



Life
Course
Centre

WORKING
PAPER
SERIES

No. 2023-10

May 2023

Cultural understandings of responsibility amongst Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane

Laura Simpson Reeves



Australian Government
Australian Research Council



THE UNIVERSITY
OF QUEENSLAND
AUSTRALIA



THE UNIVERSITY OF
SYDNEY



THE UNIVERSITY OF
WESTERN
AUSTRALIA



THE UNIVERSITY OF
MELBOURNE

Research Summary

Why was the research done?

Australia has a highly multicultural population, and with rapidly increasing migration to Australia from the Pacific Islands. Those claiming Samoan heritage make up the largest increase of Pasifika migrants, with increasing numbers settling in the Greater Brisbane region. Despite this, there has been limited research in Greater Brisbane that explores the lives of the Samoan diaspora, including cultural perspectives of responsibility. It is thus increasingly important for social research to take the diverse range of meaning-making processes into account, including around the concept of responsibility.

What were the key findings?

Responsibility amongst Samoan diaspora is enacted in one of three ways. First, Samoan diaspora enact responsibility towards their family and households, which include both financial and non-financial contributions. Second, Samoan diaspora enact responsibility towards their community, including extended family in Australia and abroad. Thirdly, Samoan diaspora enact responsibility towards their future selves, especially in terms of being able to provide for their family and community.

What does this mean for policy and practice?

Samoan understandings of responsibility differ from those typically used in Australian policy and practice. We need to understand how these forms of responsibility are enacted within diverse communities to better design and implement policies that are culturally appropriate and address the needs of different communities.

Citation

Simpson Reeves, L. (2023). 'Cultural understandings of responsibility amongst Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane', Life Course Centre Working Paper Series, 2023-10. Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland.

The authors

Laura Simpson Reeves

Institute for Social Science Research, The University of Queensland

Email: laura.simpsonreeves@uq.edu.au

Twitter: @LauraSimRee

Acknowledgements/Funding Sources

I would like to thank Professor Cameron Parsell, Professor Shuang Liu and Dr Ruth Faelolo for their support and advice throughout the research project. I would also like to thank Dr Gemma Malungahu and Dr Alice Campbell for her comments on an earlier version of this paper.

This work was supported by the Australian Government under a Research Training Program Scholarship, and through the Australian Research Council's Centre of Excellence for Children and Families over the Life Course (CE200100025).

DISCLAIMER: The content of this Working Paper does not necessarily reflect the views and opinions of the Life Course Centre. Responsibility for any information and views expressed in this Working Paper lies entirely with the author(s).

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).



Cultural understandings of responsibility amongst Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane

Abstract

Those claiming Pacific Islander heritage in Australia has increased in recent years, and those identifying as Samoan account for the largest increase amongst Pasifika populations in Greater Brisbane, Australia. Despite this, there has been limited research that explores the lives of the Samoan diaspora, including cultural understandings of responsibility. This research draws on a qualitative study with 16 members of the Samoan diaspora living in the Greater Brisbane area to examine how responsibility towards their household, their community, and themselves is described by the participants. I explore how participants enact responsibility to their households, including both financial and non-financial contributions. I describe how participants enact responsibility towards their community, including extended family in Greater Brisbane and abroad, and how this results in either close engagement with—or deliberate separation from—the diaspora. Finally, I discuss how participants draw on the choices of their parents and other relatives to feel a sense of responsibility towards their future selves, being able to care and provide for their family and community. These cultural perspectives necessitate a broader sociological understanding of responsibility than what has been historically described, and I propose a move beyond Western notions of responsibility to include other worldviews.

Introduction

Australia has a highly multicultural population, and increased migration to Australia from diverse cultural groups, such as those from the Pacific Islands, will only make it more so (Batley, 2017). According to Batley (2017), who compared 2006, 2011, and 2016 Australian census data, those claiming Pacific Islander heritage has increased both in absolute and relative terms. By far, those who identify as having Samoan heritage make up the largest increase of Pasifika immigrants (Batley, 2017). According to the 2016 Australian National Census (ABS, 2017), in Greater Brisbane¹, those claiming Samoan ancestry account for approximately one percent of the population, with that increasing in certain areas, such as 2.49 percent in Ipswich (to Brisbane's west) and 2.17 percent in Logan and Beaudesert (to Brisbane's south). Perhaps more pertinent is that these figures are rapidly increasing, with a 30 percent increase from 2011 and a 100 percent increase since 2006 across Greater Brisbane. As many Samoans migrate to Australia via New Zealand under the Trans-Tasman Travel Arrangement, which allows for free movement between the two countries, it is also likely that the census data may under-report the number of those claiming Samoan heritage (Kearney et al., 2011). Despite this, there has been limited research in Greater Brisbane that explores the lives of the Samoan diaspora, including cultural perspectives of responsibility. It is thus increasingly important for social research to take the diverse range of meaning-making processes into account, including around the concept of responsibility.

In line with other Pasifika research, it is important that I begin with an explanation of who I am and where I come from. This article has been written from a white or *pālagi* perspective. I am a researcher of Anglo-Celtic heritage currently living in Brisbane, Australia, although I grew up in rural Queensland. I have spent a significant portion of my adult life living and working in cultures that are not my own. My husband, who is of Finnish and Anglo-Celtic heritage, spent several years working in western Brisbane high schools that were largely populated by Pasifika youth. His stories, in addition to reading research from Australian-based Pasifika scholars such as Dr Ruth (Lute) Faleolo, instilled a desire in me to develop a greater understanding of the challenges and opportunities facing Pasifika diaspora in Australia. And yet I found that much of the (albeit limited) literature in Australia drew largely on Western conceptualisations rather than drawing on Pasifika perspectives.

¹ By Greater Brisbane, I am referring to the urban areas in southeast Queensland known as Brisbane City, Ipswich, Logan, Redlands, and Moreton Bay.

This article attempts to understand how notions of ‘responsibility’, particularly fiscal and non-fiscal responsibility, are enacted in the everyday lived experiences of Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane, Australia. Following a brief discussion of sociological and Pasifika understandings of responsibility, the article draws on a recent study with 16 Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane to explore how the participants conceptualise responsibility. The findings highlight that the notions of responsibility amongst the Samoan diaspora are complex and interwoven with other attributes, including socio-economic status, and thus differ from more traditional sociological understandings of responsibility. It also highlights a need to include understandings of responsibility at the meso level, rather than solely at the macro or micro levels.

The concept of responsibility

Responsibility as a concept can be challenging to define. Responsibility theory has largely been debated within the field of philosophy, particularly in relation to ethics (moral responsibility, see e.g. Williams, 2012), legality (legal responsibility, see e.g. Long, 1999) and citizenship (political responsibility, see e.g. Dunn, 1990). However, a sociological understanding of responsibility remains elusive, operating “within a web of other concepts” (Lucas, 1993: 9). Indeed, while the topic was appreciated by classical sociologists such as Durkheim, Weber, and Parsons, the topic has been of limited interest to sociologists in the past few decades (Strydom, 1999). Sociological literature that does focus on responsibility often describes the concept in relation to societal or social responsibility (e.g., Delanty, 1999: 156-157; King et al., 2021; Strydom, 1999) or has a focus on risk (e.g., Beck, 1992; Lupton, 2006). The former of these is most closely aligned with how Pasifika literature (described below) also approaches the concept of responsibility, particularly in shifting a focus away from solely individual responsibility to one of collective responsibility, although sociological approaches to collective responsibility are often focused on global challenges such as environmental or climate change (Delanty, 1999; Strydom, 1999). These approaches, which are largely Western in origin, thus tend to focus on the macro level.

However, this is not to say that the micro level is not also of interest to sociologists, particularly in relation to person-to-person interactions. This comes up in two main ways. First, perhaps most simply defined by Williams (2012: 824), “questions of responsibility arise whenever a person is expected by some other person(s) to act in a certain way”. Indeed, “[t]he ‘burden’

and ‘privilege’ aspects of responsibility have a deep relation to the role of moral and other normative expectations in enabling social interaction” (Williams, 2012: 822). Williams (2012) also describes responsibility in terms of prospective (duties that are expected) and retrospective (duties that are failed to be fulfilled) responsibilities. Other scholars have described responsibility as “linked to questions of participation”, “one’s social and emotional enmeshment in the collectivity one feels responsible to” (Hage, 2012: 112), and “linked fate” (Reyes, 2020: 785). As such, it is evident that a sociological conceptualisation of responsibility in academic literature heavily relies on the notion of agency; indeed, Lucas (1993: 12) argues that agency is a necessity of responsibility, and if we abandon agency then we must also abandon responsibility. Thus, while the focus here is largely on the micro level, the links back to the macro are evident in the links to the broader sociological phenomena and “collectivity” described above (Munro, 2011).

The second way in which responsibility is described in the sociological literature is the neoliberal conceptualisation of individual responsibility. In particular, I am referring here to the idea that we have a personal responsibility to fulfil our potential and to be our best selves, and to meet our own needs (Brown & Baker, 2012). Additionally, neoliberalism encourages the use of charity and civil society-led initiatives rather than relying on government ‘handouts’ (Parsell et al., 2021). This again creates a focus on the micro level, with a strong focus on individual needs and obligations, rather than collective needs. What is often missing from these conceptualisations, however, is a focus on the meso level.

How responsibility is described in Pasifika literature differs from the descriptions outlined above yet is still arguably sociological in its approach. There is a strong emphasis on collectivism and on ‘obligations’² to kin, particularly in relation to what Williams (2012) described as “prospective responsibilities”. Amongst Samoans, these obligations are often referred to as *fa’avelave*, which encompasses monetary gifts but also the performance of social responsibilities for major life events such as births, weddings, and funerals (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). Indeed, it’s important to highlight that *fa’avelave* “remains central to Samoan life” (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009: 19) as it is a “way to maintain an active connection with relatives, lands, titles, and dignities, they are a support network that will help one in times of need” (Ala’ilima & Ala’ilima, 1994). Faleolo (2019) demonstrates that these obligations can

² The term ‘obligation’ is not often used by Pasifika scholars but is the most appropriate equivalent English language term.

extend across transnational spaces, referring to especially to financial obligations to extended family members in the islands, and may influence migration decisions (e.g., taking a better paid job in Brisbane, Australia, than a more prestigious but less well paid job in Auckland, New Zealand). Stanley and Kearney (2017) describe the tensions these obligations can cause amongst Samoan youth, particularly when they conflict with personal desires or goals that are often elevated within broader, mainstream Australian society (e.g., higher education attainment). Yet it is important to note that these responsibilities or obligations are not necessarily viewed in a negative light. Indeed, these responsibilities/obligations form part of *fa'a-Sāmoa*, which roughly translates as the Samoan way of life, and encompasses dimensions such as extended family or kin group, service, love, and respect (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009: 8) highlights that Samoans develop “one’s *āiga* [kin or extended family] relationships through responsibilities that are maintained over time”. The importance of relationships and cultural expectations should thus be emphasised in any discussion around responsibility.

This is not to say that Pasifika notions of responsibility do not also focus on global challenges. Efi (2018), for example, discusses a Samoan framing of responsibility for climate change. Notions of responsibility amongst Samoan diasporic communities, however, typically “demands (sic) a collectivist or communal orientation that gives priority to group needs” and “upholds a sense of self in relation to others” (Kearney et al., 2011: 147). Arguably, this brings the focus into the meso level, rather than the micro and macro approaches typically addressed in sociological research (Munro, 2011). While research focussing on the meso level has been embraced by some areas of sociology (e.g., Fine, 2012), there is sufficient scope for it to be addressed in other areas, including how different cultural groups understand concepts such as ‘responsibility’.

Methods

The findings in this article are drawn from my doctoral studies, which explores the everyday lived experiences of Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane. Repeat, unstructured, in-depth interviews with 16 participants, all of whom self-identified as Samoan, were undertaken between December 2018 and February 2021, with most interviews taking place during 2020. Participants ranged in age from late teens to early 50s. 13 of the 16 participants were women, the remaining 3 were men. Inspired by longitudinal qualitative studies, and O’Reilly’s (2012)

notion of ‘ethnographic returning’, participants were interviewed between one and five times, with most participants being interviewed two or three times. Interviews were conducted both face-to-face and via Zoom or telephone, depending on participant preference and restrictions relating to the Covid-19 pandemic. Face-to-face interviews were held in public spaces, such as cafes. Participants joined telephone or Zoom interviews from their homes or from public spaces, such as parks. Each participant was offered a \$20 Coles-Myer gift card as a thank you for participating. Where interviews took place face-to-face, gift cards were provided at the start of the interview, with reassurance that they could leave or withdraw at any time and the gift card would still be theirs to take and spend as they wished. For interviews that took place via telephone or Zoom, gift cards were sent immediately following the interview via registered post. Two participants declined the gift cards.

The interview format was influenced by the Pasifika method of *talanoa*. Derived from oral traditions, *talanoa* is based on a two-way exchange of knowledge, and thus requires a personal relationship to develop between the researcher and the participant(s) (Vaiotele, 2006). *Talanoa* has been used as a research method with Pasifika diasporic communities in Australia; Ruth Faleolo (2020), for example, used the method in her doctoral research to unpack Pasifika migrants’ perceptions of wellbeing. Other scholars have used the method for health and education research in Australia (e.g., Akbar et al., 2021) and in the Pacific islands (e.g., Faoagali & Honan, 2015). The data was constructed through ongoing dialogue and discussion with participants and required “deep listening” on my part as the researcher (Fua, 2014; ‘t Hart, 2023). Discussion, including the choice of topics, was predominately participant-led, although latter interviews included opportunities for me, as the researcher, to share preliminary findings with the participants for their input and feedback.

Interviews were audio recorded and then transcribed. Transcriptions were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021). I read all the transcripts in full to (re)familiarise myself with the contents. Transcripts were then uploaded into NVivo and thematically coded. Memos detailing researcher notes and preliminary analysis were also added to the NVivo file. I identified a number of key themes in the data, one of which was responsibility.

The research was approved by The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee (approval number 2018001040). All participant names have been replaced with pseudonyms.

Responsibility to the household

First, I will explore the participants' feelings of responsibility towards the household. Much sociological literature uses the terms 'family' and 'household' interchangeably, although it is increasingly recognised that these can have different meanings and compositions based on cultural or other norms. It has been well documented, for instance, that the term 'family' has different meanings to different cultural groups (Lohoar et al., 2014; Metge & Kinloch, 1978). Importantly, members of the same household might not be legally family members, and/or there may be material bonds and resource sharing amongst non-resident family members (Bianchi et al., 2008). Family, for many Samoans, is referred to as *āiga*, or extended family or kin (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). It is then perhaps not surprising that there is no 'standard' household composition for the participants in this study. However, they largely consisted of extended family groups – parent(s), children (including adult children), grandparents, and sometimes adult siblings and/or aunts/uncles. Where this was not the case, it was often highlighted by the participant that this was unusual. Fetuilelagi, for instance, is a Samoan woman in her early-30s who lives with a non-familial housemate. She describes her living situation as unusual for a Samoan woman: “Which is also kind of a, like culturally, whoa, scandal... The youngest daughter [like me] should be living with their mum [until married].”

The incongruity between economic needs and cultural values was evident in the stories shared by the participants, who often described tensions between what they felt was in the best financial interests of their families and what their parents or other members of their household felt was appropriate. This mismatch was frequently raised as a source of frustration by the participants, who felt that cultural values and duties were often placed above the more pressing economic needs of the family. For example, participants described situations where family members ended up in significant personal debt (e.g., by taking out payday loans with high interest rates) to meet financial obligations to church or extended family. This had an impact on other members of the household, who were often then called upon to help pay the loans. For instance, Natia, an Australian-born Samoan woman in her mid-20s, described how her father had a series of loans, including three payday loans with interest rates of around 48 percent, to contribute *fa'alavelave*:

“So he [my uncle who lives in Zealand] passed away [a few months ago] and then my car rego was due. And then we were just like, oh that's a lot of big things [expenses].

And if we had saved, it would have been like, oh we can send [my mum] to New Zealand, give her some money, she can go and be with her family. Cause we never saved, we were just like oh we'll pay the car rego, we'll see if we can send [her] there but we can't. So my dad got a loan out and I was just like mad cause I was like you can just say no, just say we can't go, we can't afford it. But my dad got a loan out so then he paid for her fare and then paid for her to have money to give to the family...I understand that it's tradition and it's culture but it's like we have no money and now we've got the loan. So my dad already has heaps of loans to pay off."

Even though the debt was technically her father's, Natia felt that it was also her responsibility to pay off the loans, and to ensure her family was financially secure. This demonstrates the impact of adaptive strategies within the family, and the interaction and interdependence that choices made by one family member can have on another.

The participants in this study often described personal sacrifice for familial gain, particularly in terms of contributing financially to the household. Talia, for instance, decided to take a "gap year" between high school and university to earn some extra money to help her family: "I just waited that year and then I kind of spent that year just working, trying to help with my family as well. That was mostly what it was." When asked what she used the money that she had earned during her gap year for, she replied, "My pay just goes to like supporting like my family, doing whatever I need to do with the money. Bills, you know, all that semi-adult stuff."

Nonetheless, Talia was encouraged to begin university following her gap year, although she reflected that her brother was not given that option:

"My sister went [to university]. They wanted my brother to go. But my dad passed [away] around the time [my brother] finished school, so from there he just went straight into work... I always kind of felt bad about that, cause I reckon he had a lot of potential."

She also described how her mother's encouragement to continue with higher education was different to the experiences of some of her friends, who were "told" to find work rather than continue study:

"What I always find weird is with my [Pasifika] friends, a lot of them get told by their parents, 'No, you can't go to uni, you gotta go straight into work' which is the opposite of my family... I think it's the whole putting work on hold, that kind of skipping out of four years of a full-time income, providing for a family, that's the negative I guess."

Other research demonstrates this is a common situation, with many young adults from Pasifika families in the Greater Brisbane area being pressured to get a job to support families who are struggling financially (Chenoweth, 2014). Despite higher education still being promoted as a pathway out of poverty (McNamara et al., 2019), the realities of day-to-day financial pressures mean that Samoan youth are often pushed into low-skilled employment, such as factory work, in order to immediately contribute income to the household (Stanley & Kearney, 2017).

Even those who were provided with the opportunity to pursue higher education, however, continued to financially support their families during their study. While some participants worked full-time—or close to full-time—hours while also studying, some paused their university education to help financially support their family. Afu, for instance, had interrupted his studies to pick up some paid work to contribute to the household expenses. He moved outside of Brisbane to stay with family in a regional town for almost a year, where it was considered easier to pick up blue-collar employment. Afu used this income to support his family back in Brisbane, including paying the rent for the house that his family lived in. Loto, Afu's brother, stayed in Brisbane and was the other source of employment income for the household. Loto was also studying at university and received Youth Allowance (an Australian government welfare benefit available youth under 25 who are engaged in full-time study or training) as well as some income from a casual job that operated during school terms. His income was used to contribute to household expenses:

“I think every family has set up a different way, but in my family the way it works is my youth allowance or money that I earn, half of my youth allowance goes to my family and will probably go to church commitments, and then if I work, if I earn money from work, then Mum and Dad might give me a water bill or something like that for me to pay off, things like that. So there's definitely household expenses that I need to take care of with my casual work.”

Natia described a similar situation. She was 15 when she started her first job which, like many young people in Australia, was for a few hours a week at a major supermarket. Rather than depositing the funds into her own account, which is the process for most Australian teenagers, the pay from this job went straight into her mother's bank account. Her mother would collate the funds from her husband's work, her own Centrelink payments, and the funds from Natia's casual job to pay the rent, bills, and other expenses. Any funds left over would then be returned to Natia. Sometimes this would be the full amount she had earned, sometimes it would be only

a few dollars. Natia didn't consider this strange or unusual; it was simply being part of the household.

When Natia began university, she became eligible to receive some government welfare payments. While earnings from her casual work continued to be deposited into her mother's bank account, the government benefits came directly to her to use for university-related expenses. These expenses included textbooks and stationery, but also transportation costs: public transport initially, but later car registration, fuel, and parking. Anything left over would be contributed to the household: "They know that I just give them what I can."

Natia was at university for five years, although she graduated with a degree that takes three years full-time. Three of the five years were spent studying part-time while she picked up some extra work:

"I went part time [for a while because] I needed to work because my family needed some money...it was only my dad working at the time... Even with work, they tried to tell me to cut back [my hours so I could focus on university] but I was like, 'Oh I can't, our family needs money.'"

Natia explains that her dad had discouraged her from reducing her study load, concerned that she was not prioritising her education. Natia was adamant though that she had made the right decision to study part-time for a period: "For me, I don't care if I graduate as long as my family is fine."

Although she has since graduated and is in full-time employment, she indicated that moving out of the family household was not really an option at present:

"Right now there's three incomes – me, my brother, my dad. And so if I move out that's taking away one. And then if he moves out that's taking away the other one. And so he'll probably stay, and then when my [younger] sister can get a job he'll probably move out."

The narrative consistently told to me by the younger participants (particularly those under 25) was that the funds were earned to help pay for household expenses, particularly rent, bills and groceries. Few of these participants indicated that they were working extra hours to earn income for their own extracurricular activities, and those that did so were quick to express that they were "lucky" and it was "not usual", especially when they compared their situation to those of extended family members. Older participants indicated that their income was also used

to support their household, which may include children and their own parents or other relatives (e.g., adult siblings), as well as family members outside the household.

Some of the younger participants often described that they felt responsible to financially provide for the household, as their parents were unable to do so. Loto, for instance, expressed that his parents had frequently stated that “God will provide money” for the household. He said that this statement often “triggered” him, indicating his frustration at – as he described it – his parents’ apparent inability to adapt to a culture of financial responsibility in Australia. This ‘Australian’ concept of financial responsibility differed from what they saw as Samoan understandings of financial responsibility. Participants indicated that their choices about current full-time low-skilled employment versus pursuing higher education were directly related to providing financial support to their families, which they saw as a Samoan understanding of responsibility. These choices were closely linked to cultural expectations, particularly around providing support for parents and extended kin, and while these may have been “tacit agreements” (Moen & Wethington, 1992: 239), they were not necessarily happy agreements.

However, the reality was not as straight forward as this. Other scholars, such as Nishitani (2020), argue that amongst Pasifika diaspora, providing financial support for family members is viewed as an expression of love. Indeed, the participants spoke at different times about the value and blessings their culture provides to those who are in need. Tamah, for example, spoke about how she is able to use her relatively stable financial position to provide financial support to others:

“I love having money because you’re able to either be a blessing to somebody, be a blessing to yourself, but when somebody needs it, you are able to give, you’re able to do things with it. For me, money is to be saved and it’s to be used.”

However, these ‘expressions of love’ extended beyond financial responsibility. Emere, for instance, described the opportunity to ‘repay’ her parents for raising her as a “blessing”:

“we’re taught from a very young age that family was the centre of everything, and looking after our parents is a blessing, and that everything we do, essentially, is for our parents.”

Sefina similarly described caring for older family members as “blessings”:

“And old people, to me, they just treasures that we need to look after. I know it sounds really wanky and whatever, but to me, in our culture, looking after your old, or any old people for that matter, those are the blessings that will bless you for the rest of your life, basically.”

While much of the discussion focused on financial contributions to the household, participants also discussed non-financial responsibilities. In addition to caring for older family member, as noted above, non-financial responsibilities primarily included caring for younger siblings. Natia, for example, was frequently a few minutes late or needed to reschedule our interviews due to family commitments, which typically required her to act as chauffeur to her younger siblings. Siblings, particularly younger siblings, were often discussed in interviews, with participants expressing a strong sense of responsibility to ensure that they had the best opportunities available to them, particularly those who were still attending school.

Some participants described being involved in decisions about their younger siblings' schooling. This might include attending 'parent-teacher' meetings or helping with homework. Natia, for instance, described how she took the day off from work to attend a parent-school meeting following a conflict her brother had been involved in at school:

“So I took a day off work to go to my brother's [school] interview. Cause my brother was like, oh he really wants me to come cause my parents don't really understand English properly and he doesn't want my mum to misunderstand. Cause my dad was working so he couldn't go. So my brother doesn't want Mum to say anything that makes it worse. And I was like, oh okay. So yeah. I took a day off work [unpaid] and did that.”

Taking a day off work would result in financial loss, which may appear as a poor decision as one of the few members with financial responsibility for the household. However, it was deemed that the need for Natia to provide non-financial support to her younger sibling was a higher priority than income generation at that point in time.

Interviews with Loto revealed similar feelings of responsibility. Following discussion about the care and duties he undertakes for his younger siblings, I suggested to Loto that it sounded like he had a lot of responsibility. He replied:

“Yeah it is, it is. I try not to think about it too much because it is the reality of things for me....I think my siblings are probably the most important people in my life. My

parents are a bit, how's it going every now and then... it's on me to look after my siblings at home in terms of being supportive for them and making sure things are all together, making sure that we're all connected, on the same page.”

As briefly discussed above, looking after older family members in the household was also identified as a responsibility, particularly amongst female participants. Older relatives, including grandparents, aunts and/or uncles, typically lived with family rather than on their own or in a dedicated retirement village or aged care facility. Emere's elderly mother, for example, lives with her. She commented, “It's very common for parents in our culture to stay with the youngest girl, which is me.” Her mother is unwell, however, and in need of full-time care. This was particularly challenging during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in Greater Brisbane (March to July 2020), when the other employed members of her household – her husband and her adult brother – lost paid work. As the sole income earner during that period, Emere struggled to both work full-time (although from home) and provide the care needed for her mother, while also caring for her own children. She expressed concern about her mother being home alone once the other members of the household returned to their workplaces:

“I'm trying to convince her to get a carer, but she's very stubborn... I think I'm pushing for a carer for my own piece of mind, because she has had some falls... so I've been trying to push for her to have a carer but she's reluctant to get help from anyone but me.”

An at-home carer, Emere said, was the best option for their household.

“We would never put her in an aged care facility or anything like that. That alone is almost taboo in our culture... because we have that mentality that it's a blessing to be able to look after your parents and we acknowledge everything that they have done for us while we grew up, so looking after them up until – yeah, it's a blessing. And putting them into an aged care facility is looked upon so badly.”

However, Emere said that she had been advised she was unable to have an at-home carer, as the bathroom in her rental property was not sufficiently suitable. She was not in a financial position to purchase a home to have the freedom to make such renovations. She reported that this had meant an increased pressure from her family to leave her job to stay home full-time.

Emere's story indicates the impact of cultural notions of responsibility on individual choices and decision-making. Even when there was no 'formal' obligation to care for parents, adult children still indicated that care responsibility played a role in their housing – or moving out of home – choices. "Like many Pasifika girls I think, I still live at home with my parents." Teuila told me. "They're getting quite old so I get quite worried about leaving them." Talia expressed a similar sentiment, saying that while she would love to move abroad for a while once she graduates from university, she feels obligated to stay home to help care for her ageing mother. Here it is evident that individual choices are both enable and constrained by cultural and familial expectations around responsibility.

Responsibility to the community

While responsibility to the household was often intertwined with responsibility to family members, the participants also described responsibility to their extended family and the broader Samoan communities. As described above, Samoan cultures place high value on 'family', both immediate family members (i.e., parents, children, siblings) as well as extended family members (e.g., cousins, grandparents) (Faleolo, 2016; Stanley & Kearney, 2017), and hold a strong sense of responsibility towards them. This responsibility was often described in terms of financial obligations or *fa'alavelave*. However, this sense of responsibility also extends beyond kinship and into the broader Pasifika community. As Loto explains:

"Yeah, family could be anyone and everyone in Samoa, it just depends on the relationships between who your parents have with and things like that. So, you can be blood related and that obviously makes more sense, like 'oh they're family', and then you can be non-blood related, which doesn't really make sense in the Australian context, but because of certain relationships that previous generations have had, that makes them family."

In particular, the idea of 'family' was often extended to include members of the participant's church. "I have a lot of family and the church that I go to, I've basically been there my whole life," Natia said. "Everyone's aunty and uncle, even if we're not related." Loto also described the church he grew up as 'family':

"...the church that we were born and raised in as well, all of us, and everyone that we knew in the church was family, we grew up with those people as well. They weren't

just older people in our community they were uncles and aunties who we saw as a family basically, our own support network who were always there for us.”

This is not uncommon, as other research has found that Pasifika diaspora use the church as a way to obtain a sense of belonging (Stanley & Kearney, 2017). However, being a part of the church community also comes with additional responsibilities, particularly financial obligations, as Loto describes:

“Yeah, I’d say church commitments are something like, that would classify as an expense I guess... It’s expected. It’s culturally expected... what you give financially. I don’t know what that is in English, ‘tithing’? But that is culturally expected within the churches for family, need to give.”

When asked if the weekly contributions were about 10% of the household income, which is the percentage commonly referred to as ‘tithing’, Loto replied, “I wish it was 10%. With what our household is earning, it’s more than that because it’s expected that, I don’t know, not expected, it’s like an unwritten rule.” He then described a process whereby there was shame associated with giving less money, as it might indicate that the household was struggling and not able to meet its cultural obligations.

“Cause when you give in our church it’s called out to the rest of the church what you’ve given so I guess that plays a part in people giving more so that people can hear, oh wait, this person gave money, that’s good of them... If your name is not called out then people are like, ‘Oh this person was not called out, that must mean they’re struggling.’”

To be seen as “struggling” was indicated as a negative, something that should be hidden from the community while simultaneously promoting a strong sense of community and cohesion, again reinforcing the tensions and complexity within and across these relationships.

Beyond church, participants described fiscal responsibility at a community level, in Australia, New Zealand, and Samoa. These were typically referred to as *fa’alavelave*, which roughly translates as ‘obligation’ (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009). However, *fa’alavelave* is more complicated than simply ‘obligation’; it refers to the cultural rituals and gift giving associated with life course events, such as weddings and funerals. Historically, gifts such as food and mats were given at these events; however, more recently and particularly in diasporic communities in Australia and New Zealand, this has translated into giving cash. This shift from giving food to giving cash was described in different ways by the participants. For many second and third generation diaspora, *fa’alavelave* was often spoken of with exasperation. “We call

it *fa'avelave* in Samoan culture,” Loto explained. “And if you’re struggling financially, *fa'avelave* is not a word you want to hear at all.”

Given that the Samoan population is over-represented in low socio-economic areas of Greater Brisbane (Batley, 2017), it is perhaps unsurprising that the impacts of *fa'avelave* were frequently described as a source of tension for the participants. While seen as central to Samoan culture, *fa'avelave* was described as both frustrating and uplifting. As Loto describes:

“It comes back to our culture of making sure we support one another even though we don’t have anything to give, we still give something... Or like we’ll work in order to get something in order to give it, kind of thing. We work so hard to earn money, get money so that we can just give it away. But I think it’s important to understand that it isn’t, to us who were born and raised here in Australia, it looks as if it’s just giving away but to the older generations Samoans and those in our community it’s more important in that. It’s not the idea of just giving away, but it comes back to culture and tradition and things like that.”

The emphasis was always on the interconnectedness and interdependence of community members: that you give but people will also give to you when you are in need. However, the collective nature of this process was often seen at odds with the more individualistic nature of broader Australian society.

The tension between meeting individual needs versus community needs was particularly apparent when discussing how to meet these financial obligations. The best way to approach *fa'avelave* differed between participants, although typically second or third generation participants discussed how they had prompted their families to use a savings account or similar to help plan for these expenses; as Teuila said, “You never know when you’re going to get that phone call [asking for money].” Participants often described an underlying financial stress that these unanticipated requests could cause them. This was often exacerbated by socio-economic status; some participants indicated a system where money was regularly deposited into a dedicated bank account that was drawn upon for *fa'avelave* (as mentioned above), while others described scrambling to find the needed cash with often very little notice.

In addition to *fa'avelave*, participants also described regularly sending funds back to the islands as remittances, a phenomenon that has been described elsewhere (see, for example, Connell & Brown, 2004; Faleolo, 2016; Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009; McGavin, 2014). Indeed, there is evidence that remittances strengthen cultural identity amongst Pasifika populations and

is more than a purely economic practice (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2009; McGavin, 2014). While this phenomenon (sending money ‘home’) is common amongst migrant groups (Baak, 2015; Cohen, 2011; Simoni & Voirol, 2021), it’s particularly prominent amongst Samoan (and other Pasifika) diaspora in Australia (Brown et al., 2013; Karunaratne & Gibson, 2014). Despite coming from a low socio-economic household, Ioana described the financial resources that her family (including income provided by herself and her brothers) sends back to Samoa to help support family and community there. This might be as simple as a “top up [of] Grandma’s [mobile phone] credit every month or so”, paying for groceries, or helping to fund house renovations. Teulia described this process as *fa’a Samoa*, or ‘the Samoan way’:

“It’s just what you do, you help where you can, there’s no, ‘you owe me this much’ after, you just kind of do it... It’s been challenging at times, especially when you’re sending money to people that I’ve never met. But they’re family... they don’t have a lot of the privileges we have here to be able to provide for family, so it’s kind of a responsibility we have to be able to look after them as well.”

Here, the concept of responsibility extends beyond the immediate household to other family and community members.

Responsibility to the future self

In addition to responsibility to the household, and responsibility to their family and community, the participants discussed – often explicitly – how they had a responsibility to achieve a ‘better life’ for themselves. The majority of participants were second or third generation migrants, and described their parents moving from the islands in search of a better life, particularly for their current and/or future children. Ioana was quick to point out that they were “meant to do better than previous generations so you can help out with them.” The desire to ‘do better’ was often linked to being able to better provide for family and community, typically linked to earning more income and/or increasing their own knowledge.

The path to a ‘better life’ was thus often seen in the form of earning a higher income, generally obtainable through higher education and/or non-blue collar jobs. The life trajectories of their parents and/or other family members had a direct influence on the choices the participants made about their education and employment. Low-skilled work such as factory work was particularly viewed as a ‘failure’. Natia, for instance, referred to her father’s factory work as an example of what *not* to do: “My dad especially, because my dad’s been working in factory

his whole life, right? He was just, ‘We came from islands. We don’t want you to live the same life as us. We want you to live better ones.’” Loto described a similar experience:

“My family would always bring up the picture of factory jobs in order to motivate me to keep on trying my best in the classroom, so that I could go to university. Because they saw factory jobs as... what did they say? They’d always say things like, ‘Do you want to work in a factory job? Because that’s what you’re going to get if you don’t work hard [in] school.’ So that made sense to me because a lot of my uncles and aunties and other family members, family that I knew of, worked in factory jobs. And so I didn’t really see it as a bad thing at the time... And as I got older it obviously made me understand that yeah, factory job isn’t something that I want to do for the rest of my life because...[you]... can’t really do much in terms of career progression and earn enough income in order to support your family.”

For many participants, education – especially tertiary education – was seen as the path to a better life; a common strategy amongst lower socioeconomic households (Callander et al., 2012; Kearney et al., 2011; McNamara et al., 2019; Platt, 2007). “I’ve had this push for education since I was a kid,” Talia told me. “School comes first, then you can live your life after.” However, as described above, participants were quick to share how this was not the case for some of their other Pacific Islander friends, highlighting the vast diversity of experiences within the Pasifika diasporic community.

Linked to higher educational attainment, complexities around citizenship were often raised in terms of opportunities for a better life. Many Pasifika diaspora living in Australia are New Zealand citizens, which has implications for access to welfare benefits and other benefits such as the higher education tuition fee loan scheme (currently known as HELP, typically not available to New Zealand citizens). One of Ioana’s siblings is an Australian citizen and close to finishing high school. There is an expectation that “he better be” planning to study at university. When asked why, Ioana explained it was because he had opportunities not necessarily available to herself and her other siblings who were New Zealand citizens:

“He’s got to get some kind of certificate or something [because] he has all this opportunity and he wants to throw it away and play Rugby and ruining the whole reason why our parents moved us here from Samoa.”

Lalago similarly described graduating from higher education as a source of pride for her family:

“And that, for me, is the greatest blessing because that is what my parents and my grandparents worked their whole lives for, to see their kids walk across the stage...I know that that’s what they wanted, and I wanted to please them so much, you know. As a kid, you always wanted to please your parents and you’re old so to be able to give them that was satisfying. And I think, you know, a lot of things of what I have now, whether it’s relationships and friendships and, you know work, you know, the ability to write and speak English and converse with other people from around the world is because my parents valued education.”

Access to the benefits available to Australian (as opposed to New Zealand) citizens was often raised by the participants, especially in relation to opportunities. Loto, for instance, expressed gratitude that his parents had become Australian citizens upon arrival in Australia as it gave him access to welfare benefits while studying at university.

“[My friends are] New Zealand citizens with permanent residency in Australia so they don’t qualify for youth allowance and Centrelink. So it’s hard when you look at it that way and seeing how they have to work part-time in casual jobs. So Pacific Islanders, they work 2 or 3 jobs while studying part-time and things like that. So it’s not really, looking at how they have to go through things make me appreciate what my parents did for me in terms of like once they arrived in Australia they went straight for doing their citizenship.”

In response, Loto’s ambition is to own a home that his family can use as a basis:

“Yeah my family’s never owned our own house and so I think that might be my life’s goal, is owning my own house because that’s something that I think provides stability for a family, something that provides a strong foundation for people to come back and see this is my home, and having that strong foundation that allows them to really do anything they want with their life, but at least they know they can always come back to this place that they call home.”

Discussions of the future, including aspirations towards ‘a good life’, were thus closely intertwined with their relationships to family, household, and their community.

Conclusion

This article has explored how the concept of ‘responsibility’ manifests in the lives of Samoan diaspora in Greater Brisbane. As can be seen from the above examples, responsibility plays out through their households, their communities, and themselves. The participants indicated a strong sense of responsibility towards their family/household, their community, and their own future and that of their immediate family (e.g., siblings). For many participants, their sense of responsibility to others – particularly financial responsibility – led to stress and tension. This tension between the individual and the collective was evident in how these responsibilities were described. The benefits of being part of the community, i.e., the collective, were considered central to the lives of the participants, particularly through support and a sense of belonging. However, belonging came at a cost, which many of the second and third generation participants struggled at times to justify, particularly those from lower socio-economic backgrounds. In particular, the impact of these responsibilities is compounded by the realities of socioeconomic disadvantage, alongside cultural expectations, resulting in constraints on individual choice and decision-making. In many ways, this sense of community was used to sustain neoliberal forms of responsibility, with reliance on government-funded welfare and social support was discouraged in favour of community-led support. Nonetheless, as described by Lilomaiava-Doktor (2009: 17), “the Samoan way of living is premised on relationship”, highlighting that these relationships to *āiga* and community can be viewed as more important or valuable than money. When considered alongside these perspectives, it necessitates a broader sociological understanding of responsibility than what has been historically described and supports a claim for a stronger focus on the meso level of analysis in sociological research. This broader understanding can help in a range of settings, including public health messaging and how to better provide social support to culturally diverse perspectives.

References

- ABS (2017) *Greater Brisbane. 2016 Census QuickStats*. Australian Bureau of Statistics.
- Akbar H, Gallegos D, Anderson D and Windsor C (2021) Deconstructing type 2 diabetes self management of Australian Pacific Islander women: using a community participatory research and talanoa approach. *Health and Social Care in the Community*, 30(5): 1988-1999.
- Ala’ilima LV and Ala’ilima F (1994) Restructuring Samoa’s chiefdom. In vom Busch W, Crocker S, Crocombe MT, Crocombe R, Crowl L, Deklin T, Lamour P and Williams

- EW (eds), *New politics in the South Pacific* (pp. 247-269) Institute for Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.
- Baak M (2015) Transnational families, remittances, *cieng* and obligation for Dinka women in Australia. *Emotion, Space and Society*, 16: 123-129.
- Batley J (2017, September 28) What does the 2016 census say reveal about Pacific Island communities in Australia? *DevPolicy Blog*. <http://devpolicy.org/2016-census-reveal-about-pacific-islands-communities-in-australia-20170928>
- Beck U (1992) *Risk society: towards a new modernity* (M. Ritter, Trans.) SAGE Publications.
- Bianchi SM, Hotz VJ, McGarry K and Seltzer JA (2008) Intergenerational ties: alternative theories, empirical findings and trends, and remaining challenges. In Booth A, Crouter, AC, Bianchi S, and Seltzer JA (eds), *Intergenerational caregiving*. Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.
- Braun V and Clarke V (2021) Can I use TA? Should I use TA? Should I not use TA? Comparing reflexive thematic analysis and other pattern-based qualitative analytic approaches. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 21(1): 37-47.
- Brown BJ and Baker S (2012) *Responsible citizens: individuals, health and policy under neoliberalism*. Anthem Press.
- Brown RPC, Leeves G and Prayaga P (2013) Sharing norm pressures and community remittances: evidence from a natural disaster in the Pacific Islands. *The Journal of Development Studies*, 50(3): 383-398.
- Callander EJ, Schofield DJ, Shrestha RN and Kelly SJ (2012) Sufficient education attainment for a decent standard of living in modern Australia. *Journal of Social Inclusion*, 3(1): 7-20.
- Chenoweth L (2014, February 10) Pacific Islanders and education: is Australia an ‘unlucky country’? *The Conversation*. <https://theconversation.com/pacific-islanders-and-education-is-australia-an-unlucky-country-21920>
- Cohen JH (2011) Migration, remittances, and household strategies. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 40: 103-114.
- Connell J and Brown RP (2004) The remittances of migrant Tongan and Samoan nurses from Australia. *Human Resources for Health*, 2(2): Art. 2.
- Delanty G (1999) *Social theory in a changing world: conceptions of modernity*. Polity Press.
- Dunn J (1990) *Interpreting political responsibility: essays 1981-1989*. Princeton University Press.

- Efi TTT (2018) Le Fuia, le fuia, e tagisia lou vaelau''Starling, starling, we pine for your nimbleness': towards a Samoan indigenous framing of responsibility for 'climate change'. *Pacific Studies*, 41(1): 15-25.
- Faleolo RL (2016) Pasifika trans-tasman migrant perspectives of well-being in Australia and New Zealand. *Pacific Asia Inquiry*, 7(1): 63-74.
- Faleolo RL (2019) Wellbeing perspectives, conceptualisations of work and labour mobility experiences of Pasifika trans-tasman migrants in Brisbane. In: Stead V and Altman J (eds), *Labour lines and colonial power: Indigenous and Pacific Islander labour mobility in Australia*. ANU Press, pp. 185-206.
- Faleolo RL (2020) *Pasifika well-being and Trans-Tasman migration: A mixed methods analysis of Samoan and Tongan well-being perspectives and experiences in Auckland and Brisbane* [PhD Thesis]. The University of Queensland.
- Faoagali S and Honan E (2015) A journey in-between: using Talanoa in research reporting. In: Trimmer K, Black AL and Riddle S (eds), *Mainstreams, margins and the spaces in-between: new possibilities for education research*. Routledge, pp. 239-252.
- Fine GA (2012) Group culture and the interaction order: local sociology on the meso-level. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 38: 159-179.
- Fua SuJ (2014) Kakala research framework: a garland in celebration of a decade of rethinking education. In: 'Otunuku M, Nabobo-Baba U and Fua SuJ (eds), *Of waves, winds and wonderful things: a decade of rethinking Pacific education*. University of South Pacific Press, pp. 50-60.
- Hage G. (2012) Responsibility in the Lebanese transnational family. In: Hage G and Eckersley R (eds), *Responsibility*. Melbourne University Press, pp. 111-127.
- 't Hart, D. (2023) COVID times make 'deep listening' explicit: changing the space between interviewer and participant. *Qualitative Research*, 23(2): 306-322.
- Karunarathne W and Gibson J (2014) Financial literacy and remittance behavior of skilled and unskilled immigrant groups in Australia. *Journal of Asian Economics*, 30: 54-62.
- Kearney J, Fletcher M and Dobrenov-Major M (2011) Nonaligned worlds of home and school: a case study of second-generation Samoan children. *Journal of Family Studies*, 17(2): 146-156.
- King H, Crossley S and Smith R (2021) Responsibility, resilience and symbolic power. *The Sociological Review*, 69(5): 920-936.

- Lilomaiva-Doktor S (2009) Beyond “migration”: Samoan population movement (*malaga*) and the geography of social space (*va*) *The Contemporary Pacific*, 21(1): 1-32.
- Lohoar S, Butera N and Kennedy E (2014) *Strengths of Australian Aboriginal cultural practices in family life and child rearing*. Australian Institute of Family Studies.
- Long RT (1999) The irrelevance of responsibility. *Social Philosophy and Policy*, 16(2): 118-145.
- Lucas JR (1993) *Responsibility*. Oxford University Press.
- Lupton D (2006) Sociology and risk. In: Mythen G and Walklate S (eds), *Beyond the risk society: critical reflections on risk and human security*. Open University Press, pp. 11-24.
- McGavin K (2014) Being ‘Nesian’: Pacific Islander identity in Australia. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 26(1): 95-154.
- McNamara P, Harvey A and Andrewartha L (2019) Passports out of poverty: raising access to higher education for care leavers in Australia. *Children and Youth Services*, 97(February): 85-93.
- Metge J and Kinloch P (1978) *Talking past each other: problems of cross-cultural communication*. Victoria University Press.
- Moen P and Wethington E (1992) The concept of family adaptive strategies. *Annual Review of Sociology*, 18: 233-251.
- Munro R (2011) Unfolding social construction: sociological routes and political roots. *The Sociological Review*, 58: 1-21.
- Nishitani M. (2020) *Desire, obligation, and familial love: mothers, daughters, and communication technology in the Tongan diaspora*. University of Hawai’i Press.
- O’Reilly K (2012) Ethnographic returning, qualitative longitudinal research and the reflexive analysis of social practice. *The Sociological Review*, 60: 518-536.
- Parsell C, Clarke A and Perales P (2022) *Charity and poverty in advanced welfare states*. Routledge.
- Platt L (2007) Making education count: the effects of ethnicity and qualifications on intergenerational social class mobility. *The Sociological Review*, 55(3): 485-508.
- Reyes AM (2020) Mitigating poverty through the formation of extended family households: race and ethnic differences. *Social Problems*, 67(4): 782-799.

- Simoni V and Voirol J (2021) Remittances and morality: family obligations, development, and the ethical demands of migration. *Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies*, 47(11): 2516-2536.
- Stanley G and Kearney J. (2017) The experiences of second generation Samoans in Australia. *Journal of Social Inclusion*, 8(2): 54-65.
- Strydom P (1999) The challenge of responsibility for sociology. *Cultural Sociology*, 47(3): 65-82.
- Vaioleti TM (2006) Talanoa research methodology: a developing position on Pacific research. *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12: 21-34.
- Williams G (2012) Responsibility. In: Chadwick R (ed), *Encyclopedia of Applied Ethics* Academic Press, pp. 821-828.