



WHAT MAKES FOR A GOOD MARRIAGE OR PARTNERSHIP? SAMOAN CASE STUDY

AUT

2016 | RESEARCH SUMMARY

Tagaloatele Peggy Fairbairn-Dunlop, Koleta Savaii and Eti Puni Vakatele

Case study findings that set a platform for understanding family violence by exploring harmonious marriages and partner relationships in New Zealand. These draw on the experiences of Samoan males and females, who are or have been in a partner relationship for up to ten years.

WHAT WERE THE KEY FINDINGS?

- Enduring importance of fa’a Samoa (the Samoan way) ideals of faith and family as goals and shapers in the lives and decision-making of families
- Changes in the ways families are organised today suggest that there is a shift in thinking and responsibilities away from the traditional extended or kinship concept of family to a more nuclear model
- By referencing their behaviours to their remembrances of past times and “how I was raised”, participants noted quite significant changes in partner relationships and relationships with their children
- They also questioned the extent and nature of their relationships with their extended family members who are now quite widely dispersed. Notably, shifts in the behaviours of partners featured people-focussed and relationship-nurturing styles rather than claims for individual rights or entitlements
- The increasing independence of the family unit, seen in comments, such as “It’s you and your partner”, may foreshadow an increased family reliance on external support systems- as well as considering the effectiveness of other new and ‘not culturally appropriate’ strategies, such as counselling
- Despite strongly articulated statements that violence has no part in family relationships, some participants held a lingering fear that “violence is within us.”
- Preferred strategies for managing violent behaviours were based on family and faith, such as prayer and family talks
- Female participants showed greater resilience than males to understanding and responding to life changes. On the one hand, female resilience was underpinned by their constant (and immediate) concerns for family wellbeing. At the same time, these females showed considerable pride in their place and identity within their feagaiga as aualuma (daughters) whose sacredness should be protected at all costs. Sacredness is tied to a shared divinity with gods in the fact that females produce life.
- The lengthy discussions about the feagaiga (brother –sister bond/covenant) as a protection against family violence reinforced the importance of exploring how traditional, context-specific activities could be applied to contemporary times and place. Taking into consideration how faletua ma tauasi (wives) held the lowest status, in comparison to sisters in their partner’s families and what this means in a contemporary landscape.
- The distinction participants made between feagaiga as a sacred covenant and marriage as a legal contract suggests that the feagaiga does not, and never will, extend to protect all women and children.
- Because the feagaiga sits within the fa’amatai governance ideals and practices, any changes or weakening of the fa’amatai has the potential to also impact on the valuing and practice of feagaiga, whether this is in the diaspora or homeland communities.

WHAT MAKES FOR A HARMONIOUS MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP AND HOW ARE THESE BEHAVIOURS LEARNED AND PRACTISED?

- **Theme 1: Expectations of a partner** – commitment to faith and family were most frequently mentioned as the ideal qualities in a marriage partner
- **Theme 2: What makes for a good marriage** – a mix of ideal views and personal qualities and relationships were expressed, including Marriage is a Sacrament and Love
- **Theme 3: Challenges and how they are dealt with**– challenges named include financial pressures, who is head of the household, whether priority should be given to the extended family or the nuclear family, and parenting
- How partners dealt with challenges, including what people see as challenges and how they face them give important insights into marriage experiences, expectations and aspirations
- Maintaining fa'a Samoa ideals of spiritual and family was uppermost in these participants' perceptions of marriage partners and of marriage relationships
- At the same time, questions were raised of how these ideals could be practised in New Zealand today – balancing what was best for their families now and in the future with the benefits of investing in activities that affirmed the prestige of the extended family- especially

the shift from marriage being between two families to being between the partners

- Discussions indicated that these participants were taking responsibility for, and negotiating the realities of daily life today. This was seen in the small shifts in partner relationships with each other, their children and the extended family
- These shifts featured a relationship-enriching style (as in the fa'a Samoa) rather than a claim for rights or entitlements. In this process, females showed a greater understanding and resilience to changing times than males. Female resilience was framed within a desire to maintain fa'a Samoa and their status as aualuma (daughters) within the fa'a Samoa system, along with maintaining the feagaiga.

IS VIOLENCE ACCEPTABLE IN A MARRIAGE RELATIONSHIP?

- All participants had witnessed or experienced acts of family violence in their childhood years and these experiences have had a lasting effect on their lives
- They were emphatic that there was no place for violence generally, in a marriage, or in family relationships
- While they discussed externally generated strategies to manage violent behaviours they were more confident in family-led strategies, which drew on fa'a Samoa ideals of prayer and respect for the family institution

DO THE FA'A SAMOA IDEALS, SUCH AS THE FEAGAIGA, PROTECT WOMEN FROM VIOLENCE?

- Participants made a distinction between feagaiga as a sacred covenant and marriage as a legal contract. This suggests that the feagaiga is not and cannot be a protective ideal for all women
- An erosion of the fa'amatai will impact on the protection that sisters have always enjoyed, due to their feagaiga with their brothers, and women's identity, role, responsibility and designation
- Partners are taking more responsibility for maintaining their own harmonious family relationships rather than relying on their extended family. This raises the possibility of an increased reliance on external support mechanisms in the future
- A valuable suggestion is that the feagaiga be reconceptualised as a general relationship model that is inclusive of all people and circumstances

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The suggestion that the feagaiga be reconceptualised as a generic relationship model warrants further research

The study took an appreciative-inquiry, strengths-based approach and was conducted through the lens of a Samoan worldview. This is represented in the Fonofale model of health, that captures the cultural platform of the fa'a Samoa – the relationships between spiritual, social, economic and physical elements of culture and family. It also places these relationships within the context of changing times and places, very relevant for this New Zealand-based study.

Pasefika Proud embodies a vision of strong, vibrant and prosperous Pacific children, young people and their families. Wellbeing for Pacific families occurs when all aspects of the individual and collective are in balance, co-existing with environments, kinship and support systems while recognising mana and tapu.

Pacific cultures are strengths that can be used positively to promote and enhance resilience within Pacific families.

Pasefika Proud mobilises Pacific individuals, families and communities to take responsibility for the issues they are facing, find the solutions and take leadership in implementing them.

'OUR FAMILIES, OUR PEOPLE, OUR RESPONSIBILITY'

FIND OUT MORE

Full research reports can be requested from Pasefika Proud. Email: Pasefika_Proud@msd.govt.nz