

8 On Values and Spirituality in Trauma Counseling

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Sexual violence in some of our Samoan and Tongan families occurs in both church and community settings, just as it does in other human families. Often these situations are shrouded in secrecy and silence in order to maintain the traditional values of respect, solidarity, and resilience within families and the wider community. Sexual abuse in our Pasifika families and church communities has been highlighted here in order to illustrate how our fundamental values of respect, solidarity, and resilience¹ are often challenged in the process of counseling. When abuse happens, these values are shattered and, although the restoration of these values may occur over time, the reality is that in some cases it may not happen at all because of the ongoing and unpredictable nature of the healing journey for the clients and families involved. When a Samoan or Tongan survivor walks into the counseling room, his or her nonverbal language speaks volumes to me. Common emotions presented are those of anger, shame, broken trust, pain, intense guilt, self-blame, despair, depression, and isolation from family. Through the tears of these survivors, I am immediately drawn in to their sense of pain and brokenness, which provides an immediate platform for the initial counseling sessions.

As early as the 1940s, American psychologist Carl Rogers proposed that the therapeutic heart required empathy/interpathy and unconditional positive regard for one's clients (Kahn, 1997). Perhaps Rogers carried some unconscious knowing of the heart of the Pacific Islander. In the Christian belief system, warmth, love, and respect have always been among the core tenets of a relationship with God, others, and self. The emphasis on being in the presence of God and in the presence of the other with love and attunement has been inherent, to a greater or lesser degree, in the spirituality of the theistic traditions (Makasiale, 2007). But

what evokes despair and becomes destructive for survivors of sexual abuse is the knowledge that this venerated healing tool can and does become a “blanket,” or *‘ufi’ufi*, for the offender. Spirituality becomes a cover-up.

A Sacred, Safe God-Space in the Healing Journey

Pacific research in mental health must be based on the importance of holistic space and on honoring the Pacific clients’ space and what they bring into the counseling room. Working with my clients’ hearts and spirits is a precious and sacred endeavor. Meeting them in their space is negotiated. The Samoan concept of the *vā* (the sacred space between two persons) has been invaluable for me when building a therapeutic relationship with each client. This special and intimate relationship has its own *feagaiga*, or sacred covenant. However, hopelessness sets in for me as a counselor when I am confronted with a stone wall of spurious spirituality.

Working with the *vā*, or space between counselor and client, contributes to creating an effective therapeutic relationship, particularly when building initial rapport and trust in the early sessions. Conversations involve negotiated space, which includes shared knowledge of safety issues in the family, school, and community in order to explore any differences. As personal information becomes shared information, a common meeting place is constructed in which the counselor and the client together can find an agreed-upon understanding of those Pacific indigenous concepts or values that will inform the client–counselor relationship over the life of the therapeutic alliance.

Being able to work with our Samoan and Tongan clients to contain and apply the “trauma brakes” on any intrusive thoughts and uncontrollable memories of the sexual abuse event is a significant part of my work as a counselor. These thoughts and memories can overwhelm clients and cause them to regress to their trauma story, resulting in their reliving their trauma over again.

As Babette Rothschild (2004) describes:

my approach to trauma work, which is more cautious, is rooted in an experience I had in college. A friend asked me to teach her to drive—in a new car my father had just given me. Sitting in the passenger seat next to her as she prepared to turn on the ignition, I suddenly panicked. I quickly realized that before I taught her how to make that powerful machine go, I had to make sure that she knew how to put on the brakes. I apply the same principle to therapy, especially trauma therapy. I never help clients call forth traumatic memories unless I and my clients are confident that the flow of their anxiety, emotion, memories, and body sensations can be contained at will. I never teach a client to hit the accelerator, in other words, before I know that he can find the brake. Following this principle not only makes trauma therapy safer and easier to control, it also gives clients more courage as they

approach daunting material. Once they know they're in the driver's seat and can stop the flow of distress at any time, they can dare to go deeper. Developing trauma brakes makes it possible for clients, often for the first time, to have control over their traumatic memories, rather than feeling controlled by them. (p. 1)

Ideally, counseling addresses the whole person: the mind and head, the heart and the soul, where our deep emotions sit. When trauma happens, emotions are often intense and overwhelming, evoking dissociation, hyperarousal, and the disturbance and fragmentation of normal forms of self-protection (Herman, 1997). During the course of my work, I repeatedly hear descriptions from survivors such as "I'm losing it," "I'm going crazy," "I'm in a daze and just stare in space," "I'm there but not really there." Sudden and random flashbacks and memories of the abuse are often triggered when a client may be doing something as simple as watching television, and for some people, even a certain smell can generate flashbacks and disturbing nightmares. These are all symptoms of posttraumatic stress. Trauma braking tools that can help manage overwhelming thoughts and feelings include managed breathing; the establishment of healthy sleep patterns and a routine diet; physical exercise; mentally challenging negative thoughts by using cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT), person-centered, or narrative therapy that involves listening to and working with a client's story; and externalizing anger, self-blame, shame, and guilt. In my professional experience as a Pacific counselor, the most common significant factor in "trauma brakes" (Rothschild, 2004) and containment is that of spirituality and exploring clients' personal experiences of God in their healing journey.

Spirituality and Clients' Personal Experiences of God in Counseling

In working with these Tongan and Samoan clients, I have found that most, if not all, have spoken about a spiritual component in their lives. I recall the following experience of a Tongan client who was sexually abused. Part of her "trauma brakes" and healing was that her Christian faith in God held her.

As my Tongan client described her experience, she shared the following quote in one session:

In acknowledged need, we cry out to our heavenly Father. We find that He cares deeply for the yearnings of our heart. Far from being indifferent or indignant about our sexual and relational struggle, we discover God cares about the deep cries of our heart. We discover something else about His care too. His loving outreach to us precedes our love for Him. He has made a way for us. It is His powerful love towards us that makes possible our loving Him. (Comiskey, 2009, p. 23)

There is a search for God in the midst of the pain—a longing for love and comfort, for harmony and peace within self and with others.

As Tui Atua (2009) states, “In the Samoan indigenous religion the unity and harmony between the temporal and the divine, between time and space and all living things is God. Man’s purpose in life is to search for that unity and harmony, to search for God” (p. 114).

My Pacific professional counseling experience with some of these Tongan and Samoan survivors has indicated that they are able to separate God from their male abuser. God is seen, then, as a divine source of love. Somehow their faith, resulting from a personal relationship with God, enabled them to lessen the voice of despair, depression, and hopelessness and gave them a sense of release, hope, and peace, believing that God would see to it that justice would be done. Spirituality is the resilience factor. As Tiatia (2007) states, “Spiritual people tend to experience feelings of fulfillment and deep communion with God.... Spirituality also is an experience that may provide internal strength and peace for an individual, thus buffering feelings of anxiety, despair and other negative life circumstances” (pp. 97–98).

Despite having been deeply wounded, these clients were able to access spiritual resources that had been available to them from childhood, before the abuse happened. Clients would recall times of prayer, personal revelation, and Bible passages from when they were in church or performing as a child on White Sunday.² They would remember spiritual blessings that were given to them by a family member; for example, a grandparent or grand-aunt/uncle (who may be either alive or deceased). Thus, Samoan or Tongan clients are able to tap into God, their divine source, in an awareness of the wider help available to look up to beyond themselves, and this capacity gives rise to their ancestral legacy or cultural heritage of spiritual faith.

Given that the abuse has happened within the family, the solidarity experienced through this strong link to God is significant, as survivors say they feel that they are not alone at this time. Many of these survivors find they have faith to believe that justice belongs to God and are able to release anger, self-blame, guilt, and shame to the cross. After prayer, a client usually feels peaceful, acknowledges an assurance that they are not alone, and holds hope that they can get through this difficult time.

Restoration of the Values of Respect, Solidarity, and Resilience

I first began to gather my thoughts around this topic for a conference in October 2010 on cross-cultural issues in Pasifika mental health. After my presentation at the conference, a member of the audience asked me: “Are the values of respect, solidarity, and resilience ever restored?” My answer was that each case is different and this may happen or may not happen. I went on to explain that this is an ongoing, lifetime, healing journey for clients and therefore takes time. Steps

toward restoration may involve the traditional values of *ifoga* (forgiveness, reconciliation, and restoration). The idea behind reconciliation is restorative justice for the victim, in order to restore harmony and unity within the kinship ties in the families, villages, or church communities involved. What is different here is the group accountability and group responsibility, in that knowledge of the abuse becomes public, and thereby, the community becomes aware of who the offender is. Families are thus enabled to become more vigilant and watchful of their children's safety. In turn, offenders are held accountable in that they become cognizant that many eyes are watching them now. "Forgiveness is about accountability and restorative justice" ("Survivor," 2007, p. 88).

Disclosures by survivors of sexual abuse to school counselors and staff can sometimes lead to a statutory and judicial process via Child, Youth, and Family Services (CYFS) notifications, Police evidential video units (EVU), Accident Compensation Commission (ACC) sexual abuse trauma counseling, and, if there is enough evidence, eventually to court. As my clinical supervisor remarked, "There is a shift today in some modern Tongan families to justice for the individual when this issue is made public, in that solidarity is replaced with a greater sense of justice for the individual." As a Pacific counselor, what I have found to be helpful in this situation has been the psychoeducation of a survivor's close family member(s) or friend(s), in that working with them has enabled a shift in their thinking from what my supervisor describes as "tribal, clannish thinking to public social-justice thinking."

On the other hand, some Samoan and Tongan survivors, even despite police and CYFS involvement, choose not to go down the legal road of giving evidence, but instead prefer to receive counseling and to focus on keeping themselves and other family members safe. The reasons stated in these situations are that they wish to maintain solidarity and respect for the family name and do not want to break up the family. Many are also fearful of coming out and having to stand alone and so are not ready to go public. With these survivors, my usual approach is ongoing trauma counseling, building resilience, and processing the sexual abuse event, giving priority to a safety plan, which is usually developed in initial sessions.

Case Study

Tasi was a Samoan-born woman, in her mid-40s, who presented for counseling. She had been sexually abused (raped) in her early teenage years by a male member of her extended family, inside a church building in Samoa. She told a close family member, who minimized the situation by saying that bad things do happen and then warned her not to tell anyone else. She was encouraged by this family member to forgive and forget about what happened and to try to move on with her life. Tasi stated that she blocked out the thoughts of what had happened, but one day, when she was watching television, the news reporter was talking about

a rape case. Tasi said she began to feel overwhelmed with feelings of anger and rage. She found herself crying at different times of the day and started to have flashbacks and memories of her own rape experience. Tasi had initially sought counseling from a non-Pacific counselor and stated that, despite good intentions, the counselor could not comprehend that even though she was raped in a church, she still had a belief in God. Tasi said that this counselor didn't really listen to her and because she felt frustrated she did not go back. Tasi's diagnosis at that time was that she had symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, such as flashbacks to the sexual abuse event along with an overwhelming sense of rage and anger.

As a Pacific counselor, I began our time together by looking at Tasi's strengths and the factors that contributed to her resilience. She identified that God had been her strength throughout her process of healing. As I explored this further with her, she quoted specific biblical passages that had strengthened her during difficult times and emphasized the fact that she knew that God loved her. Therefore, in her own spiritual world, Tasi held the belief that God was on her side, He knew everything that had happened to her and He would see to it that justice would be done. Working with Tasi's spirituality strengthened her resilience and her voice. She said her faith was what had held her during her dark times.

With regard to values of solidarity and respect at this time, sexual abuse trauma work entails, first, strengthening the resilience of the individual. As my clinical supervisor remarked, "Solidarity isn't as binding and respect is challenged when there are unjust issues."

Initial counseling sessions were spent building support in a safe, therapeutic environment. It is vital in trauma therapy to develop a safe way for survivors to contend with traumatic memories. As a Pacific counselor, I invited Tasi to explore how she could invite God to be part of her "trauma brakes" in her sacred space of healing. She said, "I just pray and ask Him like I always have and He gives me scriptures to help me get through." At Tasi's request, we started and ended some of our counseling sessions in prayer. This spiritual God-experience was foundational for subsequent counseling sessions. Tasi would come to each session with biblical passages that encouraged her in her healing journey. This made our trauma therapy sessions safer and easier to control for me as her counselor, as Tasi had the courage to begin to process more of the sexual trauma material.

Thus, the trauma work deepened and broadened to enable Tasi to share what had happened and how this had impacted upon her. Throughout our sessions, one of the main goals was to develop ways in which Tasi could manage her emotions such as rage and anger. We also discussed her "trauma brakes and that knowing when to apply the brakes is as important as knowing how" (Rothschild, 2004, p. 3).

During one session, we discussed the analogy of a remote control, with buttons for stop, play, fast forward, and rewind, providing access to different channels (Va'afusuaga McRobie, 2009). This remote helped Tasi to manage and

control her flashbacks. She said her flashbacks no longer felt like waves crashing on the shore, but that she could slow them down. Tasi identified the channels on her remote in the following way:

Channel 1—God giving her the strength to challenge negative thoughts of rage and anger.

Channel 2—A physical activity to help her relax, such as deep abdominal breathing exercises or going for a walk.

Channel 3—To ring her cousin.

Channel 4—To remember her beloved elderly aunty (a nun), who had passed away and who had believed in Tasi.

Psychoeducation was also provided to Tasi around what McGregor (2008) referred to as safe and specific ways to express her anger about the abuse (p. 327). At times, she wanted to express her anger toward the offender, so there were sessions in which Tasi used a large cushion as a punching bag that she could beat and jump on until she was exhausted.

Over a series of sessions, Tasi articulated her sense of relief about expressing her feelings of anger and rage. She felt that she was now aware of what could trigger these feelings in her, had some tools to cope with her anger, and felt in control of it. She said her cousin had noticed a change in her, in that she seemed more relaxed and had fewer angry outbursts.

The Tension between Using Spirituality as a Healing Tool or to Cover Up Sexual Abuse

The following sexual abuse cases, as reported by clients, highlight the tension and the dynamics involved in these situations: A group of 10 Pacific Island young women were referred to me for sexual abuse trauma counseling. They had been flown to New Zealand “for a better life” and were residing with a Pacific Island church minister and his wife, who were both known to their families. They had been entrusted into the minister’s care. One young woman in the group stated that the minister was “God’s representative and all of my family love him.” This minister was abusing the females in the group, who were all known to him through family and kinship ties. These females were also members of his church. A few of the female survivors recounted in my counseling sessions with them that they would attend church service on Sundays, but on other days the minister would enter their rooms and sexually abuse them. A couple of young women in the group reported the incidents to the minister’s wife. The minister’s wife disciplined them for speaking of “evil things” and admonished them to be grateful for having been brought over from the Islands to New Zealand.

The survivors talked of the tension they felt between the feelings of guilt and self-blame and their feelings of gratitude to the minister and his wife for sponsoring them and providing them with a home and meals. The minister was

a “spiritual father” to them and they did not want to betray him; in fact, they claimed to love him for taking care of them. Part of the circular causality in this case was the response of the minister’s wife. She colluded with the minister. Covering up the abuse was like an attempt to contain the inevitable loss of her own identity—her status and position as the minister’s wife—within their church and family and the village community. Family members said to the survivors that the minister’s wife was also fearful of being held accountable for the young women’s misfortune and consequently suffering the wrath of the women’s parents.

The sexual abuse was eventually disclosed when a young female adult in the church group spoke up and told a member of the local community. This community member rang CYFS and the police acted swiftly. That same day, the young women were removed from the minister’s home. The challenge in this case was that some members of the church wanted to perform a formal cultural apology and ritual of forgiveness to substitute for the *pālagi* justice system. However, this request was not granted, as New Zealand law mandates the Western court process in such instances. The church minister was charged, convicted, and imprisoned. CYFS planned to eventually return the children to their homeland and birth families.

While the resolution of this tragic situation was clear under New Zealand law, certain cultural issues remain unanswered. Would the indigenous forgiveness ritual of *ifoga* have been more restorative for these young women and their families than was the process of the Western judicial system? Furthermore, did the exaggerated cultural status of the male minister provide a fortuitous cover-up of his self-serving abuse? Are there ways to redefine the social roles of Pasifika clergy to contain the means by which they too often use their position of power for their own advantage and the benefit of their immediate families?

In another case, Mele (not her real name) presented with marital issues. Intimacy (physical and emotional) with her husband was difficult. Mele felt this was a result of the trauma of her own childhood sexual abuse. She was a teenager at the time of the abuse, and the adult male offender (a relative of hers) held a chiefly status in her extended family. The offender seemed to pay particular attention to her, saying she was beautiful and intelligent. This made Mele feel special, particularly since family problems at home at the time had resulted in Mele’s feeling isolated and lonely. The offender was drunk at a family party, crept into Mele’s bedroom, and sexually abused her. He then apologized and requested secrecy. The offender continued with his chiefly duties, including representing the extended family at public gatherings such as weddings and funerals. Mele remained silent about the abuse primarily to prevent bringing shame upon the family. In addition, Mele was afraid that her parents would lay the blame on her for the abuse, causing her to carry the punishment silently. When the offender began to sexually abuse her younger cousins, Mele found the courage to break her silence and disclosed the abuse to a school staff member. The offender was subsequently charged and convicted.

Underlying the perpetuation of silencing and shame around sexual abuse are some complex dynamics (a cultural clash of spiritual values, the conflict of ethics, societal structures of power and authority, the silencing of dissent, to name a few) as well as the tension associated with values and ethics. These complex dynamics and tensions within hierarchical structures in churches, families, and communities continue to protect and sustain the pattern of circular causality around sexual abuse issues. Clients who have been sexually abused by those in positions of authority—whether in the church, the community, or their own family—carry with them a cloak of shame that exacerbates their already muted voices. Clients in the above cases commented on their shame and silencing: “I had to keep the secret to protect my family, especially my parents back in the Islands”; “Shame if anyone finds out”; “Shame on my family if I tell someone”; “Shame if the church people find out.” There were frightening threats, such as “He said he’d hurt a member of my family if I ever told anyone about what happened.”

One might wonder whether there are some primal survival/tribal instincts at work in which the cohesion of the “herd” takes priority over the objective principle of social justice for everyone. The collective identity of these indigent families is so pasted together that when one member abuses or is abused, the whole unit is affected, for better or for worse, for shame or for glory, for power or for weakness. In so many ways, the survival of Pacific Island cultures has depended for centuries on the collective strength of extended families and tribal groupings. Yet within this communal power also lie the seeds of corruption, in that such power is not always policed or questioned, and so power is easily abused. In all cultures, especially when collective cultures sit side-by-side with individualistic cultures, the human person needs to move between the “I” and the “We” for health and well-being. The separation, or individuation, of the individual from the “stuck together” collective needs to happen in these cases, but generally needs support and guidance from culturally skilled mental health professionals to protect the individual from violent or abusive forms of pay-back.

Some implications of these tensions were evident in the adolescent client group discussed earlier. Adolescents are more vulnerable when disclosing sexual abuse for the first time. Some had experienced suicidal ideation or attempted to harm themselves as a result of disclosing sexual abuse to school staff (teachers or counselors), who would then refer students to the school social workers or in some cases directly to police, or the government department of Child, Youth, and Family Services, or to community agencies that provide specialist ACC sexual abuse counselors.

By way of example: A Pacific young person was referred for ACC sexual-abuse trauma counseling by the police and CYFS. Her whole experience of disclosing her sexual abuse experience proved devastating. At her first session, she stated that “my whole world fell apart when I told,” meaning when she disclosed to a teacher and counselor at her school that she was being sexually abused by her stepfather. When she arrived home from school that same day, CYFS social

workers and a police car were there to remove her from the home and she was placed in another safe family environment. The offender was subsequently removed from the home and charged. However, due to insufficient evidence, this case was not pursued any further. After some initial sexual abuse trauma counseling sessions to support and stabilize her (safety plans were developed to include her family, school, and the agencies involved), she was eventually referred to the hospital's community adolescent mental health agencies for further follow-up care and access to psychological services.

Pacific women who are survivors of childhood sexual abuse also speak of being abused by their stepfathers or their "spiritual fathers." As well, family violence may be used to silence survivors, as in the situation described by Siaoisi Sumeo (2007) regarding

a Samoan pastor suspected of sexual abuse of a 12-year-old girl who lived in his home. State authorities removed the child from the home, but the alleged perpetrator denied the allegations and there was no supporting evidence. The child concerned was later found dead under suspicious circumstances. A year later, in 1992, the alleged perpetrator was convicted on two charges of unlawful sexual intercourse with a 14-year-old girl from his church and sentenced to eleven months in jail. In 2001, it was reported in a local newspaper that the convicted perpetrator was once again practicing as a pastor in a local church. (pp. 198–199)

Being sexually abused often and predictably has detrimental effects on the relationship of young women toward males and toward God. Externally, there were common issues that impacted their ongoing relationships, such as lack of trust and intimacy. These are well-summed-up in a comment by "A Survivor" (2007): "For years, I could not sustain intimate relationships because I had lost the ability to trust. I could not allow myself to feel sexual because it riddled me with guilt and shame" (p. 92).

Working therapeutically with Pacific sexual abuse survivors can involve working with their families. There are some situations in which the Pacific value of *talanoa* is useful (that is, to have a conversation, to talk story). Traditionally, this entails the gathering of key figures within families, churches, and community systems, such as chiefs in families, any matriarchal figures, and church ministers whose role sometimes is that of mediator and peacemaker. *Talanoa* involves bringing to the forefront the issues of incest and sexual abuse. This process demands acknowledgment of the survivor who has had the courage to break the silence and secrecy. *Talanoa* enables the family to deal with the issue, and with the shame and disgrace of what has happened, and together to develop a way forward.

The *talanoa* process has the capacity to ensure that relationships continue on for the future generations and to maintain kinship ties. In our *talanoa* process,

metaphoric narratives are used. Matai'a (2006) explains how indigenous metaphoric narratives of *laumei* can be used as a way to address the taboos of sexual abuse and incest that happen within our families. *Laumei* refers to a turtle, whose nature during mating season is to mate with its own offspring. *Mata-i-fale* is a term of indescribable shame, for it describes a situation in which one's eyes have turned to one's own family and home environment for sexual gratification (p. 146). These indigenous values of forgiveness, family, *talanoa* (talk story), and resilience are a natural part of our Samoan culture and may be used to restore balance and honor to our *aiga* relationships, kinship ties, and village interconnectedness, so that extended families can heal, be reconciled, and continue on with day-to-day life. The metaphoric narratives of *laumei* provide a way forward to ensure that *le lumana'i* (the future generations) of kinship ties and relationships are maintained.

Conclusion

Respect, solidarity, and resilience are key values in our Samoan and Tongan communities. In my experience of working with some survivors of sexual violence, I have learned how these values so often come to be shattered. However, I have found that some survivors have a spiritual faith in God that provides a platform for their emotional, relational, and sexual healing processes. Yet on the other hand, we in the Pasifika mental health community need to develop more sophisticated ways in which to evaluate the appropriateness of using spirituality as a means of healing for survivors and advocates. When is spirituality appropriately included in the therapy? Are all forms of spirituality equally appropriate to use? How can we as counselors support our survivors' faithfulness to the church and yet challenge all systems in which abusive activities hide behind cultural systems of top-down and power-over authority? What we need is more *talanoa* and dialogue in addressing these issues, so that Pacific survivors of sexual abuse are supported in their healing process.

Notes

1. At the Pacific Research Symposium on September 30, 2010 in Auckland, Melenaite Taumoevalou and Sarah Va'afusuaga McRobie addressed the meaning and implications of respect, solidarity and resilience in a joint presentation.
2. White Sunday is observed annually in the church calendar, celebrating the "gift" of children and young people. They perform poems, short readings, and songs in Church, followed by a lunch prepared in their honor. Families usually dress their children in fine white clothing to mark this occasion.

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