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**A Tongan *talanoa* about conceptualisations,  
constructions and understandings of mental illness**

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## Abstract

The New Zealand Mental Health Survey, *Te Rau Hinengaro* (Oakley-Browne, Wells, & Scott, 2006), reported that Tongan people have high prevalence rates of mental illness, do not utilise mental health services, and the risks of mental illnesses were different between Tongan people born in Tonga and those who were born in New Zealand. The risks were higher for those who were born in Aotearoa New Zealand (A/NZ). The overall aim of this research is to explore the meaning of mental illness for Tongan people in A/NZ, and the research question is, what is the meaning of mental illness for Tongan people in A/NZ?

The Tongan cultural framework *talanoa* was used as a conceptual framework to inform this research and also as a method for collecting the data. Using *talanoa* engaged this research in the circular and collective ideologies of Tongan people. Tongan cultural contexts are used to strengthen this engagement and the collection of data, and Tongan concepts are used to discuss the findings. Thematic analysis was utilised to analyse the data. These Tongan concepts construct (*tufunga*) mental illness from Tongan perspectives and interpretations.

This research found that Tongans in New Zealand perceive and interpret mental illness in three ways: through traditional Tongan interpretations, through Western and biomedical influences, and also through an intersection of Tongan interpretations and Western/biomedical influences. These interpretations are presented as themes. These themes were *tufunga faka-Tonga* (Tongan constructions of mental distress); *tufunga faka-paiōsaikosōsiolo*

(biopsychosocial constructions of mental distress), and the *tufunga fepaki mo e fetaulaki he vaha'a 'o e tufunga faka-paiōsaikosōsiolo mo e tufunga faka-Tonga* (intersections between biopsychosocial and Tongan constructions of mental distress).

The research findings, therefore, highlight challenges associated with applying a biomedical linear, individually focused Western mental health system to a traditional Tongan, circular, and collective community in A/NZ.

## **Dedications**

*To users of mental health services and indigenous traditional healers and health providers*

*To my grandparents, Lavenita Vaka (RIP) and Univā Si'ulua Vaka (RIP), Soane Tātuila  
(RIP) and Makalita Pusiaki Tātuila.*

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## Glossary

akafia	migraines, associated with spirits. A form of sickness / illness thought to be caused by conditions of the dead, as in a bad back ache in a living person linked to tree roots running through the back skeletons of a dead person
alea	discussion
ālonga	very slow, form of mental distress and mental illness
anga	behaviour
angaangaua	two characters or personalities, form of mental distress and mental illness
‘anga	suffix denoting place, fitness or suitability
‘atamai	mind, brain
‘atamai tuai	slow brain
‘atamai vaivai	weak brain, weak mind, form of mental distress and mental illness
au	coconut leaves net
‘auhia ka e kisu atu pē	struggling to reach shore and taking on water, symbol or <i>heliaki</i> for one who does not give up in the face of adversity.
‘āvanga	psychotic behaviours interpreted as being possessed by the spirits, form of mental distress and mental illness
‘āvanga fēmaleleaki	bipolar affective disorder
‘āvanga motu‘a	schizophrenia
‘ave	carried away, taken

‘āvea	spirited away, obsessively thinking, taken away
fa‘ahi kehe	the other side, the side or dimension where the dead dwell as opposed to the living
faingamālie	opportunity
faito‘o	treatment, removal, process of healing
faito‘o faka-Tonga	Tongan traditional medicine
faito‘o faka-Pālangi	Western medicine
faito‘o konatapu	illegal drugs
faivamālie	good work of art
faka‘apa‘apa	respect
fakaheka	on-board, the beginning of the application of Tongan medicine, especially of some herbal nature
fakahīhī‘anga	sloppy, form of mental distress and mental illness
fakakaukau	thinking
fakalou‘akau‘i	voodoo magic
fakamalu tēvolo	mushroom, psilocybin – thesis
fakapo‘uli	darkness, being filled with darkness.
fakasesele	stupid, fool, idiot, silly, form of mental distress and mental illness
fala	mat
fale	house
fa‘unga	reality
fa‘unga me‘a	creating and/or collection of tangibles and intangibles
fa‘unga mo‘oni	bodies of truths

fa'unga sino	creating and/or collection of tangibles
fēmaleleaki	running forward and backward abruptly
fofola	roll out
fofola e falá ka e alea e kāinga	roll out the mat for the relatives to dialogue, symbol or <i>heliaki</i> for the primary importance of the collective interests of the group over those of the individuals
folo	swallow, swallowing something
fono	village and/or family meetings
haafe meti	half mad, half mate (mate or first officer on a ship), form of mental distress and mental illness
hē (lost/astray)	hē (lost/astray)
heliaki	metaphor, proverb, simply saying one thing but meaning another
hu'unga	directionality
'ilo	eat (term for chiefs/nobles), knowledge, knowledge production
kai	eat (term for the commoners)
kāinga	extended family, kin
kāinga lotu	church community
kaungāmālie	well-attended
kaukau tuku	last bath, made up of herbal extracts marking end of healing process
kava	plant - <i>Piper methysticum</i>
kava circle/gathering	ceremonial or social gathering drinking <i>kava</i> (see <i>kava</i> )

kava club	group of regular kava drinkers, identified group of people drinking <i>kava</i> , for example, Vava‘u <i>kava</i> club (group from Vava‘u)
koha	gift in Māori
langa	to raise, rise up, pain
langimālie	clear and peaceful sky, symbol or <i>heliaki</i> for peaceful life or good health.
laumālie	spirit
lohohoho	part of the coconut tree where the coconut fruits hang onto
lolo mai	feelings of numbness, loss of energy and concentration, and abdominal pains with difficulty breathing
loto	soul, heart
Lotoleveleva	a place where Queen Salote took her son
lotomālie	middle point
lotu	religion, prayer
lotu motu‘a	old religion
loufātai	fatai leaf
māfana	warmth
mafuli	overturn/ed, form of mental distress and mental illness
mahaki fakamahaki	spirit related illness, form of mental distress and mental illness
ma‘i pālangi	illness introduced to Samoa by foreigners (Samoan language)
ma‘i Samoa	Samoan illness (Samoan language)

mahaki	sickness, illness, forcefully emptied
mahaki faka-tēvolo	spirit related illness, form of mental distress and mental illness
mahei	tilt, form of mental distress and mental illness
mala	curse, form of mental distress and mental illness
male‘ei	incline, form of mental distress and mental illness
mālie	harmony, beauty, harmonious/well done
masoli	chip/ed, form of mental distress and mental illness
matilo	crack/ed, form of mental distress and mental illness
matiti	crack/ed, form of mental distress and mental illness
matoli	chip/ped, form of mental distress and mental illness
maumau faka-‘atamai	broken/injured mind/brain, form of mental distress and mental illness
me‘a	thing, something
me‘a mo‘oni	true thing/truth
me‘a‘ofa	gift
meimei taimi vave	nearly fast timing, form of mental distress and mental illness
meimei tei	meimei means nearly and tei is Tongan transliteration of ‘day’ referred to someone in the night with little light, form of mental distress and mental illness
metikolo	Tongan transliteration of medical as things pertaining to medicine

mihimihi	Māori greetings
mo‘oni	truth, reality
motu‘a	old
mo‘ui lelei	good life, good health, healthy
namu tēvolo	smell like a ghost or spirit
napangapangamālie	well balanced
noa	sense of balance, harmony, zero, without concealment
nonu	plant – morinda citrifolia
‘ofa	love
paiō	Tongan transliteration of bio as abbreviation for biological as things pertaining to biology
paiōmetikolo	Tongan transliteration of biomedical
paiōsaikosōsiolo	Tongan transliteration of biopsychosocial
pālangi	Caucasian, white person
poto	skilful, wisdom, knowledge application
puke	un-well, illness, seized
puke faka-‘āvanga	possessed by spirits, form of mental distress and mental illness
puke faka-‘atamai	an illness of the brain, form of mental distress and mental illness
puke fakamahaki (fakamahaki)	possessed by spirits, form of mental distress and mental illness
puke faka-tēvolo	possessed by devil/s, form of mental distress and mental illness

Pulotu	Afterworld, world of the dead
saiko	Tongan transliteration of psycho as abbreviation for psychological as things pertaining to psychology
saikosōsiolo	Tongan transliteration of psychosocial
satulō	Tongan new term for mental illness referring to the devil
sesele	silly, eccentric, superficial, form of mental distress and mental illness
sino	body
sino‘i me‘a	visible body/object
sino‘i mo‘oni	body of truth
sōsiolo	Tongan transliteration of social as things pertaining to society
suei	sway/ed, form of mental distress and mental illness
tā	time, to hit, strike, beat, hit, pace, rate, motion, movement
tā‘anga	temporality
taimi	time, Tongan transliteration of time
taimi tuai	slow timing, too slow, form of mental distress and mental illness
taimi vave	fast timing, too fast, form of mental distress and mental illness
tala	to tell, told, telling
talanoa	talk, talking
tālanga	formal conversation with an agenda and structure
talatala ‘i fale	tell it in the house

tamasi‘i vale	ignorant, innocent and inexperienced boy
taula	anchor
taula‘eiki	person who communicated to the lords or gods who resides on higher grounds from the land in the sky
taumafa	eat (term for kings)
tā vā	time-space
te‘ia	physically abused as in slapped, smacked, or smashed by a spirit, form of mental distress and mental illness
temeniō	Tongan transliteration of demons
tēvolo	Tongan transliteration of devil
tofoto‘o	consultation, to operate
tofu	accurate, calm, peace, harmony
to‘o	remove
toutai	fishing, main fisherman of the ūloa (see ūloa)
tu‘a	commoners , outside
tufa	distribution
tufunga	construction, construct, also term for material art, for example, <i>tufunga langafale</i> (material art of house-building), <i>tufunga lalava</i> (material art of <i>kafa</i> (strings) sennit-lashing), <i>tufunga fonua</i> (material art of social engineering)
tufunga faka-Tonga	Tongan constructions
tufunga fepaki mo e fetaulaki he vaha‘a ‘o e tufunga faka-	intersections between biopsychosocial and Tongan constructions of mental distress



paiōsaikosōsiolo mo e tufunga faka-Tonga	
tufunga faka-paiōsaikosōsiolo	biopsychosocial constructions
tui	faith and referring to believing in God
tuki	collection sack
tuku	stop
tukuto‘o	stop removing, discharge phase, marking the end of the healing process
tu‘umālie	wealth
tu‘unga	positionality
ua	two
ūloa	type of fishing, a communal fishing technique used in Tonga
‘ulu	head
‘ulungāanga	way of life, way of living, culture
‘uto	brain
vā	space, relationship
vale	ignorance, inexperience, unskilled, crazy, stupid, mental illness, form of mental distress and mental illness
vave	fast
waka	Māori for transport, canoe

## Table of Contents

Abstract.....	i
Dedications .....	iii
Acknowledgements.....	iv
Glossary .....	vii
Table of Contents.....	xvi
List of Figures.....	1
Chapter One: Introduction .....	2
Introducing the research context .....	4
The research population.....	8
The development of this research question .....	9
Key terms .....	12
Mental distress, mental illness, and mental disorder .....	12
Service user.....	14
Pacific peoples.....	15
Structure of the thesis.....	17
Chapter Two: Defining Health and Illness and the Role of Culture in Mental Illness.....	20
Introduction.....	20
Defining health.....	21
<i>Langimālie</i> (clear and peaceful sky) Pacific health.....	24
‘ <i>Atamai mo e fakakaukau</i> (mind and thinking) – Defining mental health .....	27
‘ <i>Ulungāanga</i> – Culture.....	29
Cultural safety in nursing .....	34
<i>Vale, puke faka-‘atamai, mahaki‘ia faka-‘atamai</i> – mental distress, mental illness and mental disorder.....	37
The Diagnostic Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM) .....	40
Summary .....	42
Chapter Three: Mental health, Pacific Island people, Tongans, and Migration .....	43
Introduction.....	43
Pacific mental health and mental distress.....	44
Mental health and mental distress within immigrant populations.....	53

<i>Vale, puke faka-‘atamai, mahaki‘ia faka-‘atamai</i> amongst Tongan people (Mental health and mental distress amongst Tongan people).....	59
Summary .....	68
Chapter Four: <i>Tufunga Fekumi</i> (Research Design) .....	70
Introduction .....	70
Aims of the research .....	72
Research procedures and conceptual/cultural framework.....	72
<i>Tālanga</i> .....	73
<i>Talanoa</i> .....	75
The participants .....	84
Data Collection .....	87
Ethical issues .....	89
Terms of credibility .....	94
Data analysis: thematic analysis .....	99
Introduction to the findings .....	103
<i>Talanoa</i> participants .....	105
Summary .....	115
Chapter Five: <i>Tufunga faka-Tonga</i> (Tongan constructions of mental illness) .....	117
Introduction .....	117
<i>Fa‘unga</i> (Reality) .....	121
<i>Hu‘unga</i> (Directionality) .....	146
<i>Tā‘anga</i> (Temporality) .....	162
<i>Tu‘unga</i> (Positionality).....	167
Summary .....	173
Chapter Six: Tongan people <i>talanoa</i> about <i>tufunga faka-paiōsaikosōsiolo</i> (biopsychosocial constructions of mental distress).....	174
Introduction .....	174
Challenging Tongan beliefs.....	175
Language – use of English and biopsychosocial language.....	182
Stress as onset of mental distress.....	190
Drugs and Alcohol.....	198
Summary .....	202

Chapter Seven: <i>Tufunga fepaki mo e fetaulaki he vaha‘a ‘o e tufunga paiōsaikosōsiolo mo e tufunga faka-Tonga</i> (intersections between biopsychosocial and Tongan constructions of mental distress) .....	204
Introduction .....	204
Migration .....	207
Social networks.....	216
Services and resources for people and families experiencing mental distress .....	217
Participants’ experiences with mental distress – treatments and outcomes .....	219
Christian faith .....	222
Summary .....	225
Chapter Eight: <i>Fofola e falá ka e alea e kāinga</i> (Roll out the mat for the kin to dialogue) ..	226
Introduction .....	226
Circular, collective Tongan system versus linear and individualistic health system .....	228
<i>Tā vā</i> : time-space theory of reality .....	236
Displacing Tongan culture .....	238
Healing process, the concept of <i>to ‘o</i> (removing/uplifting) .....	242
<i>Tofoto ‘o</i> (to operate): Consultation phase .....	244
<i>Faito ‘o</i> (removal): Treatment phase.....	245
<i>Tukuto ‘o</i> (stop removing): Discharge phase.....	246
The <i>fale</i> (house/family/people) .....	248
Youth <i>fale</i> .....	248
Service user <i>fale</i> .....	249
Families with service users of mental health services <i>fale</i> .....	251
Families without mental health service users’ <i>fale</i> .....	253
Women’s <i>fale</i> .....	254
Community leaders’ <i>fale</i> .....	255
Men’s <i>fale</i> .....	256
Messages from the <i>fale</i> .....	257
Reconceptualising <i>vale</i> : Process of growth and adaptation .....	259
Summary .....	261
Chapter Nine – Conclusion and recommendation: <i>Ūloa</i> , a Tongan model of practice ...	262
Introduction .....	262
Limitations of the research .....	263
Implications of the research findings.....	264

What might need to look different in services? .....	265
Tongan understandings of mental illness .....	266
Recommendations .....	268
<i>Ūloa</i> : A potential model for Tongan practice.....	272
Conclusion: <i>Talatala 'i fale</i> (tell it in the house) – Tongan concept to reflect on the process and conclude the project.....	287
References:.....	290
Appendices.....	313
Appendix I: Massey Human Ethics Approval.....	313
Appendix II: Confidentiality Agreement for Intermediary Person .....	314
Appendix III: Information Sheet .....	315
III.a    Information Sheet.....	315
III.b    Information Sheet - Tongan .....	317
Appendix IV: Consent Forms .....	319
IV.a    Consent Form.....	319
IV.b    Consent Form – Tongan.....	320
IV.c    Focus group participant consent form.....	321

## List of Figures

Figure 1.1 Map of Tonga .....	6
Figure 4.1 <i>Talanoa</i> .....	83
Figure 4.2 Participants: The <i>talanoa</i> groups.....	86
Figure 4.3 Themes .....	101
Figure 4.4 The seven <i>talanoa</i> group.....	105
Figure 5.1 <i>Fa'unga</i> (reality).....	118
Figure 5.2 Bodies of truths with multiple meanings of concepts.....	119
Figure 8.1 The linear individual and circular collective ideologies.....	229
Figure 8.2 The Western holistic view and the traditional cultural view of the person.....	239
Figure 8.3 The transformation of Tongan spirituality.....	241
Figure 9.1 Tongan understandings of mental illness.....	267
Figure 9.2 Assessment of mental distress.....	278
Figure 9.3 Knowledge, skills and interventions.....	280
Figure 9.4 Mental health worker roles.....	282
Figure 9.5 <i>Ūloa</i> Model.....	286