

**Connecting and collaborating
across Oceania and its diaspora:
A shared approach to meaningful development
and engagement**

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Abstract

Through this short, critical piece, I, as someone who comes from an Indigenous Pacific heritage, aim to challenge the way in which mainstream society positions societal problems as siloed, isolated from a structural, collective understanding of societal problems generally evident in Indigenous epistemologies. I suggest that by using an anti-oppressive social work practice approach where power imbalances are examined and understood within a wider context, we, as a Pacific community, are better equipped to create strategies and solutions that are inclusive of those traditionally not included in the conversation for change. We need to promote the importance of creating a shared, collaborative stance on the social and welfare needs evident in the Pacific diaspora in Australia and to involve diverse voices including the voices of non-Pacific people genuinely wanting to assist our own cultural capital and growth in Western societies. This can positively influence the people with the power to make social change to share control of change-making processes and to create multiple discourses that reflect the cultural diversity of those working for justice; this will allow us to move beyond the traditional, individualistic rhetoric of ‘us and them’ to ‘we’.

Keywords: collaboration, anti-oppressive approach, Indigenous perspectives, decolonising Oceania

Introduction

From a western perspective, we pathologise societal problems as individuals’ issues. Western thought, for example, neo-liberalism, relegates responsibility for social problems from governing bodies, structures and systems to the individual person who, in turn, is seen as needing transformation. Such a limited viewpoint is perpetuated to the detriment of Pacific diaspora communities. Pacific communities are often seen as problematic, needing to be held accountable for their inability to conform to ‘mainstream’ society. However, perhaps we should look to more collectivist cultures like the ones we see across Oceania, where Indigenous epistemologies lean more towards a shared approach to handling social problems, for models of service to individuals and communities? The challenge, though, is bringing everyone to the table – not just those that come from such collectivist cultures, but white Australians and New Zealanders too. By providing everyone with a spot at the table, we enable a more shared understanding of the needs of the wider

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community and the responsibility that we all have in promoting possible solutions towards sustainable change.

It is my hope that through this short article, the importance of working collaboratively across Pacific communities here in Australia to promote good research, policy and practice is emphasised. Research, policy and practice must be undertaken and navigated via a shared approach, through a collaborative spirit that highlights the significance of Pacific cultural perspectives, Indigenous understandings and decolonising approaches that are inclusive of everyone across the region.

My own career in working with Pacific communities has been multifaceted. Through the various activities that I've undertaken as a social work practitioner, focusing on creating and implementing good practice approaches and models of service delivery and provision that effectively engage the social and welfare needs of marginalised community groups in greater Western Sydney (including Indigenous and Pacific peoples), I have learnt the value of holding a broad, holistic view of society. This may be viewed theoretically through the anti-oppressive practice approach that strives to recognise the structural factors that may oppress individuals and limit their contribution to their own local communities and broader society (Burke and Harrison 2002). This approach strives to understand the power relations that perpetuate structural oppression, cultural oppression and personal oppression. If we as Pacific people are to move beyond our relative areas of marginalisation experienced in the Australia diaspora, we need to collectively understand such factors, and then examine the possible solutions that emerge from this understanding.

Structural oppression

“Structural oppression refers to the means by which powerlessness and marginalisation are institutionalised in societal relations” (Maidment and Egan 2009, 6). It is the point at which social systems, including legislation and policies, align to benefit the dominant group. Within the structurally oppressive context of Australia, Pacific communities are striving to better understand how to engage with the various social systems stacked against them, including the education, health and legal systems. Ongoing research into the youth justice system shows that Pacific people are overrepresented. Through an anti-oppressive practice perspective, we can unpack the complex reasons behind this trend and re-position the blame that is aimed at Pacific communities. The challenge is in understanding the systemic practices that perpetuate marginalisation and that are incongruent with the socio-cultural context in which the Pacific diaspora lives. Rather than adopt an ‘us and them’ mentality, we as a broader society need to be more mindful of the way in which we can change systemic structures to be more inclusive of diversity. The provision of a platform for Pacific people to share their experiences of living away from their Island homes, for example, could aid systems in being more responsive. This suggestion is intended to create a more nuanced and engaging way in which the system can meaningfully respond to and engage with Australia’s Pacific diaspora populations. A collaborative approach to problem-solving is necessary that affords Pacific families and communities in Australia an opportunity to rise up from the marginal positions to which they are initially allocated.

The allocation of better resources to areas where large Pacific communities reside may also lead to a better outcome for the communities. Too often we assume an ethnic community group is solely responsible for its own issues, and lack insight into how everyone is responsible for the conditions in which such communities exist. This is evident in our treatment of Indigenous communities in Australia where we believe it is the Aboriginal people that need to be held accountable for their communities’ problems, and who must adapt to western ways of living.

However, we need to understand that if we are to truly operate as a community, we need to provide adequate access to infrastructure that aids and assists development for such communities. In saying that, it is also imperative to offer scope for ethnic communities to decide the extent to which they would like community development assistance, even when it is offered to fit the contexts of different communities' own ways of knowing and doing, being and becoming. We must consider to what extent a community group wants to assimilate, to take on western ideals, and to what extent western development philosophies are able to be applied to different communities to facilitate collaboration. It is from these considerations that fruitful conversations and shared, solution-focused narratives can emerge.

Cultural oppression

“Cultural oppression refers to those dominant sets of knowledge, values, behaviours and customs that are privileged at the expense of others in any given society” (Maidment and Egan 2009, 6). Within a context of cultural oppression in Australia, dominant western discourses use value laden language that perpetuates dominant positions and viewpoints. Such discourses stigmatise the marginalised ‘other’. Oppressive language is used, often unwittingly, by academics, researchers, legislators and policy makers to uphold their own positions of privilege, once again at the cost of being able to meaningfully interrogate the real causes of social problems to find possible solutions. For Pacific people in Australia, we continue to be seen as people who work in low skilled labour, who do not competently pursue further education or training, and who are better suited for manual and repetitive employment. Our physical endurance is commodified in the context of sport, where a few of us are given the opportunity to play Rugby League or Union. The other way we enter into mainstream consciousness is through our perceived natural musical abilities. Both pathways lead to celebration of Pacific peoples in mainstream culture, but also perpetuate stereotypes of Pacific people as ‘the people who are good at sport and singing’.

Such stereotypes also effect the ways in which Pacific communities see themselves. Pacific community members may believe that pursuing university or other forms of further education and training is more of a kavalagi / palagi (white) thing, that the best post-secondary pathway for Pacific community members is the pursuit of stable employment. I want to stress that I, as a Pacific person myself, am not saying that securing employment to provide financially for one’s family is of less importance than choosing further studies; rather, I believe that we are just as capable of excelling at university as any other cultural or ethnic group in western society. Indeed, knowledge is power, but it is enhanced via a collectivist ethos promoting positive outcomes for more than just the individual. Therefore, by re-envisioning the potential of Pacific people, and changing the language we use to talk about Pacific people’s potential, we can facilitate social mobility for Pacific people through encouraging the acquisition of professional skills and qualifications that may in the end lead to more sustainable employment. In turn, this may amplify Pacific voices and allow Pacific perspectives to be understood more broadly.

Personal oppression

“Personal oppression refers to the negative impact of interpersonal relationships, attitudes and actions between people” (Maidment and Egan 2009, 6). Cultural differences may shape the ways in which individuals participate in or experience personal oppression. People are viewed differently depending on their gender, class, religion, language, sexuality and ability (Baines 2011). Cultural categories may intersect with and create new identities that are in turn transformed through

interactions with other individuals who hold contrasting perspectives. Individuals shape their own personal identities in the context of these shifting categories and these identities are then influenced by how other significant people interact with and view these categories. For example, if a society views females as being subservient to males, females may subsequently be socialised into roles that reflect this status. If women challenge such behaviours and attitudes, they may be further vilified for not conforming to their society's expectations, and may then be subject to physical violence and other forms of 'discipline'. Such dynamics may be the norm in some family settings, which may then prevent female individuals from succeeding in their life goals and obtaining social, emotional, mental and physical wellbeing.

Across Pacific families, we often shy away from facing up to our individual problems, let alone problems concerning our whole family systems. This might be a result of our own cultural perceptions that such problems are 'our lot in life', and that we need to get on with life rather than waste time looking for possible solutions. In Pacific community groups, as in all community groups, even western ones, there are certain social issues that are more evident in some families than in others. These include domestic and family violence, child abuse and neglect, alcohol and other drug problems and mental health issues. However, if we are to provide better opportunities for individuals and families to understand how they can be more than these categories and to achieve self-determination, we can promote positive outcomes for society's more marginalised members. By educating all members across the community to be more aware of how to overcome these entrenched problems and negative associations, we will be better equipped to find nuanced solutions to these complex needs. By contributing to a deeper understanding of the needs of individuals in Pacific families, we can, at the same time, promote a collective approach to achieving positive outcomes with individuals, families and communities experiencing such struggles.

Connecting and collaborating

As most Pacific poets and artists attest, we are better individuals for being connected to each other. In a Fijian context, it is known as *solesolevaki* – where my reality and wellbeing is readily informed by your interaction and connection with me; and vice versa. Such a reciprocal perspective (also seen in other Pacific cultures, like *fa'asamoa* in Samoa, and *fetokoni'aki* in Tonga) requires that we collaborate and learn to understand the needs of others. Rather than feeling isolated in our own circumstances, we need to celebrate the richness that comes from such collectivist views. This approach could be applied to Pacific people in Australia. Instead of thinking that we need to be left to our own devices, to find our own solutions from within our communities, we need to create meaningful connections and conversations with non-Pacific people who can also offer support and contribute to our wellbeing.

We should all be in this together as opposed to us Pacific people creating our own barriers between Pacific and non-Pacific people, which actually perpetuates the 'othering' of us by the dominant group. We need to share an anti-oppressive practice approach that prioritises Indigenous views and aims to decolonise oppressive systems. I genuinely believe it is through this whole-of-community approach that we build initiatives that are sustainable and make community resources more widely available (Strier and Binyamin 2014). It is in this space that we can overcome personal, cultural and structural oppression and amplify Pacific voices. In turn, we as Pacific people can then contribute in ways where we feel valued and included, supporting the development of our community in the hope this will also benefit other community groups around us.

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Author's biography

Jioji Ravulo is an Associate Professor in Social Work within the Faculty of Social Sciences at the University of Wollongong, Australia. He is passionate about embracing cultural diversity and its differences, and creating strategies to promote the development of cultural and social capital alongside the contribution from equity groups.