation and possible avoidance of health services that are imperative to supporting these communities in this important area.

The key role of psychological capacity means that it is vital to consider and discuss how Samoan and Pasefika people think, and feel about such topics as mental health, thereby supporting them through the processes of demystifying and normalising such life incidents when and if they occur within their aiga. It is through the paramount role of considering peoples' opinions and thoughts about a matter that shows respect for nurturing of the *va fealoalo'ai*, when located within this psychological context.

Lagona or *emotional wellbeing* is represented by the second rear post. Similar the psychological capacity (*fa'alemafaufau*) of the Samoan self, *lagona* is also recognised as a neglected but important component in the makeup of the Samoan person, hence, represented by the backward position of the post. However, in order to work holistically, this area plays a vital role in people's health and wellness in the current environment. It is within the context of the aiga that thoughts and feelings (emotions) are nurtured,

expressed and validated. However, if there is a breakdown in the pathways for conversations and emotional attachments to be fostered and matured, the likelihood of healthy emotional development and security is disrupted or undermined. To illustrate this, I want to consider the impact of *fa'alavelave* (disruptions or emergencies that demand contribution) to the emotional capacity of the Samoan person or their community.

From my observations of Samoan communities, *fa'alavelave* is a prominent factor contributing to on-going stresses within families. *Te Rau Hinengaro: The New Zealand Mental Health Survey* further revealed that Pacific people experience poorer health outcomes than the general population (Ministry of Health, 2006). These poorer health outcomes can contribute significantly to mental and psychological ill health. If untreated, these can lead to self-harming practices, suicidal ideations and suicide attempts. Furthermore, a report by Suicide Prevention Intervention New Zealand (SPINZ, 2007) also identified that “if family expectations are not met, if moral norms are violated, or if a person’s conduct reflects badly on the family name, a person can feel guilty and shame” (p. 9). The emotional, psychological and social stressors associated with guilt and shame has led some to contemplate self-harming practices or suicide ideations as a legitimate option for address (SPINZ, 2007).

It is well documented (see Maiava, 2001; Tamasese, et al., 1997; Tui Atua, 2006 & 2009) that the most prominent factor that contributes to the greatest acute level of stress in families is the struggle for economic survival, whilst balancing cultural responsibilities associated with *fa'alavelave*. The level of stress amongst family members is particularly notable when financial demands are made on the extended members to contribute. As a result, *fa'alavelave* was often felt to be a “burden” (Maiava, 2001, p. 132). Such demands and burdens have led to questions over the continuing bonds between

traditions of *fa'asamoa* and prescribed commitment by *aiga* members. This is an important consideration because of the close ties the practices of *fa'asamoa* has in the shaping and maintenance of the Samoan identity. As much as this tension represents the crux of life challenges within Samoan family structures, this article is simply highlighting this area rather than a full discussion. Therefore, if the emotional capacity continues to be ignored or discarded, there are serious long term repercussions for Samoan people everywhere. The author acknowledges the possibility of other important posts that are not mentioned in this article, however, as discussed, these four posts of the *faletalimalo* need to be supported and strengthened because of their vital role in safeguarding the *aiga*, thereby enabling its members to survive and thrive in their journey.

Tausi Tua'oi or *neighbourly boundaries* (external boundaries) serves as the safety coverage for the *aiga* with their local community, support groups, health professionals, helping agencies, researchers and so on. It also serves to guide the context of the work (research, assessment or therapy) proposed to be negotiated with the *aiga*. The boundaries provides safe space to negotiate desired outcomes, specific timeframes, *meaalofa* (gifts – money, reimbursements, resources, food, etc.), accountabilities of the parties involved and specific responsibilities that are required by all parties involved in the engagement. A crucial and very important component of the *tua'oi* is the role of the ‘health professional or researcher’ to maintain safety with and for the *aiga* throughout the engagement period, as well as on-going consideration afterwards. The *tua'oi* is an imperative extension of the *va fealoalo'ai*, one that needs on-going nurturing, both during the engagement period and importantly, after the face to face work has been completed.

As a health professional and

researchers, an instrumental component is concerned with maintaining alertness and mindfulness of the inherent risks associated with the responsibility to *'tausi ma teu le va'*, that is, to nurture and to maintain proper boundaries. This mindfulness is informed by Samoan peoples' sensitivity and past experiences with research and researchers. As discovered with an earlier project, one participant remarked "...we are sick to death of being researched...we are not brown Papalagi's" (Seiuli, 1997). This poignant statement echoes ongoing frustrations that are felt and experienced by Samoan and Pasefika communities whose *tua'oi* is often trampled and disregarded in the name of health assessments and wellness research. It is the responsibility of all health professionals and researchers to safeguard this sacred connection as represented by the *tua'oi*.

*Meaalofa- or gift/gifting*³ represents the first of the three steps of the *faletalimalo* (Seiuli, 2004, 2010). These three steps are vital in the healing and restorative processes which support therapeutic and beneficial outcomes to be achieved by all parties involved. *Meaalofa* is a Samoan word for a gift or the rituals involved in the processes of gifting. *Meaalofa* literally means "an element of love" or "an object of affection" (Seiuli, 2004, p. 6). Additionally, *meaalofa* also encompasses the ideas presented by "...a love offering, a valued treasure, an object of adornment, one's legacy, one's heritage, one's spiritual calling, and one's service in life (*tautua*)" (Seiuli, 2010, p. 49). These attributes and values are evidently visible in and through the lives of Samoan and Pasefika communities. *Meaalofa* is not only seen and experienced by Samoan people as an integral part of Samoan life, customs, and core beliefs, but it also serves as a foundational component in the makeup of the Samoan person (Seiuli, 2004; Turner-Tupou, 2007). *Meaalofa* essentially, affirms and strengthens special relational bonds that are often accompanied by sentiments of gratitude, salutation, and more.

When functioned within a therapeutic environment, *meaalofa* is the interpersonal and relational practice of handing the gift of helping between the parties involved. That is, the engagement process and the exchange that happens within the relational space becomes a sacred gift, one that embraces the *mauli* (soul) of the participants, their environment and their occasion. The handing-over process provides the vital linking point between the giver and receiver. This distinctive connection, as provided by the *meaalofa*, is perceived by Samoan people to be the "[holistic] embodiment of the giver's feelings towards the receiver" (Sio, 2006, p. 1). Through rituals and processes of gifting, the attributes of human emotions, psychological capacity, reasoning, social and relational community, and their spirituality are connected through the exchange. Essentially, one can argue that the concepts inherent within the practices and customs of *meaalofa* (gifting) is a manifestation of the preeminent of what *fa'asamoa* has to offer.

Loto fa'atasia or the collaborative (we) approach is represented by the second step of the *faletalimalo*. *Loto fa'atasia* literally means 'to be of one heart or one soul'. *Loto* is the Samoan word that is often used to describe one's 'heart, soul or desire'. *Tasi* is the Samoan word for the number 1, and the prefix *fa'a* denotes the connection to something other than the number itself, which then takes on the meaning of 'to make or become as one'. Together, *loto fa'atasia* encourages the health professional, the therapist or the researcher to be of one heart and one mind with the participants or clients in their journey, and to place the needs of these communities above their preconceived ideas and expert notions they may bring with them into the engagement.

This concept is imperative in the role of supporting and championing Samoan and Pasefika communities' epistemological foundations. That is, these families are experts of their lives, their experiences and

their environment. As outsiders, we are privileged and honoured to be invited into their sacred space, and it is to our detriment to treat it with disrespect or *solu* their trust and dignity. The collaborative approach is about the *aiga* and communities being respected as owners of their healing and restoration. It is therefore impervious for the health professional to assume expertise and authority on what is deemed 'the best' or 'right solutions' for these communities.

The 'we' approach as an integral component of the collective self for Samoans, is seen as the core ingredient that knits Samoan people together. This connection in turn creates a strong sense of affiliation, loyalty and community. Further, this way of living and relating is foundational when it comes to Samoan peoples' place and status in the *aiga*, *nu'u*, *atunu'u* and *ekalesia* (church) (Seiuli, 2004). The Samoan person is always part of the collective unit, the *aiga*, never an independent entity unto one's own self. This is a foreign and western concept as Tamasese, Peteru, and Waldegrave (1997) reported where they emphasised that:

...there is no such thing as a Samoan person who is independent of others, [tuto'atasi]. We can try and explain the Palagi concept of self, but this is futile. We will eventually return to the connection between people [va fealoalo'ai]. You cannot take a Samoan out of the collective context. (p. 28)

Mana/Mamalu or *honouring* represents the final step of the *faletalimalo*. For Samoan people, the core values of *mamalu* and *mana* are intrinsically connected to the foundational practices of honouring and maintaining dignity. With this as a premise, it is of utmost importance that before one enters into the sanctity of the *aiga potopoto*, one need to enter with a spirit of humility; deferring honour and dignity to the family or community who have

availed themselves to the engagement. One also needs to be mindful that in the process of opening their doors to the engagement, these families and their communities are vulnerable and exposed, and many in past times have taken advantage of this vulnerability, which may have resulted in the trampling (*solu*) of the sacred relational space. It is therefore imperative as health professionals and researchers to not repeat these same mistakes, and to uphold the honour and dignity of these communities before, during and after the engagement is completed.

When the *mamalu* and *mana* of the *aiga* or community is upheld throughout, it is then a reflection of health research that is done *with* people and *for* people, not *on* people (Hodgetts, Drew, Sonn, Stolte, Nikora, & Curtis 2010; Jovchelovitch, 2007). Historically, health research of Samoan life was fundamentally research done *on* people. The outcome of these observations often resulted in representations and interpretations common of the period. We need not make the same mistakes. Needless to say, it has been sometimes reported that it is people from within these same communities who should know better, but who are amongst the culprits who dishonour families and communities they should be protecting.

The final component of the *mamalu* and *mana* concept is about supporting and validating expressed life narratives of individuals, their *aiga* and their communities. The validation process can be contextualised in three distinct ways. Firstly, the validation of expressed life stories is therapeutic in and of itself, and one which ultimately supports valuable steps to healing. Secondly, the validation of expressions is inextricably linked to the recovery and preservation of Samoan epistemological foundations. This foundation speaks about who we are: our struggles, our challenges and our emergence within our renegotiated existence as communities in western localities. Shared stories can provide a sense of community

similar to those experienced within a Samoan village. We can interpret our experiences less as isolated and exclusive incidents, and more as shared similarities with others in the wider community. Thirdly, the process of validation is about reconciling and reprioritising the important practices about our traditions, customs and cultural expressions. A clearer understanding of these priorities better equips us to continue in the process of handing on the *meaalofa* (gift): the gift of our journeys; the gift of our stories; the gift of our emergence; the gift of our struggles; and the gift of our lived experiences. The Uputaua Approach is an attempt to contextualise these gifts, as living legacies, ones that we can share and pass on to our loved ones, and to future generations (Seiuli 2004, 2010). *Fa'afetai lava*.

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Notes

¹Pasefika (Pasifika or Pasifiki) is a term of convenience to encompass the diverse range of peoples from the South Pacific living in New Zealand. Pasefika people's ancestry homes are located in the Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia groups. These are people from the island nations of Samoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, Fiji, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Kiribati, Vanuatu, Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea.

²Therapeutic is about making beneficial contribution that maintains and supports the overall health and well-being of individuals and their communities. Therefore, great care and sensitivity is maintained throughout the engagement processes, and just as importantly, the responsibility to safeguard and honour the sanctity of the participants' information that was shared. Uputaua as a therapeutic approach is purposeful in building and maintaining a trusting relationship that is mutually beneficial; one that offers opportunities for healing to take place, as well as working towards the retaining and restoring of the sacredness of people's identities and cultural imperatives.

³Meaalofa concepts are discussed in more details in Seiuli (2010).

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