

Dialogue

Pacific Island Pride: How We Navigate Australia

DION ENARI AND LORAYMA TAULA

*Pacific People Navigating the Sacred Vā to Frame
Relational Care: A Conversation between Friends
across Space and Time*

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AND MARTYN REYNOLDS

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Mele Katea Paea,
and Martyn Reynolds*

This essay represents a dialogue between three diverse friends about something that is central to us all: the significance of relational thinking and the value of the Pacific concept of *vā*, or sacred relational space. Here we seek to leverage connection to provide tentative answers to the question: To what extent can a dialogue about *vā* that is informed, critical, insightful, useful, and valuable be constructed across the spaces that connect and separate us? This begs questions of how a concept at home in the village travels and what its form might become, muffled or otherwise (Simati 2011; Tuagalu 2008).

Accordingly, we offer a synthesis of the ways people care for various *vā* drawn from our three fields: leadership, governance, and education. One literature-based contribution acts as a ground for discussion of two more empirical offerings. We hope that our observations may assist researchers in navigating a path through unexplored sacred relational spaces and in new or emerging contexts, and that by accepting the challenge of working across diversity through commonality, our enterprise will be fruitful in Pacific studies and across the region more generally. We see this work as a contribution to discussions of Pacific relational ethics and Pacific relational methodologies as part of a decolonizing agenda (Anaē 2019; Naepi 2019). It supports Kabini Sanga and Martyn Reynolds’s call for the direction of the naming of Pacific research to be Pacific—that is, framed not through the habits of the academy but instead using terms and concepts put forward by Pacific people(s) themselves (2017, 198–199). While this

can, correctly, be read as a reply to research systems that “destroy Pacific ways of knowing and being” (Naepi 2019, 3), it is more significant to us as a move to honor the Pacific people and communities with whom we are involved.

We begin the essay with a discussion of positionality as it applies to researchers and their work. Then we offer accounts of our areas of engagement. Next comes a synthesis of three key aspects of caring for the *vā*: relationality, ethics, and actions. This is complemented by attention to aspects of context. Finally, we suggest the value of this learning as we work for the betterment of the lives of Pacific people, wherever and however they sojourn. For convenience, while acknowledging varying orthographic conventions, we apply a macron to the term “*vā*.”

POSITIONALITY

Positionality involves “the stance or positioning of the researcher in relation to the social and political context of the study” (Rowe 2014, 628). It has been described using a binary of insider/outsider (Merriam and others 2001), as intersectional (Vanner 2015), and as relational (Cossa 2012). Talitiga Ian Fasavalu and Martyn Reynolds have suggested that researchers’ dialogical activity can affect positionality in relation to the field (2019). Here, we make a reciprocal asset of our relationships by creating a dialogic learning space. We balance the dangers of unwarranted aggregation and of translating ideas and language across contexts with friendship, curiosity, and mutuality. This leads us first to explore our contexts separately and then to identify connections through synthesis.

Silia

I am a traditionally oriented Samoan woman who proudly demonstrates virtues and ethics particular to a *tamaitai Sāmoa* (Samoan woman). I hold an oratory *matai* title from my mother’s family at Sataoa Safata, but I currently reside with my father’s family at Safaatoa Lefaga. I am always mindful of the sacredness of the space between dialoguing parties when involved in any type of discussion. I became friends with Martyn while studying at Victoria University of Wellington and met Mele at the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) conference in Wellington in 2018. Since then, we have been on a shared journey to explore the *vā* among Pacific people.

Mele

I am a Tongan woman firmly grounded in the spiritual strength of the Tongan culture. I originate from Matuku and Ha'afeva, Ha'apai, but was raised in the village of Ha'ateiho, Tongatapu, Tonga. The Tongan leadership model, tauhi vā māfana, and Tongan methodology, talanoa māfana, that developed during my PhD journey belong to many great people from my cultural and academic networks, including my parents. This shows that my life is very much about relationships. Through this spirit, I established a meaningful relationship with Silia and Martyn at the 2018 OCIES conference, which has led us to the beginning of this lifelong journey of caring for the sacredness of the vā.

Martyn

I was born of Anglo-Welsh parentage in south London and came to Aotearoa/New Zealand in my thirties. My PhD research investigated ideas of Pacific success in boys' education, through which I encountered the vā (Reynolds 2017a). I met Silia during my studies, and she became family to me as we formed a mutually beneficial relationship based on a culture and language exchange. I first met Mele in 2016 through her thesis. Since then, we have exchanged ideas and care.

THE WORK

Pacific studies is an area-focused enterprise. Although the Pacific is divided by cartography into regions, the history of migrations tells a more intricate and fluid story (Whimp 2008). Oralities and the relationalities they support are evident across our space (Sanga and Reynolds 2020b), and in one iteration or another, the relational self exists across the oceanic vastness (Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017; Sanga and Reynolds 2019; Ahlgren 2016).

As an example, Melanesian wantokism is a relationality of contribution and obligation mediated through tok stori (Nanau 2011; Sanga and Reynolds 2020c; Sanga and others 2018). Wantoks were traditionally members of the same clans, families, or tribes, but those who claim to be wantoks now find new things in common (Kobayashi, Nicholson, and Hoye 2013). As we mix, mingle, and tok stori with our wantoks, we wonder how modern movements through aviation and, more recently, the digital

practice turn might support enhanced understandings of life (Sanga and Reynolds 2020a). Thus, we have been challenged to think about the ontological and epistemological understandings that could be reached by following the implications of the relational self in and across the vastness of our ocean space (Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017).

This speculation seems worthy, but it requires more work to be done “at home” first. Thus, we position this collaborative piece as a marker of the possibilities of thinking across contexts in the region more generally, established by a methodology of working across diversity in relative proximity.

THE VĀ AS CONCEPT

Spatial relational concepts from the Pacific region such as the Samoan and Tongan vā are attracting increased interest. Vā as space both connects and separates (Ka‘ili 2005; Māhina 2010; Wendt 1999). In the region, space and time are “culturally ordered and historically altered in plural, cultural, collectivistic, holistic, and circular modes,” and they are the key aspects in the development of Tongan tā-vā theory (Māhina 2010, 170; 2004).

There is a well-established body of literature relating to traditional, village-based contexts in Sāmoa (eg, Le Tagaloa 2003; Finau 2017) and Tonga (eg, Thaman 2009; Poltorak 2010). However, the literature on relational understandings in nontraditional or Western-related contexts is growing, for instance in architectural studies (Refiti 2015, 2002), tourism (Talakai-‘Alatini 2014), and geography (Lilomaiava-Doktor 2009). This newer corpus deals with the experiences of Pacific people in the islands and in diasporic communities. It is testament to how Pacific people understand the world by thinking about sacred relational spaces.

This essay adds to the literature by focusing on the care of relational spaces as practiced by Pacific people across a range of contexts. We first offer information from village life in Sāmoa, leadership practices of Tongan members of the New Zealand Public Service (NZPS), and accounts of Pacific-origin secondary students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. We then synthesize across contexts.

SILIA: CARING FOR THE VĀ IN THE SAMOAN VILLAGE

This section gives an account of aspects of Samoan village life that can be seen through the vā. The sacredness of space in relation to people and

relationships is very important in the fa'a Sāmoa (Samoan way of life) in villages and elsewhere. This is expressed in Samoan as “le vā” (the space), which Albert Wendt described as “not space that separates, but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together,” and that connects and gives “meaning to things” (1999, 402). This implies variable distance, conditional on the strength and status of relationships.

“Le vā” expresses a worldview. It is a “special ordering concept” that connects all things and “administers a code of good (ideal) behaviour, an invisible language that enables space and things to be organized in a positive manner” (Refiti 2002, 209). Orally mandated, adherence to upholding the space of the vā is evident in everyday roles and responsibilities. Three considerations provide insight into the ways people care for vā in Samoan village contexts; vā feāloa'i, vā tapuia, and tausi le vā.

Vā Feāloa'i and Respect

Samoans honor the sacredness of space as vā feāloa'i, or vā fealoaloai, expressed by the cultural value of feavata'i, or respecting others. In its basic sense, this signifies the true meaning of fa'aaloalo, or respect, evident in peoples' everyday lives.

Vā fealoa'i is the concern of village chiefs and orators in the proceedings of village council meetings (Meleisea 1987). Typically seated in a round, traditional Samoan fale (meeting house), family representatives occupy spaces according to status. For example, the talking orators sit in the front, the high chiefs sit on both sides, and untitled men prepare the ava, or ceremonial kava, at the back. At the end of the ava ceremony to welcome chiefs and orators, the untitled men leave to prepare food; they are not part of the decision-making.

In such formal situations, the sacred space in the middle is left unoccupied and treated with respect (Finau 2017). If discussion heats up, people are reminded not to cross or overrule the space. The mana (spiritual power, authority) of the space places control on people and harmonizes views. During deliberations, chiefs and orators face each other as a sign of respect to denote the essence of vā fealoa'i (Finau 2017).

Vā fealoa'i is also adhered to in families. Family processes and procedures smoothly flow when people respect the space that gives context to their relationships. For example, while deliberating on successors to continue family leadership, members should be mindful of the space. Those vying for a family title can forget it in their eagerness, causing hard-to-solve problems. Such troublemakers eventually resort to presenting a formal apology for forgiveness.

Vā Tapuia and Sacredness

The major difference between *vā tapuia* and *vā fealoa'i* is in the root, “tapu,” of “tapuia” (Efi 2009). “Tapu” means not to be touched. This emphasizes the sacredness of space. An accentuated level of respect for the space is relevant to relationships between people of high status such as chiefs, orators, village mayors, and council members (Meleisea 1987).

As an example, the *vā tapuia* of chiefs and orators promotes and maintains peace and harmony in village communities. Their respect for the space means they function as informed and responsible leaders. Village communities controlled by such leaders will happily work toward improving community standards of living. The tapu space is where gifts and blessings are exchanged, fines are paid, and speeches of forgiveness, apology, and appreciation are offered.

Aiono Fanaafi Le Tagaloa acknowledged the relation between brother and sister as *vā tapuia* (1996), but this concept also applies to relatedness between family leaders and other members and between parents and their children. These spaces are “paia” (sacred), which alludes to relationships across time by denoting the holiness guarded by spirits of ancestors. Any misbehavior is countered with severe punishment (Tuvale 2011). Only when a price is paid will the spirits forgive those who upset the sacred space.

Religiously oriented people are guided by the holiness of the space between themselves and the church minister. Whatever happens in church activities, members of the congregation ensure that the space is not crossed, for instance by arguing with the minister. Such people are always mindful of the holiness of the space to avoid curse or, worse, death.

Tausi le Vā and Care

Samoans recognize the integration between the whole and its parts (Tcherkézoff 2008). Thus, people are not only social, physical, and emotional beings; they are also connected to a divine source. This interconnectedness has been described by Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi (2005), Moreli Jerome Niuatoa (2007), and Sr Emanuela Betham (2008) as a four-way harmony between the self, other humans, the environment, and the universe. The customs and traditions incorporated into *fa'a Sāmoa* practices cement the relationship between humans and the divine.

“Tausi le *vā*” refers to cherishing the interpersonal space, particularly through caring, protecting, and respecting existing relationships. That space is not empty but rather filled with theories, philosophies, and spir-

its. “Tausi” refers to the ways and means through which people nurture the space that connects them to other people, to nature, and, especially, to God. Space is “a communion with the whole of creation” (Betham 2008, 3). This acknowledges Samoan Indigenous spirituality, in which everything belongs to the Creator.

Sa‘iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor has explained that *tausi le vā* is a “moral imperative” that instructs proper conduct and behavior, including practical matters: “food division and distribution, sleeping and sitting arrangements, and language usage in private and public spaces are all conceived through *vā*” (2009, 21, 14). This shapes the way people relate to one another in accordance with their *nu‘u* (village), *‘āiga* (family), age, cultural status, gender, expertise, and other properties (Meleisea 1987). Because self in the Samoan sense refers to a person’s relationships with hereditary, social, and cultural organizations rather than an autonomous character, a communal sense of belonging is demonstrated by one’s willingness to achieve success for the whole community (Macpherson 1999). One fundamental consideration is to ensure that *tautua* (service) is rendered to the entire group regardless of age and gender (Niuatoa 2007).

Tausi le vā repairs breakdowns and restores relationships (Refiti 2002; Maliko 2012; Va‘a 2006). The notion of *tausi le vā* is used similarly to *teu le vā* (to “correct” or “tend to” *le vā*) and *iloa le vā* (to “know” and honor *le vā*) (Toso 2011; Tuafuti 2011; Wendt 1999). The “experience of the Samoan self” is “really the experience of social relations” (Maliko 2012, 40). The body of customs, traditions, and protocols of the *fa‘a Sāmoa* is, therefore, a reflection of the essence of *tausi le vā*: a framework that informs conduct and, more importantly, enables remembrance. The *fa‘a Sāmoa* is a body of cultural values and protocols that facilitate the Samoan identity. Therefore, ratifying *fa‘a Sāmoa* customs and traditions not only validates *tausi le vā* but also revives ancient knowledge and forges connections through time. The sacredness of the *vā* is endorsed by participation and interactions that embody the way Samoans are linked to their gods (Vaai and Casimira 2017).

MELE: CARING FOR THE SACREDNESS OF THE TONGAN VĀ IN A WESTERN CONTEXT

This section, focused on the public service in a Western context, deals primarily with *tauhi vā māfana* as nurturing warm relationships or caring for the social *vā* from a Tongan perspective. The term “*tauhi vā*” refers to the process of caring for the *vā*—the social spaces or relationships among peo-

ple (Ka‘ili 2005; Thaman 2004). This signifies the interconnected spaces that relate one’s knowledge, beliefs, feelings, and skills to others (Thaman 2004). ‘Ana Hau‘alofa‘ia Koloto has described “tauhi vā” as caring for a social space by creating, nurturing, protecting, and maintaining relationships that value people and that facilitate collaborative and practice-based learning (2017). Tauhi vā practices follow the reciprocal and collective manner of fua fatongia, a Tongan social way of fulfilling obligations to benefit the collective. Fua fatongia involves knowledge, acceptance, obedience, and sacrifice. Tongans who act according to these requirements can be referred to as good Tongan citizens (Latukeyu 1980; Thaman 2004).

In the spirit of tauhi vā, a successful fua fatongia is driven by the spiritual nature of ‘ofa (love or passion), which is considered to be the most influential value sustaining the Tongan way of life (Kavaliku 1977; Koloto 2017). ‘Ofa is quite similar to the concept of māfana (Manu‘atu 2000), a subjective phenomenon driven by the affirmative and warming influence of people’s ‘ofa for one another. Thus, caring for the vā can be found effective within the influence of māfana.

Faka‘apa‘apa, or respect (Vaioleti 2006; Johansson Fua 2007), provides wisdom to evaluate the success of fua fatongia through the lens of tauhi vā (Paea 2015). Faka‘apa‘apa in the spirit of māfana can also be described as a sacred wisdom that requires the profound ‘ilo, or knowledge of your vā with others, and poto, or skills of how to play roles and responsibilities under a specific vā, of tauhi vā (Paea 2015). Tongans expect the knowledge and skills underpinning tauhi vā, first learned and applied at home, to be evident in wider relationships (Taufe‘ulungaki 2004).

Tauhi Vā as Tongan Leadership

To Seu‘ula Johansson Fua, Tongan leadership can be understood through vā and through faka‘apa‘apa, which guides how Tongans behave (2007). She also conceptualized Tongan leadership through vā as a way of promoting social justice. Vā is where social transformation and leadership realities for Tongans occur; behavior and thinking can change contextually through the process of tauhi vā. People’s workplaces are enhanced through the leadership process of vā lelei, or good or peaceful interpersonal relationships (Halapua 2003).

Sione Tu‘itahi’s definition of fakapotopoto, “the way of the wise and prudent” (2009, 60), provides further insights into Tongan leadership as reciprocal and relational, aiming to achieve the best for the collective. In turn, relationship practices are expected to produce change because

people are successful when their wisdom, knowledge, and skills are used well to help one another. Elsewhere, Mele has described Tongan women's leadership practices in New Zealand as guided by the positive influence of humility and *loto'i Tonga*, or Tongan spirit (Paea 2015, 167–168). The application of *tauhi vā* can be understood through *tou-lalanga*, or weaving. While weaving, women humbly share stories, songs, knowledge, and experiences in a reciprocal way of life embedded in familial *tauhi vā* practices.

The concepts of *vā*, *faka'apa'apa*, *fakapotopoto*, and *tou-lalanga* are interrelated aspects of *tauhi vā*. This integration is enhanced further through the relationship between *māfana* and *tauhi vā*, leading to the conceptualization of Tongan leadership as *tauhi vā māfana* (TVM). TVM is a cultural practice of nurturing warm relationships in which people are influenced to change their thinking and practices in a given context (Paea 2015).

Tauhi Vā Māfana and Spirituality

Mele's research explored the interconnection between Tongan leadership and identity, drawing on Tongans' perceptions and experiences in the public service of Aotearoa/New Zealand (Paea 2015). It involved *talanoa* with thirty-nine Tongan public servants, both Tonga- and New Zealand-born, which took place at various times and in different venues. Among the key themes that emerged was TVM, which entails the interplay between *fāмили* (family), *māfana*, *fua fatongia*, and *faka'apa'apa* that enables the development of interpersonal feelings in order to accomplish real changes. The incorporation of *māfana* within the concept of *tauhi vā* provides new insights that leadership and culture are deeply inseparable.

A successful TVM in a Western culture can be driven by a warm spirit of *māfana* (Paea 2015). This means that good relationships rely not on spiritual resources that are prescribed for leaders to follow (Sinclair 2007) but on spiritual insights that come naturally from the heart (Halapua 2007; Manu'atu 2009). For instance, spiritual relationships can be a reality for people when leaders “make space for people to explore and validate ideas around values, purpose and meaning in their workplaces” (Sinclair 2007, 164). In the spirit of TVM, this refers to the harmony of the *vā*, something that must come first in leadership and is crucial for movement and change (Paea 2015). This is a belief held by Mele's research participants, who are identified here using pseudonyms to maintain her *vā* with them. For example, 'Ilisapeti shared that “like the saying, you take off your cultural

coat and hang it outside [the organization]. My empathy will always be there. . . . It's what identifies me as a Tongan."

Although Tongan ways of life may not be recognized by non-Tongans, spirituality cannot be separated from leadership because culture is the core of social life. There are three approaches of *fua fatongia* in the concept of TVM that have positive impacts in good leadership or caring for the *vā māfana* within a Western context: leading by doing, leading by reciprocating, and leading by taking back to the collective.

Leading by Doing

This approach draws attention to relational spaces as sites into which actions are placed to influence relationships toward achievement or fulfilling obligations. Mele's participants referred to the relational influence of "actions [that] speak louder than words" (Paea 2015, 126). For example, Moeata commented, "I still retain the kind of quiet leadership, my initial style of leadership—quiet leader. I just get on with the job, and I believe if you show that you can do the job, then people will follow you." In this view, caring for the *vā* through fulfilling one's responsibilities can influence others to trust a leader and recognize their potential contributions and capabilities.

Leading by doing has its roots in Tongan socialization at the family level. One participant, 'Amelia, explained, "The way I fulfill my duties at the workplace was heavily influenced by my upbringing. . . . When you are expected to do something, you have to find out how to do it, that's my belief." When understandings transfer from family to wider contexts, trust, love, and the strategies for fulfilling love-based obligations contribute to TVM.

Leading by Reciprocating

Reciprocity, cooperation, and shared responsibilities are important elements of fulfilling obligations in leadership. Participants explained that a reciprocal approach is crucial for securing good relationships that encourage people to move toward achievement. The focus shifts from individualism to mutual inclusivity, as exemplified by Milika's comment: "I don't view my role as just me. My role is a part of the team, and so the way I perform my role affects how everyone else performs their role. So for me it's about keeping the harmony."

Where Tongans see the world as reciprocal, they take care of interpersonal *vā* by acting as reciprocal leaders. For example, many of Mele's

participants, including Kala‘au, described “covering” or forgoing time to fulfill the work of others: “So that means that I have to put down what I’m doing in order to sit on the phone for a minute while somebody goes and gets a cup of tea. . . . To me that’s just contributing to the harmony of the team.” This kind of action is an important element of TVM leadership. It encourages a harmonious relational tone that can lead to the fulfillment of obligations.

Leading by Taking Back to the Collective

By leading together and giving credit to the collective, Tongans highlight their appreciation of collective achievement through the strengths of relational leadership. Mele’s participants also agreed that they could achieve more through collective actions. For example, Laukau commented: “One stick can be broken easily, but sticks tied together are very hard to break. . . . When you are working together as a collective, you can achieve a lot more things than one individual can.”

Fua fatongia through collective action encourages the idea of leading together. Participants found the spirit of togetherness more powerful and successful than leading from an individual-centric perspective. Falesiu shared: “I always try to help everyone—that comes through my Dad. . . . I just see that as my way of giving back to the church, especially to my parents by helping them.” Naomi explained that “the leadership quality that I have is usually using my status at work now to be able to help my family. Even though I have moved away from home, I still feel obligated to fulfill their obligations.” Fua fatongia is about nurturing relationships through the interdependence of caring as an important element of helping one another and maintaining familial harmony. Falesiu’s and Naomi’s responses represent acceptable ways of fulfilling and crediting the collectives in the Tongan context.

These descriptions connect a number of elements of caring for the space of the workplace. First, caring for the *vā* is about *‘ilo* and *poto*, knowing that one’s *vā* with people includes the inherent roles and responsibilities involved (Thaman 2004). This directs actions by indicating duties to be fulfilled within the *vā*. Second, caring for the *vā* is about leading with people in a reciprocal way. The success of any *vā* relationship belongs to sharing responsibilities and collective achievement. Third, relational, not positional, leadership is central to TVM. Caring for the *vā* involves caring for the diverse strengths that each team member brings to the workplace.

The integration of *māfana* with *vā* under the concept of TVM provides

illumination to *vā* in the spirit of *māfana*. Leadership in a foreign public-service organization involves an initial action of nurturing warm relationships. Harmonizing the spirit of the organization and *māfana* makes relationships more meaningful to people. When there are broken relationships, leaders of the organization must be skillful in rebuilding the broken *vā* through the positive influence of *māfana* in order to (re)secure high levels of trust, love, and respect. If you cannot lead by example, then how do you expect others to trust and follow your way?

The NZPS aims to increase the representation of Pacific people in high-ranking positions but lacks an understanding of how this can be achieved successfully (Paea 2009). Arguably, the real transformation for Pacific people occurs when their minds work inseparably with their souls (Crocombe 1976). As R G Crocombe articulated, “For a term to touch the soul, it needs to strike a harmonious chord in the heart as well as the head: a gut response in tune with a brain response” (1976, 3). Pacific people bring different types of leadership to organizations that must be understood and recognized so they can thrive willingly toward achievement.

MARTYN: CARING FOR THE *VĀ* OF PACIFIC EDUCATION

This section considers the *vā* as it relates to Pacific, or Pasifika (Airini and others 2010), education, meaning the education of Pacific students in Aotearoa/New Zealand. A growing literature base describes aspects of Pacific education through Pacific spatial relational concepts. This includes peer relationships (Reynolds 2018; Rimoni 2016; Akeripa 2017); student-teacher relationships (Silipa 2004; Reynolds 2016; Tuagalu 2008); and school-home and system-scale relationships (Mara 2013; Frengley-Vaipuna, Kupu-MacIntyre, and Riley 2011; Matapo and Teisina 2021).

Effective practice in Pacific education, from tertiary (Lillis and others 2015; Kalavite 2020) to early childhood sectors (Mara 2013; Matapo and Teisina 2021), has been understood through *vā*. Silipa R Silipa, for example, has suggested that the relationality of student-teacher spaces requires trust and expectation (2004). I‘uogafa Tuagalu has explored the role of the teacher in supporting relational development between students and subject disciplines (2008). Rae Si‘ilata has described Pacific students’ educational experiences through the model of a *va‘a tele*, or double-hulled vessel (2014), depicting bilingualism, biculturalism, and the ability to navigate between two worlds as advantages to a balanced and stable life that are more easily leveraged where the *vā* of education is configured inclusively.

In a related line of thinking, Telesia Kalavite has shown the value to Tongan students of understanding how *tā* (time) and *vā* (space) operate in learning environments (2010). This knowledge is more powerful if everyone involved in Pacific education acts with flexibility when approaching cultural understandings from Pacific sources. For example, institutions that appreciate the significance of *kāinga* (blood, kin, or social relationships) will appreciate that the *vā* of education includes parents and families, who have a responsibility for young people's well-being, care, nurturing, and so on from birth to adulthood (Kalavite 2012). This means that education and educational relationships do not pertain only to the individual. Belinda 'Otukolo Saltiban illustrated the cost to Pacific people of schools not understanding this in her 2012 case study in which the potential of bringing a student, the student's parents, and the school counselor into a common *vā* to negotiate learning goals was negated by the school's default to one-on-one meetings between students and school staff. Such examples reveal continued colonization in Pacific education that is also reflected in the severance in space and time of knowledge utility from knowledge production (Māhina 2010). Cresantia Frances Koya has suggested that one means to decolonization is education that appreciates *vā* in its relationships to *tā* and *fonua/fanua* (place) (2013).

Paying attention to *vā* has the potential to deepen our understanding of "spaces" in education (Mara 2011), as well as how these might be nurtured to counter the individualization observable in education (Thaman 2009). One such space is boys' secondary education. Drawing from Martyn's single-site case study and subsequent related data gathering (Reynolds 2017a), both conducted through group *talanoa*, the following discussion explores two pertinent areas: Pacific students' ideas about trying their best in education and their expectations of reciprocated care from teachers. *Talanoa* that informed the study were conducted with small groups of Pacific-origin students throughout one academic year in spaces agreed to by the students and the researcher. In addition, *talanoa* were also conducted with students' parents.

"Trying My Best" as Caring for the Vā of Pacific Education

Often in Pacific education, attention is placed on the actions of teachers (eg, Hawk and others 2002; Reynolds 2017b, 2019). Little consideration has been given to understanding the classroom actions of students as caring for the relational space of education. Nevertheless, appreciating in

cultural terms what students offer in the classroom has the potential to readdress what is valued in education.

Success is generally obtained when a person meets culturally sanctioned goals or aspirations. Multiple forms of Pacific success exist in education (Toumu'a 2014; Alkema 2014). One form frequently expressed by male Pacific secondary school students in Martyn's work is to "try my best." This describes fulfilling an obligation to participate in the relational space of education.

Martyn asked Pacific students in their first weeks of high school life to imagine what success would look like at the end of their first year in secondary education. Their responses, anonymized as protection due to context, counterpoint achievement and "trying" as potentially linked but essentially separate successes. For example, a student replied that "[I would want to know that] I was successful, that I didn't get bad grades or anything. . . . I wanna know that I tried my best. . . . I guess if you . . . have bad grades, but you tried your best . . . that's fine because you tried your best." Here, value is placed on classroom participation regardless of outcome; effort expended is the contribution expected. Although positive academic results are desirable, the ethical obligations of the *vā* revolve around commitment.

Pacific students articulate a tension between the values inherent in school systems and their obligation to try. For example, another student shared, "I just want to do my best, cos people are really worried about what they will get [as grades,] but when they are worrying, they don't really concentrate on what they are meant to be doing." This suggests that fulfilling one's participatory obligation can conflict with concentration on success as achievement, with behavioral and educational consequences. "Trying my best" is an act that makes students vulnerable if the *vā* of education is not well cared for. Downgrading the value of participation by limiting success to achievement mutes the relational aspect of the *vā* of Pacific education.

Pacific students, of course, value teachers correcting their mistakes. However, how that happens determines whether correction is received as an act of care. Correction can be positive, such as "getting good comments from the teacher at the end of the day on what we are doing wrong, where we make a mistake so . . . [we will be] pushing ourselves." However, it can also be negative, for instance when a student's mistake is amplified by a teacher sharing it with others. This can deny the value of trying by extending a student-teacher interaction into other interpersonal *vā*, producing a

level of discomfort that “deters you from trying. . . . It’s your best, and your best isn’t good enough.”

Pacific Students’ Expectations of Care from Teachers

Pacific students respond to the *vā* of education through willingness to relate closely to teachers. This involves trust and vulnerability in the expectation of care. When trust is reciprocated with care, participation and learning can flourish with educational consequences, as one student highlighted: “You have got to trust your teacher sometimes cos they would know what you are good at in the subject. There are some teachers [you] trust more than others. I trust my teacher because he sees potential in me.” Another student observed, “[Teachers you trust are] helping you so you feel more comfortable about what you are meant to do so that next time you are more confident and that you can really actually get into the work.”

Classroom success in the form of relational closeness can facilitate enjoyment, attendance, and achievement. Because of the importance of education to Pacific families and communities, classroom relational harmony can also feed into family relational spaces. For instance, to one student, “My Y11 year . . . was my best year. I guess it was a mixture of both [the teachers and my mindset]. All my teachers that year were mean [ie, worth being with]. And my parents, they were actually real happy. There was no class that year that I didn’t wanna go to.”

Yet Pacific students’ vulnerabilities are not always met with care. The educational price of this can be high. Relational distance can be increased by a student avoiding further encounters with a teacher. As one student shared, “I went into the class, and first thing he said was, ‘If you are going to be lazy, I don’t want you in my class.’ And straight after that I went . . . and changed [subjects].” Increased distance between a student and learning can also be a consequence of care-based expectations being abrogated. As student experiences suggest, this can be through the communication of low expectations (“If you don’t get the support from your boys or your teacher, that makes you think low of yourself. If teacher says I can’t do it, I can’t do it, so I better just give up”) or as a consequence of classroom disharmony (“I just don’t like it when they get angry and all that. It makes me feel like pressured. . . . I lose concentration. . . . I forget everything”).

Conflicts inevitably arise between students, teachers, and ideas of success relevant to different *vā*. This can be seen, for example, when peer groups for one reason or another do not participate in the educational process, but individual students wish to try their best. One participant

described this circumstance and his way of achieving balance. He offered solidarity to members of the brotherhood—his peers—by sitting with them in the classroom, but he “moved my mind” to the front of the room—to the space occupied by his teacher—to facilitate his engagement in the educational process. In this way, a skillful, or *poto*, student who recognizes the various *vā* in which he is located may be able to simultaneously care for each.

DISCUSSION

In order to learn from the way people care for *vā* across contexts, we first consider the nature of *vā*, paying attention to relationality, relational ethics, and ethical actions. We then turn to two contextual factors that affect the way these play out under different circumstances: the relationship between context and culture and the significance of the relational position of individuals.

Relationality

Relationality refers to the state or condition of being related. A *vā* is a relational space of connection and separation (Māhina 2010). However, multiple *vā* coexist, and each relationship or set of relationships has its own *vā*.

In Silia’s account of the Samoan village, many relational spaces are accounted for. These include the ceremonial *fale*, family, village society, and so on. Connections exist in each so that a person can be primarily a chief in one space and a parent in another, all the time being in a relationship with spiritual entities. It is the specific relational space that indicates which “coat” one should wear at any point in time and space.

Relational spaces are interlinked through, for example, common ideas of sacredness. This can be expressed as respect to recognize the inherent significance of a person (or object). *Vā fealoa’i*, for instance, is relevant in village council meetings and in families. What changes between these two settings is the way respect is shown, rather than its appropriateness. Similarly, *vā tapuia* is a relevant understanding of *tapu* spaces but appears differently in the contexts of relationality between chiefs and orators and between brothers and sisters. Thus, at its heart, Silia’s synthesis of literature and experience describes the Samoan village as an ecology of *vā* made sacred through the exercise of respect inspired by relation to the Creator.

Mele’s account is set in the NZPS, where Tongan leaders seek to lead

in ways consistent with their cultural knowledge and practices. In their accounts, the NZPS is also a relational space. For example, they describe leadership not as a positional or individual pursuit but as a relational practice in which their success is measured by the effect they have on the actions of others. They retain their cultural “coat” as leaders in terms of their priorities, motivations, and understandings of leadership, and their approach to workplace leadership is designed to be inclusive and mutually beneficial. Despite the positionally defined roles of colleagues, leaders give respect to all others to honor the sacredness of humanity.

Understood through TVM, Tongan leadership in the NZPS has māfana as a root of motivation. Achieved through relational harmony, pleasure at the success of others is valued. The credit given to the home for guidance in workplace leadership illustrates the cultural origin of leadership thinking. This means that culturally sourced, spiritual significances are also present.

Pacific students understand educational contexts to be relational spaces. Where respectful relationships configure classrooms, Pacific students describe themselves as present, learning, and finding success in the form of achievement. Where they perceive disrespect, learning is hampered. In an extreme case, a Pacific student may avoid conflict altogether by, for example, changing classes. Supportive relationships with peers and teachers enhance experiences, but a lack of relational support erodes self-esteem. Pacific students want their potential to be recognized by teachers so that their progress will lead to achievement that can be celebrated in the home. They expect respect that reflects sacredness. As with the NZPS, Pacific education is a social space in which harmonious relationality is at a premium but is referenced through respect to sacredness and the spiritual domain.

Relational Ethics

In all three settings described here, ethics, or the principles that govern action, operate. One way of discussing ethics in Silia’s account of the Samoan village is through the concept of tausi le vā, which shapes expectations of behavior in pursuit of harmony in the vā. The vā is nurtured contextually in ways intended to benefit the whole group or community. Common matters in which tausi le vā is practiced include food distribution, the use of physical space, and language. Clear expectations exist, framed according to relational matters that include one’s village, family, age, cultural status, gender, and area and degree of expertise. When the

ethical code is broken, protocol to restore the *vā* can be followed. For example, if a person argues with a church minister or crosses a sacred space such as that between brother and sister, relational restoration should take place so that life can resume harmoniously.

Tongan leaders in the NZPS carry a sense of ethics into the workplace that affects their leadership. Ethical aspects evident in the responses of Mele's research participants include self-sacrifice, performing one's duties well, taking responsibility, being inclusive, and valuing the collective. These ethical considerations are consistent with the literature on *tauhi vā* (Koloto 2017; Thaman 2004). Overattention to the self, personal gain at the expense of the group, and caring for people primarily because of their position would be unethical. It is unlikely that culturally framed matters would be welcome material for dispute resolution protocols in the NZPS. However, such findings provide insights into ethical leadership practices that institutional leaders can draw on to keep the harmony or warmth of the *vā* and support motivation and change.

Pacific students' comments in Martyn's account of Pacific education also display ethics that govern approved behavior in Pacific educational spaces. This is most clear in their expectations of teachers. What matters to Pacific students is that teachers relate to them as people and as learners. A line is crossed when students perceive that teachers have low expectations of them or shout at them disrespectfully in admonition. Pacific students have ethical expectations of themselves that are centered on efforts to learn.

Ethical Actions

Vā are relational spaces subject to ethical considerations. By attending to the guidance of ethical principles, people can care for *vā* through their words and actions. In Silia's account of the Samoan village, examples of actions that *tausi le vā* include chiefs and orators remaining at the end of an *ava* ceremony of welcome while untitled men leave; chiefs and orators facing each other to indicate *vā fealoa'i* when speaking; individuals seeking family titles in a restrained way; and community members not crossing sacred spaces, particularly during heated negotiations. People who are governed by the ethical guidance inherent in understandings such as *vā tupuia* and *vā fealoa'i* will take these kinds of actions. As a result, the relevant *vā* will remain in, or be restored to, a harmonious state.

Actions that express TVM in the NZPS include stepping in for a colleague, showing others how to do a job, leading quietly, leading together, bringing

people together, relating to others as people first, and knowing and valuing the strengths of others. These actions serve to tauhi vā because they honor the sacredness of others in the vā in respectful ways while fulfilling one's responsibilities. TVM is leadership that cares for what happens and how it happens and expresses respect and love for those involved.

Pacific students care for the vā of Pacific education by trying their best. They are aware of other approved currencies in education, such as good grades. However, these are not in their power to award. Other actions that care for the relational space of education include placing trust in the teacher, accepting advice from a teacher, trying to enact this advice, and being present. These actions make students vulnerable but fulfill their obligations. They are likely to lead to achievement when reciprocated with commitment from teachers.

Having developed a synthesis of our contributions that focuses on caring for the sacredness of vā through relationality, relational ethics, and ethical actions, we now turn to the issue of context. Our aim is to communicate some of what we have learned about contextual factors that can affect the form that caring for the vā takes.

Shared Understanding

A key aspect of context made clear through the juxtaposition of our three contributions is the extent to which shared cultural understanding is present. In the Samoan village, there is a high degree of shared understanding. For example, established arrangements exist in the ceremonial fale, between brothers and sisters, and between ministers and people. Although disputes take place, resolutions are referred back to the vā as a space for the presentation of apology, admonishment, and forgiveness. The mana of the vā maintains harmony as a “special ordering concept” (Refiti 2002, 209).

In the NZPS, Tongan leaders face a situation in which their culturally founded understandings may not be recognized. There may be pressure to leave them behind as a cultural “coat” as they enter the workspace. When this is true, Western workplace culture is prioritized over the culture of Tongan public servants. As a consequence, instead of a Tongan understanding of leadership, other forms may be the norm. This requires Tongan leaders to negotiate between positional and relational models of leadership. Tauhi vā involves leading from a people-centered perspective rather than a power-based perspective.

The literature on Pacific education suggests that Pacific students' expect-

tations and classroom cultural norms can be at odds. Indeed, writers sometimes refer to teachers as going the “extra mile” when they meet the relational expectations of Pacific students (Evans 2011, 64). One student in Martyn’s study found a particular year remarkable because his teachers delivered education as he desired. The consequence—that “there was no class that year that I didn’t wanna go to”—made his progress secure. In contrast, teachers show disrespect through situations that create shame or through behaviors such as shouting. It seems there is plenty of potential to realign ideas of sacred space and time in Pacific education.

Elements of cultural expectations for how to care for the *vā* appear to travel with people across distance and through generations to shape how they behave in the spaces in which they live. The negotiation of expectations is demanded of Pacific people when Pacific relational thinking is not dominant in a particular space. Both Tongan members of the NZPS and Pacific students are capable of clearly stating their understandings. However, the extent to which these are exercised may depend on a second contextual factor: their level of influence.

Influence

A second aspect of context is a person’s influence, which is often a matter of position. In Silia’s account of the Samoan village, a person’s position relative to others is established by gender, genealogy, and other means and upheld by the cultural value of *feavata’i*, or respecting others. Respecting others is evident in relational behaviors in peoples’ everyday lives. *Vā fealoa’i* at village and family levels is relational. Thus, behavioral expectations are founded on one’s relationships within a particular *vā*.

As Mele’s research shows, Tongan leaders in the NZPS understand leadership relationally and seek to accomplish it through reciprocity. For instance, to Milika, leadership involves being part of a team so that “the way I perform my role affects how everyone else performs their role.” This behavioral norm is rooted in family expectations that are transferred to the workplace. In this way, as ‘Amelia explained, leadership is “heavily influenced by . . . upbringing.” However, unlike in the village, no set protocols exist for how to care for the sacredness of the *vā* in the NZPS. Leaders must apply principals to a changing array of circumstances, adjusting what they do to the task at hand but also responding to the relational ethics of the *vā*.

In Pacific education, a student’s position as a learner is affected by that student’s relationship with one or more teachers. In schools, students often

have little influence over what behavior is expected. In a relational space, behavior affects the way relationships unfold. Pacific students describe positive learning consequences of certain teacher behaviors, such as “getting good comments . . . so . . . [we will be] pushing ourselves.” Unfortunately, the obverse is also true. Where the student voice is honored by its inclusion in the development of school protocols, Pacific relational ideas may surface in muted forms in Pacific education. However, there is little evidence that this is standard practice in Pacific education in general.

CONCLUSION

To round off the conversation, we return to the question posed in the introduction. We hoped to develop a useful dialogue about the *vā* by presenting three cases and a synthesis that spans the spaces between them.

Clearly, the configuration of the *vā* varies by context. In addition, Samoan and Tongan understandings and conceptual vocabulary are different, and the ways people care for the sacredness of the various *vā* are diverse. However, it has become clear that by employing relationality, ethics, and actions as critical tools, various efforts to care for the *vā* can be observed in each relational space. These operationalize sacredness through respect and are informed by ethical imperatives (Anae 2019).

The dialogue has also taught us that the ways Pacific people negotiate their obligations are affected by contextual aspects. These include the presence or otherwise of common cultural understanding and the influence a person may have in each context. In the village, agreed-on protocols may exist to frame social expectations and behavior. However, in the NZPS and Pacific education, a more delicate negotiation, performed ad hoc in a changing environment, is required; the relationship between contextual rules and Pacific cultural understandings is uncertain. Attention to space and time sharpens the direction of naming of research in a Pacific paradigm (Sanga and Reynolds 2017). Exploring the specifics of context moves us away from one-size-fits-all approaches to Pacific inquiry (Anae 2019), exorcising one of the shadows of colonization-through-research.

Our discussion has also demonstrated Pacific people’s adaptability in the way they care for the *vā* in various environments. Appreciating both how Pacific people understand sacred relational spaces in new and emerging contexts and the range of ways they care for them under various conditions is significant to those who seek to support Pacific people through research. It may also be of value to others, such as managers and educa-

tors, who seek, as we do, to work for the betterment of the lives of Pacific people, wherever and however they sojourn.

Indeed, the value of asserting the significance of relationality to understanding the lives of Pacific people and of relational ethics to understanding inquiry into those lives has potential beyond the places where *vā* is at home (Anea 2019). Similar value can be ascribed to differently configured understandings of relationality when drawn appropriately into research and the academy (Carter and others 2018). In this way, our discussion contributes to the critical discourse of communities of practice across and beyond the region who value relationality as the key to life and thus see its significance as a “response to the ‘moral crisis’ now faced by the world today” (Vaai 2017, 80; see also Koya-Vaka‘uta 2017; Rinehart 2018; Anea 2019).

Moving forward, the dialogic approach we have used as a frame for this essay may have potential for researchers whose relationships cross the vastness of the Pacific region. Our discussion has involved contexts connected by some aspects of conceptual thinking and socialization and separated by cultural and geographic distances. In some ways, we have stayed relatively close to “home.” However, the approach of privileging the relational self (Vaai and Nabobo-Baba 2017) offers opportunities for us and others to extend our range to work with friends and wantoks across the imposed boundaries of Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia in the spirit of mutual support, honoring diversity while valuing our shared humanity.

* * *

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Abstract

In many cultures of the Pacific region, the self is relational, inevitably and permanently connected to other people and entities as a fact of existence. Among the articulations of Pacific relationality is the sacred relational space of connection and separation: *vā*. Differences in relational thinking around *vā* in the region should be celebrated, but in an increasingly mobile world, Pacific wisdom can also be honored by paying attention to commonalities. In his essay, we offer a dialogue between friends who seek mutual learning across our various fields in relation to the concept of *vā*: Samoan village life, Tongan leadership in the New Zealand Public Service, and Pacific education. Through an informed and critical conversation across established and emerging social spaces, we hope to provide navigation points for others who value the *vā* in research and other pursuits.

KEYWORDS: *vā*, Pacific relationality, sacred space, diaspora, Tonga, Sāmoa, Aotearoa/New Zealand