Matakäinga (behaving like family): The social worker-client relationship in Pasifika social work

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Introduction

The face of social work is changing. Pasifika cultures are part of the diversity of Aotearoa New Zealand, which has implications for social work delivery, policy and education. There is a need, therefore, to delineate and develop Pasifika frameworks for practice. A key characteristic of Pasifika frameworks are Pasifika conceptions of family (for example, kāinga, aiga or kopu tangata) which permeate the social worker-client relationship. In this article I explain the Tongan concept of matakäinga (behaving like family) as a component of a Tongan social work framework for practice. Matakäinga emerged as a practice concept out of research exploring Tongan social work practice with Tongan social workers in New Zealand.¹ The research involved individual and focus group interviews with a range of Tongan social and community workers in Auckland and Wellington.²

In the first section of this article I outline the Tongan concept of extended family, kāinga. Drawing on the insights of the Tongan social workers who participated in the study, I illustrate how matakäinga characterises an approach to social work practice. I also seek to show the point of connection between Tongan and other Pasifika/indigenous approaches to family-like roles as a basis for the social worker-client relationship. I conclude by discussing implications of Pasifika family discourses for the development of social work practice.

Tongan concept of family: Kāinga

According to Helu (1999), the term kāinga originally referred to a local production and consumption unit, but today it has two meanings. First, it is a unit built around a chief and second, it is a term used for extended family. The extended family, the kāinga, is the building block of the Tongan socio-cultural setting (Niumeitolu, 1993). Principles in regard to rank, status and respect in the Tongan kāinga structure relationships and roles: sisters are ‘eiki (higher status) in relation to their brothers who are tu’a (lower status); the senior is superior in rank to the junior; paternal kin are superior in rank to the maternal and the husband is higher than the wife (Aoyagi, 1966; Vaden, 1998).

¹ This article draws on material from author’s doctoral thesis which, at the time of writing, was under examination.
² In this study social work is understood broadly and is inclusive of community work.
Another participant commented: "the initiative to acknowledge your family: the ‘ulumotu’a (eldest male) and the fahu (eldest female) and their descendants, participate in exchange of ngäue (work or consumptive goods such as agricultural, marine or animal products) and koloa (non-consumptive ceremonial goods such as mats and tapa). Such exchange reinforces tu’a (inferior; low status) and ‘eiki (superior; high status) distinctions and highlights the interplay of the economic, political, mental and social elements within the käinga."

The käinga plays a role in providing for the economic and welfare needs of its members. Helu (1999) refers to the ‘Robin Hood’ function of käinga:

"It serves as a veritable economic leveller by serving as a distributor. It takes from members according to their means and gives to them according to their needs. It acts by arresting and discouraging profiteering, individualism and any capitalistic ambition, chopping off inordinately large individual profits and siphoning them back for käinga consumption. So the käinga, in effect, is an institutionalised Robin Hood, taking from the haves and giving to the have-nots. (Helu, 1999: 147)."

Furthermore, in the current age of globalisation, Tongan käinga operate transnationally – that is, Tongan käinga networks are spread across Tonga, New Zealand, Australia, the USA and so on. From a transnational perspective, Vaden (1998) demonstrates that the käinga is a viable entity for meeting the needs of its individual members, evidenced in the flow of ideas, goods, services, money, information and culture within käinga networks. It is further argued that the käinga is a more appropriate tool of analysis when considering development, as compared to the nation-state, since it ‘relates directly to the way that Tongans perceive their social environment’ (Vaden, 1998: 133).

I suggest that the Tongan concept of käinga reveals family as a complex system of relationships which facilitates the economic and social wellbeing and development of Tongans transnationally. Käinga is central to Tongan social work, not only as an institution to be strengthened, but as a philosophical template for relationship building and meaning in the interface between social workers and their clients. Käinga is the basis for an understanding of the practice of matakäinga.

**Matakäinga (behaving like family)**

The term matakäinga describes someone who acts towards other people like family – that is, when warmth is shown on the face and in body language. Mata is face and käinga is relatives or extended family, so in the literal sense it is saying that one has the face of a family member. One participant in the study described his understanding of matakäinga as taking the initiative to acknowledge your family:

"I suppose matakäinga being a really good concept. [It’s when] you… manage to pop in at a distant relative’s place, an older couple, and drop in a fish or a can of corned beef or something. That kind of stuff…"

Another participant commented:

"… matakäinga is when your face looks welcoming. You don’t know the person, but as soon as you know, ko ho’o cousin eni mei… [this is your cousin from…], and you don’t know them"
and you still welcome them. [Then] they think, ‘O, matakäinga’, because you welcomed them whether they are family or not. And I think that’s good… for social work practice.

_Matakäinga_ then was noted as applicable to social work because it epitomises a relationship of acceptance. It was explained that _matakäinga_ is also about extending assistance and includes those outside of one’s kin group:

> It shows that you reflect family identification with them. And that means that you love them and you want to help them. But _matakäinga_ is now… used to describe anyone who relates in that way… to anyone.

The notion of inclusion was a key theme raised by participants in relation to their practice approach. They described how in their social work practice they would include themselves in the families or communities they worked with and hence treat clients like family ‘as if they were your own’. In becoming like family, social workers are including themselves in the family. One participant explained that using inclusive language gives effect to this:

> When you approach them you have to include yourself in the family. For example, ‘ko ‘eku ha’u ki heni, ko’ etau fānau’ [I have come here about our children]. You have to include yourself so they can feel that you want to be a part of them, you are there for them. If you say, ‘ko ‘eku ha’u ki heni, ko ho’o tana’ [I have come here about your child], you are more isolating yourself.

This concept of inclusion challenges conventional social work approaches which might construe such language as paternalistic or imposing.

Another participant reported an incident where a girl from a family in the church at which he was a leader ran away to his home because she was fearful of excessive physical discipline. The participant had a meeting with the father and framed his discussion in inclusive language:

> I said to the parents, to the father, I said, ‘Our daughter has come home to me…’ You know, putting me alongside him, we are the fathers. You know, we’re responsible for this girl. She’s not just your daughter; she’s my daughter as well. And I think that approach, which I think is a peculiarly Tongan approach, is very important.

This participant’s narrative conveys that inclusive language and concepts of matakäinga were successfully employed to engage with a parent in order to mediate between family members and to arrive at a position where the parent could be confronted in regard to their behaviour.

The principle of _matakäinga_ is therefore about perceiving a social work relationship as a type of family relationship. The way in which _matakäinga_ makes connection was highlighted:

> … if that client is older, then he is a father to me. I give him that title. And it works. It works because you need to make that family comfortable, that if the guy is older then they know that you are respecting them. And if it’s younger, you’ve got to give that fatherly figure, that he’s your son. And you are including yourself on that and they know that you do care. And that’s what’s wrong with the clinician. They are clinical people, okay, ask this and this, and
asking questions straight away. And of course that shuts the family up. They say, ‘No, we don’t want this guy here.’

Matakäinga then is an indigenous Tongan concept that contributes to a Tongan framework for practice and is descriptive of what might ideally occur in the social worker-client relationship. The concept of matakäinga links to values of respect, humility and maintaining relationships, which are foundational to a Tongan approach to social work.

**Pasifika social work practice frameworks**

The Tongan practice of matakäinga is similar to Mulitalo-Lauta’s (2000) description of fa’asamoa (Samoan way) social work practice. He describes a young woman probation officer referring to men she worked with as father or brother, and explains:

> The use of names such as tama (father) and tuagane (brother) effectively induced a sense of Samoanhood, brotherhood, sisterhood, fatherhood and familyhood... The inmates regarded her as their own blood – sister and daughter. They accepted her within their fa’asamoa protocol known as fengaiaga [code of respect by which a brother honours his sister] (Mulitalo-Lauta, 2000: 101).

Similarly, Lynn’s (2001) study of the ‘Murri Way’ within Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander social work, found that there is an emphasis on the ‘relationship between the worker and client that is based on familial/cultural connections rather than individualisation’ (p.907). Within Māori practice, Ruwhiu (1994) advocates whanau-based healing which is ‘structured on concepts such as tuakana-teina (older-younger), matua-tamariki (parent-child), koro-kuia-mokopuna (grandparent-grandchild)’ (p.137). Within the whanau, Ruwhiu argues that the worker will sometimes assume a matua role and be a director of action. Clearly, there is a point of connection amongst many Pasifika and indigenous social work approaches in regards to the centrality of family roles as a means to constructing roles of, and relationships between, social workers and clients.

**Pasifika conceptions of the social worker-client relationship: Implications for the development of social work practice**

A number of implications arising from matakäinga and Pasifika family discourses for the social worker-client relationship may be noted. First, the adoption of matakäinga as a social work practice implies adherence to a set of expectations, including Tongan codes of conduct and ethical principles. The complexity of relationships within käinga does not imply that boundaries are discarded, rather there are alternative guideline for the outplaying of ethical relationships. While the professional social work role within Western practice is accompanied by ethical expectations, the Tongan or Pasifika practitioner must at times negotiate both the Western professional expectations along with the Pasifika expectations. This requires a high level of skill, critical reflection and a sound grounding in more than one cultural frame. Furthermore, the negotiation that Pasifika social workers undertake across personal, cultural and professional domains accentuates the need for appropriate support and supervision (Autagavaia, 2000).
A second implication of Pasifika family discourses is that social work is constructed as an inseparable extension of day-to-day life, rather than as an activity tightly bound as a profession or job. In this way, it is similar to George’s (2005) assertion from a Fiji context that a social worker is someone who devotes their entire life to service, not just their professional life. Pasifika families and communities operate a form of welfare as part of cultural processes of reciprocity and obligation (Hau’ofa, 1994; Helu, 1999; Ka’ili, 2005; Vaden, 1998). The family, or käinga, has therefore been a capable and sufficiently flexible mainstay in which to position social work, a position that makes sense from a Tongan worldview. This challenges Western definitions of social work to be more inclusive of informal systems of care and welfare (Pawar and Cox, 2004) and to be cognisant of the contribution of community work.

Finally, Pasifika conceptions of the social worker-client relationship marks a shift in thinking about the role of family in the modern welfare state. The development of social work as a profession in the 20th century saw the responsibility for social care move away from the family and into the realm of civil society and the state. Parton (2004) argues that social work developed as a hybrid in the space between the private (household) and public spheres of society. Pasifika social work practice frameworks similarly defy any rigid separation of the spheres of family, civil society and the state. In the construction of Tongan social work, the practitioner’s practice brings käinga – their own and that of the client – to a place of centrality. In so doing, notions of family (matakäinga) become a basis for the social worker-client relationship. The positioning of social work within Pasifika family discourses ought to be distinguished, however, from the neo-conservative and neo-liberal aim of placing greater responsibility back onto families for the purposes of freeing families from state interference (Hugman, 1998). Such views are about the privatising of what are essentially social problems. Tongan social work, on the other hand, is more about bringing the complex social structures of käinga into the professional domain for the purposes of integrated, positive social change.

In this article I have identified ‘family’ not only as a site for assessment and intervention but as a template for the relationship between social workers and their clients when working from Pasifika practice frameworks. Family (käinga, aiga or kopu tangata) provide a means for re-conceiving professional relationships and forms a basis for change processes. It is widely argued that formal ‘professional’ social work largely developed from a Western philosophical basis and that indigenous cultural worldviews must now be accepted as a basis for social work development (Autagavaia, 2001; Bennett and Zubrzycki, 2003; Graham, 2002; Mafie’o, 2004; Midgley, 1981). Matakäinga (behaving like family), and other similar Pasifika practice concepts, challenge social work towards greater diversity of practice approaches and contribute to the changing face and heart of social work in the 21st century.

**Glossary**

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<td>Kopu tangata</td>
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