'When they do that kind of bad things to me, I feel that they encourage me to be strong and be who I am': How transfeminine people in Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands experience discrimination, acceptance and a sense of place

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'When they do that kind of bad things to me, I feel that they encourage me to be strong and be who I am': How transfeminine people in Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands experience discrimination, acceptance and a sense of place

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ABSTRACT

Data on transfeminine participants from a 2016 Pacific Multi-Country Mapping and Behavioural Study evidence high levels of verbal, physical and sexual abuse, as well as discrimination. In interviews from the same study, accounts of hardship were frequently countered with assertions of happiness and talk of acceptance. This paper analyses these accounts and, in particular, the ways in which interviewees viewed and managed their place in society. Data provide insights into the factors that support transfeminine occupation of a positive place in some contemporary Pacific settings, highlighting negotiation between modern and traditional, and local and global, cultures and values.

Introduction

In Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands, respectively, *fa'afafine, fakaleiti* and *akava'ine*[1] are culturally specific terms for transfeminine[2] people – those who were identified as biologically male at birth and whose gender identity and/or expression is feminine. Across the Pacific, there is a range of culturally specific gender identities that cannot be easily represented by the dominant global categories offered by sex and gender. A transfeminine Pacific Islander person may identify as a woman, neither a woman nor a man, or both a woman and a man (Farran 2010). In Samoa, *fa'afafine* or *fa'ateine*, means 'in the way of woman', as does *fakaleiti* in Tonga (Farran 2010; Besnier and Alexeyeff 2016; Tcherkézoff 2014). It seems likely that these identities are issues of more than simply sex and gender and are imbricated in social and cultural matters that transcend the sex/gender dichotomy.

This paper is grounded in study data in which the interviewees presented transfemininity as an uneasy position – both for themselves and for others. The aim is not to

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define or pin down transfeminine identities in the Pacific but rather, through a consideration of the narratives of interviewees who self-identified as (some version of) transfeminine, to attend to the means by which the interviewees worked to reconcile a transfeminine identity with, and in, their communities. While fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine do not constitute a homogenous group, they are all traditional – if sometimes controversial – identities and, outside the family, are highly visible in generally conservative societies. Transfeminine individuals in the Pacific express varying interpretations and aspects of feminine identity (Alexeyeff 2007). These often emerge from an early age and may or may not be supported by family (Schmidt 2003; Farran 2010; Farran and Su'a 2005). Pacific Island societies are highly stratified: selfhood and identity have traditionally been understood in relational rather than individualised terms. Moreover, concepts of identity and self in the Pacific context are generally inseparable from the myriad ways in which an individual contributes to and is enmeshed within family, community and culture, as well as family status. All of these issues affect the manner in which an individual's non-normative gender expression or sexuality will be treated (Thomsen 2016).

Societal attitudes to transfeminine people in Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands vary from moderate levels of acceptance within specific cultural roles to outright rejection. These attitudes are contingent upon a range of factors (Schoeffel 2014; Farran 2010; Schmidt 2003). Although acknowledged as occupying a traditional role, transfeminine people often live on the margins of their societies and may have secret lives or hidden intimate relationships (Good 2014). Farran (2010) has contended that, in the context of Tonga and Samoa, it is unhelpful to categorise fa'afafine and fakaleiti as 'other' because, even though they are sometimes victimised, they are often well-integrated into family structure and are active members of their communities. They thus have a place in society (Farran 2010). Besnier and Alexeyeff (2016) have presented a less sanguine view that, despite an apparent tolerance of fakaleiti in Tonga, they are treated with hostility and excluded from mainstream society. Futter-Puati (2017) argues that, in the Cook Islands, akava'ine are seemingly tolerated only until they break heteronormative rules. The ambivalence attached to fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine identities appears in multiple ways. Embedded in, and imbued with, tradition, they also appear to be (sometimes troubling) symbols of modernity and of an infiltration by foreign cosmopolitan and globalised sexual mores (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014).

Fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine may fulfil traditional or formal social roles, as well as undertaking domestic work and other typically feminine forms of labour – such as household and caring duties, or work in fashion, hairdressing, textiles, hospitality or tourism (Farran 2010; Besnier and Alexeyeff 2016). Transfeminine identity may be put on public display through participation in traditional and customary ritual, as well as contemporary entertainment performances. In Tonga, fakaleiti are sometimes in service to the royal family and the church (Mendos 2019; Farran 2010; Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014). In Samoa, fa'afafine have roles in customary society (Farran 2010). Drag shows, beauty pageants and cabarets all manage and promote the contemporary face of transfemininity (Farran 2010).

Fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine experience verbal and physical abuse, as well as sexual and physical abuse as children (Office of the High Commissioner for Human

Rights 2015; Samoa Office of the Ombudsman 2018). In the Cook Islands, open discrimination against lesbian, bisexual, gay and transgender people has led to a high volume of calls to mental health helplines (Youth Suicide Prevention Steering Committee 2015). Sexual relationships between transfeminine Pacific Islanders and men are subject to legal limitations in Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands, where sodomy remains criminalised (United Nations Development Programme 2012; Parliament of Samoa 2013). In Tonga, 'impersonating the opposite sex' is also an offence (United Nations Development Programme 2012; Farran and Su'a 2005). Until 2013, there was legislation in Samoa prohibiting a man impersonating a woman in public (Radio New Zealand 2013).

Pacific Islands sexual diversity and human rights organisations continue to draw attention to discrimination against transfeminine people (United Nations Development Programme 2012; Pacific Community 2017; Amnesty International 2019). International and regional human rights organisations have played a role in the establishment of sexual diversity advocacy and support groups in the Pacific region and, since the mid-1990s, there has been an emergence of transfeminine-led advocacy groups tackling stigma. The Tonga Leitis[3] Association (TLA), established in 1993, provides social support, organises beauty pageants (Schoeffel 2014) and a netball tournament, promotes *leiti* rights, campaigns against school bullying and for the repeal of sodomy laws (Mendos 2019), oversees annual HIV testing, and offers healthcare and rights workshops for young gender diverse Tongans (Agabe 2019). The Cook Islands Te Tiare Association was established in 2007 by local akava'ine people to advocate for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) rights and the decriminalisation of homosexuality and sodomy. It promotes HIV and STI prevention and offers peer support and job-seeking skills workshops (United Nations Development Programme 2016; Besnier and Alexeyeff 2016; Te Tiare Association 2018). Since 2008, the Samoa Fa'afafine Association has conducted similar grassroots advocacy to reduce the effects of discrimination and support the healthcare needs of fa'afafine (Mendos 2019). These associations – along with organisations from Fiji and Papua New Guinea, as well as emerging groups in the Northern Pacific – now form the Pacific Sexual and Gender Diversity Network.

Activism on human rights for people of diverse sexuality and gender in Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands has been inspired and encouraged by international LGBTI and questioning (LGBTIQ) rights movements and by organisations based in Australia and New Zealand that offer support to Pacific NGOs. The Pacific Islander diaspora, increased access to overseas travel, and the rise in communication technologies have facilitated a steady flow of information and ideas between the Pacific Islands and the rest of the world (Good 2014). Pacific sexual diversity organisations have adopted human rights discourses characteristic of LGBTIQ rights movements globally. As the wider social contexts framing the experiences of transfeminine people in the Pacific differ markedly, the activism and concerns of fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine will be distinct from those of international transgender human rights movements (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014). Indeed, the LGBTIQ label is itself considered Western-centric, as it does not capture the cultural specificity of non-heteronormative Pacific people (Brown-Acton 2011). Instead, the acronym MVPFAFF – for *mahu*, *vakasalewalewa*, *palopa*, *fa'afafine*, *akava'ine*, *fakaleiti* and *fakafefin*e – was coined to replace it (Thomsen

2016; Brown-Acton 2011). Moreover, the uptake of advocacy discourses and approaches should not be interpreted simply as the infiltration of global and foreign sexual cultures into the Pacific. Those elements are inevitably moulded and shaped for local uses, and the transnational influence on cultures of sexual diversity has arguably been more reciprocal than is often credited (Biersack, Jolly and Macintyre 2016).

Fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine experiences of discrimination and stigmatisation are well documented in the reports of local, regional and international agencies (Radio New Zealand 2012; McMullin and Kihara 2018; Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights 2015; Amnesty International 2019). Scholarly attention has also been directed to descriptions of the contemporary and traditional place of transfeminine identities in Polynesian cultures. However, there has been only limited academic enquiry into factors that might support transfeminine Pacific people's positive experiences of self and well-being in the face of everyday discrimination, and the ways in which they themselves are active in both making and taking a place in their communities.

Against this background, this paper looks to narratives provided by transfeminine Pacific people themselves in an attempt to address that gap. It explores the factors underpinning transfeminine Pacific people's feelings of acceptance that emerged in these accounts, despite the adverse experiences that are regularly documented among this group. The data presented illuminate some of the mechanisms by which the interviewees work to reconcile their identity with and in the community, and how they positively manage their role and appearance as transfeminine. In doing so, these data highlight a necessary and inevitable negotiation and blending of modern and traditional, and local and global, cultures and values.

Methods

During May, April and July 2016, a Pacific Multi-Country Mapping and Behavioural Study: HIV and STI Risk Vulnerability among Key Populations investigated the circumstances, experiences and behaviours of key populations in relation to HIV and STI risk vulnerability in the Cook Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, Kiribati, Palau, Republic of Marshall Islands, Samoa, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. All participants in the study were aged 16 and over.

As well as behavioural surveys, a smaller number of in-depth interviews explored social and structural determinants affecting HIV and STI risk factors, such as stigma, human rights violation, violence and socio-economic marginalisation. The 28 participants in the overall study who described themselves as trans, transgender, transgender woman, woman, girl, fa'afafine, fakaleiti, leiti and/or akava'ine were coded as 'transgender'. Six of these were from the Cook Islands, five from Samoa, and seven from Tonga, totalling 18 ($n = 18$). This paper focuses on interview data coded 'transgender' from the three Polynesian countries.

These sites comprise three distinct cultures, with different languages and histories. Transgender experiences within and between these countries are diverse. The sites do, however, share certain commonalities: the Cook Islands, Samoa and Tonga are all Polynesian nations of the Southern Pacific. Their populations are overwhelming Christian and church is central to social life. Transfemininity has traditionally been

recognised in all three cultures. Because English is widely spoken in these countries, interviews were conducted in English without the need for translation.

In Samoa and Tonga, study participants were recruited through respondent-driven sampling. All other participants were recruited through snowball sampling initiated by key informants. Interviewees were a subset of the survey participants. Targeted recruitment aimed to capture a range of participant demographics, experiences, and social status, as well as including those from outside NGO networks. Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions and were audio recorded. Questions focused on personal and family history, sexual behaviour, attitudes and knowledge about HIV and STIs, access to services, and experiences of stigma, discrimination and violence. Despite limitations inherent to the sampling method and the small sample size, the qualitative data provides valuable and nuanced insights into informant experiences and views.

This paper emerges from thematic coding of interview transcripts by the first author. Data was coded inductively in NVivo 12 and themes were generated through line-by-line reading of the transcripts (Braun and Clarke 2006; Creswell 2013). The original study interview schedules enquired into experiences of stigma, discrimination and violence, however the schedules did not pursue descriptions of how these experiences were responded to or elaboration of interviewees' views of their place. A pattern of accounts of discrimination that were countered by assertions of pride, happiness and agency was noticeable in the dataset from participants in Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands. Themes such as social acceptance, self-acceptance, self-esteem and belonging emerged and were coded in 13 of the 18 transfeminine interviews conducted in those countries. The development of these thematic codes and the express resistance to a definition of transfeminine experience as being simply, or predominantly, negative warranted closer attention. Subsequent analysis therefore attended to interviewee accounts of positive experiences, of making a place for themselves, and of reconciling themselves and others with their transfemininity, as well as enablers and barriers to, and examples of, social acceptance and self-acceptance.

Ethical approval for the study was provided by the Human Research Ethics Committee of UNSW Sydney and the Ethics Committees and Ministries of Health of the original nine countries.

Findings

Of the 18 interviews with transfeminine participants from Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands, 13 transcripts provided accounts that described overcoming adversity and making a place for themselves. The following section presents data that emerged in those 13 interviews, in which participants described their experiences of stigma and discrimination. These descriptions were followed, and countered, by highly positive assessments of their identities and lives.[4] In these accounts, we find that contributing to family and community, support from family or friends, strong connection to transfeminine networks, and involvement in transgender-led initiatives and activism appear to underwrite social acceptance, self-acceptance and positive aspects of the experience of occupying a place in society as a transfeminine person. All the names used in the presentation of the data are pseudonyms.

Experiences of stigma, discrimination and violence

Most interviewees told of bullying, discrimination and violence occurring throughout their lives because of their non-normative gender identities. These experiences included childhood sexual abuse, domestic violence, bullying at school, public harassment, physical attacks and employment-related discrimination.

Many spoke of being tolerated rather than fully accepted and of occupying an equivocal position in their communities. Huhulu claimed that transfeminine identity signifies an inferior, ambiguous and incomplete status:

> Transgender people in Tonga they are second class because sometimes they are called point 5 or half, so he's a half half. (Huhulu, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Similarly, Noelani described social acceptance as being only ever partial and a matter of proximity, citing a difference between interaction at an impersonal and disembodied 'social' level and more intimate or 'interpersonal' interactions:

> Socially I feel accepted, you know, I feel that we are generally accepted. But then of course when the circles become smaller, that is when I notice obvious animosity. So, I guess what I am trying to say is that I feel accepted, just not fully accepted. (Noelani, akava'ine, Cook Islands)

Interviewees experienced antipathy to transfemininity as being very clearly directed at their own persons, made manifest as verbal and physical abuse and intimidation. This often occurred in public:

> They keep swearing at us when we walk on the road. (Mele, fakaleiti, Tonga)

> Sometimes when we go out at night-time, out to the night club, they like punching. (Meliame, fakaleiti, Tonga)

For many interviewees, physical and sexual abuse had begun early in life:

> I been bullied and abused by my stepdad when I was young. I think because he sees me as transgender and he doesn't like me that way, I think from what I know of the past, he did it to me because he didn't like me being a transgender. (Sione, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Some, like Liliko and Sione, dropped out of school after being bullied:

> I drop out from school, high school when I was Form 2. Because of mocking and bullying in school by the students and also the teacher. I already act like a girl when I go to school.(Liliko, fakaleiti, Tonga)

> I left school early about Form 5. That's the reason why I left because lots of conflict about being a transgender. (Sione, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Other interviewees recounted being fired from jobs or driven to quit working, studying or job-seeking because of discrimination. Noelani described feeling that she had to choose between openly expressing her transfemininity and university attendance:

> I really have to admit during my first years at uni, I didn't go because I was afraid. I had to make a really big choice between my career and my identity. (akava'ine, Cook Islands)

For Noelani, fear of discrimination and of negative reactions had become an educational and career barrier.

Silivia had been explicitly required to conform to a masculine presentation at work, forcing her to choose between her outward appearance and her job:

> In the private sector … even X resort you can't have long hair [as a transgender person], you have to cut it. At X company, you have to cut it … You have to cut it and wear trousers … I am not going to cut my hair. (Silivia, akava'ine, Cook Islands)

One leiti, Meliame, decided to quit her job after a manger told her 'no more dressing like a girl, dress like a boy'. In these narratives, however, transfemininity is more than a matter of public or outward appearance. Sione's invocation of closeted transfemininity signals that fakaleiti identity is an internal state, even when it may not be outwardly expressed:

> Being a fakaleiti or transgender here in – it's complicated to be an outsider – hiding in the closet is still there. Because of our custom and traditions here in Tonga, it is very strong. (Sione, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Interviewees had a variety of views on why transfeminine people experience discrimination. Sione described how being openly transfeminine meant being an outsider and attributed this marginality to traditional Tongan cultural values, which make living as an outsider very difficult.

Other interviewees specifically attributed discrimination to both Christian and heteronormative sexual mores. They said that regardless of how they behave and whether or not they actually do have sexual relationships with men, transfemininity is conflated with, or reduced to, taboo and often illegal sexual activity:

> Every transgender here in Tonga, they be good to people. Most of the people understand but some of the people don't understand and they put us in bad labelling – like as having anal sex orientations, stuff like that. (Sione, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Interviewees tended to be understanding and even sympathetic regarding why their gender identity was considered transgressive. Some specifically mentioned the challenges of coming to terms with their own same-sex attractions:

> I grew up in a culture where it is a norm that a man has to – marries a woman. So, it was a real struggle to understand the kind of person that I was. I also grew up in a family that was very religious, so issues such as homosexuality – I heard about it in the bible and [it was] taught at Sunday school. So, when I felt these feelings – that I was more attracted to the same sex – I was very worried. … When I brought my boyfriend home, my older sister and my mother were really against it. My mother was on the verge of disowning me and my sister cursed me, from a religious point of view. (Rongomaiwhenua, fa'afafine, Samoa)

> When I say that [I have sex with men], they say 'Ah, he is very terrible. He is horrible, horrible creature', and things like that. Some of my cousins know and understand and they appreciate and respect me. They say 'that's who you are just go for it. We are not there to judge you', but the majority say 'No, it is wrong'. (Huhulu, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Positive accounts of identity

Despite describing the everyday challenges of social marginalisation, interviewees spoke positively about being fa'afafine, fakaleiti or akava'ine. They described achieving

self-acceptance, the positive aspects of being transfeminine, and feeling strong or proud when others recognised or otherwise acknowledged their gender identity – even when those reactions were negative. Enjoyment of a transfeminine identity was enhanced not only by feminine dress and outward appearance, but also by the capacity to contribute to family and the wider community, and sometimes by the assertion of rights and engagement in activism.

The juxtaposition of declarations of happiness with stories of hardship was surprising and drew attention to the capacity of the interviewees to cope with, and not be reduced to, the adversity they regularly faced.

At times, facing opposition to their transfeminine identity reinforced their commitment to it. Meliame described abuse from the wider public as emboldening:

> Around my area they know that I am a trans, they are accepting but when we go further into the community, coming to town there are lots of boys and they know that I am a trans, they start to giving out some bad words, something like that to know that I am trans. It makes me shy sometimes but it is like an encouragement. When they do that kind of bad things to me, I feel that they encourage me to be strong and be who I am. (Meliame, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Meliame's assertion of being 'who I am' speaks not only to the challenges of presenting as transfeminine, but also to the intrinsic or essential nature of that identity. Tama also presents her gender identity as an inherent and unchangeable part of herself and its expression as a source of empowerment and happiness:

> I think being a fa'afafine, it has helped me more because I think it has feeling inside of us that makes us alive and be happy and do whatever we have to do. (Tama, fa'afafine, Samoa)

Noelani described her relationship to her identity in the following, particularly positive, way:

> I enjoy [being akava'ine] because I feel like there is a little celebration happening in my head every time I take a step towards being myself, a woman. I enjoy that my friends accept me as a girl. (Noelani, akava'ine, Cook Islands)

Being recognised by others as a fa'afafine, fakaleiti or akava'ine person, or as a woman or girl, was also described as a source of enjoyment and pride:

> I am so proud of how acceptance is also a feeling of recognition that it is coming from a fa'afafine. I am so proud of how people feel about myself. (Lanu'ese'ese, fa'afafine, Samoa)

Liliko too spoke about pride:

> I am very proud of myself. Proud of who I am as a leiti, as a transgender woman. Being a leiti, like, you know better than those people, they are discriminate us. (Liliko, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Pride, it should be noted, is a heavily freighted term in this context. It highlights the sometimes conflicting elements of the cultures at play. Being a Biblical sin, pride is often frowned upon in Pacific Christian cultures. It connotes self-admiration and a primacy of self that is anathema to traditional Pacific mores. Gay Pride is, however, also a cornerstone concept within international LGBTIQ discourse, where it has extremely positive connotations and is invoked as an endorsement of living one's non-heteronormative gender or sexual expression boldly and free from shame.

Acceptance and support

The interviews indicated multiple factors in transfeminine people's lives that under-pinned social acceptance, self-acceptance and happiness. Fa'afafine, fakaleiti and aka-va'ine described feeling accepted when family members or friends demonstrated support. Acceptance by others was often described as being consequent on the trans-feminine person's ability to contribute in a meaningful way to family, community or society.

Some interviewees spoke about their gender expression being encouraged by at least one family member or, if they were rejected by family, finding support among a friendship network of transfeminine people:

> [My mum] supports me really much. … She is always the one taking care of all of my clothes even with the bras. When it comes to acceptance it's a matter of love instead of understanding because people will understand you and they will still judge you. But not the people who love you because the people who love you will accept you for no matter what or who you are or what you identify as … They might not understand you but they will still love you because you are family. (La'ei, fa'afafine, Samoa)

La'ei positioned non-judgemental or unconditional love as the key requisite of acceptance, which she saw as being supportive rather than necessarily understanding. In contrast, Huhulu described more active encouragement:

> One of my friends, she was doing politics when we were in university, she always goes 'I feel you, don't let them put you down, let yourself put them down'. It's always echoed everywhere I go, I just do whatever I want to do. (Huhulu, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Noelani attributed social acceptance to the contributions she had made to the wider community. However, she acknowledged that belonging to a high-status family helped secure her place:

> I think that I fit into the community quite well, I mean sure there was a bit of prejudice growing up but I feel generally accepted. My family and village was quite influential within the community so I already had a name and family reputation that helped me be accepted, because I came from a respected family. Then I also started doing work for the community, the Church and that helped with my acceptance. (Noelani, akava'ine, Cook Islands)

Other interviewees believed that their social acceptance was conditional. Lanuola did not consider fa'afafine to be particularly well accepted in general by many Samoans, but said that individuals were loved nonetheless because of their contribu-tions to the community.

> Now I want to be called fa'afafine … It's a third gender. So I am so proud of it but we are trying to because half of Samoa, no, a quarter of Samoa don't understand and they don't like it, but the majority of people they know us, they love us because we do a lot of charity work for Samoa community. (Lanuola, fa'afafine, Samoa)

Lanuola believed that the actions of individuals worked to improve the public view of fa'afafine more generally. In this way, the role and acceptance of transfeminine indi-viduals and the public view of transfeminine identities are perceived as being closely intertwined.

Many interviewees lived with extended family and either contributed financially or fulfilled key domestic roles:

I am basically looked at now as both a mother and father in my family. I live with my three siblings and my nieces and nephews; I live in a house full of probably 15 of us. Five adults plus me and the rest makes up the 15, but we have two houses and three bedrooms each. I love where I live, my family is very receptive of my lifestyle. (Rongomaiwhenua, fa'afafine, Samoa)

Helping my mum do women works like cleaning, washing, helping my aunty with weaving, preparing the pandanus for weaving. (Meliame, fakaleiti, Tonga)

According to La'ei, demonstration of respect for family is very important to fa'afafine. She described how the fa'afafine club she was a member of supported the efforts of members to contribute to their own family life, while at the same time itself functioning as a family:

We also have a club called the My Girls Club and it's a fa'afafine club. There is 14 of us and we support each other. We are from all over and support each other in helping our families, we each bring in some kitchen stuff every month when we do our raffles and then donate it to one of our members to help out our families. Our main goal is a sisterhood to help develop our families. (La'ei, fa'afafine, Samoa)

Here La'ei describes the way in which fa'afafine group activities centre on enabling members to contribute to their families as a way of supporting one another. These efforts help members secure their place in the community and in relation to others. Participating in community life, respecting and contributing to family life, and supporting the transfeminine identity of self and others are deeply interconnected in La'ei's narrative.

A place and role within family provided some participants with a buffer against isolation from the wider community. For others, rejection from family necessitated building community among transfeminine peers. Transfeminine community groups and activities provided an important safe space for many interviewees to express themselves openly:

Te Tiare is a place where we can be us. (Silivia, akava'ine, Cook Islands)

I just love [TLA] because it gets us together. We don't look down on each other and fight. The TLA members are together like one family. We can stand for our rights together. We support each other. (Mele, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Interviews highlighted the importance of safe space and connectivity with transfeminine peers. Transfeminine-led NGOs were cited in this study as providing much-needed space for participants. After discussing being bullied at school, Liliko described finding a community and a place to belong:

It make you feel like, that you're sad, like that you're left behind from the world. That you do not belong to Tonga. While that you don't belong in that school, I said drop out, I walk away. No more school. I found I go out and find out which place is right for me. It's a happy life and free life. Now, I am very proud of myself. (Liliko, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Several participants had connected with transfeminine friends through beauty pageants, theatre and dance organised by local groups. Public performances of transfemininity helped interviewees respond to, and resist, marginalisation and also generated confidence. Noelani explains that, despite being shy in other social situations, she found public performance liberating:

Being on the stage, [the public] can't touch you. But they appreciate, at the end of the day at least they put on a good show. [The audience think] 'Sure, they are trannies, but

they put on a good show and can dance better than real girls'. That was a comfort and that was the thing that built my confidence. (Noelani, akava'ine, Cook Islands)

Huhulu described involvement in LGBTIQ human rights forums as an important step in her journey towards self-acceptance, despite social pressures to act more manly:

When I was young, I was exposing myself to more risk in terms of coming into cultural things, because there are certain, um, having the roles of men to be played as men – and it is quite difficult sometimes because I have to act like one, like a man. But slowly because I think I am to exposed to some of these areas like LGBTIQ, sexual orientation, human rights and all this forums that I been attended [I started to think] 'oh it is my right and no one has to deny that'. (Huhulu, fakaleiti, Tonga)

Other interviewees cited involvement in advocacy work and a community of peers as being empowering:

I see myself as an agent of change. I have been very vocal about fa'afafine and LGBQTI community here in Samoa, this is my area of passion. (Rongomaiwhenua, fa'afafine, Samoa)

LGBT here in Tonga are fighting for their rights. (Siola'a, fakaleiti, Tonga)

For most interviewees, self-acceptance and pride did not develop in a vacuum but were grounded in acceptance by others. In these narratives, acceptance was founded on relational elements rather than the individual features of their lives. It was made possible through the varied ways they connected with others and took up useful roles.

Organisations such as the TLA, the Fa'afafine Samoa Association and the Te Tiare Association emerged as important contemporary mechanisms for transfeminine self and community acceptance, increasing capacity for participation in family and social life, sporting activities, human rights forums or beauty pageants. Pageants are well-established events that publicly celebrate and showcase transfemininity. While the spirit in which they are received may be mixed, pageants have influential champions. For example, the Tongan Miss Galaxy pageant is endorsed by the royal family. Pageants aim to counter marginalisation and provide a means for transfeminine people to position themselves in relation to the wider society (Schmidt 2003). In doing so, they utilise contemporary elements of global culture while celebrating a tradition of cultural performances of femininity.

Discussion

The ambiguities captured in these narratives resonate with other literature on Pacific sexualities, in which transfeminine Pacific Islanders are described as 'both deeply embedded in the structure of society and marginal to it' (Besnier and Alexeyeff 2016, 28). Histories of the social position and role of transfeminine people in the Pacific are complex and often contested. Gender relations, family and kinship structures, community values and religious beliefs in the region have all been impacted by legacies of colonialism – especially in regard to the law and Christian missionary values (Jolly and Macintyre 1989) – and are currently influenced by global culture via tourism and sport industries, increasing migration and travel, international humanitarian efforts, and human rights and sexuality discourses (Besnier and Alexeyeff 2016; Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014).

There are various theories regarding the bases for transfeminine discrimination, including a rising Christian fundamentalism in Samoa and Tonga (Mendos 2019) and the perception that fa'afafine represent 'immoral' sexual practices and constitute a threat to *fa'asamoa* or local culture and traditions – especially kinship dynamics and family structure (Schoeffel 2014; Schmidt 2003).

The participants interviewed in this study voiced a similar range of views. While having no claim to expertise on the origins of anti-transfeminine discrimination, they must be considered authorities on their own personal experiences. Their accounts described various forms of discrimination and rejection experienced by transfeminine people in Tonga, Samoa and the Cook Islands in the contexts of family, friends, public life, education and employment, causing stress and hardship from an early age and throughout life.

Mental wellbeing and suicide are matters of concern among sexual and gender minority groups globally (Cover 2016; Hottes et al. 2016), including Pacific youth in general (Uddin et al. 2019). It is, perhaps, therefore more notable that the data shed light on ways that the interviewees experienced transfemininity as positive, joyful and empowering. In the narratives discussed here, the ability to contribute to or support the family appears to be an important factor in transfeminine social acceptance. The accounts of these participants are consistent with Thomsen's descriptions of the role that contribution to family, community and society plays in the acceptance of transgender people (2016) and with the view that community and social service are a core element of fakaleiti identity in Tonga (Mataele, cited in Talanoa 2018). While Farran has asserted that 'fa'afafine and fakaleiti are accepted and protected within the family' (2010, 2323), this was not true for all our interviewees.

The term 'resilience' refers broadly to a capacity to cope with, or recover from, adversity and stress (Hartling 2008; Luthar 2006). While fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava-'ine frequently experience stress as a result of a stigmatised identity or marginalised position in society, the interviewee accounts show that many are also highly positive about being transfeminine. Hartling defines resilience as 'the ability to connect, reconnect, and resist disconnection in response to hardships, adversities, trauma' (2008, 5656). The data presented in this paper highlight the ways in which contribution to family and community, connection to a cultural role, and involvement in sexual diversity community-led initiatives underwrite the resilience and self-acceptance of transfeminine people in the study.

The narratives also highlight the importance to the interviewees of access to an identity that – however stigmatised – is experienced as authentic, as well as being simultaneously social and individual. Fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine are culturally embedded identities with particular and evolving histories. Contemporary culture – for these interviewees, as for other sectors of Pacific Islands societies – is enmeshed in modernity as well as historical tradition.

The idea of forging – or perhaps re-making – a place for fakaleiti in contemporary Tongan culture is advanced by Joey Mataele in the 2018 documentary film *Leitis in Waiting*, which portrays fakaleiti as embracing traditional cultural roles while also fighting for individual identity-based rights (Hamer, Wilson and Wong-Kalu 2018). Conversely, Farran suggests that, given the existence of a traditional role, there may be 'no need to adopt Western-style advocacy of greater or different rights for

fa'afafine or fakaleiti' (Farran 2010, 2626). She downplays the need for, and the value of, advocacy, political struggle and activism. The narratives in this study appear to concur with Mataele, positioning lived experiences of fa'afafine, fakaleiti and akava'ine identity as being reconcilable with both rights-activism and respect for culture.

Transfemininity in the Pacific islands today necessarily navigates historical and contemporary, and local and global, cultures to shape the space for transfeminine people and identities. The narratives here also suggest, however, that the transfemininities of the interviewees remain quintessentially Pacific identities, necessarily anchored in family and community (even where family must be re-created through peer and other support groups).

Conclusion

Transfeminine people of the Pacific Islands navigate a complex web of life in the family, the church, the transfeminine community and wider society. Each sphere offers different avenues and barriers to acceptance of, and space to express or occupy, a fa'afafine, fakaleiti or akava'ine identity. The position of transfeminine people of Samoa, Tonga and the Cook Islands, like their identity, is ambiguous: they are both marginalised and accommodated by their respective societies. The interviews in this study provide ample description of abuse and discrimination resulting from non-heteronormative gender expression. However, in most cases, these descriptions are followed by, and juxtaposed with, claims that attest to transfeminine lives marked by a proud and joyful perseverance, along with descriptions of the ways in which the interviewees manage to assume, or generate, a position for themselves as transfeminine within their social world.

Scholarly literature on transfemininity in the Pacific has tended to argue about origins, authenticity and cultural validity; about whether or not there is a tradition of transfemininity in various Pacific societies; and about just what roles it might have fulfilled historically. Judgements as to which gender expressions and identities are more or less culturally valid are not always helpful. The more productive and more useful challenge is to look to transfeminine people themselves, to better include transfeminine views, to attend to their lived realities, and to support the ways in which they make their own place. Pacific transfemininity, in all its various and locally specific cultural forms, is – like all aspects of culture – subject to change: it is a shifting and mutable, rather than fixed, phenomenon. Consequently, we might conclude that culture and family will inevitably be enablers, and not simply barriers, to the ongoing evolution of transfeminine identities in the Pacific.

Notes

1. Transfeminine Cook Islander people were previously referred to as *laelae*. Because of the negative connotations of that word (Alexeyeff and Besnier 2014), the term *akava'ine* is now more commonly used.
2. When referring collectively to the participants in this study, the term 'transfeminine' is used for brevity. There is no ideal English word to encompass *fa'afafine*, *fakaleiti* and *akava'ine*. We use 'transfeminine' rather than 'transgender' or 'transgender women'. The phrase 'transgender women' implies identification as women. The term 'transfeminine' has emerged to encompass a spectrum of femininity and is less insistent on alignment to

a specific gender (University of California 2016; Oliphant et al. 2018; Peitzmeier et al. 2017). For these reasons, we consider it more appropriate to capturing the diversity of gender experiences and identities discussed here.

3. *Leitis* is short for *fakaleitis* – literally, 'ladies'. The term *fakaleiti* contains a somewhat tongue-in-cheek allusion to 'the way of English or white ladies'.

4. Among the other five interview transcripts, some referred to experiences of discrimination but did not mention any positive aspect; others spoke of being happy and fulfilled as a transfeminine person and did not describe experiencing discrimination.

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