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Relational and collective excellence: unfolding the potential of Pacific early career researchers

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Relational and collective excellence: unfolding the potential of Pacific early career researchers*

Pacific Early Career Researchers Collective**, Jean M. Uasike Allen (Tonga-Makaunga, Kolovai, Tongatapu, Vava'u: Tefisi; Pālangi) [a], Jesi Lujan Bennett (Guåhan (Guam)-Barrigada and Dededo) [b], Zaramasina L. Clark (Tonga-'Ohonua, 'Eua; Pālangi) [c], Kirita-Rose Escott (Samoa-Fasito'outa, Mulifanua; Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairoa; Palagi) [d], David Taufui Mikato Fa'avae (Tonga-Ma'ufanga, Taunga Vava'u, 'Eua, Niuafo'ou; Samoa-Satalo; Niue-Alofi) [e], Jasmine Lulani Kaulamatoa (Tonga-Niutoua, Tongatapu, Ta'anea, Vava'u; Pālangi) [f], Rachael Kaulamatoa (Tonga-Niutoua, Tongatapu, Ta'anea, Vava'u; Pālangi) [g], Taniela Lolohea (Tonga-Vava'u, Ofu, Kolomotua) [h], Melemafi Porter (Tonga-Faleloa, Ha'apai) [i], Veisinia Pulu (Tonga-Tongoleleka, Kotu Ha'apai; Fiji-Mualevu, Lau) [j], Sylvia Tapuke (Samoa-Fasito'otai, Fai'a'ai, Sili, Lalovaea, Solosolo; Tūhoe, Ngāti Hineuru, Tūwharetoa, Raukawa ki te Tonga) [k], Yvonne Ualesi (Samoa-Mulivai Safata, Pu'apu'a, Savalo, Lotopa; Tokelau-Fakaofo; Fiji-Bureta Ovalau) [l], Solema Elspeth Withers (Samoa-Sama'i, Falelatai, Aotearoa-born in Taumarunui) [m] and Victoria Helen Woolner (Cook Islands-Mauke: Kimiangatau; Papa'a) [n]

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ABSTRACT

As Pacific early career researchers (ECRs), relational interconnections and engagement are at the heart of our collective responsibilities to each other. Although we share a mutual responsibility to our

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*We use the terms Pacific, Pasifika, and Oceania to refer to the geographic region that encompasses Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia. We acknowledge the colonial histories from which these terms were created. As a collective, we continue to discuss ways to reclaim an Indigenous and inclusive name for our larger region and peoples.

**All members are listed alphabetically under the Pacific Early Careers Research Collective, with the Collective as the lead author.

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research communities (in academia and industry), each Pacific ECR is unique in our field of research and genealogical connections to the Pacific. This paper engages the Indigenous story work methodology to capture, negotiate, and make meaningful links between our research experiences and relational excellence. This methodological approach reveals thematic elements of respect, responsibility, reciprocity, reverence, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy are woven throughout the paper to highlight our collective va-relationality and potential as ECRs. Our collaborative approach to defining and engaging with Pacific research creates new and innovative possibilities for Indigenous and Pacific research excellence.

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KEYWORDS
Relational excellence; Indigenous story work; va-relationality; collective responsibility; decoloniality

Introduction

> … my ancestors were guided by sky and sea trails way before Columbus even hoisted his sails!
> What we leave behind, matters to those who go before we face the future with our backs, sailing shore to shore …. (Marsh 2020)

In line with recent collaborative work of Pacific Early Career Academics (see Baice et al. 2021; Leenen-Young et al. 2021; Thomsen et al. 2021), this article also confronts many assumptions about what it means to be Pacific early career researchers (ECR), and the cultural mechanisms we use to make sense of our positionalities as researchers in academia, industry, and our wider communities. Our Collective encompasses a range of disciplines, including science, design, education, humanities and social sciences. Connected by our sacred and innovative Pacific ancestors, we united under the guidance of Fijian scholar Sereana Naepi at 'He Pito Mata Awakening the Potential- Early Career Research Wānanga', hosted by the New Zealand Royal Society in June 2021. During the wānanga, Samoan/Tuvaluan poet Selina Tusitala Marsh delivered this poetry excerpt above that reflects her message of unity, where her navigation to potential lies in her ancestral past as she journeys towards a common good. We resonate with this as we explore our varied experiences as Pacific ECRs, in and outside our respective institutions. We show that our research is not created in isolation from the world around us.

In constructing this article, we shared critical insights about what we found meaningful in our personal and professional trajectories. These conversations led us to explore the connections and fractures in what is often presumed to be a homogenous experience for Pacific ECRs. We are diverse across age, gender, race, ethnicity, location of upbringing, familial affinities, and institutional affiliations. As Pacific ECRs, our need to define 'research excellence' is in response to working in neoliberal and Eurocentric institutions in Aotearoa-New Zealand (NZ) (Kidman 2019). These institutions often reward extractive research created in isolation, especially when involving Indigenous communities. Our collaborative exploration and efforts reveal a different approach to knowledge production grounded in collective responsibility and relationality.

Central to our collective exploration to deconstruct conventional academic outputs, we also discussed innovative approaches to using our Pacific languages in research. Our relational approach found that using a single Pacific vernacular would homogenise

our related yet incredibly diverse histories, cultures, and experiences. Despite our varied and distinct Pacific heritage languages, we found a shared vernacular in our exchange of stories. These narratives incorporated the exchanging of personal belongings, cultural pieces, names of mentors, and practices that sustain us today. Together we found strategies to share how we draw from the past in our research while also creating new approaches to inspire Pacific ECRs yet to come.

Through discussions over Zoom, we shared our experiences to explore stories that captured our nuanced experiences as Pacific ECRs. These complex narratives reveal how we conceptualise and enact relational research, a concept grounding our professional work in communities and reciprocity. These stories are woven throughout the paper alongside key literature to analyse the robust ways we define relational research. We herein juxtapose our understanding of Pacific research excellence with global notions of research excellence, discuss how relationality is central to understanding research excellence from a Pacific ECR perspective and utilise Indigenous story work methodology (Archibald 2008a, 2008b) to engage with our narratives of research excellence. To begin, however, it is critical to ground our journeys concerning the Indigenous people and their understanding of research excellence as Pacific ECRs based in Aotearoa-NZ.

Positioning research on whenua

Although most of us are not Indigenous to Aotearoa-NZ whenua, our indigeneity is ancestrally rooted in places within Te Moana-nui-a-Kiwa. Our reference to Indigeneity or Indigenous relates to our connections with whenua and each other as Pacific ECRs. Firstly, it is critical as manuhiri to acknowledge tangata whenua, the Indigenous people of the land, and their distinct values and practices. At a relational level, excellence includes demonstrating the core value of humility and service by acknowledging one's position and being respectful as a visitor would within the lands of another. The proverbial Samoan statement further supports this shared belief across the Pacific, 'E lele le toloa, ae ma'au i e vai'. Despite where one is in the world, they will always return to their home – to their roots, culture, histories, and language. The return home can also occur in new lands, partly eased through our ancient connections to tangata whenua within Aotearoa NZ. Not only does this afford us a relationship distinct from other settler groups, but we can learn from their experiences of navigating and transforming excellence in research, an area yet to be fully explored.

Despite the shared genealogies, values, practices, and journeys of Pacific peoples with tangata whenua, we cannot assume that our experiences of knowledge construction, colonisation and reclamation are homogenous. Our Indigeneity negotiates our place-based vā-relations. It carries an ethical politics that confronts and reminds us not to perpetuate oppressive and demeaning practices that disadvantage Māori and other Pacific peoples directly impacted by settler-colonialism. We are also part of the settler-colonial rhetoric that supports the erasure of lands, language, and identity. Most of our parents and grandparents entered this country through immigration work schemes driven by the government of the day for the demand for cheap labour.

Consequently, those who stayed adapted to the requirements of the newly adopted and coveted educational system as a survival strategy within the 'promised land of milk and honey'. The success of a Pacific scholar within the mainstream education

system is regarded as a symbol of excellence. As we have reflected upon ourselves, it continues to provide honour to families and communities over generations.

The imprints of settler-colonialism have also led to the development of hegemonic legacies, including standards of excellence, which we hold. Over time, we become implicit in the cycle of meritocratic behaviour in contrast to our ancestors' cultural collective ethos and strengths. For the Pacific ECR, the demands of academia and research force us further from our traditional culture, identity, and language. In addition, the colonial histories of our Pacific homelands provide a space to position our decolonial and Indigenous Pacific intentions. Moreover, our Pacific Indigeneity continues to be directly and indirectly shaped and reshaped by colonial and intergenerational trauma that pervade our Pacific homelands and the settler-colonial state in which we position our thinking, writing and research. This knowledge of our position within Aotearoa NZ enables us to think about va-relationality within ourselves, with each other as Pacific ECR, with tangata whenua and their knowledge system, and with the dynamic and shifting knowledge system, we currently operate within.

> The assets are 'us', and the wisdom we receive through alagaupu (Samoan proverbs), pese (songs) and fagogo (stories) explicitly remind us of who we are, where we hail from and how to forge forward with excellence as knowledge-makers. (YU, 2022)

Global research landscape

Further concept development of research excellence as it relates to us as Pacific ECRs also requires consideration and understanding within a global context. In 2018, European scientists, policymakers, practitioners and scholars created five broad definitions of research excellence. They found that the term research excellence cannot be fixed, fully defined, and is open to interpretation. It requires quantification and measurement, resulting from the demands of evidence-based policies. The construction of research excellence indicators is a socio-political practice that influences science practice. Finally, developing transparency in the 'participatory process' of producing indicators is required to meet research excellence (Ferretti et al. 2018, p. 739).

Expanding from Europe to the Global North, research excellence is characterised by a continuous and closed system of competition, economic growth, privilege and power. Therefore, research excellence is associated with competition where 'researchers have always tried to be the first to find and the first to open new pathways of knowledge' (Beretz 2018, p. 30). In science and technology across industrialised countries, 'universities are seen as engines of innovation and sources of high-quality talent for growth of high-tech industries' (Haddawy et al. 2017, p. 389). The associations between those who determine excellence, how it is assessed, measures of excellence and who judges them are deeply embedded in all our systems. They are often underpinned by Euro-American-centric norms that privilege white middle-class practices and values (Kidman 2019).

These Euro-American-centric norms lead to the notion that research excellence is socially-constructed and is also open to the frailties of society by those who maintain power and privilege. They include biases and inherent prejudices, which result in a

lack of diverse perspectives and representation, inequitable resource allocation and access for those who do not fit the construct of excellence. Globally renowned Māori academics Smith and Webber (2019) argue that 'in most colonised jurisdictions, across the world generally and around the Pacific Rim, in particular, Indigenous communities continue to suffer high and uneven levels of social, cultural, economic, and political inequality when compared to non-Indigenous populations' (p. 814). Societal institutions responsible for education and research in these settler-colonial nations remain critical sites of struggle, as they embody colonial, systemic structures that inherently favour Eurocentric knowledge and ideals. The quest for research excellence also leads to research and innovation inequalities and straggling scientific outputs (Beretz 2018). Research excellence, therefore, can widen inequities amongst institutions and nations. Furthermore, managing research institutions using a corporate approach based on neoliberal ideals can drive negative perceptions of excellence (Beretz 2018). These lead to inequitable and oppressive outcomes for minority groups, with many left undervalued and underserved.

> In my experience, the widespread view of 'research excellence' does not often coincide with my view of Pasifika research excellence. This is a result of our universities being historically Pālangi spaces, built on Pālangi values and experiences; therefore, Pacific peoples are marginalised in countless ways. (JLK, 2022)

What constitutes excellence is a contextual matter, shaped and filtered through ideas linked to impact, relevance, quality, equity, and appropriateness. As a fundamental academic value, excellence can be a 'positive driving force that sets examples and provides less-biased incentives and rewards' (Beretz 2018, p. 33). Thus, universities and research institutions have a 'strong responsibility to be flagships, to act as beacons and examples' (ibid). Pacific peoples' desire to connect, shift thinking and practice depend on the research's relevance, appropriate design, delivery, and aim. In agreement with Paul Ramsden, the late I-Kiribati scholar Teresia Teaiwa positioned deep learning (2011) as emerging from a 'qualitative change in a person's view of reality' (p. 214). Although gathering data and evidence are valid, there are benefits in how such information is utilised to improve lives for Pacific peoples and their future generations. Thus, only meaningful research actively transforms thinking and practice.

> What makes Pacific research excellence to me is how we, as Pacific people, look to excel as researchers and innovators in our own spaces, whether that be about Pacific methods or knowledge systems, or interests outside of that, the parting difference is the importance of conducting unhindered research while representing our people, our family and our communities. (TL, 2022)

Disrupting the status quo and transforming processes and outcomes to meet Indigenous people's learning more effectively and socio-cultural aspirations is crucial (Smith and Webber 2019). The role of researchers is to ensure the approaches, concepts, and methodologies utilised within research resonate and align with the lived realities of the involved communities (Suaalii-Sauni 2017). As Pacific researchers, this means negotiating the tensions between naming and implementing processes and outcomes that (re)present the majority, without further marginalising the marginalised, are part of our robust and systematic analytics.

Pacific and the region: locating research purpose

As we move from the global context, it is crucial to acknowledge and recognise the Pacific region to which we as Pacific ECRs have ancestral ties.

> Pacific research excellence, in my view, is fluid and dynamic. It has an inter-generational relevance and appropriateness to it. The "excellence" not only relates to the production of new and innovative knowledge, it is also about "how" key research learnings are utilised to benefit and advance the lives of the kāinga and to'utangata. (DTMF, 2022)

Pacific scholar Yvonne Te Ruki-Rangi-o-Tangaroa Underhill-Sem (2020) claims, 'Oceanic narratives invoke notions of relationality that Indigeneity makes possible in the Pacific and allows for both fluidity and mobility, rootedness and grounding in (is)lands' (p. 317). This statement implies that research purpose in the Pacific involves locating one's self and the Collective's selves within the kāinga (extended families, kinfolk) and to'utangata (generations). As a result, forming a collective 'positioning [that] can be grounded, in many multiple and/or variable ways' (Underhill-Sem 2020, p. 317).

> First, looking within yourself, excellence is about you and everything that comes with you as a Pasifika researcher - experience, knowledge, values, attitude and skills. Secondly, excellence is about research that benefits your family, your communities and our Pasifika communities in general so that all of our lives are improved. (ST, 2022)

> Research excellence is integrally tied to building brave spaces that reflect the rich knowledge systems we come from. For me, that means creating research projects that are collaborative and strengthen our relationships with those in and outside of the academy. It means centering Pacific experiences and voices in the many spaces we negotiate as researchers. (JLB, 2022)

For Pacific Island nations, building human capital, capacity, and capability was paramount to regaining control of their decision-making from colonial administrators during the 1960–70s. This phase inspired several Pacific leaders and scholars to step up and lead the way (Wendt 1982; Hau'ofa 1994; Hereniko 1999; Trask 1999; Heine 2002; Sanga 2002; Teaero 2002; Teaiwa 2017). Like the quotes above, Pacific researchers interpret research responsibilities and notions of excellence by evoking their values, attitude and skills to ensure Pacific voices and the experiences of their communities and families are present and visible. Space here precludes us from highlighting all works that privilege Pacific ways of being, knowing, and doing across Oceania in various nations, islands, and communities. However, work by Heine (2002), Bevacqua (2017), Na'puti (2019) and Bennett (2022) provide an example of how scholars working within the Northwestern Pacific (Micronesia) navigate ways to centre their voices and experiences while their nations remain politically governed by or in a political relationship with the United States.

The challenge we face as Pacific ECRs is demonstrating our understandings of research excellence (which may disrupt dominant discourses) whilst continuing the development of our identities as Pacific peoples within these colonial spaces. For instance, extra and unpaid labour goes into explaining/unpacking Pacific research excellence in institutional systems and continuing the development of research excellence as Pacific peoples. Argentinian decolonial scholar, Walter Mignolo, sees the shift from the deficit descriptor 'third world' to that of 'Global South' as a symbolic liberation from

Western democratic rhetoric (2021). Locating indigeneity and decoloniality in the Global South is symbolic. Furthermore, Mignolo and Walsh (2018) centred relationality as the key to understanding decoloniality. For us, the Collective development is central to our process of excellence, allowing us to privilege and develop relationality which assists in sustaining and revitalising our cultures within academic research spaces. This sustainability and revitalisation through research '*benefits Pasifika communities for improved lives*' (ST, 2022). It is part of the '*importance of conducting unhindered research while representing our people, family, and communities*' (TL, 2022). These quotes, alongside others throughout the article, demonstrate our commitment to honouring our various connections and the collective relationality of excellence through seeing-knowing-being-doing excellence.

Relational theory: seeing-knowing-being-doing excellence

Māori scholar Carl Mika (2017) takes an Indigenous world philosophical view of the self as being constructed by the world and vice versa. His view affirms that all entities in the world, including humans, are interrelated. This theorising is an appreciation of the holistic, interrelated nature of Indigenous Pacific knowledge, ideas, values, and practices. Seeing-knowing-being-doing excellence affirms that pursuing knowledge requires us to appreciate the nuances in our sensing and making meaning of the world. Although our experiences transcend geographic, political, colonial, and spiritual boundaries in the Pacific, our (re)presentations of being and becoming in the world are intimately tied to our whakapapa as kāinga of Pacific migrants settled in Aotearoa-NZ. Our obligation is to respect and honour Te Tiriti o Waitangi, tangata whenua, and one another as fellow ECRs within this Collective. Learning to make sense, navigate, and appreciate these positions of interconnectedness is a measure of our relational essence and excellence.

> Relationality is a big thing for Indigenous peoples. Knowledge is the understanding that you're a part of a whole. The whole-ism. And we're not separated from the land or the moana … our languages tell us that; those songs tell us that, so [it's] that kind of … understanding. Most people don't get it. If you don't grow up in it, you know, in that kind of community. You won't get it. But it's a deeply philosophical thing. (DTMF, 2022)

Ethics of care and generosity, articulated above, underpins relational theory (see also Suaalii-Sauni 2017). Reciprocating and respecting our interrelational and interdependent connections with our communities, one another, and other entities in the world, is an appreciative practice. Certain Pacific concepts are used to (re)present relationality, including va (Samoa), vā (Tokelau, Tonga), vahaloto (Niue), veiyaloni (Fiji), and wā (Hawai'i, Māori) (Togiatama-Otto 2015; Fa'avae 2018; Aporosa and Fa'avae 2021; Smith and Wolfgramm-Foliaki 2021). Pacific scholars affirm the centrality of Indigenous relationality when unpacking the interconnections between knowledge, world views, people and practices (Wendt 1982; Māhina 2010). The state of va/vā/vahaloto/veiyaloni/wā as spatial and temporal relations within Western academia are epistemically in the margins, deemed of little value. When implementing theory and the agentic and emancipatory conditions aligned with its practice, wā/veiyaloni/vahaloto/va/vā-relationality embodies a disruptive yet generative state and space where Indigenous stories, perspectives and experiences find grounding and relevance.

Locating methodology: Indigenous story work

Locating an appropriate methodology that aligned with our knowledge, values, worldviews, and practices was a priority. Our approach using talatalanoa allowed us to privilege our desire to maintain wā/veiyaloni/vahaloto/va/vā-relationality and enabled collaboration and cohesion within the Collective despite tensions of power. Thus, while Indigenous Pacific methodologies such as talanoa and talatalanoa (Aporosa and Fa'avae 2021) centre on the oral traditions of some of our ancestors, the concept did not resonate with the majority of lived realities. Given the ongoing development of our relationality and the unfolding of our potential as a collective, our responsibility was to ensure inclusiveness with our methodology, analysis, and representations of peoples' stories linked to 'research excellence'. Honouring our diversity and specificities, we reflected on employing Archibald's Indigenous story work (Archibald 2008a). Jo-ann Archibald, also known as Q'um Q'um Xiiem, is a First Nations scholar from Stól:lō with St'at'imc ancestry. Her work canvases Indigenous studies and education with a focus on the importance of story work in meaning-making and Indigenous ways of being, doing, and knowing. While Archibald is not Pacific, her story work methodology was well-suited to our group as it honours the oral traditions of all our ancestors, focuses on relationality and provides a collective approach that does not privilege one Pacific group over another. This approach was essential to us as part of the development of our relationality involved respecting the 'mana' (prestige) of people's voices. Indigenous story work privileges lived experiences and stories; how they contribute to cultural revitalisation, resistance to colonisation, and disruption, as 'the words *story* and *work* together signal the importance and seriousness of undertaking the educational and research work of making meaning through stories, whether they are traditional or lived experience stories' (Archibald 2008a, p. 3).

Before we elaborate on the story work methodology, context is required regarding our approach and processes. Prior to the end of He Pito Mata, we collectively decided to stay in contact via online Zoom sessions. The sessions commenced in August 2021 and spanned over six months. Each session followed a general prayer routine, followed by introductions and talatalanoa focusing on the paper's broad themes, concluding with prayer. During the sessions, members offered their experiences and perceptions of the process we were experiencing around research excellence. A dedicated session also focused on a Pacific meaning of research excellence. Employing a deductive analysis approach, comments were canvassed from eight online fono sessions using transcript and video recording excerpts. Direct quotes were selected and used to populate the indigenous story-work values table, with two core themes emerging. Firstly, the group discussed the process, context and structure of research excellence, which was then applied in writing this article. Second, the group identified foundational values of research excellence, discussed in the following section.

Four data collection and analysis techniques support the Indigenous Story work methodology, including capturing, appreciating, negotiating and meaning-making (Archibald 2021). Multiple approaches to *capture* stories, included digital tools (e.g. Zoom and Otter.ai), communicative modalities (listening, free talk, recounts, retelling), and visually (art, graphing and CAD (computer-assisted design)). The combined forms of capturing information enabled the group to deconstruct and reconstruct our thoughts whilst

appreciating our distinct and shared worldviews and perspectives. Stories, complex conversations, jokes and disagreements were shared in the sessions over 80–100 h, including meetings with focus groups to discuss specific responsibilities with the paper. Although sessions seemed light, there was also rigour behind decision-making stages as a group. For example, discussions around authorship and the merits of authorship types were held. A sub-group explored the different options supported by research and was presented to the larger group.

Further discussions were held, including developing a collective criterion (if we chose to use the traditional authorship approach), resulting in a mini-survey amongst the group because of time constraints. This process is one example of how the group *negotiated* spaces, pathways and direction. This approach has transferred into the article writing process to develop a collective voice. In this stage of making meaning of ourselves, we noted that our journey is relatively new, and we are still learning about each other and our diverse positions. Therefore, we are in a stage of *sense-making* rather than meaning-making. In other words, we are still sensing what collective research excellence is from our multiple and connected lenses. Reaching that next phase requires more time and close engagement. While these four elements cannot fully represent the complexities of the discussions, and responsive actions taken, there are facets of the process of collectively determining relational excellence that can be highlighted.

Although 'research excellence' is an ideal prioritised by institutions predominantly through the production of outputs, which has its purpose, it is not an ideal that comfortably resonates with our responsibilities and values. These instead focus on ensuring the continuity, survival, and thriving of our kāinga and communities. Nonetheless, we are located in institutions within higher education and research, and it requires us to (re)think, articulate, and transform the normalised practices and structures so that our community knowledge, worldviews, and practices can flourish for generations to come. After all, 'excellence' is in realising our 'being and becoming' with-by-for each other and our communities.

Collective cultural values

Our collective cultural values live within our ancestral stories. In this section, we unfold our conversations further, highlighting how research excellence is interwoven through Indigenous story work and its underpinning values. Archibald (1997, 2008a, 2008b, 2018, 2021) highlights the seven Indigenous principles of story work: respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Our collective relational process employing the story work methodology and its principles, are visually (re)presented in Figure 1, which was inspired by mathematical structures known as graphs/networks. The nature of a graph allows the exploration of connections within and across countless contexts, mathematical or otherwise. Drawing on this feature of interconnectedness, it embodies our organic engagements by the interconnecting swells across the Pacific Ocean. It was important to illustrate the folding and unfolding of critical conversations and their depths of value, which are connected to the seven principles of Indigenous story work (Archibald 2021). The cyclic and circular movements inside and out are evidence of our positional Pacific selves forming intersections whilst acknowledging difference in locality, discipline, and research excellence. As

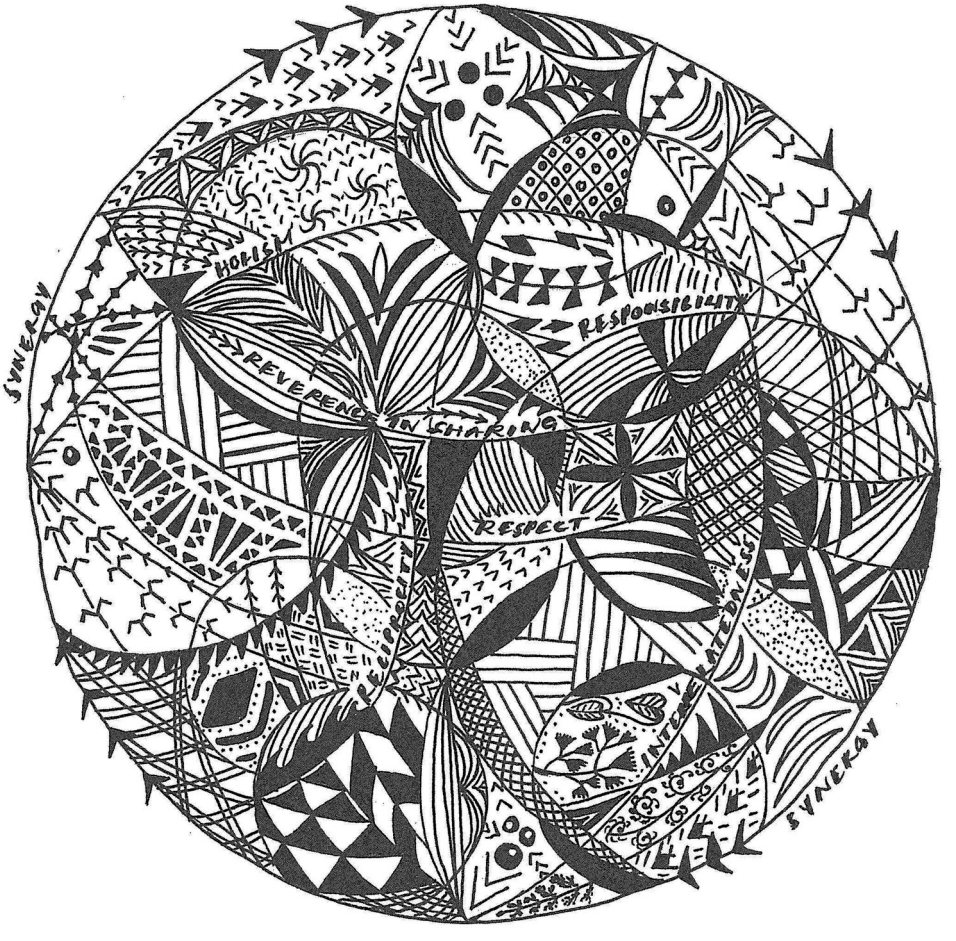

Figure 1. Graphic representation of the Pacific Early Career Researchers collective relational sense of research excellence using Indigenous Storywork principles.

Pacific peoples, we resonate with Archibald's principles and through our ongoing fono, unfolded the potential of our collective and our research excellence. It is important to note that while we have separated these values into individual sections, we do not view these values as separate. Rather, in accordance with Indigenous world views, values, customs, and practices are understood as holistic and cyclic (Bear 2000). Therefore, our dialogue and resulting understandings are grounded in multiple values, spaces, and contexts.

Respect

> They make connections with everyone despite not being in each other's physical presence. I think it's pretty magical that we're still making these genuine connections online. But also taking the time to learn about each other. Some of you I haven't had the pleasure of having a face to face talk with but reading your contributions, listening to those contribute in Zoom recordings, as well, has been really awesome. I wanted to acknowledge that … (JLB 2022)

Respect can be expressed and felt in several ways. For example, meeting familial obligations can be a sign of respect, as can demonstrating reciprocity with a generous friend (Ashworth 2019). Our Collective demonstrated respect in various ways. As articulated above, we lived the value of respect in the way we took time to develop relationships with one another, afforded people space to share, to story, and in our adoption of an inclusive approach to this paper. Archibald (2008a) articulates that we must have respect for the cultural knowledge embedded in the stories we are hearing and telling, showing respect to the people who own the stories. As a collective, we respect the mana individuals had over their voices and experiences and how these were presented in this article. As part of our ethical responsibility to the Collective, we had to agree that we were comfortable with where our voices were positioned, how they were framed and utilised.

Responsibility

Responsibility can be understood from individual and collective perspectives. The responsibility of the story work rests with us all. We reflected this responsibility by taking ownership of our stories. This honouring of stories reflects the values of our collective and many other Indigenous researchers (see: Smith 1999; Trask 1999; Bevacqua 2017; Ka'ili 2017; Na'puti 2019; Bennett 2022). Our responsibility, grounded in relationality, also requires a cyclic approach to our sharing, where we discuss, check, negotiate, make-meaning, and recheck meaning. It requires us to each take part in the process of learning (Archibald 2008a). The interconnectedness of our stories to those outside of our fono was evident.

> I think maybe the idea of collective benefit, because really if I can't see my work improving the lives of my family, my friends or my community then it's not really meaningful or "excellent work". (ZLC 2022)

> At the end of the day, if Pasifika communities can not gain from my research I wouldn't consider it excellence. (MP 2022)

Responsibility to one another, alongside those in the communities, spaces, and places we are connected to is central to our values as a collective. By prioritising relational dialogue, our collective responsibility is foundational to enabling research and scholarly transformation that matters to us and our communities (Battiste 2000).

Reverence in sharing

There is an intimacy and vulnerability in sharing one's experiences. For Indigenous Pacific peoples we bring our whole being into spaces, sharing our ancestors, those who have come before us, those who we honour. However, there is also power in sharing our stories during our collective fono and through this paper. Our words invoke a sense of revitalisation, of survival and of meeting our spiritual needs (Chamberlain 2008). Approaching our story work in an Indigenous ethical manner, drawing on our ancestors, prayers, and songs, we show reverence as storytellers, and story listeners (Archibald 2021).

> It is about you as a researcher never forgetting your roots, maintaining connection to your identity, culture and language; and doing the very best you can within (and beyond) the system you work in, and upholding the values of your ancestors. (ST 2022)

> When the effects of our work unfold within the community, we know we have reached māfana when we experience ʻofa. This is a good indication of successful, fruitful and empowering research. (RK 2022)

This revitalisation is realised in the upholding of our values, and through the development of relationality, which continually evolves and assists in negotiating story and space. It allows for the people sharing and listening to demonstrate a reciprocal reverence for the stories and knowledge being shared (Davidson 2016).

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a core Indigenous Pacific value and is seen as a way of addressing power within the research setting. The act of exchange for the mutual benefit of both giver and receiver includes transference of energy, time, knowledge, and resources, and establishes order and equilibrium. It provides an ethical guide for those working in Indigenous spaces and/or with Indigenous peoples (Smith 1999). Archibald (2021) articulates that within educational settings, reciprocity is marked by the mentoring of others, and knowledge sharing. Our collective discussions often involved the importance of mentorship and creating pathways for fellow Pacific researchers within our various spaces. As the quote below demonstrates, reciprocity is an important aspect of excellence from a Pacific perspective.

> Excellence is also holding the door open for the next generation coming through, it's holding space for my peers to thrive in this environment too. (ZLC 2022)

While mentorship is part of our understanding of reciprocity, we acknowledge that it is often tied to our experiences and to people who guide our ethical practice. Archibald (2008a) discusses reciprocity as being about balance and sharing our learning. For our Collective, reciprocity and excellence were tied explicitly to kāinga.

> When I think of the essence of who I am as a Pasifika ECR, I think of her (my Mum). (K-RE 2022)

In addition to Archibald's (2021) explanation, our Collective determined that reciprocity for Pasifika ECRs is implicit with our sense of respect, duty, obligation to our families and communities. We recognise that knowledge exchange with our networks is fundamental to realising our full potential and achieving research excellence.

Holism

> For me excellence includes a range of things and I am quite ambivalent as I am equally repulsed by the western colonial system and its power, but also attracted to the research process and academia is general … It also involves a certain level so staunchness, of taking up space and holding it in acknowledgement of those who have come before us, and those who we will mentor, work with and advocate for in the future. (JMUA 2022)

Indigenous scholars have advocated for a holistic, human-centred approach to research, education, and academic spaces, where we can bring our whole being into these spaces we occupy (Mika 2017; Mignolo 2021). Story work articulates that holism addresses the relationships among the self, family, community, wider world, and the environment (Archibald 2021). This perspective is not new to Indigenous scholars, our understandings

of our being are relational and tied to more than ourselves in this point and time. As Māhina (2008) articulates, we, as Indigenous Pacific peoples 'walk forward into the past and walk backward into the future, both in the present, where the seemingly fixed past and elusively, yet-to-take-place future are constantly mediated in the conflicting ever-changing present' (p. 79). Our whole being and connection to space and time is ever evolving and interrelated in all we do and those who walk with us.

Interrelatedness

> I continue to learn from and share with those learning from or with me. Some might agree that a collective of knowledge building and strengthening might perhaps be our research excellence in continuity. Like the material-led practice of 'afa: It can be diverse, depending on the range of coconut sennit species or hands and thighs that roll the fibre, alongside intrinsic branches of critical thought at play. However, there are pluriversal contexts regarding the humble sennit braid. In Kiribati, it is referred to as Te Kora, their originality of use is demonstrated through intricately woven cuirass. They will have their specific contexts alongside this, however that is not for me to say, but rather to acknowledge how the sennits' interpretation across the Pacific Ocean can increase our knowledge and intersections of one and another. (SEW 2022)

Our Collective's interrelatedness is demonstrated in the above quote, where the author discusses their ideas of research and research excellence, in relation to the Indigenous Pacific practices of 'afa. Kerr and Ferguson (2020) articulate that through interrelatedness we experience stories in a fully embodied way, learning from them, rather than just seeking to interpret them. Indigenous interrelatedness involves aspects such as the heart, mind, body and spirit, alongside influences from family, community, and many other contexts (Archibald 2021). Interrelatedness between learning, knowledge, cultural practices, and contexts are discussed in the above quote. Moreover, synergy occurs when bringing together these diverse, yet interrelated concepts.

Synergy

Separating holism and interrelatedness in this article, allowed us to explore these values in their own right. However, they cooperate in the story work process to create synergy, 'powerful storywork understandings that have the power to help with emotional healing and wellness' (Archibald 2008b, p. 10). During our fono, dialogue evolved constantly, adding many perspectives. Archibald (2018) calls this shared work building dialogue 'synergistic action', where the shared experience of one person evokes a memory and contribution from another. We experienced this group synergy when discussing how excellence in the broader context unfolds to address various 'real world' issues.

> Research should be focusing on developing a practical real-world solution to issues facing families and communities. Therefore, improving services should be at the forefront of research. Part of the approach should include testing outcomes produced by the collaboration of both researchers and participants and making changes to ensure that it is effective. It should also involve systems development and promote community capacity building with the goal of improving the services and health of the community. (VP, 2022)

The development of our relationality through a range of online fono created synergy through our story work from positions of the storyer, the listener, and understanding the context in which the story is shared (Archibald 2018).

Conclusion

In summary, as a collective of Pacific ECRs, we constructed what research excellence means to us as Pacific ECRs. Research excellence begins with the development of relational excellence. It is through building and developing deep and cultivating meaningful relationships with one another, that we were able to bring our whole being, our ancestral ties, and wisdom into this space where we made sense of what excellence means to us as Pacific ECRs. Relationality is central to us as Pacific people, and through story work (Archibald 2008b) we were able to learn through our own and each other's stories, through intergenerational experiences, and through our connections to land and nature.

Our processes of engagement were rigorous, and we were systematic in our negotiations, that built on our values, our ways of being and becoming by-with-for each other and our communities. The seven principles outlined by Archibald (2008b) allowed us to demonstrate how collective research excellence is built not only through relationality, but is underpinned by key values such as respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Our negotiated process of story work addressed tensions of power, via negotiating knowledge bases, that demonstrated care, protecting mana moana and the spirit of our collective engagement. This is important as relationships and the building of va/vā/wa/vahaloto/veiyaloni are at the centre of our reality as people of and from the Pacific (Figure 1).

Through building these relationships, we are accountable to each other as well as our collectives – a central part of the ceremony of Indigenous research (Wilson 2008). Thus, for us, as Pacific ECRs, research excellence must begin with relationality, and the development of relational excellence.

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