

Introduction by editors of the Special Edition on Spaces and Practices of Pacific Thought and Research

Patrick Vakaoti

University of Otago

Rosalina Richards

University of Otago

Mele Taumoepeau

Victoria University of Wellington

For centuries, Pacific societies were sustained by collective knowledge systems premised on a relational existence between humans and the environment. European contact, through its modernising agenda disturbed this reality, and turned Pacific knowledge systems on their head, relegating them as secondary, or in some instances irrelevant. Political independence since the early 1960's has seen a renaissance in things Pacific. Universities have been central to this development. At the University of Otago, under the umbrella of the Pacific Thought Network (PacTNet), graduate students and academics both of Pacific and of non-Pacific heritage participate in a range of activities that foster Pacific ways of knowing and engagement.

PacTNet is young, formed only in 2020, its first meeting occurring in the midst of Aotearoa New Zealand's first lockdown. However, the support it receives from members reflects the appetite for critical Pacific conversations at the University. This special issue showcases the research interests from some PacTNet members. The eight papers illuminate the spaces and practices of Pacific thought and research, and demonstrate the value and worth of knowledge systems capable of contributing to understanding ourselves as Pacific peoples, and our place in the world. This issue is also special because it offered five contributors the opportunity to academically publish for the first time. The sense of familiarity and support they have experienced in this process and from the group can only serve to enhance their scholarly pursuit and the growth of Pacific thought leaders.

The first paper 'Growing into: Pacific intellectual genealogies and Indigenous Development' Powell and Newman sets the context for the papers that follow. The authors who are early career researchers draw on their Pacific Studies training to inform how they position their understandings of, and approaches to Indigenous Studies, the programme they both currently teach in. The paper also engages with the importance of acknowledging place and its influence on knowledge production. In doing so,

these authors push the boundaries and conversations about indigeneity to include both local, national, and international considerations.

Shaver and White present a comprehensive methodology paper that articulates how social and behavioural researchers can employ quantitative analysis (network analysis) in Pacific research contexts. Guided by the Vanua Framework Methodology their research focus is in understanding the long-term impact of Pentecostalism on the social and economic fabric of Fijian communities. As academics of European descent they take seriously attempts to decolonise research in the Pacific, by using an analysis technique that privileges the principle of relationality so central to Pacific peoples' conceptions of self. They eschew an ethnographic approach that privileges individual voices and offer enticing insights into how one can integrate the use of a longitudinal quantitative analysis method, with the foundational principles of research in a Pacific context by actively capturing the dynamics of the 'space between people'.

Staying within the Fijian cultural context, and similarly concerned with change and development over time, Kwan and Anderson examine the impact of the Fiji coups on the development of higher education in Fiji between the periods of 2007 – 2017. The authors are acutely cognisant of the sensitivities associated with this historical period and lean heavily on the guidance provided by the Vanua Framework Methodology. In providing a comprehensive analysis of the Vanua Framework Methodology and its specific application to their research, they highlight the particular challenges for indigenous researchers conducting research both within Aotearoa and in Fiji, and the value of having such a framework to guide the work. Their research reveals how the power of talanoa resides in its flexibility to respond to the cultural sensitivities associated with both the participants' positionalities, and the content of the talanoa. What results is a rich tapestry of information concerning higher education post 2006 that could not have been obtained using non-indigenous methods.

The power and potential of Talanoa is also explored by Maniam, this time from the perspective of an early career researcher who is Malaysian of Indian ethnicity. In this personal reflection Maniam describes the tensions between their own personal values and expectations of research co-construction, and the 'research interview' approach that informed their early training and the subsequent connection and resonance that they found in the process and values of Talanoa.

The impact of a 'culture of testing' within Pacific education systems is addressed in Toumu'a and Otunuku's critique of the widespread practice of ranking children according to their assessment outcomes. Toumu'a and Otunuku's report is a challenge to educationalists to consider using specific analysis techniques to improve the educational accountability of such 'high stakes' assessments, and to inform educational practices within language and literacy education. Using the English language examination scripts of a cohort of young Tongan children, the authors demonstrate how to produce more reliable tests, and how the development of cross-linguistic transfer can be assessed through an error analysis. The results of their analyses go beyond their immediate educational benefits, however, to spotlight the complexities of effectively educating our bi- and multi-lingual children in the Pacific.

In their paper 'The revitalised Fonofale as a research paradigm: A perspective on Pacific sexuality and reproduction research' Young, Bird, Hohmann-Marriott, Girling and Taumoepeau engage with sexual and reproductive health, often a sensitive topic in Pacific. The researchers suggest that a nuanced framework that engages with, and centres the sensitivities is best placed to achieve meaningful research outcomes and participant/community needs. They do this by revitalising the Fonofale model, infusing it with the cultural concepts of tapu and noa. This is then applied in sexual and reproductive health conversations with tertiary young people. The findings suggest that acknowledging the cultural realities

of participants enveloped within tapu and noa has the potential to generate more honest and open conversations about topics traditionally considered to be challenging for research and researchers.

Naduva also steps into a space that is challenging to discuss, but vital to address. This paper explores the legal requirements for reporting child sexual abuse across thirteen Pacific countries. Offering a concise analysis of differences in legislature relating to reporting processes, professions and definitions, the authors also note important local social and cultural differences that may affect reporting. The findings highlight the important work that remains to be done to match the uniqueness of each nation with legislation that is bespoke to the needs of its people and which leverages with protective components of traditional laws and customs to protect current and future generations.

The final paper by Grounder asks the important question “Are we losing the battle: Fiji’s efforts against illicit drugs”. An analysis of newspaper reporting over a year provides a compelling picture of the modern social, legal and technological context of the illicit drug industry in Fiji. In the face of growing concerns about the burden of harm this is placing on communities and the complexities of production, consumption and trade of illicit drugs, the author calls for strong multi-sector collaboration and responses.

The papers in this special issue offer a glimpse of the scholarship that exists within PacTNet. In doing so, they demonstrate the potential of Pacific scholarship and the supportive and nurturing environment required to ensure Pacific and other indigenous scholars take their place in the academy. We are grateful to *Pacific Dynamics* for providing the platform to showcase the work of our contributors and for the opportunity to gift themselves through their thoughts and writing to the world. We hope that the papers will be read widely and initiate ongoing conversations in and beyond Pacific communities. Finally, we thank the authors for this very public expression of scholarship often a lonely and personal process.

Authors’ Biographies

Associate Professor Patrick Vakaoti, is a Fijian sociologist at the University of Otago. He has research interests in Pacific youth and community issues and indigenous ways of knowing. He teaches youth sociology and sociology theory. He has a passion for supporting indigenous students thrive and succeed at university.

Associate Professor Rosalina Richards is Deputy Director of the *Va’a o Tantai – Centre for Pacific Health* and Co-Deputy Director of the *Coastal Peoples Southern Skies* Centre for Research Excellence at the University of Otago. From Samoan and English ancestry she was born and raised in Te Wai Pounamu, the South Island of Aotearoa. Her academic background is in Psychology, Public health and Pacific health.

Associate Professor Mele M. Taumoepeau (She/Her) researches and teaches in the field of developmental psychology at Victoria University Wellington. Her focus is on the social and cultural influences on children and young people’s social development. She has a particular interest in how language interactions between children and their caregivers influence their socio-emotional development.
