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Social policy, social work and fatongia: Implications of the Tongan concept of obligation

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ABSTRACT

The dominance of Western social work discourse is slowly being challenged as voices from indigenous cultures are expressed. This paper examines the Moanan-Tongan concept of *fatongia* and considers how it might contribute to a re-examination of the English language concept of *obligation* in order to develop a more socially progressive perspective on social policy and social work. In countries with a neoliberal welfare state the concept of obligation has become a vexed issue between citizenry and the state. The neoliberal requirement to demonstrate certain behaviours in order to gain access to benefits has challenged the consensus of social rights that imbued traditional notions of state welfare. We argue that rights and obligations have became separated as the Western welfare state discourse has shifted from a rights agenda to an agenda of obligation. Fatongia is about obligation that is entered into freely: it involves the giving of a gift that is enjoyed and reinforces mutual obligations. It is reciprocal and symmetrical and leads to stronger sense of community. By comparison, obligation in Western discourse is asymmetrical, coercive, compulsory and oppressive. For social work practice, the concept of fatongia offers a new direction in which rights are broadened into duties, and responsibilities into gifts. The duality of obligation and rights under fatongia implies a web of relationships between people, families and communities. This offers social work practitioners a constructive and progressive narrative for relationship-based work with clients/service users, and a celebration of rights through doing duty.

KEYWORDS: fatongia; obligation; social policy; neoliberalism; pacific; indigenous

Introduction

The Moanan-Tongan tradition of obligation or *fatongia* provides a radically different concept with which we can explore social policies and social work practice. The dominance of the Western intellectual tradition overshadows indigenous intellectual traditions and often renders them invisible. Because indigenous knowledge is often founded on oral traditions, indigenous concepts are not visible in philosophical discussions about social policy or social welfare. However, there has been a resurgence of interest in Moanan cultures. Writers such as Helu (1999), Hau'ofa (2005) and Māhina (2005) – among others – have advanced our knowledge of this intellectual tradition. In the Tongan language the word Moanan means sea of islands, and the term Moanan is more commonly used – as an alternative to the use of the word Pacific – to describe people from Polynesia, Micronesia and Melanesia (Helu, 1999). In this paper we follow the usage of Moanan by Helu and other Tongan scholars such as Mahina (2005) and Ka'ili (2011) as a more descriptive term for a worldview. It is this tradition that offers a different and, we argue, inspiring way to conceptualise obligation and what it means for both social policy and social work practice (Thaman, 2000; Lafitani, 2011).

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The notion of obligation has underpinned much of Western thinking about social policy, and was an extremely useful concept for the emerging welfare state since it provided a link between citizenship and the state (Marshall, 1965). It provided the rationale for the role of an active state with obligations towards its citizenry with regard to income support, education, health, employment and family supports. However, from the 1970s onwards, the welfare state has been under fierce attack in most Western jurisdictions and many commentators argue that the rhetoric and policies of successive neoliberal governments have effectively dismantled it (Jamrozik, 2009).

Obligation has come to represent, in social policy and social work, a vexed relationship between citizenry and the state. In particular, over the last two decades, social policy has shifted towards a paternalistic approach to income support with the quarantining of benefits and the income of beneficiaries directed into specific goods and services, all of which has been achieved within a framework of obligation. The social work commitment to a rights-based approach (see Ife, 2012) is increasingly undermined as the relationship between rights, duties and obligations have been disaggregated.

The shift to the concept of conditionality, in which formerly universal services come to depend on specific conditions being met, represents the realignment by government of their obligation to providing support to all citizens as a right. The fiscal crisis of the welfare state has become even more most stark since the global financial crisis of 2008. The Eurozone debt crisis inaugurated severe austerity programmes where the level of welfare assistance was slashed and eligibility requirements tightened: for example, the age requirement for pension rights has been increased in a number of countries and there has been a retreat from the idea of social rights (Dabrowski, 2009; Keeley & Love, 2010). In Australia, the budget deficit led the previous Liberal Conservative Abbott Government to undertake radical cuts to services, a policy which has been continued by the Turnbull government.

The remainder of this paper will explore the concept of fatongia as it relates to Moanan cultures; outline the progression of Western social thought on obligation and its relationship to social policies; and consider the implications of fatongia for social policy and social work practice.

Fatongia in Tongan culture

An understanding of the etymology of fatongia is crucial for an appreciation of its multi-layered meanings and the implications for the English synonym of obligation. To say that fatongia is the Tongan word for obligation misses the crucial point of what this concept means for Tongan culture. The word obligation, in the Western sense of that term, does not capture the essence of what fatongia means in Tongan or other Polynesian societies. Fatongia has significant metaphorical, aesthetic, social, psychological, political, moral, economic, religious and cultural characteristics.

Fatongia's etymology stems from the traditional Tongan sweet-smelling plant of *fa*, and *tongia* stands for 'immediately permeating fragrance'. Fa is a pandanus plant (*Pandanus odoratissimus*) belonging to the tropical *pandanaceae* family and countless types of this plant are found throughout Moanan islands and other tropical places,. Tongia refers to 'the immediately permeating fragrance of a round bunch of ripe pandaus fruit, straightaway after plucking or cutting' (Helu, 1999, 2006; Thaman, 1974, 1981, 1987, 1993, 2000; Māhina, 1992, 2005, 2006). In this context, fatongia implies that an obligation is a gift, similar to receiving a sweet smelling newly plucked or cut fragrant plant. For the receiver, obligation is not about coercion, lack of choice or mandatory behaviour; it is a gift, a pleasure, not a burden, to have an obligation.

The multi-layered nature of tongia further elaborates and nuances the concept of obligation. So, while it is a pleasure, it is more than that. Tongia metaphorically points to an unforgettable and poignant deed

or word, of love by a man for his beloved partner or wife (and vice-versa), in which the latter normally feels its mesmerising impact on her life for a period of time. There is a Tongan expression that manifests this other poetical-proverbial sense of tongia: "Oku kei tongia pe hoku loto 'i ho'o 'ofa, pea oku' ikai ke u malava'o matanag mei ai" (I am still mesmerised by your love, and it is hard for me to disengage from it). Tongia is therefore, metaphorically and aesthetically, considered as implanted in the psychological and emotional states of happiness, love for others and any artwork or deed that includes the qualities of beauty and harmony.

Fatongia is based on how the Moanan-Tongans perceive fundamental human values and behaviours in society. Such values like moral respect (faka'apa'apa) and generosity (nima homo), are based and evolved around fatongia with the aim of pursuing happiness. It is one Tongan concept that – along with other concepts such as fonua (land and people) and moana (sea and people) – interacts in a dialectic manner of opposing and supporting modes of exchange. The idea of modes of exchange is essential to fatongia, it exists only in relationship.

Fatongia does imply the deontological questions of who is obligated to whom? who is to obey? and who is responsible to others? It is, overall, a concern with the feelings of who is to be obligated and responsible to whom, or the feeling of being obligated or responsible to others. It goes hand-in-hand with the feeling of helping and caring for others, with the aim of pursuing happiness and harmony. This is a special way of viewing the world, the Moanan-Tongan belief in fatongia with the specific aim of fiefia (happiness); the feeling of being obligated to others is seen as a fundamental human phenomenon. Society operates through this particular way of caring for and loving others in the manner of asking who is responsible to whom. Tongans sometime say, "Ne lava fiefia pea faka'ofo'ofa 'a e fatongia', pea kuo tau fiemālie mo nonga", which translates as "Our obligation was successfully and beautifully fulfilled, and we are in satisfaction and serenity". Normally Tongans do not feel happy (fiefia), satisfactory (fiemālie) and calm (nonga) if a given fatongia is not carried out successfully.

Fatongia is an essential part of being Tongan. However, it is recognised that fatongia, for many Tongans, can also be exploitation (tāpalasia), alienation (fakaehaua) and oppression (fakapopula): in particular, in the feudal and Christian systems in Tonga (see Helu, 1999). It is the situation which is known by Tongans as fuakavenga (to carry the burden). Such a situation can in fact create unhappiness (ta'efiefia), dissatisfaction (ta'efiemālie) and anxiety (ta'enonga) as a consequence of failing to direct and operate things in the equal (tatau) and symmetrical (potupotutatau) ways of fatongia (Māhina, 1992, 2005, 2006; Ka'ili, 2008, 2010, 2011).

In the political sense, fatongia is a mode of exchange which is equal and proportional, so that there is harmony (maau) and no chaos. However, disharmony (ta'emau) occurs when there is failure to uphold these two balanced factors. In both the political and social sense, fatongia is a sweet-smelling gift if it is about exchanges that bring harmony, happiness and satisfaction to all participants. Without mutual obligation what is realised is not the fatongia of sweet-smelling action, but the fuakavenga of carrying a burden.

Fatongia is not a constant or a bank which builds up credit to be discharged in the future. It is in a very real sense momentary, fresh, immediate and not durable. It is the willingness of the person to undertake fatongia that captures the sense of immediacy and the beauty of caring for others.

Fatongia and obligation as concepts in Moanan and Western traditions are related but distinct. In general they are both related to the political-moral and socio-economic duties of people to look after themselves for social and political security, welfare and cultural preservation. However, for

Helu (1999), Western societies take an individualistic approach to securing socio-political security, economic, welfare and cultural preservation; whereas Moanan-Tongan fatongia operates in a communalistic and altruistic manner (Lafitani, 2011). Fatongia is a worldview and cannot be isolated from related moral values like human rights (totonu-'a-e-kakai), social justice (vahevahe-tatau) and democracy (pule-'a-e-tokolahi). There are multiple and changeable fundamental values and behaviours when dealing with fatongia. On the one hand, it can be fragrant and exciting, associated with satisfaction and serenity as well as being reciprocal and equal; but on the other hand it can end up in a fuakavenga situation of unhappiness, with the metaphoric flavours hu'atamaki (bitter-liquid-taste), kanotāmaki (bitter-flesh-taste) and ta'eifo (tasteless) with unequal and oppressive relationships.

By using the concept of fatongia the Western discourse on obligation can be rescued from its coercive, compulsory and oppressive connotations to one of being engaged and rewarding. Having rights implies obligations. My right to have children obligates me to care and protect for them as well as to foster their growth and development, so they achieve their full potential. This is done not because the state requires me to do so, but because there is satisfaction in children growing up and developing their potential. For most parents, caring for children, no matter how hard and difficult it is at times, does have the sense of fatongia, a beautiful fragrant smelling flower and climactic euphoria, a gift to humanity.

The transition of Tongan society from a traditional culture where fatongia is central to social and political life to a more complex and postmodern culture (blending the new and the old) has seen a weakening of fatongia without any development of the social support systems of a modern welfare system (see Lafitania, 2011). How to transition, how to keep the concept of fatongia central yet develop social policies that deal with disability, child well-being and protection, and economic security is problematic. It is, however, possible to incorporate the values of fatongia into how a society supports individuals, families and communities.

Obligation, western social thought and 'conditionality' in welfare

The classical Greek philosophers (in particular, Socrates, Plato and Aristotle) have provided an extraordinary understanding of the nature of obligation and its importance to human fundamental values and behaviours. The nature of obligation shapes the relationship between the majority and those who rule, based on justice, the rule of law, equity and individual freedom. Importantly, it was recognised that for the stability and sustainability of the state, all needed to be included. This philosophical position provided the understanding of the state from the Greek and Hellenistic periods through to the Renaissance.

Social contract theorists such as Locke, Hobbes and Rousseau were important in outlining the relationship between the citizenry and those who rule. The Hobbesian view of the natural state of humankind was one of 'war against all' and that the state had a contract in which citizens gave up certain rights to allow the state to rule on behalf of all. Obligation was about the duties of citizens to the state. The language was about obligation and duties. The concept of rights began to be part of the political discourse in the late eighteenth century with the dramatic influence of the French and American Revolutions, though of course rights were not universal but conditional on gender, race and at times social status (Macpherson, 1962; Malcolm, 2002). The twentieth century has seen the discourse of rights dominate. The focus on human rights has been the most important development since the 1950s. In the discourse of rights there is little discussion on obligations and duties. The rights discourse has moved the debate to rights and their violation by the state (Donnelly, 2003; Beitz, 2009; Moyn, 2010).

Marshall's (1950, 1965) work on rights provided the framework for the ideological development of the welfare state. He argued that the eighteenth century saw the growth of legal or civil rights which allowed for the development of mercantile capitalism. The nineteenth century saw the development of political rights (though it took until the early part of the twentieth century for full political rights to be achieved, and these rights were not universally available even although they were enshrined in the UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948). Following the Second World War, social rights became entrenched in the development of the welfare state. These rights were about access to education, health services, affordable housing, employment services, income support, and personal and family support services (Titmuss, 1974; Jamrozik, 2009).

These social rights did not use the language of obligations and duties. They were available by virtue of citizenship. As a citizen you had a right to free education, health services, income support for being sick or out of work, and so on. However, since the 1970s there has been concern from the political right that these universal rights were unaffordable, and that they implied some inbuilt, though rarely articulated, obligations. For the political left, social rights were illusory and tied the working class to a capitalist system that restricted their freedom and kept them in or just above poverty. For the political right, social rights were ideologically problematic as they were not considered to be essential rights (Donnelly, 2003; Beitz, 2009; Moyn, 2010).

The neoliberal revolution led by Thatcher and Reagan developed this ideological positioning by arguing for smaller government and the lowering of taxes on the productive members of society; they led a massive attack on social rights and the welfare state. The period from the 1970s to 1990s has been variously described as a 'retreat from the welfare state', 'rolling back of the welfare state' and ironically by some commentators as 'welfare reform' (Brown, 2005; Taylor, *et al.*, 2009).

The neoliberal critique reshaped traditional obligations and duties by the state to its citizenry introducing the concept of mutual obligation in which the citizen had certain eligibility requirements to meet if they were to receive benefits from the state.

The ideological and philosophical position underlying mutual obligation was 'new paternalism', a position espoused by Lawrence Mead, a conservative US writer (Mead, 1993, 2011). Mead had been very influential on Reagan, and his ideas have been picked up by subsequent conservative governments. This rhetoric has a resonance with the nineteenth century view of poverty as moral failure, and the view that those who could not look after themselves were undeserving. Social welfare supports, therefore, had to be both rationed and controlled in order to prevent recipients using them to buy alcohol, cigarettes, drugs, etc.

Obligation in this discourse was harsh and intended to push beneficiaries, for their own good, off welfare to become independent of the state. The move by governments to quarantine welfare payments echoes Mead's paternalistic approach to welfare. Carney (2011) has stated that it involved "Conditional social security, which curtails or removes the freedom to spend associated with cash provision, or which imposes onerous lifestyle or other conditions of eligibility (such as imposing education or drug treatment requirements)" (p. 234).

The quarantining of welfare payments has been applied to a variety of beneficiaries such as families with child protection issues, long-term welfare recipients, disengaged young people, and other vulnerable clients. Their benefits are quarantined in that they can spend a certain amount on discretionary items with the rest being determined by the state – food, clothing, etc. (Carney, 2011). Income management is consequently a strategy to ensure that those on social benefits spend pubic monies only on government approved commodities.

The state presents income management as a way for the individual to manage their monies to enable them to meet essential household need and expenses. In the Australian context income management can be an individual choice; or a social worker, child protection agency, public housing agency, or other referring authority can refer an individual for mandatory income management. The debate in Australia has been about extending the number of locations in which income management can occur. The mandatory introduction of income management for Aboriginal communities was part of the Conservative Government's Northern Territory Intervention in 2007 following allegations of rampant child sexual abuse (see Creative Spirits, 2016). Income management has been extended to other Aboriginal communities and to communities with low socio-economic status in Sydney, Adelaide, Perth and other rural and regional communities. The operation of obligation in this context is clearly a form of new paternalism (Carney, 2011); it appears to be restrictive and without choice. It offers activities that must be complied with, a compliance regime. Obligation is not something you do, but is done to you. It has lost any meaning as part of the discourse of rights.

It is our perspective that the Moanan-Tongan understanding of fatongia offers a way of reconstructing the Western tradition of obligation, particularly in the context of the current neoliberal discourse. We have argued that the connection between rights, duties and obligations has been pulled apart and disaggregated. The rights debate has focused either on a very radical legalistic definition of rights; or a neoliberal position in which rights are continuously eroded particularly around freedom of expression (see Ife, 2012). Obligation has become separated from this debate and becomes coercive; or, in Moanan-Tonga terms, it becomes fuakavenga (to carry the burden). In the following section we tease out some of the possible implications for social policy and social work, and for work with the Tongan community.

Implications of fatongia for social policy and social work

The concept of obligation as a gift - a sweet smelling gift that allows the person to welcome the obligation rather than perceive it as a burden - provides a context in which we discuss the possible implications. It is a lens through which we can view policies, programs and practices. It is a lens that can be used intersectionally with other lenses such as gender, diversity, class or race. It is also important for practitioners in Australia and elsewhere in working with Pasfika peoples to acknowledge the importance of community as expressed through fatongia. The dominance of neoliberalism in the policy discourse, in which harsher and harsher policies are developed in the name of personal liberty and freedom, needs to be continually challenged. The concept of fatongia can be used to shift the debate away from a coercive focus on socially responsible behaviours that elevates individualism above collectivism (Bray *et al*., 2012). A focus on fatongia, as a social policy imperative, would activate a sense of collective responsibility framing obligation as a gift to be treasured. In this context, the current fiscal expenditure on policing coercion could more usefully be spent on services that foster the inner resources required of active citizens, shifting the focus from oppression to freedom with responsibility. Obligation, in this sense of the word, is about relationship and connectivity. Fatongia provides a policy narrative in which responsibility can be recast as a gift for families and communities.

For Tongan society, family and community are interrelated and fatongia allows for the continuation of relationships. Tongan communities in Australia are faced with the challenge of individualism and the lessening of fatongia (see Lafitani, 1992). While the community is small in Australia, with just over 9000 people born in Tonga in the 2011 census, there are over 25,000 people in the 2011 census who claim Tongan ancestry. However, they have higher rates of unemployment and lower rates of educational achievement and participation.

They are also located in poorer communities in the major cities. Mafile'o (2008 p. 119) defined Tongan social work as aiming to:

> capture and cultivate the cultural value system that has advanced the well-being of Tongans. The *pola* [a communal activity that captures and depicts the essence of Tongan construction of social and community work] then can be understood as a metaphor for the goal of Tongan social work whereby through collective effort Tongan values and social systems are reinforced to strengthen, protect and promote Tongan culture and its propensity to meet day to day needs of Tongan *kāinga* (extended family) even in western contexts. (p. 119)

The concept of fatongia can help to extend the nuances of helping and caring within the context of Tongan social work practice.

Conclusion

In this paper we explored three interrelated themes: the concept of fatongia, the relationship of Western social thought on obligation, and how fatongia can provide new ways of conceptualising social policies and shaping social work practice. We argued that fatongia is a powerful way of understanding Moanan-Tongan culture and contrasts strongly with how obligation has changed over time in Western culture. This different cultural lens allows for an interpretation of obligation as a celebration of rights through doing duty. It becomes a source of personal happiness, freedom and commitment to others. For social workers, being willing to use this lens in relationship to their clients/service users could enable different narratives to emerge. For social work and social policy, Moanan-Tongan concepts of care are important for moving from a Western-centric approach to one in which indigenous worldviews can be incorporated and strengthened. From the Asian-Pacific region, social work has the opportunity to strengthen its worldview from one based solely on the Western intellectual tradition to one that values and incorporates indigenous understandings.

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