PACIFIC YOUTH WELL-BEING

Diaspora perspectives

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Abstract

Pacific youth in diaspora have faced many well-being challenges. This group has had to navigate the tensions between holding on to their Pacific values and participating in Western society, which at times can be contradictory. As this group comes of age in their host country, their well-being becomes ever more important. In this article, we explore the well-being journey of this cohort and their stories of resilience. We show how these groups have been able to use their Pacific culture(s) as a form of positive well-being. Through the sharing of Pacific youth experiences, by two Pacific researchers, we provide an insider's perspective on how our youth have been able to positively navigate their respective host countries with a positive connection to their Pacific culture(s). As members of our communities, we highlight the importance of Pacific culture(s) among this cohort, in the hope that it will better inform government and non-government initiatives.

Keywords

Pacific youth, Pacific diaspora, Pacific well-being, Indigenous well-being, diaspora studies, youth studies

Introduction

The migration of Pacific families beyond the islands for new opportunities in foreign lands has resulted in an ever-growing Pacific diasporic population (Faleolo, 2020). The early establishment of Pacific Island people in countries like Australia, New Zealand and the United States as early as the 1940s has meant that many of these migrants have had children in the host country (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020; Va'a, 2001). Interestingly, when Pacific people left their island nations, they did not leave their cultures behind. Instead, they used their Pacific ways of being and knowing to navigate their new country of residence (Enari & Taula, 2021; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010).Many Pacific people used their family and church networks, languages and cultural practices to sustain themselves upon arrival (Enari & Taula, 2021).

As the children of the original Pacific Island migrants came of age, many were taught

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contradictory values (Enari & Matapo, 2021). They were taught Pacific values of collectivism at home and among their Pacific circles, only to learn contradictory values of individualism among mainstream society (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Tiatia-Seath, 1998). This article aims to explore the narratives of diasporic youth, not only highlighting the challenges but also privileging their notions of resilience. It is also our aim to explore the positive correlation between Pacific youth well-being and their Pacific culture(s). We present these stories as two Pacific diaspora researchers, one residing in New Zealand and the other in Australia.

Pacific youth in New Zealand

Using Stats NZ data on the Pacific population in New Zealand, the Pacific Advisory Group Pasefika Proud (2016, pp. 2–5) show that 55% are under the age of 25 years old, with Pacific peoples having a faster growth rate than the general population of New Zealand. Approximately 93% (274,806 people) of the Pacific population live in the North Island, and 66% reside in Auckland. Nearly one-fifth (18.6%) of the general population speak more than one language, with Samoan being the third-most common language following English and Māori in the country. Samoans are the largest Pacific group, followed by Tongan, Cook Islander, Niuean, and the other island groups. More than half of the New Zealand Pacific population are New Zealand-born.

Unfortunately, the New Zealand-born Pacific population are at higher risk of developing mental illness compared to island-born migrants to New Zealand (Oakley-Browne et al., 2006). Mila-Schaaf and Robinson (2010) highlights the struggle that Pacific youth face in terms of identity. They identify with the ethnic backgrounds of their parents but struggle to be accepted by their community due to many factors, including lack of cultural knowledge and language. A high number of families who identify with multiple cultures also bring diverse cultural backgrounds. There are a high number of Pacific young people who identify themselves with several ethnicities. This contributes to challenges with identity, which heavily influence and impact on mental health (Tiatia-Seath, 1998).

Addressing the needs of these Pacific youth requires critical understandings of this (these) group(s), with the ability to attend to their needs accordingly (Manuela & Anae, 2017; Thomsen et al., 2023). This means untangling the Pacific population and focusing on their ethnicities, with an emphasis on their differences. Pacific youth tend to assimilate the norms and values of the host country, New Zealand, with little knowledge of their Pacific country of origin, their values and norms (Vaka, 2014, 2016; Vaka et al., 2016, 2020).

Despite this, Pacific youth have been able to thrive in New Zealand with their Pacific culture(s). Forums where Pacific youth display their cultural pride include the annual Polyfest (the Auckland Secondary Schools Māori & Pacific Islands Cultural Festival), and Pacific language and cultural subjects taught in school and church youth groups. Pacific culture(s) have not only been showcased in New Zealand but have also been sewn into the fabric of New Zealand society. Manifestations of Pacific pride such as Samoan 'ava ceremonies, the Mate Ma'a Tonga fans, and Cook Island dance groups can be seen across New Zealand and on mainstream television. Pacific pride has helped Pacific youth in New Zealand embrace their Pacific culture(s). Pacific youth can be seen (re)presenting their Pacific pride through all aspects of their lives including music, sport and academia. In displaying Pacific costumes during music festivals, speaking their Pacific languages during sports interviews (Enari & Keung, 2024), or speaking of how their Pacific cultures helped them navigate the school system (Enari & Matapo, 2020), many Pacific youth in New Zealand have attributed their success to their Pacific Island cultural values and pride.

Pacific youth in Australia

The mass contemporary Pacific Island migration to Australia can be traced to the Australia and New Zealand Trans-Tasman Agreement of 1973 (Faleolo, 2020). Through this arrangement, Australian and New Zealand citizens have been able to freely migrate between countries (Vasta, 2004). The majority of Pacific Island migrants to Australia have used their New Zealand citizenship to reside in Australia (Voigt-Graf, 2007). Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS, 2017) census data show 214,635 people who identify as Pacific Islanders. However, it is believed this figure is a low indication of actual Pacific Islanders in Australia, as there are those who have not disclosed their Pacific Island ancestry and were captured as either Australians or New Zealanders. Pacific communities are considered some of Australia's fastest-growing (ABS, 2006, as cited in George & Rodriguez, 2009). Pacific Islanders have migrated to Australia from New Zealand for educational opportunities and higher wages (Horton, 2014; Kearney, 2012).

Figure 1 The Griffith Pasifika Association cultural dance group comprised of Pacific youth; co-author Dion Enari is top left (2014).

Despite moving to Australia for better living conditions, many were faced with new challenges, such as lack of government support (Va'a, 2001). Sadly, many of these families were unaware of their ineligibility for government assistance before arrival (Moosad, 2019). The unreliable nature of data on Pacific youth in Australia has made it difficult to monitor and assess their needs (Kearney et al., 2011). Regrettably, there is a lack of Pacific Island researchers in Australia. For robust, meaningful and culturally appropriate research, more Pacific Island researchers are needed, as they are not only of the communities; they also understand their cultural, spiritual and religious intricacies. The current research on Pacific youth in Australia is scarce, with the limited work available focusing on social disengagement and negative health outcomes (see, e.g., Ravulo, 2015). On top of negative Pacific youth research, this cohort is also overly reported throughout the media as the main perpetrators of youth violence, which further instigates social exclusion (MacDonald, 2017). Pasifika youth have also been identified with poor educational outcomes (Chenoweth, 2014) and low representation at tertiary institutions (Kearney, 2012).

Some believe these issues are caused by a disconnect between home and school culture. Ideologies of individualism are at odds with ideologies taught at home, which focus on collectivism (Kearney et al., 2011), and the background and lived experiences of white school teachers are different to those of their Polynesian students (Kearney, 2008). Others have also apportioned Pacific education underachievement to familial obligations such as providing for the family (Ravulo, 2015), while some believe it is due to a lack of support for New Zealand citizens (Moosad, 2019).

Despite the negative data on Pacific youth in Australia, there has been an upsurge of positive Pacific role models. These Pacific role models have been beneficial in positive well-being formation and encourage this cohort to view others from their background, and consequently themselves, through a strengths-based lens. Pacific people in reputable positions in the National Rugby League, Australian Rugby Union, Ultimate Fighter Championship, the music industry and the business sector have been able to (em)power and inspire Pacific youth to be proud of their Pacific identity(ies) while navigating the Australian context. These role-model Pacific Islanders have been able to (em)power this cohort through workshops, seminars and online engagements.

There are also other community initiatives for Pacific youth in Australia which encourage them to (re)connect with their Pacific cultures (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Shepherd & Ilalio, 2016). These communities hold activities such as Pacific dance groups and language classes to encourage youth to (re)connect with their ancestral languages, dances and relatives. An example of these events is shown in Figure 1 (Enari & Faleolo, 2020).

Many of these activities of cultural engagement among Pacific youth in Australia have contributed to positive well-being outcomes (Enari & Fa'aea, 2020; Faleolo, 2020). There is also a push for Australian education pedagogy to reflect Pacific values and ways of being.

Pale (2019) believes that if Pacific values and

beliefs are more evident in the classroom, a better sense of belonging and identity could be achieved, which will positively affect educational outcomes.

Discussion

Pacific youth are relational beings, as many are (re) claiming their connection to their Pacific culture(s). Interestingly, our Pacific youth, many of whom are born out of the islands still see value in their Pacific cultures. Our observations and ongoing communication with this cohort reveal that their collective well-being is positively affected by their Pacific cultures (Enari & Faleolo, 2020). More specifically, this cohort has been able to internalise their island pride in navigating their space in the diaspora. Although this cohort have had negative experiences with their cultures, they see the value and importance of it in their lives.

In these situations, Pacific youth (re)connect with their cultures as a form of positive well-being. Many speak of their love for their Pacific language, culture and family.

The communal nature of Pacific youth well-being means that any effective initiatives must always be in consultation with the wider community. Despite the negative perceptions of Pacific youth, they have shown strong resilience. The youth's resilience can be seen in the way they have adapted their Pacific cultures in a diasporic context. The benefits this cohort gain from their connection to culture can be used as a catalyst for other Indigenous youth.

Conclusion

Pacific youth in both New Zealand and Australia have been represented negatively in research. However, both cohorts have also shown how their culture(s) positively affect their well-being. The island pride that these youth experience is the main reason they have been able to progress and navigate their country of residence (em)powered.

It is envisioned that the positive outcomes from cultural empowerment can be used as a catalyst for current and future initiatives involving Pacific youth, as it is an integral part of who they are.

In closing, this article has provided useful insight into how Pacific youth well-being can be positively affected. Future youth initiatives should consider how the well-being of Pacific youth is affected in a Western society. Also, those who engage with Pacific youth should nurture their Pacific cultural pride as a form of empowerment. Despite migration and generational establishment in the host countries, this cohort still draws upon their culture(s). It is our intergenerational and collective responsibility to ensure our treasures are sustained, and that our worldviews live on, not only now, but for future generations to come. La manuia.

Glossary

Māori

Māori	Indigenous peoples of New Zealand

Samoan

'ava ceremony	ritual in which a ceremonial beverage is shared to mark important occasions in Samoan society
la manuia	good luck

Tongan

Mate Ma'a Tonga	Tonga national rugby league team; lit. "Die for Tonga"

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