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Family Dynamics Among Pacific Islander Americans

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A television news program not long ago showed images of a Samoan family in California. A neighbor saw large numbers of people entering the family's home, heard "a great deal of noise," and called the police, saying something suspicious was going on next door. Police arrived on the scene, surrounded the house, and confronted the Samoan family. With a police helicopter beating the air overhead, the officers frisked men and women, young and old. It was never clear to observers what they were looking for, but gradually it became clear to the police what they had found.

They had found a birthday party. The Samoan household's baby was one year old, and, since they were loving and respectful people, they had invited all the members of their extended family to come share in the auspicious occasion. The joyous event included singing and dancing, which triggered the neighbor's complaint. The police were embarrassed by their mistake. The party-goers were bewildered and intimidated at the treatment they had received.

Pacific Islander American families are not much understood by non-Pacific Islanders. It may be partly because they are not much studied. What literature there is dwells on two themes. First, a small number of anthropologically-oriented writings (Handy and Pukui 1972; Shu 1985-86) talks about patterns of kinship in Polynesia—the roughly one-third of the Pacific that is most familiar to Americans. In addition, a slightly larger and growing body of literature talks about domestic violence (Dubanoski and

Snyder 1980; Gray and Cosgrove 1985; Counts 1990; Mokuau 1991). Only a tiny number of scholars have paid attention to other dynamics in Pacific Islander families (Jolly and Macintyre 1989). Almost none of them have had anything to say about Pacific Islanders who reside in the United States.

This, then, is a first foray into that large, almost uncharted territory: the family among Pacific Islander Americans. It was undertaken by the Pacific Islander Americans Research Project, a student-faculty research unit sponsored by the Institute for Polynesian Studies and the Division of Social Sciences at Brigham Young University-Hawaii. The team operated on the theory, common in the psychotherapeutic community (Caille 1982; Doherty and Baird 1983), that detailed, structured interviews with family members would provide insight into both structure and processes in Pacific Islander families.

The interviewers comprised four women and a man, all Pacific Islanders and all students at BYU-Hawaii. They interviewed forty-one people in fall 1992 and winter 1993, all Pacific Islanders in their twenties and thirties, and all students at BYU-Hawaii. Twenty of the interviewed people were men, twenty-one women. Sixteen were Tongan, seven Fijian, five I-kiribati, and thirteen Samoan. All spoke about their families of origin—the households in which they grew up, generally in their countries of origin although sometimes in the United States. The interviews lasted from one to two hours each.

The inquiry was directed toward four topics: the meaning of “family” in each of the cultures under study; family structure and decision-making; discipline; and culture change. After taking background data on the respondent’s age, sex, ethnicity, birth order, birthplace, place where raised, marital status, and occupation, the respondents were asked the following questions:

Meaning of “Family”

What comes into your mind when I say the word “family?”

What is the word for family in your language?

What comes into your mind when you think of the word for family in your native language?

Who would you include as members of your "close family?"

Family Structure

How are important decisions in the family made?

How does your family express caring for each other?

How are disagreements resolved in your family?

Discipline

Whose job was it to discipline your family members?

How were members of your family disciplined when you were a child?

Can you describe a time when someone got in trouble?

How were they disciplined?

Do your parents continue to discipline you in any way now?

Culture Change

What aspects of your upbringing would you like to maintain in your "own" family?

What things would you like to see change in your "own" family?

The four Pacific Island peoples interviewed—Samoans, I-kiribati, Fijians, and Tongans—come from widely separated parts of the Pacific. Physically they do not resemble each other: Samoans and Tongans are Polynesians, I-kiribati are Micronesians, and Fijians are Melanesians. Linguistically and in most aspects of culture they are quite distinct. Yet with respect to family structure and dynamics, the people interviewed in this study exhibited remarkable similarities. Except where noted below, their family attributes were similar enough that it was decided to describe them together in this article.

The Meaning of "Family"

The people interviewed had two definitions of "family." One, which they frequently offered when they were asked to respond to the English term, had to do with what many people would understand as the nuclear family: father, mother, and children, all living under one roof. A Tongan man said, "I think of my own family: my brothers, sisters, my parents, my home." Intertwined with that definition, however, was the imperative of respect. The man went on: "When I hear the word family, I think of respect and unity. . . . In Tonga we are very family-oriented and everyone is, it's a part of our culture that we respect our parents truly."

When the interviewers asked people the word for "family" in their native tongue, each had a quick response. For some Tongans, it was *famili*, a term borrowed from English. But most of them also recognized *kainga*, which also included, as one said, "The extended family and cousins, uncles, aunts, grandma, granddad." The Samoan word, *aiga*, is linguistically related to *kainga*, and carries the idea of going back five generations and including all collateral kin under an umbrella that large. The Fijian word for this extended family is *matavuvale*. In Kiribati, it is *te utu*.

Both these conceptions of family operated in the minds and lives of the Pacific Islanders interviewed. Most people had associations with the word "family" that had to do with this larger entity. A male Tongan defined his close family as "My cousins, my grandparents, my family, even down to second cousins. Anyone who is related. . . . cousins, uncles, grandparents. . . . My uncles and aunties are like mothers and fathers. My cousins are just like brothers." Sometimes the idea of the extended family conjured up associations that were warm and social. "A lot of kids, happy, togetherness with the family, big feast," said one woman. "Love, picnics, beach. . . . To go out and do the work together, have fun together," said a man.

Frequently the people interviewed spoke of the sense of belonging and joy they felt when all the extended family gathered to

mark a significant milestone, such as the baby's first birthday party described at the beginning of this paper. Other occasions included births, deaths, weddings, graduations, and coming of age ceremonies. All branches of the family chipped in to pay for such occasions. One Tongan man said, "When there's a family occasion such as a funeral or birthdays or any party . . . everyone is helped out, even if . . . you are already married and have your own family, you still come and support and help pay for all expenses." One person spoke of getting together with her extended family at Christmas and holidays for about three weeks at a time, to have fun together.

In other instances, people associated the extended family with more formal occasions that had to do with decisions affecting the whole group. One person said, "Our tribe will come together and discuss about . . . money given by the government. . . . If there is a disagreement. . . . it is brought to our grandfathers . . . [who] would be listening . . . and then solve the problem."

Frequently, though individuals understood and valued this large family ideal, in practical fact most of their lives were organized around their nuclear families. Although they spoke of their families as these extended entities and recalled large family occasions with fondness, almost every time they were asked about actual decision-making, discipline, and expressions of love, they zeroed in on the nuclear family as the unit of action. Frequently they would say, "My father this . . ." or "My sister that . . ." Seldom did they speak about aunts or cousins unless prodded by the interviewer.

It seems clear that Pacific Islanders value both the extended and the nuclear family. A commitment of loyalty, obligation, and support to both groups is crucial to the Pacific Islander American way of family.

The Structure of Power

The respondents were unanimous in describing male-dominated families. Fathers made the final decisions on all significant issues.

A Kiribati woman said, "The father is the head of the family. . . . He's the boss. Even though my Mom disagrees, she has to go along." A Fijian said, "Usually my Dad made the important decisions. He may let us think about the decision, but usually he is the one who decides." The mother frequently was accorded some input, often taking the role of intermediary to express the opinions of other family members before the father did the final deciding. A Tongan woman said, "My Dad makes all the decisions. . . . My Mom. . . suggests softly and then my Dad will say yes or no." A Tongan man said, "My Dad is the head of the family, he makes the decisions. But Mum also has a say in making decisions. . . . [She] suggests, but it all comes down to the father."

Out of respect, the children obey. Sometimes obedience means a serious change in their life plans. One Tongan woman recalled, "When I finished high school I didn't want to go on my mission [a Mormon custom, involving two years' service abroad for a man, a year and a half for a woman]. Then my father forced me to go on a mission, so I had to go and I didn't have any decision in the matter. My father made the decision for me to go."

With respect to the question of the relative importance of the extended and nuclear families, it is perhaps worthy of note that almost all of the examples that the respondents gave of such decision-making took place within the nuclear family. A few spoke of times when aunties or uncles broke into nuclear family decision-making. But in the vast majority of cases, the parents, and specifically the father, made the decisions. They were not referred to some larger extended family council or clan leader.

Sometimes older siblings, brothers in particular, felt themselves deputized to take on the decision-making role. One Tongan said, "I'm considered one of the older ones in the family, so I can tell the younger cousins or brothers what to do. . . . [When] the father's not around, the mother [makes the decisions. If] the mother's not around, the next oldest." Another said, "I'm their teacher. I look after the younger ones."

Expression of Caring

To a person, the people interviewed described their families as loving ones, where a great deal of caring was expressed. But to a person, they said that caring was seldom expressed in words. A Samoan man said, "There's no such thing as 'I love you,' or 'I feel for you.' There's none of them. It's expressed through Christmas and birthday presents. There is no verbal expression. I couldn't even say 'I love you Dad' or 'I love you Mom.'" A Samoan woman said of her parents, "They didn't really express it in words. . . . My Mom took care of me." She told how her father would show his love for his children by walking them over a mile to school. "When we were afraid Dad would walk with us until it got light . . . then he would walk all the way home and start working in the plantation."

An I-kiribati man said, "We don't hug or say it but . . . I show my love for my mother by obeying her words." Many described obedience to and respect for elders as way of showing love. A Tongan said love meant "Respect for the elderly people. Do not question the authority that they have. Whenever they need help, help them out. . . . My grandfather, always have to carry for him heavy stuff. You know, he can carry it, but he's older. So . . . I carry it for him." People talked about sharing of food as an important way of showing love. Members of the extended family would drop by, especially on Sundays after church, and would automatically receive the best food which the household was able to provide.

So the love that exists in abundance in these families was expressed not in words but in deeds, gestures, and behaviors. Pacific Islander men displayed their love by looking out for the welfare of their female family members. By contrast, women tended to demonstrate care and concern by doing manual tasks of a nurturing kind. This can be seen in the testimony of a man who lives in the same college community as his two sisters. As for familial caring, he said:

That's a real important role. Especially since my sisters are here we really care for each other and they care for me. I

check on them sometimes to see how they are doing. If I meet them at the dances or at the movies I make sure they come home and I leave or go out on a date with someone. Same relationship how they care for me. Like if I'm going to the temple or something they ask me if my white shirt is clean, and I bring it over to them and they wash it or something, or if it's all right with me I just tell them that I'm okay.

Other males reported similar surveillance and chaperoning activities. No one seems to have felt a need to chaperone the men.

Many of these same respondents had no difficulty expressing their love for family members to the interviewers, but they could not articulate themselves directly to their families.

Discipline

One of the ways that the parents of the Pacific Islander respondents expressed their caring was by disciplining their children. Discipline among Pacific Islanders is intimately connected with caring, and also with respect. The word "respect" appears over and over in the transcripts of the interviews, perhaps more frequently than any other word. Some Tongans used a word, *faka'apa'apa*, which evokes an elaborate system of duty, honor, obligation, and security that stands as the rock of stability at the base of Tongan society (Tuifua 1992). One young man said "*Famili*...in Tongan... means the relationship we have in a very respectful way... When I hear the word *famili*, it creates that sense of respect." It is in context of the value which Pacific Islanders place on caring and respect that one must understand the issue of discipline.

From the perspective of middle-class, White Americans, Pacific Islander disciplinary practices seem harsh. Almost always, in the families of the people interviewed, discipline involved forthright physical punishment. Dubanoski and Snyder (1980) go so far as to label such practices "child abuse." They may not be right.

Almost always, it was the fathers who did the heavy hitting, and boys especially were their targets. One recalled, "We got hit. By a stick or a broom or something. . . . One time. . . . I got hit. I was so upset at my Dad's sister. She came and stole something at home, and I was very young and I swore at her. . . . 'cause I was so mad, and my Dad heard. He came and he hit me and I still have a lot of scars all over my body because he was so mad." Another man recalled an occasion when "I didn't tell my Dad where I was going to go. So I walked in the house and he threw a big punch. A big punch!" That would not happen now, however, in this person's estimate: "Now that I'm tall and bigger and much stronger, my Dad doesn't hit me any more. You've taken his punishment in a good way, so now you just talk."

Girls also got hit, but not so often and not so hard. Mothers were more likely to scold or to reason with children than to hit, although sometimes they, too, got physical. One woman remembered that, "Usually in our family when we do something. . . [our mother would] always come and sit me out, and tell me to sit down, and then she tell me not do this because—and then she would explain it and everything. But sometimes she would pinch." Only a few of the respondents reported being slapped by aunts or uncles. Sometimes the delegation of leadership to the oldest member of the younger generation meant that an older brother or sister felt empowered to slap a younger sibling, but that was very rare.

The people who were interviewed had a somewhat different understanding of this physical punishment than some non-Pacific Islanders might suppose. Almost to a person, they spoke in positive terms of the corporal punishment they had experienced. A Tongan man said he would discipline his children "just how I was punished, because I like it that way, 'cause right now I don't regret anything that my parents did to me. I think that's how they show their love to me." In all four ethnic groups, the children expressed this same idea, that physical punishment was one way they knew their parents cared for them. A student from Kiribati said the father's beatings "showed his love for us, because if they didn't do that we would be really naughty." A Samoan woman said that "If

somebody were to ask if I was abused when I was a child I would say no." A Samoan man said, "I think I learned more being disciplined—being hit, rather than not being hit. I think I learned more from my father through discipline. If it wasn't for him, I wouldn't be here today." A Tongan said that physical punishment "made me do what I am supposed to be doing." A woman told how her father had insisted her brother go spend two years on a Mormon mission, and had beaten the younger man up when he refused to go. During the missionary period, the young man wrote and thanked his father for beating him into going, and he did not change his story once the mission had ended.

It may be contended by some observers that this sort of positive statement about physical punishment simply reflects the psychological dependency of an abused person upon her or his abuser. But it may be equally valid, given the ubiquity of the practice of physical punishment throughout the Pacific areas under study, to take these statements at closer to face value. If the people involved do not experience physical punishment as tyranny and abuse—if, to the contrary, they see the punishment as centrally important to the development of their own positive character qualities and to the maintenance of family stability—by what right may someone with another theory of childrearing impose a negative value judgment? (cf. Gray and Cosgrove 1985).

The literature on child abuse suggests that physical punishment may be more dangerous for children when it is negatively sanctioned (Dubanoski and Snyder 1980). Conversely, it may be less dangerous in the Pacific Islander American instance, where it is viewed as a natural and positive way to raise one's children. Also, if physical discipline is a usual method rather than a desperate last resort, it is less likely to be abusive (Parke and Collmer 1975). Similarly, if physical discipline is swiftly and unselfconsciously administered, it is unlikely to result in serious injury (Korbin 1987a, 1987b).

A Tongan woman summed up the Pacific Islander American view of physical discipline. Back home, she said, "My Mom

gave me the stick." When she came to the United States she was surprised to learn that, "Over here parents are not supposed to hit your kids. . . . That's how you teach your children. . . . If you don't hit them then they will not learn anything." Physical discipline in these Pacific Islander families was one prime way by which parents showed the depth of their caring. Children showed their caring in return by obedience, by respecting the elderly, by taking care of their siblings, by not answering back.

Cultural Change

Each of the people at the time of the interview was living in Hawaii, thousands of miles from her or his homeland and native culture. Nearly all are also physically remote from their families, extended and nuclear, though some had a few local relatives. Moreover, their countries of origin are undergoing dramatic changes under the impact of global market forces and the swirling movements of goods, people, and culture across and around the Pacific. It is inevitable that these particular individuals should express personal feelings at some variance with what they perceive to be traditional family imperatives in their native cultures.

Many people when interviewed said they would not do exactly as their parents had done. This was especially true in the matter of discipline. Even though they valued the punishment they had received, they said they would exercise a lighter hand on their own children. One woman quoted above as approving of the way she was raised, said nonetheless, "I think whenever my parents see anything wrong they would just hit you without letting you explain your point. So what I want to do is let them [my children] explain first." Several respondents echoed these sentiments. They would not completely eschew corporal punishment, but they wished to inject an element of dialogue before leaping to discipline. Another said he would let his children have a bigger say than he had in making decisions about their own lives: "I would let them choose for themselves. I would just explain everything to them and let them choose." Most of the respondents were not quite so liberal:

they would discuss issues with their children, they said, but not allow them total freedom to make their own choices.

Both these desired changes—talking with children before punishing them and discussing options before making decisions—will depend on establishing new patterns of verbal communication. Not only were all the people interviewed better at showing love than speaking love, they felt themselves tongue-tied before their parents in most situations. One Tongan man described a case that applied to others as well: “Even though we have something in mind to say. . . it’s very rude to talk back to our parents, even if we feel they are not right. And [if] there is something in our hearts that we need to express to them, we cannot say until, I don’t know, you just cannot say anything back.”

One of the factors one would like to tease out is the impact of religion on moving the people interviewed for this study away from traditional family dynamics. All are members of a faith, Mormonism, that is highly bound up with White, middle-class, American culture. As one put it, “The Mormon belief is that you give up your culture and you take on Mormon culture.” In practical fact, since some of the respondents came from nuclear families that were Mormon but extended families that were not, their Mormonism drew them out of the extended family network. Then, too, certain Mormon practices are built around the nuclear family. Some spoke of having family home evening, a weekly togetherness time practiced by most Mormon families. Some spoke of family councils—another Mormon device—where they tried to air grievances and work out differences.

The person whose family showed the most evidence of these Mormon influences was a Tongan male whose parents had been educated at BYU-Hawaii years before and whose father had since accepted a calling as a bishop—the equivalent of a pastor or priest in Protestant or Catholic circles. The young man described his family’s situation: “My Dad used to discipline us [physically, but] ever since my Dad got the calling for church. . . he does away with the Tongan, whack!, belt stuff. He gets on a one-to-one basis

and we just talk and clear it off. . . . So instead of taking me into the room and belting me he just talked to me really good and made me feel so bad that I started crying. But my Mum she got really mad, so got the thing and started to beat on me, but my Dad just talked to her and my Mum tried to convince him to hit me, but he didn't." Because of the influence of the church, this family seems to have made a cultural transition in its way of relating.

Yet this family was unique among those interviewed for this study, in the degree to which it had adopted a foreign model of family communication. Because this is not a longitudinal study, it is not clear at this point exactly how much culture change actually has taken place in these families, or will take place in the future. Nor is it clear what part of any culture change can be laid at the door of Mormonism, and how much ought to be attributed to more general causes.

Summing Up

From these interviews, it is possible to construct a fuller picture of the roles and behavior patterns that characterize Pacific Islander Americans than has existed up until now. For example, the respondents have given a picture of family structure where much of what is most important is organized around the nuclear family, yet the collateral family takes over at key points. The wider kin network is emotionally important to the individual and is there for ceremonies and celebrations, as well as for major decision making. In some instances, extended family members are accorded positions much like those of parents and siblings, although most daily functioning happens within the nuclear family.

There is a strict hierarchy of power and authority in Pacific Islander American families, with parents taking primacy over children, men over women, older over younger siblings. A great deal of caring is expressed in these families, but it is seldom expressed verbally. Together with caring, respect is the highest value in the Pacific Islander American family system.

One of the forms through which caring and respect are mediated is physical discipline. This takes the form of hitting and slapping. It generates obedience, and, in the minds of the informants, is a good thing—indeed, a necessary tool for character development.

Nonetheless, one can see the acids of Euroamerican culture eating away at more traditional Pacific Islander customs. Many informants expressed a desire to tone down the hitting and increase verbal communication in the next generation. The trend seems to be toward emphasizing the attributes of the nuclear family. The degree to which this trend is affected by the respondents' Mormonism and the degree to which they are more generalized social phenomena are unclear and await further research. Surely, both factors are at work.

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