

# Resistance, reclaiming and reframing: Relationship-based Pacific social work practice

*Tu Mau* holds space for Pacific social workers to speak truth to power. Pacific social workers—social workers who trace their ancestral roots to moana-nui-a-kiwa—often find themselves in spaces of resistance, reclaiming and reframing for themselves, their families, and the Pacific communities they work with. This long-awaited *Tu Mau* issue gives necessary space and encouragement for Pacific social workers to speak into social work scholarship. To foreground the contributions in this *Tu Mau* issue, this editorial discusses two cross-cutting contemporary social work themes evident in the contributions: the Covid-19 pandemic's impacts on social work; and relationality and social work. The contributions to this *Tu Mau* issue are then introduced, highlighting how they enrich and strengthen the inclusion of Pacific perspectives in social work.

## Pandemic-related impacts on social work

A critical part of our social work role is an ability to engage people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing (International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW], 2014). However, the unprecedented arrival and ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly altered global and local society, and subsequently social work practice. The first case of Covid-19 in Aotearoa New Zealand was reported on 28 February 2020 and within a month the New Zealand government, like many other countries, introduced a series of measures to respond to the pandemic. The initial Covid response framework was based on a four-tier alert level system (level 1 to level 4) aimed at eliminating

Covid-19. At alert level 4, New Zealanders were advised to stay at home and maintain physical distancing, travel was restricted (where people could only leave home for work or obtain necessities), public and education facilities were closed, and people were encouraged to work from home where possible (Baker et al., 2020). For more than 90 days, Aotearoa NZ had experienced no instances of community-based transmission, however, this changed with the Delta outbreak in August 2020.

The pandemic made equity issues more visible. The initial Covid-19 Delta outbreak affected a higher proportion of Pacific communities, later spreading to Māori and other communities (Smith & Adams, 2021). At a time where there were relatively few deaths, the passing of four Pacific and Māori individuals in this initial cluster outbreak highlighted the disproportionate impact on Pacific and Māori communities and subsequently, interventions for Pacific and Māori needed to be prioritised and adequately tailored (Cheung et al., 2021; Fa'alili-Fidow, 2020).

## Impacts on Pacific population

While there are many inherent strengths within Pacific families and communities, the Covid-19 pandemic further exacerbated social, educational, environmental and economic challenges (Ioane et al., 2021). A larger proportion of Pacific communities are in the lowest socio-economic bracket—11.6% of Pacific are classified as *poor* compared to 5.9% of New Zealand Europeans (Plum et al., 2019) and experience poorer physical and health conditions (Cheung et al., 2021). This phenomenon, whereby Pacific populations had increased rates of Covid-19 infections

compared with other population groups, was also reported in the United States (Moore et al., 2020). While most Pacific communities were generally supportive of the lockdown restrictions (Long et al., 2022), with some highlighting the positive benefits (Su'a-Tavila et al., 2020), such benefits were largely overshadowed by the negative social, emotional and financial impacts experienced. A study examining the impact of Covid-19 on the lives of 500 Pacific South Aucklanders in 2020 revealed that over a third of Pacific households have been financially impacted by Covid-19. Nearly one in five (18%) Pacific households lost half or more of their income, and almost 3 in 10 (28%) Pacific people who tried to get mental health support during alert levels 4, 3 and 2 felt they could not get this support (Colmar Brunton & Tupu Toa, 2021).

A further study exploring the experiences of Pacific women in Auckland during the Covid-19 pandemic involving 22 women in three focus group talanoa (Su'a-Tavila et al., 2020) highlighted the multifaceted challenges, including:

- uncertainty due to family future and financial support;
- stress—in case their family member/s caught the disease unconsciously;
- lack of resources to study at home and challenges of having children at home with fewer resources for schoolwork;
- basic information was not readily available, such as on health, food and finances;
- family violence increased within the community space;
- family members with long-term health conditions were at risk—very stressful and overwhelming as clinics gave wrong information in relation to attending clinics;
- challenges of accessing support services, especially when there was no access to mobile phones and internet connection;
- high demand for food parcels and frustrations due to long queues at foodbanks;
- frustration and fear of long queues at supermarkets; and
- mental health issues on the rise (Su'a-Tavila et al., 2020, p. 7).

For Pacific and other collectivist communities, the restrictions in social gatherings which included the outright banning, and then limiting the numbers of people attending significant milestones, such as funerals added to the emotional distress experienced (Long et al., 2022). This is particularly relevant as, in many Pacific communities, family and relational connections are particularly important, especially as family forms the foundation for one's health and wellbeing as depicted in the Pulotu-Endemann's Fonofale models of health (Cheung et al., 2021; Endemann, 2009).

### **Impact on social work practice— Pasifika social workers**

Dalhousie's "The Fono's 'Alert Level 4' Story" discusses how their multidisciplinary team at the Fono, including Pacific social workers, responded to the Covid pandemic. The increasing complexity of needs highlighted by Dalhousie are noted in other studies with Pacific front-line and essential workers (Fa'alili-Fidow, 2020; Independent Pacific Researchers, 2021; Smith & Adams, 2021; Su'a-Tavila et al., 2020). Supporting Pacific communities during the Covid outbreak, particularly during the 2021 Auckland August lockdown, took an emotional, physical, spiritual, and social toll on many workers. Pacific social workers experienced an increase in their workload, were asked to support new Covid response initiatives whilst simultaneously facing increased responsibilities on the home front with caregiving responsibilities. Many accepted this call from an innate desire to serve (*tautua*) and protect their community, a trait underpinned by Pacific cultural values of caring and love (*alofa*) (Independent Pacific Researchers, 2021; Ioane et al., 2021).

In light of social distancing requirements, social workers, like many health and social service professionals, had to quickly pivot and create and maintain relationships using online mediums. The increased effort to maintain connection and relationships, an essential part of social work, has taken a personal toll with many Pacific workers not recognising until too late that they were burnt out (Independent Pacific Researchers, 2021; Smith & Adams, 2021). As noted by Smith and Adams (2021) in their reflections on the experience of Pacific nurses in the Covid pandemic:

It sits in our heart and our passion for our communities to heed the call and keep going. We may not see this as burnout, we just carry on because we know it is what we need to do for our families and communities. (p. 98)

With the shift to online interactions, maintaining *vā*/ethical practice with clients has been at the forefront for many Pacific clinicians. In a recent paper, a group of Pacific theorists (Fa'avae et al., 2022) provide a conceptualisation of *e-talanoa*—an extension of talanoa research engagement and practice through digital tools and platforms. Whilst this paper focuses on research processes, these principles are applicable to social work practice and a number are presented here:

- As a method, *e-talanoa* is strengthened when participants are familiar with, and can confidently use, information technology and digital tools.
- The quality of *e-talanoa* negotiation between researchers and participants depends on their willingness to *tauhi vā* and *teu le va*.
- The values of respect, reciprocity, humility, love, care, and generosity were identified as important elements within *e-talanoa* (Anae, 2016; Ka'ili, 2017). As Halapua (2003) points out, *tauhi vā* enables respectful communication during in-person talanoa.
- Pacific researchers require a sound understanding of ethical and socio-cultural principles to navigate meaningful online *vā* relations through *vā māfana* and a good grasp of the communication services and online forums they and their participants can access together.

Studies undertaken with social workers across the globe reveal additional issues experienced by social workers (Ashcroft et al., 2021; Banks et al., 2020). An international study of the ethical challenges faced by social workers from 54 countries during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 revealed six key themes relating to social workers' ethical challenges:

1. Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships via phone or internet with due regard for privacy and confidentiality, or in person with protective equipment.
2. Prioritising service user needs and demands, which are greater and different due to the pandemic, when resources are stretched or unavailable and full assessments often impossible.
3. Balancing service user rights, needs and risks against personal risk to social workers and others in order to provide services as well as possible.
4. Deciding whether to follow national and organisational policies, procedures or guidance (existing or new) or to use professional discretion in circumstances where the policies seem inappropriate, confused or lacking.
5. Acknowledging and handling emotions, fatigue and the need for self-care, when working in unsafe and stressful circumstances.
6. Using the lessons learned from working during the pandemic to rethink social work in the future (Banks et al., 2020).

### Impact on social work education

The advantages and challenges of maintaining client-social worker connections

via electronic platforms were also present in social work education (Bay et al., 2021). Like our international counterparts, the lockdown measures required Aotearoa NZ social work educators to quickly shift teaching and assessment to online conference platforms, such as Zoom. Traditional face-to-face lectures were replaced with those either audio-visually recorded, and/or streamed live. Conference platforms, such as Zoom, also enabled educators and students to connect in online tutorials and small groups. The ability to teach and assess core social work skills such as active listening, rapport-building and empathic communication through online platforms requires unique skills as outlined by Bay et al. (2021) who provide a useful account of overcoming common online teaching practice issues.

### Where to next?

Covid continues to influence the lives of our clients and communities, and it is clear that the tail of recovery for our Pacific communities will be long (Ioane et al., 2021; Smith & Adams, 2021). The pandemic has revealed the inequities in Aotearoa NZ society and has provided an opportunity for workers and organisations to reflect on ways of effectively responding, including the need to invest in the Pacific workforce (Ratuva et al., 2021). As social workers, we are in a strong position to contribute to these efforts, particularly with our knowledge and skills of community development. This is vital, given that addressing the social determinants of poor health with thoughtful, targeted strategies will help ensure that the long-term effects are mitigated.

### Relationality and social work

Relationships are central to social work. Amidst the pivots necessitated by Covid—working from home and online engagement—social workers continue to demonstrate agility in their relationship-based practice. Relational and culturally responsive social work approaches are

also themes which the contributions to this *Tu Mau* issue elaborate on. Pacific social work embeds culturally resonant relational approaches, drawing deeply from Oceania cultural values, knowledge and ways.

Relationality is addressed in broader international scholarship and in Moana-Pacific scholarship (Fa'avae et al., 2022; Koya, 2017; Mafile'o, 2019). Relational epistemology, as discussed in the international literature, highlights connectivity and knowing done in connection with others (Huffman, 2018); it is an epistemology which is wholistic and more than logical (Lim, 2015). Relationality as an approach means the scope of what is considered relevant and legitimate knowledge is extended—not narrowed. Whilst none would dispute that the social work relationship is foundational in social work, cultural interpretations of relationship vary.

In practice, relationality means social workers' decision-making, for example, it considers a wide range of knowledge sources. Knowledge sources such as voices of extended family members or community members beyond the individual recorded as a 'client'. An implication for practice is that confidentiality concerns are weighed up against the benefits of a holistic, collective and relational approach. Another implication of relational epistemology in Indigenous social work is that sources of knowledge are inclusive of spiritual insight and intuition or signs in the natural environment and is related to human action.

Relationality between people and the environment is central to Indigenous ways of knowing, being and doing (Hart, 2010). This relationality is evident in social work programmes and interventions which centre this connectivity between land and people. Examples are land-based interventions with Indigenous Hawai'i families (Morelli & Mataira, 2010). Such approaches are holistic, and the processes and outcomes are

congruent with relationality as a principle. Climate change is emerging as a pressing social work concern and there are calls for sustainability to become more central in social work (Ellis et al., 2018). In this sense, relationality includes consideration of the human–environment relationship. In all its many facets, relationality will continue to be central to social work, and Pacific social work in particular, as richly illustrated in the contributions to this *Tu Mau* issue.

### Overview of contributions to this *Tu Mau* issue

*Tu Mau* opens with an article by Delena West, “Pasifika families aren’t accessing specialist services as much because those services require a really one-eyed view of the child”. West explores how social workers engage Pasifika children with disability, and their families. Acknowledging that, for Pasifika families, accessing disability services in Aotearoa New Zealand is a complex undertaking, West utilises an anti-oppressive analysis to explore how non-Pasifika social workers engage and maintain relationships with Pasifika families and if there are approaches that might be advantageous to this work. The findings highlight the structural, cultural and personal oppressions experienced that need to be addressed in order for social workers to successfully practise with Pacific families.

As noted earlier, Dalhousie’s viewpoint on “The Fono’s ‘Alert Level 4’ story” explores the journey of organisational change that The Fono, a Pacific Health provider, engaged in in response to the first wave of Covid in 2020. As Dalhousie shares, the arrival of Covid required many organisations to respond in ways that were unprecedented. We have heard the words that organisations had to be ‘agile’, ‘resilient’ and ‘responsive’ to provide much-needed services to communities. What we are really talking about is the willingness of employees to conduct their work differently—and oftentimes in new settings—to respond to

a health issue that was unfamiliar, with no certainty of what the coming weeks and months would bring. Dalhousie’s viewpoint provides an insight into the process of organisational transformation, where innovation and transformation became embedded as part of The Fono’s integrated model of care. Central to The Fono’s metamorphosis was a strong communication strategy that aimed to keep their workforce connected with each other while moving together towards a common purpose. This viewpoint highlights the ability of Pacific organisations to be agile change agents within Pacific communities.

In “Understanding I-Kiribati wellbeing and its implications in health and social services”, Louisa Cleverley considers how understandings of wellbeing can inform the delivery of culturally appropriate social services. Cleverley’s research findings are the result of interviews with I-Kiribati professionals working in health and social service organisations in a particular geographical area within Aotearoa New Zealand. Cleverley identifies four key findings from her research: I-Kiribati perspectives of wellbeing; family and home as central to I-Kiribati wellbeing; the importance of the preservation and maintenance of cultural practices; and the centrality of community connection in wellbeing. In relation to the maintenance of cultural practices, Cleverley notes that, while there are smaller numbers of I-Kiribati in Aotearoa New Zealand than in other Pacific nations, there has been an increase in migration propelled by the impacts of climate change for the island nation. Cleverley gives attention to how wellbeing for I-Kiribati must consider the importance of maintaining cultural heritage and practices in the event of displacement from island homelands. The literature agrees that climate change is an urgent issue for Pacific nations, where the cascading effects of increased global temperatures have impacted small island nations, contributing to displacement (Veitayaki et al., 2021) The



article explores the impacts of these findings on social service provision, concluding that approaches to I-Kiribati practice should be grounded in Pacific Indigenous knowledge and experience.

In a reflective piece, “Fieldwork placement reflection from a regional Pacific university during Covid 19”, Soro Ramacake examines the challenges and lessons learnt from coordinating student placements and supporting student learning across a vast geographical area (the Pacific) in a global pandemic environment. Ramacake found that the challenges of operating a fieldwork placement system in a pandemic context were mediated by having strong networks in place; engaging in a culturally responsive way with fieldwork providers and students; creating assessments that were culturally sensitive; and by employing a patient, flexible and understanding approach with students. The learning shared by Ramacake can inform work in Pacific social work education as a matter of course, but also in disaster or crisis conditions.

Up next, Waqa et al. share the reflections of students, graduates and junior staff from the University of the South Pacific (USP) on “Culturally relevant social work in Oceania”. The university provides education to students across 12 countries in the Oceania region. Importantly, this article acknowledges the increased voice given to Indigenous social work knowledge and theory and considers the implications for how social work is taught in the Oceania region. The findings acknowledge that social work education has an over reliance on Western knowledge and practice frameworks. The authors argue for the ongoing development of Pacific specific social work education that maintains Pacific cultural identity; includes Pacific Indigenous knowledge; uses Pacific languages; addresses issues relevant to Pacific nations and communities; and uses assessment practices that are culturally inclusive and responsive. Deciding the approach for social

work education in Oceania should be, the article suggests, determined by Pacific social workers, educators and social sector leaders.

In this *Tu Mau* publication, we also present two book reviews. Aulola Lino has reviewed *Pacific Social Work: Navigating Practice, Policy and Research*, edited by Jioji Ravulo, Tracie Mafile’o and Donald Bruce Yeates. Our second book review, *Disrupting Whiteness in Social Work*, is provided by David McNab.

We wish to congratulate all of our authors, reviewers and contributors to *Tu Mau* and thank you for your persistence and commitment.

**Yvonne Crichton-Hill**

**Tracie Mafile’o**, Guest editor

**Analosa Veukiso-Ulugia**, Guest editor

#### References

- Anae, M. (2016). Pacific research methodologies and relational ethics. *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*. <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780190264093.013.529>
- Ashcroft, R., Sur, D., Greenblatt, A., & Donahue, P. (2021). The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on social workers at the frontline: A survey of Canadian Social Workers. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 52(3), 1724–1746. <https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article/52/3/1724/6328852>
- Baker, M. G., Kvalsvig, A., & Verrall, A. J. (2020). New Zealand's COVID-19 elimination strategy. *Medical Journal of Australia*, 213(5), 198–200. <https://doi.org/10.5694/mja2.50735>
- Banks, S., Cai, T., de Jonge, E., Shears, J., Shum, M., Sobočan, A. M., Strom, K., Truell, R., Úriz, M. J., & Weinberg, M. (2020). *Ethical challenges for social workers during covid-19: A global perspective*. The International Federation of Social Workers. <https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-06-30-Ethical-Challenges-Covid19-FINAL.pdf> <https://www.ifsw.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/2020-06-30-Ethical-Challenges-Covid19-FINAL.pdf>
- Bay, U., Maghidman, M., Waugh, J., & Shlonsky, A. (2021) Guidelines for using simulation for online teaching and learning of clinical social work practice in the time of COVID. *Clinical Social Work Journal* 49, 128–135. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10615-021-00807-x>.
- Cheung, G., Bala, S., Lyndon, M., Ma'u, E., Rivera Rodriguez, C., Waters, D. L., Jamieson, H., Nada-Raja, S., Hai Yan Chan, A., Beyene, K., & Walker, X. (2021). Impact of the first wave of COVID-19 on the health and psychosocial well-being of Māori, Pacific Peoples and New Zealand Europeans living in aged residential care.

- Australasian Journal on Ageing*, 41(2), 394–400. <https://doi.org/10.1111/ajag.13025>
- Colmar Brunton, & Tapu Toa. (2021). *Impact of COVID-19 on Pacific peoples living in South Auckland*. Manatū Hauora Ministry of Health. <https://www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/general-information-releases/impact-covid-19-pacific-peoples-living-south-auckland>
- Ellis, L. M., Napan, K., & O'Donoghue, K. (2018). Greening social work education in Aotearoa/New Zealand. In *The Routledge handbook of green social work* (pp. 535–546). Routledge.
- Endemann, F. K. (2009). *Fonofale model of health*. <https://whanauoraesearch.co.nz/wp-content/uploads/formidable/Fonofalemodelerplanation1-Copy.pdf>
- Fa'alili-Fidow, J. (2020). Covid-19 underscores long held strengths and challenges in Pacific Health. *Pacific Health Dialog*, 21(6), 351–353. <https://pacifichealthdialog.nz/index.php/phd/article/view/95>
- Fa'avae, D. T. M., Faleolo, R., Hepi Havea, E., Enari, D., Wright, T., & Chand, A. (2022). E-talanoa as an online research method: Extending vā—relations across spaces. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 18(3), 391–401.
- Halapua, W. (2003). *"The Vanua" in Tradition, Lotu and militarism in Fiji* (pp 81-109). Fiji Institute of Applied Studies. ISBN 982-301-021-8.
- Hart, M. A. (2010). Indigenous worldviews, knowledge, and research: The development of an Indigenous research paradigm. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, 1(1A).
- Huffman, T. P. (2018). Paradigmatic tools for communication scholar-activists: Toward a pragmatic and relational epistemology. *Review of Communication*, 18(1), 19–36.
- Independent Pacific Researchers. (2021). *Pacific families and frontline workers' experience of COVID-19*. Ministry of Health. <https://www.health.govt.nz/about-ministry/information-releases/general-information-releases/pacific-families-and-frontline-workers-experience-covid-19>
- International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). (2014). *Global definition of social work*. <https://www.ifsw.org/what-is-social-work/global-definition-of-social-work/>
- Ioane, J., Percival, T., Laban, W., & Lambie, I. (2021). All-of-community by all-of-government: Reaching Pacific people in Aotearoa New Zealand during the COVID-19 pandemic. *New Zealand Medical Journal*, 134(1533), 96–103.
- Ka'ili, T.O. (2017). *Marking indigeneity: The Tongan art of sociospatial relations*. The University of Arizona Press. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89kr9>.
- Koya, C. F. (2017). Rethinking research as relational space in the Pacific pedagogy and praxis. In *Relational hermeneutics: Decolonisation and the Pacific Itulagi* (pp. 65–84). USP and The Pacific Theological College.
- Lim, L. (2015). Critical thinking, social education and the curriculum: foregrounding a social and relational epistemology. *Curriculum Journal*, 26(1), 4–23.
- Long, N. J., Tunufa'i, L., Aikman, P. J., Appleton, N. S., Davies, S. G., Deckert, A., . . . Sterling, R. (2022). 'The most difficult time of my life' or 'COVID's gift to me'? differential experiences of COVID-19 funerary restrictions in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Mortality - Promoting the Interdisciplinary Study of Death and Dying*, 1-17. doi:10.1080/13576275.2022.2049527
- Mafile'o, T. (2019). Cake art as social work: Creative, sensory and relational knowing. In *Disrupting whiteness in social work* (pp. 125–138). Routledge.
- Moore, J. T., Ricaldi, J. N., Rose, C. E., Fuld, J., Parise, M., Kang, G. J., Driscoll, A. K., Norris, T., Wilson, N., Rainisch, G., Valverde, E., Beresovsky, V., Agnew Brune, C., Oussayef, N. L., Rose, D. A., Adams, L. E., Awel, S., Villanueva, J., Meaney-Delman, D., Honein, M. A., . . . COVID-19 State, Tribal, Local, and Territorial Response Team (2020). Disparities in incidence of COVID-19 among underrepresented racial/ethnic groups in counties identified as hotspots during June 5-18, 2020 - 22 states, February-June 2020. *Morbidity and mortality weekly report*, 69(33), 1122–1126. <https://doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm6933e1>.
- Morelli, P. T., & Mataira, P. J. (2010). Indigenizing evaluation research: A long-awaited paradigm shift. *Journal of Indigenous Social Development*, 1(2A).
- Plum, A., Pacheco, G., & Hick, R. (2019). *In-work poverty in New Zealand: 2019*. New Zealand Work Research Institute. [https://workresearch.aut.ac.nz/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0009/326709/In-work-Poverty-in-NZ\\_PDF.pdf](https://workresearch.aut.ac.nz/_data/assets/pdf_file/0009/326709/In-work-Poverty-in-NZ_PDF.pdf)
- Ratava, S., Crichton-Hill, Y., Ross, T., Basu, A., Vakaoti, P., & Martin-Neuninger, R. (2021). Integrated social protection and COVID-19: Rethinking Pacific community responses in Aotearoa. *Journal of the Royal Society of New Zealand*, 51(S1), S37–S54. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03036758.2020.1861033>
- Smith, A., & Adams, S. (2021). Inequities and perspectives from the COVID-delta outbreak: The imperative for strengthening the Pacific nursing workforce in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Nursing Praxis in New Zealand*, 37(3), 94–103. <https://doi.org/10.36951/27034542.2021.040>
- Su'a-Tavila, A., Pereira, T. B., & Manuleleua, M. T. (2020). *The experience of Pacific women in Auckland during and post the COVID-19 pandemic*. Report submitted to the National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women (NACEW). National Advisory Council on the Employment of Women (NACEW). [https://women.govt.nz/sites/public\\_files/4578\\_MFW\\_Pacific%20Women%20Covid%20Report\\_v3.2%20KW.pdf](https://women.govt.nz/sites/public_files/4578_MFW_Pacific%20Women%20Covid%20Report_v3.2%20KW.pdf)
- Veitayaki, J., Nuttall, P., & Chand, P. (2021). Living climate change impacts in Pacific SIDS: Articulating the Pacific way in an unresponsive world. *Ocean Yearbook Online*, 35(1), 239–269. [https://doi.org/10.1163/22116001\\_03501009](https://doi.org/10.1163/22116001_03501009)