





# Intimate partner violence prevention: using interactive drama for intimate relationship education with young people in Samoa

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## ABSTRACT

Globally, young people experience physical, sexual and emotion abuse within their intimate relationships. There is a need to explore creative, participatory sexual and relationship education that provides spaces for critical reflection regarding gender norms and approaches within intimate relationships. This study explores an interactive theatre intervention aimed at uncovering and analysing social and cultural influences affecting experiences and approaches within intimate relationships among young people in Samoa. Focus groups were conducted with the audience before and after a public, interactive theatre production. Focus groups aimed to capture shifts in understandings and perceptions as well as overall experiences related to participating in the production. Post production, participants showed a deepened of understandings related to social and cultural factors influencing approaches and actions within intimate relationships. Participants engaged in dialogue around new possible approaches to initiating and maintaining intimate relationships free from violence. Embodied learning opportunities appeared to contribute to feelings of empowerment to try out new responses in everyday life. Study findings highlight a role for drama in intimate relationship education and advocate for the inclusion of intersectionality informed approaches that uncover diversity within a group and acknowledge interactions between individuals' social position(s) within complex social and cultural contexts.

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## Background

International studies indicate that physical, sexual and emotional abuse from an intimate partner is a common and expected part of many young people's lives (Chung 2005; Plourde et al. 2016; Senior, Helmer, and Chenhall 2017; Stöckl et al. 2014). Experiencing intimate partner violence (IPV) in adolescence and early adulthood has significant and lifelong physical, psychological and economic consequences (Stöckl et al. 2014). Furthermore, young people are at a critical life stage for building the foundations for

initiating and maintaining intimate relationships free from violence later in life (Heise 2011; Stöckl et al. 2014).

An emerging body of literature suggests that prevention and educational interventions with young people must build knowledge and awareness of IPV and associated factors, enhance communications skills, and provide opportunities for critical reflection regarding gender norms and approaches within intimate relationships (Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Fox et al. 2014; Heise 2011). Understandings of intersectionality demonstrate how prevention and education must acknowledge the intersections of people's multiple identities (e.g., age, gender, sexuality, ability, ethnicity, culture, religion) within social systems of power (Flood 2015; Heard, Fitzgerald, Whittaker, Va'ai and Mutch 2018b; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). IPV prevention and education should therefore recognise the role of context and focus on the social and relational factors that drive behaviours, including how actions are influenced and mediated through social systems of power (Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Heard, Fitzgerald, Whittaker, Va'ai and Mutch 2018b; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005).

There is growing recognition that meaningful participation in sexual and relationship health education with young people is essential (Bateman and Coetzee 2018; Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Evelo and Miedema 2018). Such approaches must create educational opportunities that are responsive to the needs of young people and allow for active decision-making and exploration regarding potential solutions and ways forward (Evelo and Miedema 2018). Drama, as a method of participatory education, may be a particularly useful means of engaging young people in discussion, consideration and exploration of harmful gender norms and safe approaches within intimate relationships (Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Ponzetti et al. 2009). A recent review of studies exploring the role of drama in IPV prevention highlighted the potential to raise awareness of IPV and its different forms, dispel myths associated with IPV, reduce the acceptance of IPV, and decrease gender stereotyping among audiences (Heard, Mutch, and Fitzgerald 2017). Importantly, drama that includes interactive and participatory components can create opportunities for embodied and affective learning that may assist with translating knowledge into practice (Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011; Christensen 2013; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Heard, Mutch, and Fitzgerald 2017; Madsen 2018; Plourde et al. 2016; Ponzetti et al. 2009). Researchers in this area have identified the need to further explore evaluative methods that can capture diverse and nuanced participant experiences and describe what is happening within drama-based interventions (Bateman and Coetzee 2018; Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Ponzetti et al. 2009).

Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) methodology – an interactive drama-based methodology that works to create social change by providing tools for the analysis and exploration of new ways of understanding and addressing personal and social issues (Boal 2002) – has shown promise in sexual assault prevention and education with young people (Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011; Christensen 2013; Mitchell and Freitag 2011). In particular, a quantitative study with university students in the USA showed an increased self-reported likelihood of intervening when witnessing a potential act of sexual assault after participating in an active bystander TO production (Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011). The approach differs from other drama-based methodologies that often focus on drawing attention to a particular issue or providing prescribed solutions to an audience. TO is

informed by Freire's 'pedagogy of the oppressed', which stresses how emancipation and agency require understanding of the broader social, political and historical forces that guide action (Freire 1972). This may be achieved through raising critical consciousness (Freire 1972), a 'process through which a person is enabled to reflect critically on the conditions shaping [their] life and explore ways to change these' (Casale and Hanass-Hancock 2011, 357).

In contrast to more traditional, passive theatre approaches, participation and physical action is a key element of TO. By using embodied activities focused on raising critical consciousness, TO encourages individuals and communities to uncover and explore the social and cultural drivers behind their own and others' actions (Boal 2002). Participants are encouraged to recognise and investigate ways to address power relations within their relationships, communities and wider society (Boal 2002). In this way, TO has potential as a powerful tool for IPV prevention and education by creating dialogue around the social and cultural drivers of IPV and providing opportunities to explore positive ways forward for individuals and communities as a whole (Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011; Christensen 2013).

There is a need for innovative, action-oriented research exploring creative and participatory approaches to sexual and relationship health education in greater depth, particularly in culturally diverse contexts and with young people (Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Heard, Mutch, and Fitzgerald 2017; Heise 2011; Madsen 2018; Michau et al. 2015; Stöckl et al. 2014). This study seeks to contribute to an emerging body of literature exploring the use of drama in sexual and relationship health education, with a particular focus on IPV prevention (Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011; Christensen 2013; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Evelo and Miedema 2018; Heard, Mutch, and Fitzgerald 2017; Madsen 2018; Plourde et al. 2016; Ponzetti et al. 2009).

### ***Samoaan context***

Since the introduction of Christianity to Samoa in the 1800s, interpretations of Christian doctrines have seen patriarchal authority embedded within Samoa's social and cultural systems (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh, and Percival 2018; Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2006). This is reflected in the high reported rates of acceptance of male authority within families and the experience of IPV among women in Samoa (Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2006). Recent modernisation and globalisation in Samoa is challenging social structures and gender roles, influencing the experience of stress and violence within intimate relationships for young people, particularly those living in the urban centre of Apia (Macpherson and Macpherson 2009; Noble, Pereira and Saune 2011).

The present study was developed in response to literature indicating young people in Samoa experience high rates of IPV (47.5% of women aged 15–24 years report physical and/or sexual IPV) and supporting attitudes (Boodoosingh 2016; Stöckl et al. 2014). There is evidence to suggest that young people in Samoa are alienated from sexual and relationship health education due to strict cultural expectations that prohibit sex before marriage (Boodoosingh 2016; Heard, Auva'a, and Pickering 2015). While most young people in Samoa attend secondary school, particularly those in Apia, the national curriculum includes limited sex education, with a strong focus on abstinence and approaches that reinforce unequal gender roles (Boodoosingh 2016). Providing

opportunities for good quality education regarding gender norms and safe relationships with this group is therefore essential (Samoa Office of the Ombudsman/National Human Rights Institute 2018; Secretariat of the Pacific Community 2006).

## Methods

This article examines the effects of an interactive drama production, *Suiga/Change*, as an intimate relationship education intervention with young people in Samoa. *Suiga/Change* was developed from qualitative research exploring the experiences and perceptions of intimate relationships with young people in Samoa (Heard, Fitzgerald, Va'ai, Collins, Whittaker and Mutch 2018a; Heard, Fitzgerald, Va'ai, Collins and Mutch 2019). Five young people, recruited from this initial research and the wider community, wrote *Suiga/Change* in collaboration with the first author (EH) and a local theatre practitioner (FC). The story follows the interactions of four young people before, during and after a dance party. The lead female character, Lagi, is coerced via a text message conversation into attending the dance with the lead male character, Lemautagi, who she does not know well. The story ends with the Lagi experiencing verbal (and potentially physical and/or sexual) abuse from Lemautagi, when she resists accompanying him out of the dance. *Suiga/Change* was written to highlight the collision of identities and social positions young people in Samoa inhabit. The play draws attention to the way in which cultural and social systems – including gender role expectations, family relations, information technologies and peer pressure – influence the way in which young people initiate and negotiate intimate relationships.

As part of the intervention, the audience were invited to participate in interactive TO activities that explored the characters and storyline after the initial performance. Activities consisted of Image Theatre, in which audience members were invited on stage to create images (dynamic sculptures) representing the range of motivations and emotions a particular character may be experiencing at a given moment (Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011; Boal 2002). Through Image Theatre, an audience is encouraged to empathise and identify with the characters, deepen their analysis of the situation being presented, and broaden the scope of possible responses (Ahrens, Rich, and Ullman 2011; Boal 2002). Three key moments were explored in this way with the audience. The first of these was at the beginning of the play when the lead female character is coerced into attending a dance during a text message conversation. Next, peer pressure and social environments are brought into focus as the audience is encouraged to think about the moment in the play when the lead male character was encouraged by a peer to 'take control of your girl' (Heard, Fitzgerald, Va'ai, Collins, & Mutch, 2019, 304). Finally, the audience is asked to reflect on the moment of aggression by the lead male character as he attempts to make the lead female character leave the dance with him. Each Image Theatre activity culminated in a constellation of images surrounding each character that presented to the audience the myriad of feelings, thoughts and inner dialogues motivating that character's actions. Throughout this process, approximately half of the audience (including both female and male audience members) physically participated in the activities, while others watched. This interactive engagement with the production facilitated an intersectionality-informed intervention

approach, allowing for the expression of diverse interpretations and exploring potential consequences and alternative responses for people located at unique social positions.

*Suiga/Change* was performed at a public location in Samoa's urban centre, Apia. The production was advertised via posters and flyers at the local university campus and an 'all-student' email. Church youth groups in Apia received invitations and the cast were encouraged to promote the production on Facebook and via word of mouth. While the production was targeted towards young people, no restrictions were placed on who could attend.

### **Participants**

Approximately 50 people attended the production. All audience members over the age of 18 were invited to participate in pre-production and post-production focus groups, and fourteen female and eleven male audience members participated in these groups. Focus group participants were aged 18–29 years (median age 22 years). One male participant appeared to be a church youth group leader. All the focus group participants currently lived in Apia, with home villages spanning urban and rural Samoa. In line with cultural expectations and ethical guidelines, audience members under the age of 18 years did not participate in focus groups and participants were not asked about personal experiences of violence or relationship status. The 'real life' context within which the study took place meant that detailed demographic information was not captured. Recruitment strategies (largely via church youth groups and a local university) suggest most participants would have completed some secondary schooling and some were involved in tertiary education.

### **Focus groups**

Focus groups with audience members before and after the production were used to explore two broad questions, 'Did participants' understandings or perspectives of social and cultural drivers of IPV shift in response to the production?' and 'What did participants gain from participating in the production in terms of approaches to future intimate relationships?' Consistent with a TO-based approach, these questions were informed by a pedagogy of the oppressed theoretical approach.

Focus groups are an effective tool for gathering rich accounts from participants and have been identified as a culturally relevant research approach with young people in Samoa (Tamasese et al. 2005). The focus groups allowed participants to reflect on their own and their peers perceptions and share ideas about ways to apply insights from the production in the future. Furthermore, by facilitating discussions about whole experiences, personal perspectives and social norms and institutions, focus groups allowed for the uncovering and investigation of intersections related to participants' social positions and social systems of power.

As people arrived at the venue, they were invited to join a female or male focus group. Gender separate groups allowed for the safe discussion of culturally taboo topics that may be difficult to speak about across genders (Tamasese et al. 2005). Focus group facilitators (EH and TA) then described the study aims and procedures, including the freedom to withdraw at any stage. The information and consent forms were provided in

both English and Samoan, and participants were given the opportunity to ask questions in either language (Galuvao 2018).

Pre-production focus groups explored participants' knowledge and perspectives regarding conceptualisations of intimate relationships, safe and harmful practices within intimate relationships, and the social and cultural influences affecting these. For example, participants were asked to discuss what they believe makes a 'good' intimate relationship, who holds the power within intimate relationships, and if violence within intimate relationships is ever justified. Post focus groups were conducted immediately after the production. Participants discussed the same questions in order to capture any shifts in understandings and perceptions. Participants were further asked to discuss their overall experiences related to participating in the production. Focus groups were audio-recorded, translated where required and transcribed. Facilitators checked and annotated the translated transcripts and another bilingual researcher checked the translations to ensure accuracy.

To complement the focus group data, the focus group facilitators (EH and TA) took comprehensive field notes immediately after the production describing interactions and dynamics between participants. EH and TA audio-recorded debriefing discussions to further capture observations around participant responses, interactions and dynamics. Focus group transcripts were annotated to note the social positioning of the speaker, as well as the context within which stories were provided and broader group responses to the speaker. This was important to capture the nuance of interactions and how these may be influenced by broader social dynamics and norms, such as the presence of an older male person in a leadership role.

### ***Researcher roles***

EH facilitated the intervention and the focus groups with female participants. TA, the peer researcher, was recruited during the initial phase of qualitative research and trained by the lead author in qualitative research methods including conducting focus groups and thematic data analysis. TA was also a member of the cast and contributed to the development of the focus group schedule. He facilitated the focus groups with the male participants.

### ***Ethical considerations***

This study received ethical approval by The University of Queensland's Human Research Ethics Committee and The National University of Samoa's Research and Ethics Committee. The study was developed in line with international guidelines for conducting IPV related research and intervention in culturally diverse contexts, and with consideration of local Samoan expectations and requirements for cultural safety (Ellsberg and Heise 2005; Galuvao 2018; Tamasese et al. 2005; UNESCO 2012). A local theatre practitioner (FC) and cast wrote the play to ensure authenticity and cultural safety. A local researcher (SV) and peer researcher (TA) contributed to the design of focus group schedules to ensure cultural and age appropriateness. The intervention was conducted as a whole group to allow participants to learn from each other in a safe space, while the focus groups were divided by gender to provide opportunities for

separate discussion (Tamasese et al. 2005; UNESCO 2012). Information flyers for a local organisation offering free counselling for victims of family violence were provided and the research team were available for debriefing and support to participants after the production, where required (Ellsberg and Heise 2005; Galuvao 2018).

### ***Data analysis***

The first author conducted an initial thematic data analysis using data from the focus group transcripts, identifying key themes from the data (Braun and Clarke 2006). Transcripts were re-read multiple times by the broader research team to corroborate themes and identify and sub-themes; data were then coded to this set of themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). Constant comparison between and within responses was conducted, and field notes allowed specific attention to be paid to the group dynamics between participants and the researcher, the social positioning of the participant speaking, and the context within which the story or response was given. To support an intersectionality-informed approach, the authors drew on the 'contextualist' method of analysis as described by Braun and Clarke (2006). This ensured consideration of how broader social context influenced responses and understandings and located participant experiences in relation to their social locations. Analysis aimed to highlight deepening of understandings between pre and post discussion.

### **Findings**

Key themes from the pre-production focus groups centred on cultural gender role expectations; trust and vulnerability within young people's intimate relationships; and equality within intimate relationships. Post-production, participants described more nuanced understandings of intimate partner violence and warning signs and highlighted the usefulness of embodied learning opportunities for exploring new approaches to communication and negotiation within intimate relationships into the future. Findings are presented with a focus on highlighting any shifts in perceptions and attitudes between pre-production and post production focus groups. Pseudonyms are used to protect participant confidentiality.

#### ***Female pre-production focus groups***

Responses to initial focus group questions were broad and general. For example, foundations for a 'good relationship' were described as 'trust', 'looking happy together' and 'communication' with minimal discussion about what these concepts look or feel like in reality. As the discussion proceeded participants became increasingly relaxed and open. Discussions centred on culturally prescribed social expectations of gender roles and young people.

#### ***Cultural gender expectations***

Female participants highlighted the implications of cultural expectations, which prevent female and male young people from socialising together, on opportunities to develop strong foundations for intimate relationships. As illustrated below, these expectations

led to uncertainty as young people struggled to navigate intimate relationships with members of the opposite sex:

The upbringing of us young ladies, it's very hard to get involved in a relationship and get more serious about that, considering the cultural background... Our parents believe that girls will always socialise where the girls are and the boys will socialise only where the boys are...[that creates] a barrier between the girls and the boys. And...also leads to things happening besides actually dating, for example, teen pregnancy.. When there is a barrier between a really close couple, it tends to make them do things that they wouldn't think would happen, but it happens. (Alofa, pre-focus group)

Restrictions on where and when young women can spend time created further tensions between young couples, as boys were granted more freedom to explore and socialise leading to differences in experience and expectations between young partners:

Boys are more flexible, it's a lot less restricted than the girls... Instead of being committed to you, he is going someplace else, someone else, and they get more experience than you, who has actually stuck to that person, thinking that they are committed. (Nafanua, pre-focus group)

As illustrated by the above quotations, female participants drew out the ways cultural gender role expectations created tensions within young peoples' intimate relationships.

### ***Male pre-production focus group***

While the majority of participants in this group were young men, one older man (29) was present who appeared to be a church youth group leader. This had implications for dynamics within the group as cultural protocols tend to foreground the voices and opinions of figures of authority. Perhaps because of this, initially, participants expressed the need to develop trust and get to know each other. For example, in response to an initial question one participant commented, 'It is not time to share yet'. As the peer researcher described his personal history, discussions became more relaxed. Discussion focused on concerns related to trust and vulnerability with intimate partners, and male dominance and control in intimate relationships.

### ***Trust and vulnerability***

Young men suggested that it was important to test if a partner was trustworthy since cheating and lying from an intimate partner was to be expected, and physical violence was discussed as a common response to emotional hurt.

I wanted to know whether [my girlfriend] loves me enough.. It took me a few weeks to find out what she was like. She is a religious person and she keeps telling me...that I am the only one that she will ever love but I don't feel that she is sincere in what she says... I was afraid that I might rush into being serious with her when she was not as serious. I started to suspect [that she likes to go to parties]... I don't have enough patience if something happens. So that ends that episode. A person's heart is not cheap, if it breaks you converse only in knives and axes. (Isaia, pre-focus group)

### ***Equality in intimate relationships***

Male participants described the social expectation to maintain (physical) control within married relationships, reflecting social norms that support male leadership within



families. These norms appeared to create tensions related to gender role expectations within early intimate relationships. Participants connected marriage to notions of ownership and described their role in marriage as one of leadership. Physical violence was described as an acceptable response to conflict.

During the time when you are just starting your relationship... you cannot touch your girlfriend [using physical violence], you are not married yet and you are not yet the head of the household. It is not time yet for you to be the person that rules that family; that owns the relationship... But once you are married, if she trips up, for example, having another boyfriend, I will beat her to verge of death. (Mikaele, pre-focus group)

In contrast to the ideas expressed above, another young man stated that decision-making should be shared and that both partners should have 'equal rights'. In response, the older participant emphasised the need for parental acceptance of your partner, 'equal rights or not', his comments highlighting the important role family structure and social hierarchy play in shaping how young men initiate and negotiate intimate relationships.

Overall, before the production male participants' comments centred largely on tensions linked to understanding of their role within relationships and their response to stress and vulnerability, which might lead to physical IPV. Tensions between discourses of equality and cultural gender norms were apparent for some young men who expressed the desire to pursue equality within a social system that privileges male leadership and family/community expectations over individual choice.

### ***Female post-production focus group***

Afterwards, female participants described the play as a 'wake up call' for identifying warning signs and IPV within their relationships. Discussions centred on a more nuanced understandings of the foundations required for good relationships, and empowerment to trial an increased repertoire of responses regarding new approaches to communication and negotiation within intimate relationships.

### ***Conceptualisations of intimate relationships***

Young women discussed important aspects of a 'good' relationship in greater depth, including getting to know your partner well and communicating with them. Participants discussed the need to explore ways of developing meaningful friendships and foregrounded the importance of face-to-face talk.

It's better to meet someone in person. By texting them you do not even have an idea of who they are. I think it is better if you meet a person, like a direct conversation. (Fetu, post-focus group)

### ***Equality within intimate relationships***

Discussion also indicated reflection on beliefs about male leadership with one participant recognising that 'we are so stuck in thinking that I belong to this person and I cannot get out [away] from that person', and another stating 'It's the truth. You see it every day. Male culture'. Participants indicated an awareness of their own behaviours

within intimate relationships and how these are shaped by inner dialogues guided by social norms:

For me, the drama was helpful for us because it shows how the girl gave in so easily in decision-making. (Upumoni, post-focus group)

Despite this deepening of awareness regarding how social norms shape relationships, female participants described how their repertoire of potential responses remained constrained by (internalised) social expectations of male control and female passivity. This was illustrated by suggestions that it was the female's responsibility to show 'courtesy' to males.

### ***Embodied learning***

For female participants, embodied and interactive opportunities were important in supporting personal reflection regarding the drivers behind actions within intimate relationships. As one participant stated, '[In Image Theatre] you can see what controls your mind'. The exploration of key moments in the play was an opportunity to increase their repertoire of responses as participants shared ideas and encountered multiple understandings and interpretations in an embodied way:

In the play, we just saw one [version]. But when there were other images of it, it's like we saw... what is actually going on, what that person would actually have in mind. We saw the play being expanded, instead of just one scene, you see so many other things that could have happened. (Fa'alupe, post-focus group)

The interactive activities also provided opportunities to collectively brainstorm to new approaches to recognising and responding to challenging situations with potential intimate partners, as well as new ideas about ways to initiate and maintain safe relationships:

This happens every day. Like it's an everyday thing and sometimes you don't have the solution because your head just stops there with the one solution that you have in your mind. But if you see it with a lot of images you can interpret it more and then you have more than one solution. (Kalautia, post-focus group)

Discussion further highlighted how Image Theatre provided an opportunity to physically embody new practices and develop the courage to try new approaches in everyday life.

It gives us the courage to do it. Because sometimes when you face a lot of challenges, you just let the challenges go and not have the courage to just say, 'Just to do it!' (Tina, post-focus group)

### ***Male post-production focus group***

#### ***Recognising IPV and warning signs***

Male participants also described the production as a positive experience and an effective way to create awareness of IPV and its consequences. They indicated increased recognition of the early signs of abusive behaviour and greater acknowledgement of the harms related to physical violence. However, they continued to express a limited scope of non-violent conflict resolution strategies and discussions suggested violence as inevitable in certain circumstances:

Noa (post-focus group): The situation that will happen, in that instance, is that there will not be enough patience and the guy might beat the girl up.

Peer researcher (TA): Does the boy have a right to do that?

Timoteo (post-focus group): No. But it will happen.

Gender role expectations policed by peer networks were acknowledged as key contributors to IPV. Participants reflected on their own role in supporting and encouraging abusive behaviours by peers and stated an intention to not engage in this kind of peer pressure in the future:

I used to be the one that would encourage, force my friends on, but now I have changed, I am not [using peer pressure to encourage aggressive behaviour towards females] again. (Lasalo, post-focus group)

### ***Trust and vulnerability***

Contrasting with the pre-production focus group, discussion post-production included reflection on communication practices and how these might influence trust. Participants considered new ways of doing intimate relationships including communicating face-to-face and sharing thoughts and feelings more openly with partners. One participant described how the production helped him understand important differences between texting and face-to-face communication:

The most important thing that I picked up is how different it is when you talk to each other face-to-face. The difference of dialogue, the *va* (space and relationship between two people) is very different from texting... You can say anything when you are talking on text. (Elia, post-focus group)

### ***Equality in intimate relationships***

There was an increased dialogue related to equality in intimate relationships with participants agreeing that shared decision-making is important:

They have to agree, together...This is a really good choice. (Timoteo, post-focus group)

Young men also indicated the production encouraged them to explore new, non-violent approaches to dealing with conflict and personal emotions, but they wanted more time and space to understand and practice how to do this:

I was approached by some of the young men [after the focus group].. One young fellow told me how he wished he could have tried to practice a situation. He said he has a terrible problem of staying in a relationship because he has trust issues and feels vulnerable to doubt and mistrust. But he said that the play and the focus group helped him to see that he is not alone in these issues. [Others] shared how they thought that the interactive part was cool. They said it was neat that they could sit back and see how so many emotions could be involved in such a small speck of time. They said seeing and participating helped them realise their own need to be more aware of their own emotions. (TA field notes)

## Discussion

Participatory education that supports critical reflection on gender norms and approaches within intimate relationships can be a critical component of IPV prevention (Bateman and Coetzee 2018; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Evelo and Miedema 2018; Fox et al. 2014; Heise 2011). Consistent with previous research, findings from this study show increased awareness of IPV as a result of this kind of work. They also reveal how a theatre production facilitated a deepening of the way in which participants understood key social and cultural influences affecting conflict, violence and inequality within intimate relationships including gender role expectations, and male dominance within families and communities (Schoeffel, Boodoosingh, and Percival 2018).

Pre-production, young women and men expressed both gender role expectations that hindered their ability to develop relationships built on trust and respect. After the production, participants engaged in critical discussion concerning how broader social systems of power and cultural norms influence their actions and alternative ways to develop safe relationships with members of the opposite sex. This included new environments for developing friendships, alternative modes of communication, and personal reflection on responses to vulnerability (particularly for men) and positioning in relation to power (particularly for women). These findings resonate with the broader literature highlighting how intimate relationship education for IPV prevention should raise awareness of associated risks, build communication skills, and provide space for critical reflection regarding gender norms (Bateman and Coetzee 2018; Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Heise 2011).

Before the production, young women expressed the desire for equality, while acknowledging that male dominance within families was commonplace and expected. After the production, they deepened their analysis of these norms and critically discussed potential ways to build equality into their relationships. Post-production, male participants indicated the desire to refrain from using violence and acknowledged the need for opportunities to practice alternative modes of conflict resolution and ways of coping with strong emotions. The increased dialogue around equality within intimate relationships in post-production focus groups (particularly for men) suggests the intervention created a safe and trusting environment that allowed participants momentarily to transcend social role expectations and converse freely about alternative approaches. Overall, therefore, our findings build on the growing body of international literature highlighting the importance of IPV prevention and relationship education with young people to create safe spaces in which to acknowledge and respond to complex interactions between social locations, gender role expectations, and evolving understandings of equality (Chung 2005; Flood 2015; Senior, Helmer, and Chenhall 2017).

Through Image Theatre, participants were able to embody current and new approaches to relationships, raising the possibility of doing intimate relationships differently in the future (Bateman and Coetzee 2018; Ponzetti et al. 2009). Both young women and men in this study indicated the intention to translate knowledge into action, while acknowledging that more opportunities for learning and the exploration of new approaches are required. The Image Theatre activities provided an opportunity to express a diversity of understandings and created opportunities for dialogue situating these understandings within a broader social and cultural setting.

These findings build on literature foregrounding the need for intimate relationship education to explore innovative ways to uncover and address diversity with a group, including the complexity of lived experiences (Cobbett-Ondiek 2016; Flood 2015; Heard, Fitzgerald, Whittaker, Va'ai and Mutch 2018b; Sokoloff and Dupont 2005). Findings suggest further research into the role of drama as a practical tool to engage in intersectionality informed health promotion and education, within the sphere for IPV and more broadly, is warranted.

### ***Strengths and limitations***

This study was limited by the small sample size and its exploratory design. The design of the pre and post production focus groups enabled us to capture a range of diverse perspectives. The carefully designed focus group schedules, the inclusion of researcher observation notes and rigorous data analysis helped strengthen the validity of findings. The decision not to restrict participation to a specific age group was consistent with Samoan cultural protocol and was important to attract a large and diverse audience. Discussion within the young men's group may however have been influenced by the presence of one older person. However, the involvement of a peer researcher helped address any broader power biases linked to age. Findings from this study are largely exploratory. Longitudinal, in-depth research is needed to further understand the potential of drama to support meaningful sexual and relationship health education (Christensen 2013; Heard, Mutch, and Fitzgerald 2017; Ponzetti et al. 2009).

### **Conclusion**

Study findings add to a growing body of literature highlighting a role for interactive drama in sexual and relationship health education with young people, particularly with respect to IPV prevention. The evidence presented here supports the use of creative, participatory approaches to prevention education as a means to uncover and investigate the implications of intersections between personal identities and social systems of power on experiences of violence and inequality within intimate relationships. The potential of drama as a practical tool to engage in intersectionality informed health promotion and education warrants further investigation, especially in contexts such as Samoa. Providing more opportunities for embodied exploration and learning in relation to safe intimate relationships is an important challenge for future educational interventions addressing IPV in Samoa.

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