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The TonGan model
adapting a community health development approach
to the Tongan diaspora in urban New Zealand

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THE TONGAN MODEL

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses a participatory action research project conducted with Tongans living in Mangere, a suburb of Auckland, New Zealand. The primary aim of the research was to adapt a well-proven New Zealand community development/health promotion model to use with Tongans living in urban areas, so as to enable them to address the health and well-being issues affecting them in a positive way. Information gathered in this study showed that Tongans in Mangere felt disorganised and disoriented in the face of the kinds of social, cultural, economic, health and environment issues arising in this “new” cultural and societal milieu. It was also clear that these factors directly affected their health and well-being.

This adaptation was to be called the “TONGAN Model”, with the letters TONGAN standing for; Talking, Organisation, Needs Assessment, Goal Setting, Action and Negotiated Evaluation. These designate steps in an operational systems approach to setting up and running empowerment-based community projects, where the community itself is in control. The possibility that this model might work with Tongans was especially interesting since its philosophy of empowerment and self-determination was different from the Tongan background from which many had come.

Overall, the research showed strong support for the TONGAN Model approach, and the final form of the Model presented here reflects fully the cultural and community requirements and views expressed by the participants. It is felt that this Model is not only applicable to Tongans in Mangere, but is also potentially useful for Tongans in other parts of New Zealand and perhaps also for other Pacific and migrant groups both in New Zealand and elsewhere.

Key Words: Tongan People, TONGAN Model, PEOPLE System, empowerment, capacity building
INTRODUCTION

Tongans have been migrating to New Zealand for more than a century, although the vast majority arrived after the 1970s or were born to parents who migrated since then (Taumoefolau, 2006). Many migrated with a pre-conceived idea that New Zealand is “the land of milk and honey” (McKenzie, 2007, p.36). As they settled in Auckland, they were confronted with a vastly different living environment and culture to what they had known in the Islands, and the adjustment for many was difficult and protracted.

The evidence from Mangere is that Tongans there felt disorganised and disoriented by the social, cultural, economic, health and environmental issues they faced in this - new- cultural and societal milieu. A Ministry of Health report (Ministry of Health, 2004) showed that such factors have had a negative impact on health and well-being. This also revealed that Tongan migrants in general have poorer overall health than the New Zealand population as a whole, and much of the excess morbidity and mortality was associated with the difficulties these families faced in adjusting to the New Zealand urban setting.

This research arose from the wish to try to do something about this situation from a community development and health promotion perspective. Mangere was selected as the site for this research, since it has the largest grouping of Tongan migrants in New Zealand. The aim was to see if there was interest in starting, in association with the University of Auckland, an empowering community development project run by local Tongans, with the aim of raising the level of health and well-being among Mangere Tongans.

What the primary researcher wanted to establish was whether such a project was wanted, and if so, whether an approach to organising this project along the lines of other successful health and wellbeing community projects in New Zealand was applicable to the Tongan setting. This approach is called “the PEOPLE System” (Raeburn, 1998), and the intention was to call the Tongan variant “the TONGAN System”. Both these models are described with more detail later. These aims led to a process of participatory action research involving initially, many informal discussions in kava groups and other settings, and then a more formal qualitative study involving 19 key Tongan stakeholders, selected by a method to be described shortly.

This paper focuses on the TONGAN Model itself, and on those parts of the larger research project that relate to the nature and acceptability of this model.

AIM

The aim of this paper is to describe the process and outcome of an attempt to assess the acceptability of a community development/ health promotion model to Tongans in Mangere, and to describe the final form of the model that emerged from this process.
RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The research objectives were:

1. To determine whether a model of community health and wellbeing action successfully used in a non-Tongan New Zealand environment could be adapted for usage by Tongans in Mangere, and in the wider New Zealand society.

2. On the basis of the information gathered, to present a version of this model that fully incorporated the requirements expressed by Tongan stakeholders in Mangere, in a form that was able to be used by the Mangere Tongan community to set up and run their own community development project.

THE “PEOPLE SYSTEM”

This model was developed by John Raeburn and has been successfully used in a variety of New Zealand and overseas community development projects (Raeburn, 1992, 2001a). This was the model that was taken to the Tongan community living in Mangere to see whether it would suit the Tongan context and their needs in Auckland.

The PEOPLE System is an eight-step planning and evaluation model based broadly on an operational systems theory. It is illustrated below. (Fig. 1)

**Fig 1: PEOPLE System: eight procedural steps**

In this depiction, the arrow represents a whole project progressively moving forward, following a series of semi-chronological action steps required to bring about a successful, sustainable and evaluable project. This includes feedback to all phases of this process, based on a systematic critical reflection process at each step. Here, the term PEOPLE is an acronym for “Planning and Evaluation of People - Led Endeavours”, which stresses control of the project by the community of interest itself. Such community control is at the heart of the empowering dimension which is the key value of this type of community project.
The community both determines its own needs and priorities, based on its own values and culture, and then implements and controls the whole endeavour themselves. Experts are used, but only as supports – the community itself owns and directs the project. The psychological sense of control that arises from this is considered to be directly health-promoting in its own right (Sarafino, 1998).

The PEOPLE System type of approach provides a sustainable method of working, with some projects that have used it surviving for up to 40 years. It also results in measurable increases of health and wellbeing, and its processes engender a high degree of participation, capacity building and community cohesion (Raeburn, 1998). It has been successfully used in Maori and other cultural settings, and across all age groups. As a consequence of all these factors, this approach seemed to offer an excellent potential model for application in a New Zealand Tongan context.

METHODS

This study was undertaken using a participatory action research (PAR) methodology adapted to a Tongan cultural and community context. PAR approaches involve interactive dialogue with the people being “studied” on a continuing basis, which assumes that those studied are active partners in the research process (Reason & Bradbury, 2001; Ramsden & Cave, 2002; Reason & Rowland, 1981). In the present study, this involved three consecutive stages as follows.

THREE STAGE PARTICIPATORY ACTION PROCESS

STAGE 1: INITIAL DISCUSSIONS (TALANGA)

In this first stage, the primary researcher (who is a Tongan) participated in Tongan social Kava clubs (three in Mangere and one in Ranui, West Auckland) - where Talanga sessions (discussion sessions) were conducted on the topic of the PEOPLE System Model. This involved describing the model with the aid of a visual representation of it, to see whether those present thought that a similar kind of model could be used in a Tongan community setting. The feedback from these sessions indicated general support for applying the kind of approach represented by the PEOPLE System in a Tongan context. This enabled the researcher to formulate questions about such an approach that were part of the questionnaire used in Stage 2.

STAGE 2: INTERVIEWS WITH KEY STAKEHOLDERS

The central part of the research described here involved face-to-face interviews of key stakeholders from the Mangere Tongan community. The process was as follows:

Selection of stakeholders

Nineteen key stakeholders participated in this research. They were selected by a method previously used in an Auckland community development setting (Campbell, 2003) to try to identify the most trusted community members to speak on behalf of different sectors of community (youth,
men, women, old people, etc). The technique is labelled “the Grid Method”, because it uses a grid to determine who the participants will be. In this study, the application of the Grid Method involved the primary researcher approaching numerous Mangere Tongans from different age groups, sexes and backgrounds, encountered in settings such as kava clubs, shopping centres and churches. In each case, he asked about the Tongans they most favoured to speak on their behalf in Mangere which is the name of the study area. This resulted in a lengthy list of names in a table, and each time a name was mentioned, a tally mark was put beside it (This was the “grid”). The researcher was then able to select the names of those most mentioned, which gave him a sample of 19.

In brief, this sample consisted of 17 males and 2 females. The ages of the 17 men ranged from 40 to 59 years and the two 2 females were aged 60 and 69. Sixteen of the stakeholders belonged to the Methodist Church while the remaining three belonged to the Catholic, Tonga Independent and the Tonga Uniting Churches. These stakeholders had lived in Mangere for 20 to 40 years.

Questions relating to the PEOPLE / TONGAN Systems

The interviews of the key stakeholders were guided by a questionnaire that covered a wide array of topics related to the setting up of a community project, and the perceived needs to be met by such a project. Amongst these questions were a small number relating specifically to the PEOPLE System. It is this group of questions that form the basis of what is covered in this paper. (Note that the “Tongan” version of the PEOPLE System emerged gradually through these discussions).

The introductory statement preceding these questions and the questions themselves were as follows.

Now I would like to talk to you about an approach to community development- which I am interested in. It is called the PEOPLE SYSTEM and it has been used in quite a number of community development projects in New Zealand. Its aim is to provide a simple way of enabling the community people to run their own project. It has a number of steps and bases its way of working on finding out what the people want for themselves, setting clear goals, being well organised and having a number of activities to meet the goals developed by the community people. Evaluation of how well it all works is also important. Could I ask the following questions?

- From what you have heard, do you think that the People System model is a good one? If so could you elaborate?
- Can this model used by Tongans living in Mangere community development work? If “yes”, how?
- Are there any constraints or difficulties of its usage by Tongans in Mangere in community development activities? If yes, why?
- One important aspect of the People System is that community people themselves decide on the priority issues and then work on these themselves. Do you think that local Tongan people would
be prepared to do this? If “yes”, why?

- Do you think there is a specific Tongan Style or set of values that could be added to the People System approach? If so, what are those?

Analysis of the key stakeholder data

The information collected from the key stakeholders’ interviews was transcribed and analysed using an adaptation of Thomas’s General Inductive Approach for Qualitative Data Analysis (Thomas, 2000). The results that now follow summarises what emerged from this analysis with regard to the PEOPLE System questions.

Is the model a good one?

All of the key stakeholders said that they thought that PEOPLE System Model was a good one. It seemed simple and easy to understand, and would help to guide Tongans in general on community action to resolve their problems.

Could the model be used by Tongans living in Mangere? Are there any constraints or difficulties that Tongans might encounter in using it?

All of the key stakeholders said that they thought the model could be used by Tongans in Mangere. They were also of the view that there would be no constraints or difficulties in using it, since the model is easy to understand, makes sense, and is simple.

Do you think that Tongans would be prepared to use the model with its concept of community control?

All but one of the key stakeholders stated that they thought Tongans would be prepared to use the model and its concept of community control. The one remaining participant was of the view that it would take time for the general Tongan population to work and change in the way suggested by this model, since their cultural orientation in the Islands was totally different to what is happening here in New Zealand.

Do you think that there is a specific Tongan value and style to be added to the model?

All of the key stakeholders said that they felt there could and should be specific Tongan values and style added to the PEOPLE System Model, and made suggestions in this regard.

Some examples of what people actually said relating to the above questions are as follows:

“I wish there was an appropriate Tongan model that the Tongan community could use in their community development activities…I like one that considers Tongan values and cultural protocols” (Female stakeholder).

“The literatures are full of different models ….even the Maoris they have published their own models….but it is sad to find few from the Pacific and even Tongans” (Male stakeholder).

“When I see a model that acknowledges me as a human being then I appreciate it at all times....
so the PEOPLE System model is one of them” (Male stakeholder).

“The People System model is easily understood…..there are many other models that were developed locally and overseas but they are complicated …they are hard to understand” (Female Stakeholder).

“If we have a model that looks Tongan, and everyone knows its Tongan….it respects and acknowledges Tongan cultures, values and its way of life” (Male Stakeholder)

STAGE 3: CREATING THE TONGAN MODEL

Overall, it can be seen that the key stakeholders almost unanimously supported the idea of something like the PEOPLE System but with a strong Tongan orientation. On the basis of this, the principal researcher then proceeded to design a distinctively Tongan version of the PEOPLE System, which he called the “TONGAN Model”. This is now presented. The TONGAN Model replaces the PEOPLE System’s arrow with the image of a boat moving forward in the water as illustrated in Fig 1.1. For Tongans, this boat represents key values of Tonganess as these relate to health and wellbeing at a community level namely – coherence, wealth, prosperity, connectedness, oneness, shared values and meaning.

Fig.1.1: The TONGAN Model: A Tongan version of the PEOPLE System

The eight procedural steps of the original PEOPLE System are replaced in the Tongan Model by six steps. In English, these six steps are summarised by the acronym “TONGAN”, which stands for the following:  T = Talking, O = Organisation, N = Needs Assessment, G = Goal Setting, A = Action and N = Negotiated Evaluation.

Each of these English words has a Tongan equivalent, which is shown by the words on the side of the Tongan boat. These steps are now described in terms of their Tongan meaning.

1. Talanga (Talking)

“Talking” in English can be interpreted in Tongan as “talanga”. Talanga originated from two
Tongan words “Ta” (the starting remarks in a conversation) and langa (the responding remarks in a conversation). Hence, Talanga is much more than just talanoa (talking without a purpose) in Tongan. It is a form of interactive verbal communication that has a purpose and which Tongans use in any community consultation that they do. In the context of this model development, “talanga” means that any community development project involving Tongans in Mangere would need to start with the Tongans themselves actively involved in talking (Talanga) about issues of concern to them.

Talanga can take a variety of forms. These include action talking (talanga ngaue), constructive talking (talanga langa fonua), inspirational talking (talanga mafana), reciprocal talking (talanga feveitokai’aki), positive talking (talanga ‘aonga), simple talking (talanga mahino), respectful talking (talanga faka-matapule) and entertainment talking (talanga malie). It is likely that some or all of these forms of conversation would be involved in the various discussions leading up to the formation of any kind of community development project.

2. ‘O’ofaki (Organisation)

“O’ofaki” refers to a particular kind of way that Tongan people organise themselves for taking community or health action. The ‘o’ofaki concept originates from the way chickens use their wings to collectively bring together or protect their young ones. When the young ones are together they feel secure and protected, and they receive warmth from being inside their mother’s wings. This is the kind of organisation and mobilisation that is exemplified in this step. ‘O’ofaki is more than just bringing the people together. It involves protecting and safeguarding them for a purpose in life.

In the context of setting up a community development project, the ‘o’ofaki approach means creating governance and organisational structures that bring people together to collectively plan and undertake action that reflects the stated values. In particular, the governance structure will need to ensure “community control” and the empowerment of the community to attain the goals arising from the needs-assessments.

The ideas key stakeholders shared in the research process definitely supported this kind of approach. People spoke of the key principles underlying ‘o’ofaki, including social cohesiveness (fetokoni’aki), togetherness (faaitaha), social recognition (fe’ilongaki), safety (hao), security (malu), oneness (me’a taha), caring and sharing (fetauhi’aki), reciprocity (feveitokai’aki), loyalty/commitment (mamahi’i me’a) and interconnectedness (fekau’aki). These principles are in accordance with the overall ethos of any good community development project, but are especially important in the Tongan context.

3. Vakai’i ‘oe Fiema’u (Needs assessment)

“Needs assessment” in English is interpreted in Tongan as “vakai’i ‘oe fiema’u”. This refers to identifying the most important and deeply felt needs of Tongans in their communities. It involves tapping in to the true needs and motivations of the people themselves and prioritising and stating those in ways that lead to practical action.
Certainly, the response of participants in the research indicated strong support for the kind of philosophy underlying the concept of a project driven by needs and issues articulated by the people, including the concepts of empowerment (fakaivia), community control (mapule‘i faka komiuniti), community-based wishes and wants (fiema’u vivili taha faka komiuniti) and community participation and involvement (kau kotoa‘ae komiuniti). These concepts were fundamental elements of the TONGAN Model.

4. Visone (Goal setting)

The fourth procedural step involves the transference of the felt needs into goals. Traditionally, Tongans would do such a task by having community, village or church meetings where they would discuss and decide on the goals to be adopted based on a consensual voting system.

This approach can be translated directly into the setting of the annual, monthly and weekly goals in community development. This involves specifying a “destination” or a kolo (i.e. what the desired outcome is) and deadlines by which the kolo is to be reached. Such goals need to be simple, measurable and attainable, at do-able in terms of available or potentially available resources (money, facilities, skills and person power). Overall, this process can be referred to as “community-based goal setting” (Kolo fokotu‘u ‘ehe komiuniti).

5. Ngaue‘i (Action)

The action step involves the development of a series of actions to meet each of the specified goals. In general the first step is to set up a subgroup around each goal, with its own leadership. The second step is to have the actions required to meet the annual goal broken down into a sequence of sub-goals, e.g. weekly, fortnightly or monthly. The setting of sub goals, and review of the action taken, happens through regular review meetings to monitor the progress and achievements of the project on an ongoing basis, using feedback from progress on sub-goals to confirm or alter action strategies.

The interviews indicated that Tongans would be willing to act on what was needed in the more measured and systematic way involved in this step. This would require them to be involved early in the action process, and in an on-going way regarding all aspects, including discussion, allocation, delegation and implementation of tasks and activities.

The research showed support for the more general values, requirements and principles implicit in taking action in the kind of way outlined here. These included community control (pule‘i ‘ehe kakai), empowerment (fakaivia ‘oe kakai), equity and equality of resources (tufotufa tatau he ngaahi koloa ngaue), loyalty/commitment (mamahi‘i ngaue) sustainability (mateaki ke tu’uloa), being community driven (fakalele ‘ehe kakai), and there being a contingency action plan (palani talifaki).
6. Fakama'opo'opo (Negotiated evaluation)

The last procedural step in the Tongan Model involved the monitoring and evaluation of projects and activities. In practical terms, this means setting weekly or fortnightly sub-goals leading to the achievement of each of the annual goals. To monitor progress, weekly or fortnightly review meetings are held to monitor progress on these sub-goals. New sub-goals are then set for the next weekly or fortnightly period.

Once a year, an overall audit of progress is done to assess both process and outcome of the project in terms of its goals. In addition to goal attainment evaluation, other measures can also be used as a supplement, such as satisfaction ratings of those involved, social, behavioural and health/wellbeing changes in the community, and so on.

In the TONGAN Model, the process of these review meetings is called “negotiated evaluation” because it is equally a social and an operational process. Not only do participants support each other and problem-solve together in achieving goals, but the evaluation of progress on these goals is determined in a consensual manner by the participants themselves. The degree of progress is discussed and negotiated- until all are in agreement that a fair appraisal has been made. The consensual outcome is then formally recorded as a statement of progress on that goal.

The assessment of goal progress and outcomes, and also the wider judgements on participant and community impact, can be of both a research and anecdotal nature. The key to this is the negotiated aspect – that is, the statements on final outcomes are negotiated in an atmosphere of support and collaboration. This in turn leads to supportive correction of actions that have not worked so well, and to the celebration of successes and achievements, the latter typically being the dominant kind of outcome.

The research supported the overall approach not only in terms of the concept of negotiated evaluation (fakama’opo’opo feloto’aki), but also in the wider values and principles relating to this approach, such as participatory evaluation (kau e kakai he fakama’opo’opo), community control evaluation (pule’i ‘ehe kakai e fakama’opo’opo) and goal-based evaluation (fakama’opo’opo ‘o fakatatau ki he taumu’a ngaue).

DISCUSSION

This research was aimed at determining in a preliminary fashion whether a model that had been successfully used to organise community-controlled community development in a number of non-Tongan communities in New Zealand could also be applied in a Tongan context, initially within the Mangere Tongan community. What has been presented here shows this does appear to be a suitable way of working, especially when it is comprehensively re-worked into a Tongan framework that incorporates Tongan language, values and processes. This appears to be true even though some of the core values of this approach, such as self-determination and empowerment, initially seem to run counter to traditional models of Tongan social organisation.
The model proposed here, the TONGAN Model, appears to meet the requirements of providing a sound organisational base for such an endeavour, given that it includes the key elements known to be successful in the PEOPLE System; It is comprehensively Tongan in all its dimensions. It is clear that a sense of Tongan ownership is already felt towards this Model, and will continue to grow. Certainly, as a way for guiding action in the proposed Mangere Tongan community development context, there seems to be strong support for proceeding in this way.

What are the limitations of this study? One obvious point is that there was minimal input from women, something that would need to be corrected in the future. Another is that this is very much a work in progress, and at an early stage. The TONGAN Model will need continuing refinement and elaborations, which can best be done once the overall project is under way. There is also need to spell out how each of the six steps of the model will be operationalised in practice.

CONCLUSION

The TONGAN Model introduced here appears to have promise. In its initial shape of development, it has been endorsed by a selected group of stakeholders which suggest it can now be developed and implemented.

Based on these initial findings, the next steps are to implement this project. This includes establishing a steering group, acquiring suitable premises to serve as an organisational and meeting centre for the project, commencing the talanga process, and organising a systematic community needs assessment involving a random sample of Mangere Tongan households.

These steps would then be followed by setting annual goals, forming action groups to start achieving the goals, setting working goals to guide these groups, and conducting ongoing reviews of progress, plus (in due course), annual audit based in the negotiated evaluation approach. Further annual goals would also be set as part of this annual stock-taking, beginning the goal-action-evaluation cycle again. In addition, the process to facilitate critical analysis and feedback at each stage would need to be set up.

We look forward to continuing this process in the form of a demonstration project taking place in Mangere- which hopefully can serve as a model for other Tongan communities in urban settings in the future.
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