

Meaalofa

Making Samoan Counselling Practices Accessible and Visible in Aotearoa New Zealand

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E lele le toloa ae ma'au i le vai

The toloa [grey duck] will fly anywhere,
but will always return to the water.

— *Samoan proverb*

Abstract

This article is not intended to provide an expert perspective on Samoan customs inclusive of *meaalofa* (gifting) principles. Neither is it meant to convey a dominant knowledge of therapeutic interventions to address the needs of Samoan people in clinical settings. This paper is a humble contribution, with personal reflections, to the reservoir of ideas, perspectives and theorising that enlarges our capacity as clinicians to assist and support the therapeutic processes of healing for Samoan (and Pasifika) people in Aotearoa New Zealand. It explores and highlights meaalofa concepts in a therapeutic environment through research findings, talanoa interviews with participants of the study, and case study vignettes from my own counselling work. This account is by no means the last word regarding meaalofa concepts in therapeutic settings; rather, it is just the beginning so others can contribute to its richness both in content and context.

The article begins with a Samoan proverb concerning the toloa, that *one will leave home, but will always return*. The meaalofa presented through the content of this article and through my clinical work is about my ongoing journey of returning home. Since the initial research was conducted, it has taken six years for this paper finally to be written. The discoveries that are explored in the paper came out of the research I undertook for my Master of Counselling dissertation at the University of Waikato in 2004.¹

This paper was conceptualised on the premise that as Samoan counsellors, we are involved in an important cultural process called *meaalofa*. Meaalofa is a Samoan term that makes reference to a gift or the principles of gifting. Meaalofa literally means “a thing of love.” In my original thesis (Seiuli, 2004) I broaden this Samoan concept to encompass deeper meanings and constructs validated by processes found in the practices of meaalofa such as “love offering, a valued treasure, a legacy, a heritage, a calling, or an object of adornment” (p. 6). For the purpose of this article, meaalofa will be assumed to mean *the gift of counselling*.

For Samoans, like many other Pasifika groups, the giving and receiving of meaalofa in various forms and representations signifies acts of appreciation; promotes the reciprocal processes of respect; embodies the concept of honouring; conveys messages of love, appreciation and sympathy; provides affirmation for special relational bonds; ushers forth sentiments of gratitude and acknowledgement, and much more. Therefore, meaalofa is not only seen and experienced by Samoan people as an integral part of Samoan life, customs, and core beliefs—otherwise referred to as *fa’aSamoa*—but it also serves as a foundational component in the make-up of the Samoan person (Seiuli, 2004; Turner-Tupou, 2007).

Moreover, meaalofa is an interpersonal and relational practice of handing a gift from one person to another, which provides a connecting point between the giver and the receiver. This gifting process is seen by Samoan people as the “physical embodiment of the giver’s feelings towards the receiver” (Sio, 2006). That is to say, through the physical (visible) act of gifting, the sometimes invisible (yet evident) attributes of human emotions, psychological capacity and reasoning, social and relational community, and the spiritual make-up of the two parties are connected through the meaalofa exchange.

From a counselling perspective, I want to suggest that the meaalofa concept occurs when Samoan clinicians engage in the provision of counselling help and support for their clients. The meaalofa process is even more significant when the recipient of the gift is a person of Samoan ethnicity. As practitioners engage in the work of therapy, they are actively involved in the process of handing over the meaalofa (gift of counselling) to their clients. Meaalofa is therefore a unique and useful therapeutic concept that invites the interweaving of the person’s physical, emotional, psychological, familial, and spiritual attributes in the act of *alofa* (love) embodied in the gift of counselling. Meaalofa encompasses the totality of the Samoan self, and becomes an important, culturally sensitive way to understand and relate to Samoan people. Within a therapeutic environment, it promotes a holistic approach to healthcare for all people.

Intergenerational connections

The Samoan worldview of intergenerational continuity over time and space as expressed by Anae (1995, 1999) and supported by Webber-Dreadon (1999) affirmed my own experiences and discoveries about meaalofa as a therapeutic concept. Upon reflection on my *malaga* (journey) to arrive at where I am today in clinical counselling practice, pastoral work, and mentoring, it has become clear to me that my desire to be a helper is reflective of the meaalofa I have received through the encouragement and support of many forerunners before me. In her keynote address at the Pacific Vision Conference, Anae (1999) emphasised the importance of ancestry connections when she said, “we are carrying out the genealogies of our ancestors ... [and] ... we are merely continuing the voyage of our ancestors over time and space” (p. 1). I am convinced that this ancestral connection in some way also spurred me onwards, and eventually toward professional training in counselling. This connection sowed generational seeds that have taken the form of meaalofa, and counselling is the arena where it can be handed over on a regular basis. There are many people and experiences that have encouraged me along my professional path, and I want to highlight two significant occasions to illustrate the intergenerational connection that meaalofa has gifted me and its connections to my pursuit of counselling training.

The first memory of the meaalofa’s presence in my life happened when I was about five years old, living in my home village of Malie. Our village is located on the northwest of Upolu, Samoa. The memories are associated with the life and passing of one of my grandmothers we called Tinā (mother). Her life is foundational to my journey as a counsellor and the meaalofa that was passed on to me. She cared for my siblings and me while our parents worked in paid employment. She was my safe refuge in times of trouble and her caring arms wrapped around me and kept me safe from harm, both real and perceived. My grandmother’s name was Uputāua. In English, *upu* means “word” or “a saying,” and *tāua* refers to something sacred or important. Uputāua can be translated as “words of wisdom” and/or “sacred conversations.” I always felt very secure when Tinā was present to watch over me. When she passed away in 1975, even at my young age I was left with many unanswered questions, such as who would be my security and refuge now that she was gone, or who did I have to support me when trouble was near? As a youngster, my secure world was beginning to crumble and I needed someone like her that I could trust to be there to hold things together.

In her research on indigenous approaches to supervision, Webber-Dreadon (1999) concludes that our work reflects the “gifts handed down by our tīpuna [ancestors]”

(p. 8). This gift was passed down as a living legacy that solidifies, supports, and knits us together through time and space. This is significant in my clinical work especially when I find myself in the privileged position of engaging in “sacred conversations,” or actively participating in “wise [collaborative] counselling” with people who seek my support. What a privileged and humbling position to be in! Like my grandmother Tinā, we are sometimes called to be co-holders (even for a brief moment) of our clients’ crumbling and insecure worlds. Therefore, as carriers of the meaalofa—whether we realise it or not—we become secure refuges for and with our clients throughout the therapeutic process. The handing-over process allows the meaalofa to serve and help people over and over.

The second influential event that spurred me even more toward counselling training came in the form of a family tragedy toward the end of 1998. My wife and I and our two daughters were living in South Auckland due to our involvement in pastoral ministry in Manurewa. I received a phone call from my father concerning one of my younger brothers, who had been involved in a car accident and died shortly after at Moto’otua Hospital in Samoa. I remember experiencing feelings of numbness and disbelief that immediately enveloped my mind, my emotions, and my physical being. When I received the news of my brother’s tragic death, it all seemed like a bad dream that I would soon awaken from. Although I regularly get informed about deaths and losses, especially in my role as a pastor, it was a difficult emotional and physical task to accept the personal loss of my younger brother. I also recall struggling to make sense of the emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual turmoil that I experienced through this tragedy. As I worked through the process of grief and loss, it strengthened my desire to become professionally trained as a counsellor, so I could make sense of my own loss better, and would be able to help others understand and work through their own grief processes. The two significant situations I have highlighted are a reflection of the intergenerational legacy the meaalofa carries. As a recipient of the meaalofa gift, I have the responsibility to hand it over, especially in the way I engage in counselling work with Samoan and Pasifika clients, as well as taking the opportunity to honour the gift through undertaking professional training.

Meaalofa research

Ongoing interest in meaalofa led me to undertake research, and to discuss the concept with my supervisors and with three Samoan counsellors who agreed to participate in my project. In our conversations, we discovered that meaalofa was evidently present

in their lives and their counselling practices. This discovery excited us as Samoan clinicians because we found a Samoan concept that was rooted in our histories, traditions, and the fa'a Samoa. Furthermore, the meaalofa concept enabled us as counsellors to give meaning to and make sense of our clinical work. Meaalofa also provided a pathway that highlighted our own malaga to become practitioners in the counselling field.

Meaalofa processes

Meaalofa-based processes occur when I support clients through counselling. The counselling engagement activates the meaalofa processes, such as “sensitivity to the client’s holistic needs,” both evident and sacred (unspoken); paying attention to the *va fealofa'i* (the sacred space between); having “genuine respect and unconditional positive regard” (cf. Rogers, 1961; Shaffer, 1978) for the client; attending to “cultural and spiritual needs” of the client, and “working collaboratively” to journey with clients through the life challenges they are experiencing. Through the therapeutic engagement, we work collaboratively to explore pathways that will encourage healing, restoration, and resolution for clients. These acts of alofa, as integral components of the meaalofa, provide opportunities for the gift of counselling to be practised and passed on from counsellor to client.

Continuity is another key feature in understanding meaalofa. The handing-over process, as highlighted earlier, is significant in the therapeutic environment as it allows the meaalofa to continue to be passed on to future generations. This is a unique and vital aspect of the gift as an intercultural and intergenerational concept. Meaalofa is a gift to be shared. In my conversations with participants in this study, they emphasised that meaalofa is a universal gift that needs to be passed on. Meaalofa cannot be kept for oneself or one’s own *aiga* (family). Through the therapeutic process, meaalofa is handed on from a counsellor to a client, from one cultural group to another, and from one generation to the next. Indeed, the continuity process of meaalofa may provide opportunities for more Samoans, and other Pasifika people, to be inspired to pursue professional clinical training in counselling.

Meaalofa case study: Sale and Susana’s story

Sale and Susana (pseudonyms) were referred to me via the Family Court for counselling mediation to address issues around family violence and care and protection concerns. In accordance with the standard agreement for court-related work, we had six

one-hour sessions to resolve the dispute and address any issues brought into the sessions by either party. Prior to being referred to me, Susana had gone to a local agency that specifically helps women, in order to seek help for herself and her family. For some reason, the person at the agency who interviewed her took Susana to a lawyer and had her sign an affidavit, applying for a Protection Order, a Parenting Order, and an Order for Removal of Assets from her and her partner's property. This was done without any consultation with Samoan or Pasifika agencies. Without understanding the full ramifications of what she was signing, Susana reported when I interviewed her that "I just did what the lady told me to do. I didn't realise that I was signing that my husband was not allowed to see me or the kids. This wasn't what I went there for. I wanted some help so we could sort things out at home." The person who took Susana to the lawyer was not of Samoan or Pasifika ethnicity, and Susana's command of English was very basic, while her husband only spoke a little English. They had not been in New Zealand very long and their children did most of the translating from English to Samoan so they could understand.

When Susana came to see me, she was relieved to see a Samoan person who spoke the language, so we talked in Samoan for the whole session. Our first session together focused specifically on making a cultural connection that included explorations of our family names; our village affiliations; the purpose of our journey to New Zealand and the length of time here; the dreams and aspirations we held for our families, partners and children, and our community connection here in New Zealand. These were significant steps of the meaalofa that aided in the building of trust and rapport with Susana, especially because of her initial experience with the agency that she had encountered prior to being referred to me. Because of the sensitive nature of Susana's family situation, which could be embarrassing and shameful, I left it to her to bring up the subject when she was ready. As the counsellor (and a male), I was fully aware of the position of power evident in the counselling relationship. Therefore, it was necessary for her to be given respect and honour to approach the subject of her family situation when she was ready, which she did before the end of our first session.

In the second session, Sale entered the counselling arena with me. Under the Family Court procedures, the first two sessions are to be individually attended by each party. The reasoning behind this is to give both parties equal opportunity to present their side of the situation without the other party being in the room. Like Susana, Sale was also relieved to be working with a Samoan counsellor. He reasoned that as the counsellor, I could help him understand the procedures expected by the court and what he could and could not do. This was his first experience with "this type of thing."

At the start of our session, he asked if we could pray together for his family, as he missed his wife and his children. We opened our session with a prayer for his family, for him, and for me as the counsellor. This was followed by our discussion of the Family Court processes and what the affidavit meant with regard to the orders that were attached to it. With a clearer understanding of the court processes, Sale was able to comprehend the work that he, his wife, and his family needed to do before coming back together again. In our later sessions, Sale admitted that he needed to take more responsibility for his actions in order to be more supportive of his wife and kids. He also realised that raising a family in New Zealand is not the same as back in Samoa.

As the work progressed with Sale and Susana, through their lawyers I advocated for the importance of working through the issues together as a couple. The protection order, however, prohibited them from being in the same place together. As a result of my insistence on cultural sensitivity and working effectively to serve the needs of this Samoan family, we were able to relax the protection order, and put guidelines in place so that we could monitor their progress and when Sale had contact time with his children. Even after the court sessions were completed and they were reunited as a family, Sale and Susana continued to see me for monitoring once a month. In one of our final sessions together, Sale commented on the importance of the counselling *meaalofa* by saying, “I want our children to learn the lessons that we have learned the hard way. I want them to have someone like you to talk to before they get into trouble and lose what is precious to them ... our family.”

Influences on the research

The research methods applied in this study were influenced by three main factors. First, there was the research question, which asked: Can Samoan counsellors identify themselves and their counselling work through this cultural process called *meaalofa*?

The second factor derived from my theoretical desire to weave Pacific ways of researching together with elements of a constructionist approach—in particular, questions that explored how Western counselling theories and modalities can be connected to, and woven together with, *meaalofa* ideas within the counselling environment.

Third, what influences (if any) does *fa’aSamoa* bring to the work of Samoan counsellors with clients, such as the implications of keeping and maintaining the *va* (the sacred space) between male and female, between parent and child, between Samoans and non-Samoans? How do *fa’aaloalo* (respect and politeness), *agaga feasoasoani* (goodwill or willingness to give help) and *alofa* (sense of charity/love)

(Mulitalo-Lautā, 2000) contribute to the overall make-up of the therapeutic work by Samoan counsellors? How are these different from or similar to the understandings that guide the practices of non-Samoan counsellors?

Selecting participants

The following criteria served as guidelines for selecting participants for the study. Only counsellors of Samoan ethnicity were invited to be part of the research group. The selection process also took into account their accessibility to be interviewed, whether they were regularly counselling clients, had had some formal counselling training, and were currently affiliated with a professional governing body such as the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (NZAC), New Zealand Association of Social Workers (NZASW), New Zealand Christian Counsellors Association (NZCCA), or were working under a professional code of practice provided by an employer. Because of the depth and nature of qualitative interviews, participants were limited to three or four at the most.

In the end, three Samoan counsellors were interviewed, one male and two females. Due to the absence of Samoan counsellors in Hamilton who met the criteria of the study, all three participants were based in Auckland. The first counsellor participant was involved full-time in a counselling role with a not-for-profit social service agency. The second participant worked half-time as a counsellor and the other half as a social worker for a social service agency. The third participant was involved in counselling work for the majority of his time. He was also involved in other support roles within the community that complemented his counselling role, such as being a Justice of the Peace and doing advocacy work.

All three participants were born in Samoa and spoke Samoan fluently. They were all very familiar with fa'aSamoa and its associated cultural protocols in the lives of the Samoan clients they worked with. They had all received counselling training in New Zealand, which they incorporated with their knowledge and understanding of fa'aSamoa in their counselling work, especially with Samoan clients. The counselling participants agreed to be given pseudonyms (Tavita, Maria, and Elisapeta) in the research report to protect their privacy.

The talanoa interviewing method

The interviews with the participants utilised *talanoa*, which is a Pacific-style dialogue process. The participants involved in a talanoa set the parameters for their discussions,

which value inclusion, reconciliation, and mutual respect. Talanoa provides space for participants to speak from the heart and mind (Halapua, 2000) with respect to any issue in question. Although talanoa dialogue is generally held within group settings, this research engaged participants in individual conversational interviews utilising a talanoa format. This was done deliberately to provide participants with a private space to speak about their individual journeys and their own counselling practices in the context of a familiar Pasifika concept.

For this study, the talanoa provided participants with the respectful space to share their personal and professional perspectives on predetermined questions related to counselling and the meaalofa concept. In the talanoa interviews, they were invited to explore and discuss their counselling journeys and practices, particularly with Samoan clients. The talanoa interviews also provided a forum where the participants reflected, explored, and celebrated their stories as Samoan counsellors in New Zealand. Although the processes of talanoa are premised on having no agenda, guiding questions were provided to ensure that the outcomes of the conversations captured the essence of what the participants offered in their counselling work. The talanoa began by using the Samoan language with appropriate greetings and gestures of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), *aganu'u* (cultural sensitivity), and *tatalo* (prayer), as agreed to by both parties. The interview with one of the counsellors, Tavita, provides an illustration of the important Samoan cultural protocols involved in welcoming a client.

Researcher: *Talofa lava i lau afioga.*

Tavita: *Talofa lava.*

Researcher: *I le ava ma le fa'aaloalo lava, 'oute fia momoli atu ai se fa'afetai tele lava i lau afioga, i lau tali mai i lenei valaau. E vi'ia le Atua ona ua e maua le soifua malosi ua mafai ai ona ta feiloa'i, e ta te talatalanoa i 'autu o l nei mata'upu. (In humbleness and humility, I would like to express my gratitude to you, sir, for accepting my invitation to be part of this research. I want to praise God for giving you health and wellness enabling us to meet and share together according to the research project as I have requested.)*

Tavita: *Faafetai lava i lau susuga. Fa'afetai lava mo upu matagofie. E fiafia lava lo'u nei tagata ua tu'uina mai se avanoa tate talatalanoa ai foi i le mata'upu ua e su'esu'eina nei. Ia talosia 'ina ia fa'aoga'ina lenei taumafai e manuia ai o tatou tagata.*

(Thank you. Thank you for those kind words. I am pleased to be given the opportunity to share thoughts with you on the important topic you are

researching. I do hope that our sharing will be beneficial to the well-being of our people.)

This type of reciprocal conversation about honour and deference continued between the participant and me before entering into the main talanoa interview format. The talanoa also started and concluded with a prayer.

Some key findings

Personal experience as a catalyst

This study identified a number of similar pathways traversed by the participants that led them to become professionally trained in counselling. Participants revealed similar experiences to my own, which led them to counselling training—that is, through personally distressing experiences, they began to ask questions about how they could help others in comparable situations. Similar to my own emotional struggle with the death of my younger brother, one participant (Maria) spoke about her marriage break-up as the catalyst for choosing counselling as a career option. She said:

What led me to that place [thinking about counselling training] was because something happened in my own marriage ... that's when I really cried out to God and asked Him, "Show me the way and show me what to do now." It was a difficult period of pain and grief.

As she engaged in therapy to address her pain and grief with her counsellor, she experienced the value of counselling, and the support structures offered through counselling, as a way of helping people like her to cope and to work through the emotional, physical, psychological, and spiritual pain experienced in a relationship break-up.

Another participant (Tavita) spoke about his distressing experience that came about with the death of his father. He reported that the absence of someone of the same cultural background who could help him understand his grief and pain opened the door to consider becoming a trained counsellor. He saw that becoming a counsellor provided opportunities to hand over the meaalofa of counselling help that enabled bereaved people like himself to give meaning to and make sense of their loss, grief, and pain. He said:

It all started in Samoa when my father passed away. I was fifteen years old at the time. When I came home and saw my mother crying and in deep distress, I asked

her what had happened. In that time of emotional chaos, there was a lot of misunderstanding and not being clear about what was going on. It was then that I wished someone could interpret or translate for me what was going on with my family. My aiga were very confused as they tried to look for ways to make sense of what had happened to my dad. It was then that I started thinking about becoming a minister or pastor. I later trained at Knox College and also took further training as a hospital chaplain. As a chaplain [counsellor], I was available to listen to people's struggles and help them when they were faced with emotional distress through bereavement.

Fulfilling a call

Another key theme from the talanoa interviews highlighted meaalofa as an important “calling” that participant counsellors were in the process of fulfilling through their clinical practices. This was particularly evident when they spoke about their desire to help people (especially Samoans and Pasifika) through similar distressing situations. One of the participants (Maria) emphasised that an important part of fulfilling the calling came with the responsibility to attain an adequate level of skill to support the meaalofa in her work. She said:

I firmly believe that counselling is a calling, not a coincidence. That's why I'm still pursuing this counselling work by going back to do studies. We have to come to that calling. It has to be in you. It is part of you. I believe this calling was there right along, but it surfaced when I went through this traumatic marital experience.

Another participant (Elisapeta) was convinced she was fulfilling her calling as a counsellor. She pointed out a life-changing aspect of the meaalofa calling that she experienced regularly in her clinical role, but which was particularly evident in her work with Samoan and Pasifika clients who came to her for help and support. She said:

I am in this role to fulfil a call, which is why I think I have changed. My life experiences have been helpful to where I am today and it gives me understanding that helps me help other people. I have changed as a person. I am a lot more humble, patient, and loving to people. That's why I feel it's a calling because I never ever felt this way about people before. I go beyond just the role of counselling and social work. The work that I do with people is out of alofa.

Tavita also supported the views of counselling as a calling, as expressed by the other two participants, adding that counselling was more adequately interpreted in the

realm of a “professional calling.” He reasoned that a calling in Samoan culture is traditionally understood as a spiritual role. He said:

It's a calling for me. From a Samoan perspective, it is a professional calling. It is important to understand that in Samoan culture, a calling is mainly perceived in the form of being a minister or pastor. But yes, this counselling role is a professional calling.

The participants' responses revealed that not only were they encouraged into the counselling arena through personally distressing experiences, but through those, they each discovered a calling arising from a genuine desire to be enabled to pass on the gift of counselling to others who found themselves in similar situations. This is particularly significant when the meaalofa is passed on to clients of Samoan and Pasifika backgrounds.

Samoan counsellors

Another theme that emerged from the talanoa interviews, reflecting an integral part of the meaalofa, had to do with continuity. All the participants responded favourably about advocating for counselling and psychotherapy as a prospective career choice for Samoans and other Pasifika people. Tavita spoke about the importance of passing on the message that a counselling career is both admirable and desirable. He emphasised the need for Samoan counsellors to be available to counsel Samoan people. He added that becoming professionally trained as clinicians is the way forward for Samoans. He further argued that trained Samoan counsellors are particularly useful to Samoan clients, especially if they are able to integrate their Western counselling training together with Samoan cultural knowledge and understandings. He stated:

I would like to encourage Samoans that it's very, very vital to have Samoan counsellors available to provide counselling help for Samoan clients. For me personally, I would like to pass on to other people, Samoans in particular, who want to move into counselling, that it is a wonderful career. If they can have the training in New Zealand as well as the understanding about the theories and psyche of our Samoan people, especially the older ones, this will be really valuable in the work that they do for our people. They can combine their knowledge of Western counselling methodologies with Samoan cultural understanding to benefit our families and our people here in New Zealand.

Elisapeta also spoke about the value of Samoan counsellors working with Samoan

clients in their own language, and maintaining cultural protocols and customs as a sign of respect for the whole person. These practices help both client and counsellor achieve a collaborative therapeutic relationship that is conducive to positive outcomes. She said:

It is very important to have Samoan counsellors counselling Samoan people. In my experience, it helps save time because I know the proper way to approach Samoan clients and ways that will help us get to the bottom of problems they may have presented.

From the talanoa interviews, the participants fully endorsed that a counsellor's understanding of Samoan customs, protocols, and language is essential in successful therapeutic outcomes with Samoan clients, particularly elderly Samoans.

The value of counselling

The findings from the research also confirmed that Western counselling approaches have a valuable role in assisting Samoan clients to make helpful changes in their lives. The participants reported that there is, and will be, an ongoing need for therapy in the lives of Samoan people. They reasoned that counselling is becoming more readily acceptable and practised within Samoan communities in New Zealand. Furthermore, the value of professional training gives credibility to counsellors in their role of helping and supporting clients. For example, one participant reported that in her work with Samoan and Pasifika clients who were new to New Zealand, her counselling training provided an opportunity to engage clients in psycho-educational strategies that helped her to inform new immigrants about expected guidelines and regulations within New Zealand society that may be different from those expected in the islands.

The role of fautua (advisor)

The findings also revealed that the traditional role of *fautua* informs most Samoans' understanding of counselling concepts. That is, participants pointed out that from a traditional Samoan worldview, the understanding of counselling, based on the *fautua* role, is generally about giving advice from a position of wisdom. Advice given is often gathered by the *fautua* through a lifetime of learning and serving. The *fautua* role is also associated with providing spiritual and cultural guidance and direction. Therefore, Samoan people may see the *fautua* role as one reserved for a person with status such as the *faiifeau* (minister), *matai* (chief), or *matua* (family elder). These people are respected and honoured within the *aiga* (family) and the community. It is a prestigious and respected status within Samoan society. Because of this cultural understanding,

Samoan clients, particularly elderly people or those of status in the community, may expect or prefer to engage with an older person as their counsellor, or someone of recognised status within their community. Therefore, having some understanding about the *fautua* role and how this is traditionally perceived within Samoan society can assist counsellors in working effectively with Samoan clients.

However, personal experiences in counselling New Zealand-born Samoans and Pacific youth, as well as Samoans educated or trained in New Zealand, reveal that they have a broader understanding of counselling perspectives due to their exposure to such roles in schools and tertiary institutions. Counsellors are readily available in most schools and tertiary localities throughout New Zealand. Nevertheless, many of the older Samoans who were educated primarily in Samoa, where no such formal counselling services were available, are unlikely to have been exposed to such a concept. Therefore, the concepts and processes discussed in this article can assist in catering for the specific therapeutic needs of this group.

The importance of cultural protocols

Samoan customs and cultural protocols as foundational components in forming the therapeutic basis of the counselling work with Samoan clients are vitally important. The participants expressed sadness and disbelief when they discovered through conversations with Samoan clients who were later referred to them, that they were initially sent to agencies where no Samoan or Pacific counsellors were available. These clients reported being labelled and told that they were “uncooperative” or “noncompliant,” particularly when they had felt too uncomfortable to engage, or had asked for a Samoan or Pacific person to work with. To make matters worse, their cultural needs were neglected and ignored, or assumed to be the same as those of Māori clients. Consequently, these people reported that they just nodded in agreement, or smiled to show the interviewer what was expected, but it was not what the clients were seeking (Tamasese, Peteru, & Waldegrave, 1997). Sadly, too much of this mistreatment still happens in helping agencies today. This study is a response that aims to provide useful information that is both relevant and helpful in assisting Samoan or Pacific people in therapeutic settings.

An integrated approach

Both the participants and their personal clinical experiences support the idea that an integrated approach to counselling, which weaves Western counselling models and theories with Samoan cultural understandings and protocols, is significant to the

success of any therapeutic relationship with Samoan clients. This integrated approach was therefore seen and experienced as the “best practice” approach for working successfully with Samoan individuals, couples, and families. Although the participants used different models learned through their respective training, they all advocated for the value of understanding Samoan culture and speaking the language as important skills for counsellors who are working with Samoan people.

The participants also reported the usefulness of Western counselling models such as cognitive behavioural therapy, existential therapy, a family systems approach, narrative therapy, person-centred therapy, transactional analysis, and spiritual exploration in their work with Samoan clients. When these models are woven together with appropriate Samoan cultural protocols such as *fa’aaloalo* (respect), *alofa* (love), and others, they create a culturally safe and sensitive environment that is conducive to nurturing a therapeutic relationship. The success of this integrated approach was especially evident in the work with older Samoans who had important status in the community. Furthermore, understanding the significance of *ola fa’aleagaga* (spirituality) for Samoan and Pasifika people generally meant that prayer was said either at the beginning or at the conclusion of a counselling session. One participant emphasised the importance of prayer by stating: “This is fa’aSamoa!”

Concluding thoughts

The research findings discussed in this paper are founded on the premise that Samoan counsellors are involved in an important intercultural practice called meaalofa. As a therapeutic concept, with roots in Samoan and Pasifika ancestry, meaalofa is essential to understanding and relating to Samoan people, especially as it encompasses the totality of the Samoan person. Meaalofa provides a unique framework for the holistic counselling that supports the physical, spiritual, social, emotional, psychological, and cultural healing of the Samoan person as a whole.

Meaalofa as a concept is vital in understanding Samoan culture and its role in the counselling context. It is the gift that connects counsellors with their clients. This featured strongly in the role of *fautua* and the practices of *fa’aSamoa* as discussed in this article. In the context of the Samoan self, meaalofa is the intergenerational and relational aspect of *fa’aSamoa* that connects Samoans to the *aiga, nu’u* (village) and *atunu’u* (country). Therefore, meaalofa is the best of what *fa’aSamoa* has to offer, particularly when a Samoan counsellor supports a Samoan client through the counselling process. Strong support was voiced by the participants for the importance of having

appropriately trained Samoan counsellors available to counsel Samoan individuals, couples, and families. Having this in place would go a long way toward avoiding misunderstandings and the misguided treatment of Samoan people by social and mental health workers in the future.

Finally, meaalofa is a unique way of locating and making meaning of Samoan counselling practices in our professional and personal lives as Samoan counsellors in the New Zealand context. Meaalofa is a useful and relevant Samoan and Pasifika concept that enables us to continue the journey of honouring the legacy handed down by our ancestors. As counsellors, we have a passion and a calling to continue to hand on the meaalofa in our clinical work with clients, especially those who are members of the Samoan and wider Pasifika communities. *Soifua ma ia manuia.*

Notes

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