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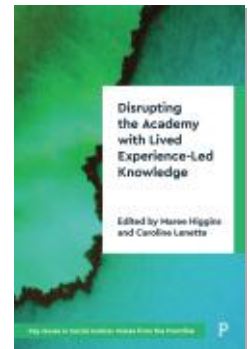
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Responding collaboratively to COVID-19 and our health needs across Pacific communities: CORE Pacific Collective

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Donina Va'a and Maherau Arona*

Key points

- This chapter disrupts the academy by highlighting the value of *talanoa* as a culturally centred and community-led research and knowledge creation process.
- Privileging Pasifika perspectives provides a platform for effective and engaging health and community responses developed with local Pacific-Indigenous peoples alongside their support services and social structures.
- Lived experience knowledge that informs applied research activities helps understand the situations and circumstances Pacific people may be situated and located within.
- By co-creating, co-curating and co-opting this knowledge, it can help mobilise a leadership approach alongside social inclusion outcomes that are grounded in a collective, collegial and collaborative approach.
- Social justice tenets around access, equity, participation and human rights can be enacted through a culturally nuanced and relevant approach.

Introduction

This chapter is co-authored by five Pasifika peoples, also known as Pacific-Indigenous and First Nations Pacific. We reflect on our own lived experiences and journey as professionals striving to work in partnership across the local region and beyond. We endeavour to decolonise and disrupt how we co-create knowledge that can inform applied research activities and lead to social justice outcomes for diverse communities. We have employed a collective, collaborative and collegial approach through a *talanoa* process, where we share and hold a dialogically driven space to talk about our experience of working together to support our Pasifika communities through the CORE (Collaboration Openness Respect Empowerment) Pacific Collective.

Talanoa is a key concept found across Pacific-Indigenous cultures, which allows for a collective and shared conversation with no prescribed agenda or structure (Vaiolati, 2013). Rather, it aims to create a safe space for participants to hold space, to sit within space, and to share their own insights on topics explored (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2014). As a relational approach, a *talanoa* provides people with an opportunity to nurture the sacred (*vā* or *tabu*) connection they have with self and others (Tecun et al, 2018). Authenticity is a major component in creating a *talanoa* that is sincere. Participants are actively invited to be vulnerable on the premise that others will. As a result, a deep sense of connection is established, providing the platform to establish and share themes organically. We write this chapter as a shared conversation with ourselves and readers, as an approach of working together by sharing knowledge.

First formed in June 2021, the CORE Pacific Collective came together to collaboratively respond to COVID-19-related concerns raised by Pacific people across Greater Western Sydney in the state of New South Wales (NSW). We represent the top five Pacific diasporas in Australia: Māori, Cook Islander, Samoan, Tongan and Fijian. Three main issues were raised: first, Pasifika communities had limited information and understandings of the impacts of COVID-19; second, there was a need to promote the safety and effectiveness of getting vaccinated; and third, we aimed to reinforce that their spiritual, religious and traditional cultural practices can complement westernised medical treatments. As a group, we mobilised key activities alongside key collaborators, including NSW Health, NSW Multiculturalism and local community-based agencies. We developed a series of videos in Pacific-Indigenous languages to share across our social media platforms; we helped host vaccination hubs in community centres in suburbs across Greater Western Sydney; we provided media commentary and opinion pieces; we hosted weekly Facebook Live events titled ‘Nurturing Vā’ with experts and government representatives to interact with our communities; and we developed a HOPE COVID-19 toolkit that provides practical resources in language for our communities. Our work is housed under a dedicated website.¹

It is through this shared approach that our lived experience led to the co-creation, co-curation and co-opting of knowledge and research that shaped and continues to inextricably influence our activities, outputs and outcomes. All of our resources were developed alongside experts in various academic fields, including medicine, social work, nursing, public health, educational leadership and exercise sciences, so that they would also learn to work collaboratively with our community groups to achieve social justice.

We first reflect on literature that discusses the importance of shaping lived experience-led knowledge towards social justice outcomes. This is followed by our *talanoa* that we held in person and audio-recorded in Fairfield, NSW, Australia, in May 2022. This *talanoa* was an opportunity for us to reflect on our work to consolidate and catapult future direction as a collective entity.

At the same time, we are keen to express how our lived experiences as Pasifika people shaped our shared approach to responding to community needs. This knowledge was curated as a means to mobilise current and future social action and change.

Writing this chapter as a form of collaborative autoethnography

We use collaborative autoethnography to formally document and reflect on the shared work of the CORE Pacific Collective. In accordance with [Chang and colleagues \(2016\)](#), collaborative autoethnography is an opportunity to create shared understanding of experiences that may occur with groups working together. This solicits a broader perspective on the phenomena being examined, while also positioning such lived experience as tangible research evidence and outcomes. The iterative process of a collaborative autoethnography involves four steps ([Chang et al, 2016](#)):

1. Preliminary data collection: group sharing and probing.
2. Subsequent data collection: group sharing and preliminary meaning-making.
3. Data analysis and interpretation: group meaning-making and theme search.
4. Report writing: group writing.

In essence, we engaged in collaborative autoethnography where our *talanoa* (shared conversation) was used for step 1, preliminary data collection. In writing up the transcript of the *talanoa*, we undertook step 2, subsequent data collection, where we further explored the context and shape of our shared conversation and assigned preliminary meaning to what we discussed. We moved to step 3, data analysis and interpretation through the key themes derived directly from the transcript of the *talanoa*, which led to the subsequent and final step 4, the group writing of this chapter.

We were able to achieve the anticipated benefits of collaborative autoethnography ([Chang et al, 2016](#)), including the collective explorations of researcher subjectivity, power sharing among researcher-participants, efficiency and enrichment in the research process, deeper learning about self and others, and supporting community building. As such, we see the potential for culturally centred and community-led research to generate tangible outcomes including influencing policy and practice and for further knowledge creation.

Reflections from the literature

The literature we accessed to support our understanding of lived experience-led knowledge and research was mostly grounded in health settings and social

services. Mental health treatment and recovery practices have benefited from the role of peer workers, who are employed based on their own lived experience of mental distress. These knowledges help shape and ground nuanced recovery strategies (Honey et al, 2020). This has disrupted the status quo of the medical model, which is privileged as the underlying premise to health systems and structures. Effective leadership can assist in promoting lived experience in practice settings to create a sustained and meaningful approach (Byrne et al, 2018).

As a methodology, lived experience-led research provides a platform for individual voices to be part of a broader conversation, nuanced with insights on how people experience their own space and place (Petitmengin et al, 2019). It helps make meaning of the micro (individual and families), meso (community and organisational) and macro (systems and structures) challenges and disrupts dominant discourses that perpetuate and take for granted the realities of people who are not in positions of influence and power (Frechette et al, 2020). There is a push for academic institutions to better support researchers with lived experience so that their knowledge is valued, through professional pipelines and academic roles (Jones et al, 2021).

From a social policy perspective, the lived experience approach has been undervalued, and might not appeal to people outside the social sciences (McIntosh and Wright, 2019). However, other disciplines including the medical sciences are starting to use lived experience perspectives to shape responses that go beyond the goal of a one-size-fits-all health approach. This suggests that there are multiple, and even more complex ways, to creating solutions. Social and health services that interact with people based on their development stage, such as childhood, can be greatly assisted in their effectiveness and engagement when children are given an opportunity to shape their care outcomes through lived experience (Rogoff et al, 2018).

From a Pacific point of view, exploring and examining our lived experiences as a Pasifika diaspora in Australia is vital. Our prevalence and presence have been maligned by over-representation in youth justice spaces (Ravulo, 2016a; 2016b) and under-representation in higher education (Ravulo, 2019). Our mental health needs and accompanying levels of health literacy has impacted our engagement with health services and help-seeking behaviours (Ravulo et al, 2021). Failure to understand our realities will continue to perpetuate lack of inclusion across health settings, leading to poorer social and economic outcomes.

The context of COVID-19 emphasised the need for researchers to use qualitative methodologies to shape medical treatments (Gorna et al, 2021). Without understanding the lived experience of Pasifika people at the onset of COVID-19, Australian responses failed to recognise the need to create knowledge and research to assist in counteracting misinformation and hesitancy in treatment. A lack of insight into the shared reality of minority

groups, especially those based on class, ethnicity and colour, or even combined and intersecting all three, leads to poorer health outcomes and large disparities in accessing treatment (Lopez et al, 2021).

Our *talanoa* as the CORE Pacific Collective

Malo e lelei, Seini Finau Afeaki is my name, from the Kingdom of Tonga. Finau is my maiden name. I was born and raised in the village of Masilamea, on the main island of Tongatapu. My maternal grandparents are from Pangai Ha'apai, Nukunuku and Kolomotu'a and my paternal grandparents are from Masilamea. I am a fearless advocate with a purpose for the Pacific communities in NSW for the last 30-plus years. I started my career in Tonga as a teacher at Queen Salote College, my old high school. I later joined the Ministry of Finance as the Deputy Secretary and migrated to Australia in 1984. Since then, I have worked across government and non-government agencies in different capacities, and I am currently with the NSW Children's Court Clinic. My postgraduate training is on project management and policy development. I have served on different boards including as a former Commissioner for the NSW Community Relations Commission. I am currently a Senior Advisor to the Pacific Women's Professional Business Network. I am also the Chairperson of the Pacific Mental Health Initiative.

Pacific greetings and *talofa lava*, I am Loau Donina Va'a, Early Childhood Development Specialist Consultant with UNICEF Pacific, providing technical support to the Pacific Regional Council for Early Childhood Development, and Chair of the Pacific Women's Professional Business Network. My father hails from Saoluafata, Upolu, and my mother from Sala'ilua, Savai'i. Born in Grey Lynn, New Zealand, I grew up in Samoa and Fiji. Most of my professional life is in Sydney, though I have also worked in Samoa, Fiji and New Zealand.

Kia orana! Warm Pacific greetings, I am Maherau Arona. I was born in Dunedin, New Zealand. My father is from Rakahanga, and my mother is from Penryhn, Cook Islands. I am married to Toa Arona from Tupapa Village. My Piho family home is Matavera. I currently reside in Sydney. I am employed with a non-government agency called Mission Australia and I also work as a Youth Justice Conference Convenor. I am the President of the Pacific Islands Mount Druitt Action Network Incorporated and Team Manager for the Cook Islands Rugby League Women's World Cup Team that competed in the UK in November 2022. I studied at Otago University, and worked for New Zealand's Department of Child, Youth and Family Services.

Kia Ora. Ko Malaemie Fruean toku ingoa (Greetings. My name is Malaemie Fruean). I am the Chair of the NSW Council for Pacific Communities. Both my mother and father are from Ngapuhi associated with the Northland region of Aotearoa New Zealand and centred in the Hokianga, the Bay of

Islands, and Whangārei. I was born and raised in Whangarei, New Zealand – my *whānau* (family) is from Whangaruru Ngatiwai; we are the children of the sea. I have lived in Australia now for over 37 years, most of that time in Sydney where I still currently reside with my husband Charlie, our five children and 12 grandchildren. Charlie is New Zealand born Samoan; his mother is from the village of Mulifanua and his father from the village of Faatoia. I have worked within the community for a number of years doing community development. I have been employed by TAFE NSW (technical college), Mission Australia, Campbelltown City Council, One Door Mental Health and now I manage the South West Multicultural and Community Centre. I have a BA in adult education from the University of Technology Sydney. In 2021, I was awarded the Order of Australia Medal. I am very humbled and honoured to have received this recognition for the service I have been blessed to do with Pacific communities in NSW. The following Māori proverb reflects my approach: *He aha te mea nui o te ao* (What is the most important thing in the world?) *He tangata, he tangata, he tangata* (It is the people, it is the people, it is the people).

Bula and G'day, I'm Jioji Ravulo, Professor and Chair of Social Work and Policy Studies at the University of Sydney. My father is iTaukei (Indigenous) Fijian, with his father coming from Nayavuirea village in the region of Ra, and mother from Sawani in the region of Naitasiri. My late mother is Anglo-Australian and originally from Sydney. I was born and raised in Sydney, Australia, and have lived and worked most of my personal and professional life in various areas of Greater Western Sydney. My academic life has included working with the University of the South Pacific, providing opportunities to collaborate across the Pacific.

Collectively, we would like to acknowledge the traditional owners of the land, the Cabrogal people of the Darug nation, in which this *talanoa* took place in South West Sydney. We acknowledge that the lands where we work, play and live are all still considered stolen, as sovereignty was never ceded. Always was, always will be Aboriginal land. As Pacific-Indigenous peoples, we strive to be allies and to ensure Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and their knowledges, perspectives and practices are privileged across the shared spaces and places we traverse.

In this *talanoa*, we discuss seven key questions that were developed to help us collectively and organically discuss our cultural views and values on our communities' lived experiences of COVID-19, while subsequently reflecting on the work we have done on this journey together so far.

Why do we do what we do?

Seini: In a nutshell, when they listen, I'll stop what I'm doing. This includes advocacy, lobbying for my community.

- So when they sit up and listen, then I will stop. At the moment, they are not listening, so it's not going to stop yet. It's a long journey and process.
- Donina: To make change, progress, you need to be seen to exist, and that's absolutely critical to be heard, 'cause then you do exist.
- Maherau: I love my community, I love our Pasifika people, and I know in Australia we are over-represented in various areas including youth justice, corrective services. There are lots of issues for our Pasifika community, and I can see there is no beauty in any of that, but we are beautiful people. When this changes and can be seen by the wider Australian community, then we won't stop until we see that. We have a long way to go, but we will do that.
- Malaemie: To make a difference, including hope. I acknowledge the mentors that I have had the privilege to walk alongside, including Aunty Molly, who would say 'you are digging the trenches and it's hard work'. I am doing this for my children, your children, for our grandchildren.
- Jioji: I do this because I'm passionate about inclusion and passionate about people who are not given the opportunity to have a voice, to have a voice and to be involved in having shared conversations. I'm greatly inspired and encouraged by others along the way that also helps me to keep focused and grounded on what I do and why I do what I do.

What has COVID-19 meant for us?

- Seini: Generally, on a personal level, it meant pause, slow down. Self-care was quite prominent at that time, not just for myself, but for my family, my friends, and others and the community. It was a time to pause, reflect and do what you could do for yourself, your family, friends, community. On a community level, I saw what it was doing to our community. It was a time of panic. We as a group put our hands up to do something about it, in response to that panic and requests from individuals being raised to us. It was an opportunity to put our resources together and put aside our indifferences on previous experiences. There were challenges, and some community members weren't understanding what the collective was doing – but we still worked together with

the whole community, in guidance from our Elders and in collaboration with the government.

Maherau: I remember the time when the first [Pasifika] mother passed away, and the whole matter went viral via mainstream media and across social media platforms. Because nobody really knew what was going to happen amongst our community. It became very real, very quickly, to hear and see someone so young, with children, die from COVID-19. But our team was able to then access the resources and the support. From the connection that we were able to hook into, including Joseph [La Posta, Chief Executive Officer] from Multicultural NSW, I ended up talking with Western Sydney Local Health District Chief Executive Officer to get a response from public health. It made us work harder, and smarter, as a collective, and because we have power in our own entities, so when we come together as CORE, it made us stronger and made government see their role in supporting and helping to then respond to our families. This approach has then spread locally to the community. As a result, I now have a wonderful relationship with Mt Druitt Police, so much so that I'm talking to the commander of the local office, and it's been built from COVID-19, 'cause they've seen us do this work as a team, as CORE.

Donina: There was a big pause for me too, a renewing of mind and intention on a personal level. Prior to COVID-19, we were running with the wind and then we had to step back to have that pause and look internally as to what's important and what we have to prioritise. What COVID-19 means to me is the relationships, and the sincerity that has evolved from this. The collective is an example of this – where we were able to reach out to organisations including the Muslim Women's Association, Mission Australia and others to support the work that we do 'cause we can't do it ourselves. Despite having our own jobs and families, we were able to pause, come together, put our differences aside and work together. With the fears being felt by the community, we were able to turn it into hope through strategies that the collective were able to implement.

Malaemie: It was like a tsunami for me – as everything was coming our way so quickly. I was feeling overwhelmed, and that's overwhelmed with the requests, and the demands from the community. This was all without looking at your own

personal and family stuff. Also, what COVID-19 means for me personally is this unique friendship amongst each other. Whatever pools of resources or networks we had we went to each other's aid to support. And I was a recipient of that too from this group. COVID-19 made me focus on what's really important, which is my family of course, but you're still overwhelmed by the community. Without the CORE Pacific Collective, I don't think I would've coped. Personally, it turned the tide around. My dad has always taught us, when you get caught in the current, don't fight against it, you're going to make yourself tired and you're going to be in danger. You have to go with that current, and without the connection of members, I don't think I would've coped with the current I was in at that time.

Seini: I'm thinking further about how we are all using the word 'connection', 'relationship', 'togetherness' – that's all from our roots, from where we come from. It's who we are. And we are just practising who we are. When it needs to be utilised – we take these approaches out and use them. We are connected people, we are grounded people. We put our heads together and amazingly do and achieve the work.

Jioji: A lot of the stuff around COVID-19 would be about how it separated people, in which it did separate people physically, but on reflection with each other, if I didn't have my involvement with the CORE Pacific Collective, I don't think I would've also come through it because I was also learning so much by virtue of being involved in our activities. I had to turn up, I had to engage, I had to learn about what was happening across the community with COVID-19. Because we were running Nurturing Vā [Facebook Live panel event] where I was facilitating the conversations each week, I had to present, I couldn't take a back seat in this. COVID-19 for me has also meant we were mobilising these relationships, we were also forming a stronger bond with each other, but also helped me to survive COVID-19 personally and with our community.

Why does our lived experience as Pasifika people matter to health outcomes?

Mal: Number one – does it matter? Number two – damn right it matters! We are talking about Pasifika here – so it does

matter. We talk about the importance of advocacy and our own voice and the value that the lived experience brings to the table when looking at solutions – which gets you 20 times quicker up the ladder than sitting around going ‘well I think, and I think, and I think’. The lived experience should be acknowledged as a strength, not a deficit. That’s where the solutions lie.

Donina: No one knows better than the Pacific person themselves, so being able to share that lived experience is important. They know best what they’ve just gone through – and that will certainly create the awareness from there rather than from somebody else – we need this!

Seini: The lived experience humanises the issue. We just spoke about the first Pacific mother who passed away in Western Sydney – yeah, everybody dies, everywhere. But when you talk about that particular mum and that particular family with those kids, the faces and the stories humanise the issue of COVID-19. The devastation it caused to a person, to kids, to families, to a community – the whole community was devastated by that passing away. Yes, it’s about the dollar, it’s about the number, but lived experience makes it more meaningful to you, to me and to the policy makers hopefully. So, it makes a difference because your own narrative determines your health outcomes.

Maherau: During this whole experience of COVID-19 for me, I have my nephew who almost died from COVID-19 at Westmead Hospital. The experience that I had with him as his main family here in Sydney – to be involved in the health system’s response – was amazing. NSW Health were a great support. We were communicating with family, via Zoom, in New Zealand, and also all around Australia and in the Islands. He was in a coma for three months, and he’s only just starting back at work this week, only for light duties. He’s had a lived experience with COVID-19 and got through it – it is the human side of how we care for each other that needs to be told and shared. The health staff were absolutely blown away because my family were singing to him whilst he was unconscious, over Zoom. He could hear everything – and even his five-year-old daughter and her mother had to come into the special COVID-19 ward as they contracted COVID-19 too. While they were there, there was this little bird that kept

coming onto their balcony. And the daughter believed it to be Daddy visiting her – because they couldn't see each other. So, the lived experience that we have as Pasifika people, you can't connect that with Australian white ways here. I know you all get it, I know Indigenous people would be the same, but [white] people won't get it.

Jioji: It's the context in which people exist, it's the human element. It's all about making sense of what it means to be here, and I think for me, lived experience matters from a Pasifika background, or perspective, or the way in which we view the world, because we can't then create strategies, solutions or engagement without those perspectives.

How does Pasifika leadership influence outcomes?

Seini: We need to define the term leader. Personally, that particular term – when it is referred to me, I would outright say that I'm not. I don't think of myself as a Pacific leader although I've been told 'you are!'. I'm still a learner, and I've got Pacific mentors, everyday, and I quote people who I learn from. So for me – I don't know – I would rather the others are labelled a leader but not me. I would like for other people to be the leaders, and I am just the advocate hoping for changes.

Malaemie: They cannot be what they cannot see. I'm talking about COVID-19; we may not identify with the leader title, but we come into this work, and come into this space – and go back to that why. I look at my grandchildren, and think, well one day, we are now all doing the work towards that. But they cannot be what they cannot see. So, we had to get into the current and step forward regardless of what title we had or did not have. For the community, they needed to see people step forward. I don't think any of us said 'we will step forward' per se, but rather we went into the current with a view to do our best that we can with the resources that we have to help each other. So how does Pasifika leadership influence outcomes? Well, definitely in the *papalagi* (white) world it makes a difference, it does have a huge influence towards the outcomes. It's all about servant leadership. When you go back to your people, they are happy that you do what you do, but if you can't pick up a tea towel and help out in the kitchen – that's what matters to your *whānau* (family). That you haven't

forgotten what it's like to serve the people – that's the leadership they are looking for.

Donina: I see myself as a servant – not as a leader. I'm serving – that's what I love to do. I've always seen leadership as a reflection of my mentors, those that have been there, done that and have paved the way. And that also goes to our Ancestors – I looked to that. That's what's opened doors – I wouldn't be where I am today and I'm hoping to also open doors, and gently pull our people through. So, in regards to influencing change – yes it does – but not per se me – I'm just opening doors that others before me have opened, and I love that. Doors are starting to open, and people are being inclusive of us. Through the collective, I am seeing things that I've never seen before including better changes towards cultural appropriateness. Government departments are taking notice and are wanting to engage productively with us.

Maherau: We have a lot of leaders in our Pacific communities; we have National Rugby League players who are seen as leaders for the young, we've got ones in music that are seen as leaders in the music world. I'll go into events and young people won't know how I'm connected but their role models do and I'm all good with that. I've always been told off by my husband as I'm the girl when we're in sport, that I would always prefer to run the water bottles onto the field – 'cause I just love serving. I'm one to just do the work and don't see myself as a leader. I know there are times that I have to be a voice for the people, for our community, especially with vaccinations access to our people. Leadership is for the community, for my family. If my children and family succeed, then I've done my duty.

Jioji: I relate to everything that you are all saying – and that's why we get on so well. Despite how busy we all were, and still are, at no time did I ever take on a request from yourselves and think – no – I can't do it. I did it with a sense of ease and without a sense of burden. I think it's a testament to our shared approach with servant leadership. I too don't see myself as a leader or representative. But by virtue of me turning up in space, from a Pasifika background, that is a point of difference amongst settings that don't have us there. We are disrupting the status quo by turning up.

In Pasifika leadership, we all play a role, we all play a part. In our shared cultural concepts, we all matter, nobody is left behind.

How does the role of gender play out across the community?

Seini: Well, if you look around the CORE Pacific Collective, how many girls are here? Generally during COVID-19, women took the lead in organising and rallying people, whether they are in health, community organisations or on the ground. Women took the lead during COVID-19 in rallying the Pacific community. What did men do – they did a lot too. We called upon our Church leaders, most of them are men, so there are different roles that were interacting during that time. Religious leaders were really good at mobilising their communities for COVID-19 including the community vaccination hubs. Different roles came together. It showed that whatever your gender expression or sexual orientation, we need to do this together. Not one gender can do it.

Malaemie: So, we are the mothers, the nurturers; fathers were the providers. COVID-19 saw gender roles combine to unite and work cohesively with our families during lockdown. The women took a leading role organising things. Whether it was something they were appointed to – it's just their nurturing nature of women. There was a need, and we may not know straight away how to meet the need but actioned straight away something.

Jioji: Gender roles can be quite performative, generally in society, but you see them play out differently in Pacific cultures. Some Pacific cultures are more matriarchal, where women are leaders based on their nurturing and caring roles – and bring this dynamic to a broader community setting and context. I think Pacific men rely heavily on Pacific women to bring that to the conversation and to provide that. We strive to respect and revere women in our lives to work alongside them with a view that everyone plays a part – at the same time it is complementary. By virtue of all genders working together, it reflects the collectivist context in which we operate and exist. Compared to the western perspectives, being able to complement each other through our gender roles is a strength.

Donina: On reflection, we saw women as mothers and nurturers rise to the occasion in getting their families vaccinated. They wanted to also help other families and they started interviewing their children and putting it up on Facebook so that other families could see that it was okay to get vaccinated. The great thing is that you could see the Dad there, in the background, wasn't interviewed, but they went as families. You saw women getting vaccinated, the protectors, and the men would then come. Men walking beside women and their families; it's a win-win situation.

As a result of our collaboration, how have we actioned change?

Donina: Well, we've talked it, we've walked it, we've influenced it. We've certainly walked the talk, and the change. I can't say enough how many people are talking about it – but seeing five people from different Pacific backgrounds, I get asked 'how do you do it?'. There is this mutual respect here, and it was a lack of any hidden agendas. We are here sincerely, for this. Yes – we have our own organisations that we represent – but we all came together to respond; especially when we would use a group call on messenger – we would pick up and talk. Our resources that we developed in collaboration with others is being used across the community including schools and church groups.

Seini: The collective has produced a model that shines a light on who we are as Pacific people. But the collaboration, in itself, we've never really seen in NSW. This is a ground-up thing, by the Pacific people, not a partnership that was instigated by government. It's a framework to be followed by others, cause we've seen it work. We've influenced the change through this model. For the government, they sit up and listen based on collaboration. We got together and governments saw this as an opportunity to engage.

Jioji: I think the change process has been by virtue of us working together collaboratively as five separate entities together to enact and achieve such outcomes.

How does our work reflect and influence social justice?

Seini: If you consider the tenets of social justice, it's about equity, access, participation, diversity and human rights. The CORE Pacific Collective covered all these tenets.

Community was accessing information, diversity is through our representation, having a voice as a basic human right was in supporting our people to participate. Mobilising of resources gave people a chance to get involved and benefit from these shared resources.

Maherau: Where else are you going to see five separate nations, as represented in this group of people, working together voluntarily to enact this change? We are not getting paid to do this work for our communities, for our nations, but I just think there's the richness which in itself says a lot about us being in this space and place together. I don't think you will see this anywhere else in Australia, or New Zealand, especially with what's happening in our communities with all the violence that's happening in the area code. There are five nations in this room working collectively, collaboratively. If the kids in our community could see this – it would be of benefit to all.

Malaemie: Collectively, we have had an influence by all coming together because there was a need. You can't be what you can't see. We think about the young, inspiring leaders that include young women running community-based sessions. It's happening because we have models like the collective that are providing examples and opportunities for others to implement their shared approaches. It's about opening the door for all the others coming through. How many times is it around 'this is mine – I'll get a bit of this and that'. With the collective – it's not about that. It's coming together and not having territorial perspectives or stuff. It's about playing a part in putting together solutions towards turmoil that we are all a part of. Our influence has been in responding practically to the needs of COVID-19, whilst also modelling for young people possibilities to achieve community outcomes to influence social justice. This isn't an elite group – we are in this together.

Donina: We have had our own personal challenges across the pandemic – but as a group we have rallied together to assist each other. The key here is: this hasn't been work, but a passion to support our people. We understood what the issues were by speaking directly to the community. This includes messages we separately received on the issues and concerns, including the fear being felt. It was striving to reflect the voice of the

community. Our key activities came from trying to alleviate the fears that were being shared with us. As a result, we were able to create support that aimed to meet the need of the community.

Jioji: I was heartened throughout our journey, seeing this as a support to each other and the wider community. I knew that my contribution would have a contribution to your contribution around this reciprocal context and learning that supported our outputs towards social justice and inclusion. Where everyone was involved, we utilised our strengths to mobilise our shared approach.

Final thoughts from our *talanoa*

From our *talanoa*, we highlighted how our community and culture was at the forefront of our shared responses and work with health services. Without this, we continue to create a limited understanding of the true impacts of health and social issues exacerbated by COVID-19. By working collaboratively, collegially and collectively within Pacific communities, we can mobilise a strength-based approach to shape burgeoning social policy and health service provision. Our lived experiences are at the heart of our narratives and have been the platform to form and facilitate our convictions to be part of the change process towards social justice outcomes.

Our work within a collectivist context is informed by the shared desire to privilege a culturally centred and community-led applied research approach. By centring culturally nuanced perspectives, including those coming directly from lived experience as fellow Pasifika people, we are intentional about this approach. In a western and white framing, failure to work with Pasifika knowledges perpetuates the dysfunction and lack of suitable solutions within health structures, and resources to address Pasifika health needs are mismatched and misaligned. Through our community-led action and activism, we were able to achieve, in real time, health outputs and outcomes that were meaningfully engaging and engaged.

Though reluctant to be seen as leaders or experts, we see the importance of working together as part of our cultural convictions that the collective helps achieve a common good for all. Our diverse lived experiences and different Pasifika heritages have been the platform to shape our contributions to this collaborative approach. We believe that it is through our lived experience that we can help co-create new knowledge across social justice research that deconstructs, disrupts and decolonises dominant academic discourses and its practices. As Pacific-Indigenous people, we are mindful of ensuring our own voices, and as such, representation, should be part of whole-of-community and whole-of-government approaches. Our culturally nuanced

views, values, perspectives and practices create spaces that are responsive and engaging, leading to helpful health and welfare outcomes.

Note

¹ See <https://www.nswcpc.org.au/core-pacific-collective>

Further reading

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