

## **Cultural Context of Health and Well-being among Samoan and Tongan American Elders**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This article examines cultural-related factors that may serve as sources of protection/benefits and risk for the health and well-being of Samoan and Tongan American elders. People from Oceania, in this case Samoans and Tongans, view health and well-being holistically, thus this study focused on biological health and psycho-social-spiritual well-being of participating elders. Study participants included 20 Samoan and Tongan American elderly immigrants living on the islands of Hawaii. For this exploratory qualitative research, data were collected via individual interviews. Findings indicate that commitment to cultural practices in the family such as respect for the elders, community and church leaders; reciprocity; spirituality; native language; use of traditional medicine, food, and music; and cultural expectations have protective influences on an elder's health and well-being. These cultural practices provided psychological encouragement and strength, social support systems, opportunities for reciprocity and strengthened relationships with God and others. On the other hand, over-giving and over-doing these cultural practices led to negative impacts on an elder's health and well-being. Cultural duality was identified as a source of both risk and protection for health and well-being. Implications for research and policy practice for the larger Pacific American group and other culturally similar groups are discussed.*

**Keywords:** Immigrant elders, Samoans and Tongans, Cultural practices, Health and well-being, Risk and protective factors

Immigration into the United States presents a complex and complicated context in which Samoan and Tongan Americans attempt to practice and perpetuate their traditional cultural lifeways. Although, traditional cultural lifeways are generally strong and deeply rooted across generations, Samoan and Tongan elders remain central to cultural survival, especially among immigrants. The significance of these elders to the survival of their cultures, and ultimately their people, has been recognized, however information on the influence of culturally related factors on the health and well-being of immigrant Samoan and Tongan elders is sparse and what is available does not accurately describe the experiences of these elders. The study presented in this paper attempts to initiate a meaningful discussion about the cultural context of health and well-being of immigrant Samoan and Tongan American elders. The research explored the consequences of strong connections and commitment to cultural values and beliefs on health and well-being. Specifically, what is the influence of culturally related factors as sources of risk or protection on the health and well-being of Samoan and Tongan American elders? In this study, culture is inclusive of family relations, connections to the land, church, respect for authority, and reciprocity. Understanding of the immigrant experience as the context in which the phenomenon of culture and its links to health and well-being exists frames this study. In this initial phase, qualitative research methods are appropriate for exploring the depth and complexity of this phenomenon which will contribute information on the health and well-being of immigrant Samoan and Tongan American elders.

### **Literature Review**

Samoan and Tongan elders are central to the daunting task of ensuring the transmission of traditional culture as well as assisting the young in negotiating cross-cultural identities such as a Samoan/Tongan American identity. The literature specific to Samoan and Tongan American elders is extremely limited, incomplete, and often subsumed within the general Pacific American literature which is also sparse. Available information regarding Pacific American immigrants, Samoan and Tongan cultural lifeways, and Pacific conceptualizations of health and well-being provides a foundation for further dialogue on the link of culture to health and well-being. Although brief, this review of the literature speaks to the significance of study which will contribute to

the existing knowledge by describing the experiences of Samoan and Tongan American elders in negotiating their cultures in a United States environment, the outcomes of such negotiation, and the accompanying challenges of the immigrant experience.

### **Pacific American Immigrants**

Currently, Pacific Americans<sup>1</sup> consist of over a million people, new and older generation immigrants, living primarily in Hawaii, California, Alaska, Utah, Washington, Texas, and Oregon (Population Reference Bureau, 2006). With population growth due to migration and birthrate comes both opportunities to achieve and contribute to the greater societal good, as well as challenges and difficulties. For instance, the average Pacific family size is reported as four, however, with the commonplace of intergenerational living, family household size can be as high as 10 individuals or more. The median Pacific family annual income is estimated at \$50,000 (Ibid.) with the lowest annual incomes among the Tongans at about \$27,000 and Hawaiians at about \$38,000. There are about 26 per cent of Samoans and 23 per cent of Tongans in the U.S. living below the poverty line. In terms of education, about 10 per cent of Pacific Americans have undergraduate degrees and 4 per cent have graduate degrees, compared to 27 per cent and 11 per cent of white Americans respectively. Specific to language barriers, 42 per cent of Pacific Americans speak a language other than English in the home (Population Reference Bureau, 2006; Vakalahi & Godinet, 2008).

In relation to health, Pacific Americans have high rates of obesity, alcohol use, and smoking, with the leading causes of death being diabetes. In Hawaii, Native Hawaiians are more than 5 times as likely as white Americans to die from this disease. Pacific Americans also suffer from cancer, heart disease, gout, accidents and stroke, with a high prevalence rate of hepatitis B, HIV/AIDS and tuberculosis (Population Reference Bureau, 2006). Pacific American elders are at particular risk given the combined challenges of these debilitating health problems, lifelong inadequate health care and lack of health insurance, likelihood of being employed in hard-labor jobs with low wages, language barriers, and living in a racist and ageist society that does not value the wisdom that comes with age. These factors are intimately linked to the

immigration experience (Braun *et al.*, 2004). The lack of access to and use of western health and social services by these elders are also major problems, either due to the lack of knowledge of available services, distance, or lack of financial resources (Braun *et al.*, 2004; Population Reference Bureau, 2006). Unfortunately, such health, social, and financial challenges faced by Pacific American elders can prove to be personally and culturally problematic (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004; Fitzpatrick, 2004; Linsk & Mason, 2004; Patton, 2003).

While the literature on Pacific American elders is sparse, information that exists indicates that elders are key to the survival of indigenous Pacific cultures in the countries of origin as well as the new countries of residence (Dodd, 1990). In an environment comprised of dual or multiple cultures such as the U.S., Pacific American elders play a crucial role in the preservation and transmission of cultural values, beliefs and practices for new and older generation immigrants. For Pacific Peoples, constant interaction with elders has significant meaning throughout the life course, with cultural practices such as respect for the elders, reciprocity and collectivity, and family and community responsibilities taught in the arms of the elders (William Wallace, Hawaiian cultural expert, personal communication, October 1, 2002). Pacific elders are the spiritual linkage between the past, present and future.

### **Traditional Samoan and Tongan Cultures**

Samoan and Tongan American elders include those in the U.S. with heritage and ancestry that are originally from the Pacific nations of Samoa and Tonga. The Samoans and Tongans belong to the Polynesian group of the people from Oceania<sup>2</sup> (Hau'ofa, 1994). Due to patterns of migration and exploration in the vast Pacific Ocean, cultures of people from Oceania are unique in their own rights; yet, they are familiar and similar to each other in so many ways (Taufe'ulungaki, 2008). Samoan and Tongan cultures share familiarity, a closeness that exists not only in terms of cultural values, beliefs, and practices but also proximity in the location of the two island nations and by virtue of living side by side in the U.S. in states such as Hawaii and California. Their immigration experiences in the U.S. have been quite similar particularly in terms of having to negotiate cultural duality. In

other words, they constantly deal with the reality of having to live simultaneously in their culture of origin and their new American culture.

In relation to the traditional Samoan culture, Autagavaia (2001) and Bell (1998) discuss key cultural values and practices taught and enforced by the elders, which includes familial connections; connection to the land; absolute respect for authority of the chiefs (matai) and ministers (faife'au); and a collective identity and worldview that is based on spirituality, physiology, and history. Also important is respect for the elders in speech and conduct, for example, when speaking to an elder one must not be standing.

The church and its ministers hold much power in the Samoan community. Mutual respect (vafealoaloa'i) and sacredness placed on human relations are core principles. For instance, in weddings, funerals, and other special occasions, Samoan families are expected to share the responsibilities and costs for the occasion. This sense of reciprocity and collectivity is facilitated by the fact that a Samoan person is rooted in the multiple aspects of culture including a family (aiga), village (nu'u), and ancestors. Children and grandchildren are customarily named after their grandparents/elders and are raised to respect their culture through participating in cultural ceremonies, retaining the Samoan language, and eating a traditional Samoan diet which includes breadfruit, taro, bananas, pineapples, coconuts, fresh pork and fish prepared in an underground oven (umu).

Similarly, the church plays a significant role in the lives of Tongans in and outside of Tonga, which is indicative in the strict observance of the Sabbath day and the inclusion of this protocol in the Tongan Constitution. Traditional Tongan culture emphasizes inclusiveness, reciprocity, extended family relationships, and respect for the elders as the basis for collectivity among Tongan people (Afeaki, 2001). Births and weddings are celebrated with families and communities who come to offer emotional and financial support, and include exchanges of gifts. There are roles in these gatherings that are elder, gender, and birth order specific. For instance, grandparents/elders name their grandchildren and such names are often the names of other elders in the family. Also, speeches given on behalf of a bride or groom are customarily given by the oldest elder from a family. Also similar to the

Samoan culture, traditional Tongan diet include mangos, oranges, melons, fish, and pork (Bell, 1998).

Relevant to both Samoan and Tongan cultures, Mulitalo (2001), Hereniko (1995), and Newport (2001) emphasize the fact that even in our transnational world of today, spirituality remains fundamental in all Pacific epistemology and regardless of where Pacific people reside, their sacred connection to the people and homelands remains strong. The elders play a key role in maintaining this sense of sacredness and connectedness in environments like the U.S. where immigrants must deal with dual or multiple cultural identities.

### **Traditional Conceptualization of Health and Well-being**

Pacific models of health and well-being vary yet are fundamentally similar in that, health and well-being are holistically inclusive of the physical, mental, social and spiritual dimensions as well as other cultural and environmental factors (Anae *et al.*, 2001; Durie, 1985). For instance, according to the Fonofale model, the roof of the fale (traditional Maori house) represents cultural values and beliefs which are integrated into both traditional and contemporary healing methods. The foundation of the fale represents the family and each of the *pou* (house posts) represents the biological, spiritual, mental, and other dimensions such as gender, class, age, and sexual orientation. The fale is surrounded by a context that represents the environment (Anae *et al.*, 2001).

Furthermore, Finau *et al.* (2004) add to this conceptualization of health and well-being by explaining that the absence of disease and pain is the ultimate goal. Furthermore, the inability to meet family and community obligations and the inability to achieve personal goals are considered possible outcomes of poor health and well-being. This inclusive and collective conceptualization of health and well-being can assist service providers in clearly framing their understanding of the experiences of immigrant Samoan and Tongan American elders.

### **Methodology**

#### ***Research Questions***

The research question explored in this article relates to the cultural context of health and well-being of Samoan and Tongan American elders: What are the consequences of strong connections and

commitment to cultural values and beliefs on health and well-being? Specifically, what is the influence of culturally related risk and protective factors on the health and well-being of Samoan and Tongan American elders? These questions are informed by the integration of the Ho'okele model (Vakalahi *et al.*, 2007) and concepts of risk and protective factors. The Ho'okele model speaks of the centrality of Pacific elders in navigating the future of their families and communities. It focuses on connections and transactions across multiple systems, beginning with the elders as keepers of cultural knowledge, practices, traditions, and customs. Elders are entrusted with the responsibility of connecting and nurturing all of the generations and systems (Ibid.).

### *Design*

The inductive nature of grounded theory as an exploratory qualitative research method was utilized for this study. Grounded theory provides a systematic set of procedures for constructing a theory about a phenomenon that is grounded in data and the interpretive understanding of the meanings of an individual's lived experiences. Grounded theory research focuses specifically on describing a phenomenon and its meaning from a participant's perspective, and as a result, constructed theories are grounded in the participant's lived experiences. In grounded theory research, an individual's meaning-making process is understood only in the context in which it occurs and is embedded. Data collection, analysis, and theory construction are regarded as reciprocally related. This interweaving is a way to increase insights and clarify the parameters of the emerging theory (Charmaz, 2006).

The phenomenon that was explored in this study was the influence of cultural related risk and protective factors on the health and well-being of Samoan and Tongan elders. Because Pacific cultures view health and well-being holistically (Agnew *et al.*, 2004; Finau *et al.*, 2004), this study embraced the idea of the interconnectedness and interaction of the bio-psycho-social-spiritual dimensions.

### *Sampling Procedures*

The setting for this study was Honolulu, Hawaii, the most common port of entry and the U.S. location with the largest populations of Samoans and Tongans. Due to limited knowledge regarding parameter

estimates of Samoan and Tongan communities in Hawaii, a networking non-probability sampling method was used to recruit study participants (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994). The research team solicited participation through contact with Samoan and Tongan churches, activity groups, and community organizations. Recruitment employed the use of flyer distribution and word of mouth communication, both proven effective in these communities. Research team members were from the community and utilized their community networks to assist in recruiting participants for the study. To assist with retention, every effort was made to schedule interviews during times convenient to the participants. All participants received a gift for their participation.

### *Participants*

Ten Samoan and ten Tongan elders, proportional between males and females, participated in the study. Most participants were in their 60s or 70s, and three were in their 80s. All were born in Samoa or Tonga and migrated to the U.S. as early as 1958 and late as 1997; only 2 elders were 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Americans. The elders lived on the island of Oahu, from Honolulu to La'ie. The number of people living in the home ranged from one to 10 people (median of three), and included children, spouses, nieces, nephews, mothers in law, parents, and siblings. Only 4 elders were currently employed, with the remainder living on social security and spouse's pension. Annual income ranged from less than \$20,000 to \$80,000 with more elders renting rather than owning a home. Samoan and Tongan languages were predominantly spoken in the homes. Four elders reported attending college and the lowest educational achievement level was elementary school.

### *Data Collection*

In grounded theory, data collection, analysis, and theory construction are regarded as reciprocally related (Charmaz, 2006). Data were collected through individual interviews with participating Samoan and Tongan elders who were regarded as experts in their lived experiences. The questionnaire for the individual interviews was developed specifically for Pacific American elders in collaboration with several Pacific American community leaders and scholars in Hawaii. In addition, the works of Malcarne *et al.* (2005) on the Scale of Ethnic Experience; Wallston *et al.* (1978) on the Multidimensional Health Locus



of Control; Renzentes (1993) on the Hawaiian Culture Scale; and the Marin and Marin Acculturation Scale by Marin *et al.* (1987) were utilized to inform the interview guide. The instrument included questions about the influence of cultural duality (being Pacific in America); strong connections and commitment to cultural values and beliefs; commitment to carrying out cultural expectations and practices such as reinforcing spirituality/religiosity, leading the family and community, teaching the young about cultural pride and preservation, codes of social interaction; hierarchies on health and well-being; and self care.

In emphasizing the significance of the naturalistic environment, interviews were conducted at each participant's home, a location of preference by the participants. To ensure confidentiality and privacy, locations for the interviews were safe and convenient to participants. Interviewing these elders individually was important for understanding their lived experiences and the meanings and themes regarding Samoan and Tongan cultures. The individual interviews were a one-time, two hours in length activity that used a semi-structured interview guide approach. All efforts were made to adhere to cultural rules regarding the positions of elders as leaders and final arbiter of the interview. Interviews were tape recorded and interviewers also took detailed notes.

Interviews were conducted by two members of the research team. The interviewers were trained associates with English, Samoan and Tongan languages capabilities. Participants chose the language in which the interview was completed. In translating data to English, back translation was conducted to ensure that the contextual meanings were kept. The interview process began with participants verbally completing a brief demographic questionnaire, with information pertaining to age, gender, family income, place of birth, number of and relationship between people living in the home, language use at home, educational level, employment status, and type of employment. Upon completion of the demographic questionnaire, participants were interviewed regarding their cultural experiences as elders and the impacts on their health and well-being.

### *Data Analysis*

Following data collection, information was transcribed. Atlas.ti<sup>©</sup> software was used to organize the data. In keeping with the tenants of

grounded theory, the initial step was immersion in the data, reading the data transcriptions verbatim, line by line and reading for natural emergence of themes, patterns and categories. Coding of the data followed and thereafter, memo writing and annotating of interrelationships among the codes occurred. The line-by-line analysis of each transcript was conducted verbatim in order to discover and describe significant themes related to the phenomenon. Memos were used to define interrelationships among themes and identify recurring patterns which were sorted into categories. Constant comparative analysis was conducted in order to identify and compare themes and interrelationships among themes. Line-by-line analysis, memo writing, and constant comparison were conducted until redundancy, a point in which no new themes were discovered (Charmaz, 2006).

According to Drisko (2005), grounded theory is the core qualitative research metaphor evident in Atlas.ti. This qualitative data analysis software was used as a means of organizing the textual data into an analytical framework that is conceptually clear. The coding capability of Atlas.ti was an especially useful data analysis tool for helping the researchers determine themes and patterns related to the cultural context of health and well-being of Samoan and Tongan elders.

## **Findings**

### *Cultural Practices in the Family*

Samoan and Tongan American elders spoke with much pride about customs, traditions, values and beliefs practiced by their families in the U.S. Themes pertaining to codes of conduct and cultural protocols which have been preserved are presented below:

*Respect.* Participants discussed respect practiced by both young and old as a code of conduct expected and evident in their families. Respect for the elders in terms of caring for and honoring them, respect for community and church leaders, and respect for teachers were identified. Reflecting the centrality of the elders to the survival of their families, one elder said, "I believe that if I wasn't an encourager and guide for them, I don't believe any of them will still be around." Another elder said, "I try to keep them close." Still another stated, "One of the things that I like about our children, they honor our traditions

such as bending when walking in front of people, you have to say *tulou* (excuse me), help each other, giving to others.”

*Reciprocity.* Interdependent living and relationships, sharing, giving, and exchanging of resources and support were indicated by the participants as cultural protocols practiced in their families. Participants identified the family as a forum for reciprocating love and togetherness. The practice of *Fa’aSamoa* (Samoan way) and *fa’alavelave* (duties and responsibilities) ceremonies and celebrations were discussed as mechanisms for sustaining reciprocity. One elder said, “To me, the Fa’aSamoa is our way of life, exchange of fine mats and money.” Another elder said, “Cultures in the home that is part of me is giving to others. That is very important...we must always give and love people. People will always return the favors.” Still another indicated, “My oldest child says that she will never leave me because it’s her duty to take care of her mother. I agreed that because she is my oldest, she will care for me until I die then she will leave. This is why I believe there are positive things in the Fa’aSamoa and in my spirituality that helps me.”

*Spirituality.* The church, spirituality and prayer as part of the traditional Samoan and Tongan cultures were important to these participants. One elder said, “I tell my children that even though the church is far away in Kunia, I make sure that I go because they are the reason. I want them to be safe.” Another stated, “Love others and go to church are the Samoan cultures that are very good. Prayer is the main thing. Respect for older people, like Reverends at church.”

*Language, Food and Music.* The Samoan and Tongan languages were identified as significant in the family for purposes of carrying out cultural responsibilities and transmitting cultural practices to the next generation. One elder said, “My husband taught me how to speak the chief language. I used to be a spokes person when we take stuffs to a funeral.” Another elder said, “I am a speaker during *fa’alavelave* on behalf of my *aiga* (family) because of my *matai* (chief) title.” Traditional Samoan and Tongan foods and music were also discussed as integral parts of the ways of life of these Samoan and Tongan American families.

### Cultural Sources of Protection/Benefit

Participants talked about certain cultural practices as possible sources of protection and benefits for their biological health and psychosocial-spiritual well-being. In relation to positive impact on biological health, participants talked about eating traditional Samoan and Tongan food (coconut, taro, yam, fish) and using herbal medicine (aloe, ti leaves) indigenous to their cultures. As one elder said, "I use the ti leaves to massage my mother as well when I see that my mother is not feeling well." Preparing these foods freshly, which was how food were prepared traditionally, as well as avoiding fried foods and not overeating were also discussed as positively impacting their biological health. Another elder said, "We grow our own food, vegetables and fruits. It is very good for our health." In addition, farming and traditional *dancing* (siva) provided exercise for many of the participants.

In terms of impact on psychological well-being, participants described cultural practices as a source of encouragement and strength for their psyche. Several elders said, "Our self-esteem and self-worth increase when we give or help others. The more we give the happier we are so when we accumulate wealth (foods, animals, land and crafts), it is to give and donate to others when needed for one day I may need help myself."

Regarding social well-being, for participants, cultural gatherings, celebrations, and ceremonies provided a support system of extended family, opportunities for reciprocity, a social life, and connection with nature (i.e., water). One elder stated, "Lucky to have that much support" while several other elders said, "I love the Samoan social life. If one person is in need, everyone helps out. Keeps my mind occupy when I socialize."

In terms of spiritual well-being, participants talked about cultural practices as ways to strengthen connection with the church, relationship with and belief in God and the strength and wisdom He provides, and relationship with others. One elder said, "Yes, worshiping together, and the fellowship, the women group talk about health issues facing the Samoan women." Ultimately, cultural practices were identified as a major contributor to happiness and spiritual well-being. One elder

stated, "That's where I get my strength. The wisdom comes from God and all thoughts." Another said, "God that teaches us, gives us knowledge, and to strengthen us in this life. Pray fervently to God it helps our spiritual wellbeing. We are in a good place and I'm happy." Still another indicated, "I believe that's why my family is blessed."

Finally, participants discussed the overall impact of cultural expectations on their health and well-being. In Samoan and Tongan cultures, families are expected to care for the elders. It is considered a blessing to care, support, respect, and acknowledge the elders. At the same time, participating elders talked about being expected to preserve and teach cultural traditions such as fa'alavelave and ceremonial speech to the next generation. The impact of these cultural expectations was positive for these elders. Essentially, cultural expectations gave these elders a purpose, happiness and joy, emotional and monetary supports, and social opportunities.

### **Cultural Sources of Risk/Downside**

As much as cultural practices were embraced as positively impacting health and well-being, participants also identified the over-doing and over-giving aspects of the culture as sources of risk for their health and well-being. For instance, in terms of the biological dimension, participants described the downside of Samoan and Tongan cultural practices relating to overeating which is often reinforced by the practice of White Sunday gatherings where food is over abundant and very little physical movement occurs.

In relation to the psychological dimension, participants talked about over-giving, especially in current difficult financial times, and of miscommunication due to lack of English proficiency as contributing factors to feelings of depression. Regarding the social dimension, cultural practices such as fa'alavelave (duties and responsibilities) often leads to lack of resources, little privacy, conflicting family relations, jealousy, and unnecessary stress for the elders. One elder said, "It is too much. When there's too many fa'alavelave at the same time and not enough resources to contribute." Likewise, in terms of spiritual well-being, lack of financial resources was a source of stress for elders which impacted their sense of spirituality. As indicated by one elder, "You believe in God, and sometimes you don't believe in God" speaking of bad economic

times. Another said, "It impacts the congregation it causes friction in the church and that's not a good thing."

### **Cultural Duality as a Source of Risk and Protection**

The immigration experience presents the issue of cultural duality. The duality of Samoan/Tongan American cultures was discussed as a source of both risk and protection for the health and well-being of participants. Negotiating the duality of traditional Samoan/Tongan and American cultures was described by participants as challenging, and conflicts between the two cultures sometimes negatively impacted their health and well-being. The reality of language barriers and subsequent miscommunication often led to disconnects between people, especially among the elders and the young. One elder stated, "It can be challenging and conflicting at times. Trying to keep our core values where the western culture emphasis is on individual rights and choices regardless of how others feel and think." Another said, "Communication, especially speaking to my children and grandchildren, is a challenge and sometimes most of our family problems are miscommunication." Another stated, "Here in America, you pay for everything where as in Tongan culture, I can ask anything of anybody so I can enjoy both. American culture is driven by money and it's very expensive so I'm too busy trying to make money to care for my family." Still another said, "It is different here, cost of living is too high, I have to care for my family's needs before mine. The focus here is money and people expect it when they do things for others. People are too busy making money they don't have time to enjoy."

On the other hand, participants also saw the positives in the duality of their Samoan and Tongan American culture. They perceived cultural duality as opportunities to create options for themselves and their grandchildren. Participants talked about doing their best to keep only the positives from each culture. For example, they learned to negotiate between independence and interdependence in their Samoan and Tongan American context. One elder said, "I have choices....when there is conflict between the two cultures, I choose my Tongan culture. I keep only the 'good things' from both cultures." Several others said, "I love my cultural medicine but I go to the doctor when I'm sick. I am involved in my culture through involvement in my church and our

Fa'aSamoa practices. I don't understand the American way very much but I do understand the depth of the Samoan culture. This is one of the big reasons why I am active with my Samoan community."

## **Discussion**

Similar to other immigrants in the U.S., Samoan and Tongan Americans continue to face challenges linked to the immigration experience regardless of how many generations of their family have lived in the U.S. In this study, the immigration experience of Samoan and Tongan American elders framed the context in which their lived experiences with culture and the impacts on health and well-being was examined. Traditional Samoan and Tongan cultures conceptualize health and well-being as holistic. These study findings continue to affirm these concepts as critical to the lives of the elders and those for whom they are responsible. Understanding these holistic conceptualizations is significant to social work practice with these immigrant elders.

The elders in this study further shared the preservation and perpetuation of Samoan and Tongan cultural practices such as respect, honour, and care for the elders, reciprocity and interdependency (Fa'aSamoa, fa'alavelave), spirituality and the church, Samoan and Tongan language, traditional medicine, food, and music and the protective impacts of these practices on their health and well-being. Traditional Samoan and Tongan food prepared fresh, herbal medicine, and music positively impacted the elders' biological health whereas cultural ceremonies and celebrations provided psychological encouragement and strength. Engagement in Samoan and Tongan cultural practices provided strong social support systems, opportunities to practice reciprocity and interdependency, and opportunities to strengthen relationships with God, others, and the church. These elders believed that their cultural expectations provided them with purpose, joy, and support. Continuity of these cultural practices in the U.S. context is significant for the health and well-being of these immigrant elders and generations to come. This also may be the story of other ethnic and immigrant communities around the world.

Furthermore, study findings indicate that maintaining balance is important in sustaining health and well-being. For instance, over-giving as a cultural standard often leads to lack of resources for an individual's

basic needs, which leads to feelings of depression, stress, and conflicting family relations. Moreover, global migration naturally leads to exposure to other cultures and subsequently, cultural duality. Such duality generates urgency in preservation and perpetuation of cultural practices among the larger Pacific American group. These elders discussed cultural duality as a source of both risk and protection for their health and well-being. For instance, language barriers often lead to miscommunication between the elders and family members. However, they also perceived cultural duality as offering options and opportunities for themselves and their families. In essence, balance in integration of the two cultures with the goal of enhancing health and well-being must be negotiated carefully, and the elders are central to this process.

### **Implications for Research and Policy Practice**

Specific implications for research and policy practice are offered in this discussion with possible relevance to other ethnic communities in the U.S. and globally. Future studies need to explore the cultural conceptions of health and well-being among elders in immigrant and dual cultures. Decision makers need to support the testing of indigenous cultural theories on health and well-being in such communities. Exploration is needed on the protective or risk-related aspects of cultural duality on elders' health and well-being. The specific issue of language barriers needs further exploration, particularly in terms of the impacts on the elders' roles as navigators, teachers, and transmitters of traditional cultures to the younger generation. Language barriers have been documented as being responsible for misunderstandings and conflicting family relationships.

In addition, future research should explore the practice of reciprocity and collectivity across cultures and particularly among indigenous people around the globe. Research on the role of the elders in maintaining reciprocity and a collective perspective could inform 21<sup>st</sup> century community practice. Increased global travel and migration offers opportunities for cutting edge cross-cultural research on protective aspects of reciprocity and collectivity.

With increasing diversity in demographics, policies in countries around the world need to reflect the cross-cultural backgrounds and ways of life of their citizens. It is beneficial for professionals providing



services to immigrant populations to understand and respect the decision making role of the elders in their families and communities, as working with these elders can be beneficial for the outcomes of the work.

### **Footnotes**

<sup>1</sup> Pacific Americans include immigrants born outside of the U.S. and those born in the U.S. to immigrant parents/grandparents.

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