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"We All Need to Work Together on This": Collectivised Approaches to Care in Pacific Post-Separation Families

Moeata Keil*

Abstract
Parental separation has become a common occurrence across the Anglo-West, including New Zealand where this study is based. Much of the literature on post-separation care of children relies on nuclearised understandings of family, focusing on how separated parents care for children and experience post-separation family life. There is limited research on the experience of caring for children in collectivist cultures, including Pacific cultures. Collectivist cultures often adhere to extended family structures and hold communally based understandings of care. In such contexts, caring for children both pre- and post-separation often involves children moving, living and being cared for across multiple households and family members, including their parents, grandmothers, grandfathers and other family members. Yet, there is a dearth of literature that examines how culturally distinctive modes of doing family that vary across culture and context impacts on how and by whom children are cared for following parental separation. Drawing on *talanoa* with 30 Pacific family members involved in children's everyday post-separation care, this article examines the actions that Pacific family members undertook to manage and mitigate the challenges experienced by children and parents in post-separation families. In pursuing this inquiry, I pay special attention to how collectivised approaches to caring for children translate into practice, shaping how children are cared for following separation and the meanings that family members attach to their care.

Keywords: collectivised caring practices; caring morality; post-separation families; collectivist post-separation families; Pacific families

Introduction

Terms like 'parent' and 'parenting' centralise individualised and nuclearised understandings and approaches to caring for children. Similarly, in the context of parental separation and divorce, phrases such as 'shared parenting' and 'shared care' often used in care-and-contact (or custody) as well as child support policies rely on assumptions that following separation, parents will cooperatively and collaboratively work together to make arrangements that facilitate joint forms of care and responsibility for children (Elizabeth et al., 2012b; Natalier & Dunk-West, 2019). Notions of shared care and shared parenting are connected to ideas that frame parents as being responsible for organising and providing care for children and also establishes parents as caregivers and children as receivers of care. Such constructions, however, render invisible collectivist and communally based ways of caring for children and all those impacted by parental separation, including the role that extended family members play in encouraging and fostering cooperative post-separation parentings arrangements for children (Keil, 2024; Keil & Elizabeth, 2022a, 2022b, 2023).

Parental separation prompts a (re)negotiation of children's care arrangements and, in particular, how, when and by whom children's care needs are met and fulfilled. Yet surprisingly, given how commonplace it has become across the Anglo-West for parents to live apart, we know little about how and by whom care is performed in shared parenting arrangements (Davies, 2015; Robertson et al., 2008, 2009).

* **Moeata Keil** is a senior lecturer in Sociology at Waipapa Taumata Rau | University of Auckland.
Email: moeata.keil@auckland.ac.nz

We know even less about the role that extended family members—or family members other than parents—play in caring for children following separation. There is a small body of sociological scholarship that explores practices of caring for children in post-separation families that extend beyond the couple and/or parent-child dyad, examining, for example, grandparents' caring practices (Davies, 2015; Lussier et al., 2002). Lussier and colleagues (2002), for instance, found that grandparents provide vital emotional support for children following their parents' separation. Similarly, Roberton et al. (2008) found that following parental separation, extended family, particularly grandparents, functioned as important sources of support for children. As such, Davies (2015) critiques the concept of shared parenting, which assumes a "triadic relationship" (p. 11) between parents and children, by highlighting the significant role that extended family members play in caring for children when parents live apart. Davies' research revealed that care of children was frequently provided by individuals other than biological parents and was strongly influenced by gender, noting that stepmothers, aunts and grandmothers were often key supplementary caregivers for children following parental separation. Children themselves described how care provided by these "othermothers" (Collins, 1990) was essential to their daily lives. Instead of referring to these arrangements as shared parenting, Davies (2015, p. 10) argues it would be more accurate to describe these situations as "shared care families".

Although parental separation and divorce as well as caring for children across multiple households has become a common occurrence across the Anglo-West and multicultural societies, much of the literature on experiences of post-separation care and family life draws on normative White Western and nuclearised understandings of family structure, and the nature and scope of caring obligations and practices within that structure, thereby reproducing nuclearised family norms, albeit in a bi-nuclear (post-separation family) setting. There are thus "implicit assumptions of caring as a unidirectional, linear and causal process of caregiving from parents (mostly mothers) to children" (Marschall, 2014, p. 518; see also Brannen & Moss, 2003; Haugen, 2007). There is limited research on the experience of caring for children in collectivist cultures, including Pacific cultures. These cultures often adhere to extended family structures and communal approaches to caring for children. In such contexts, caring for children both pre- and post-separation often involves children moving, living and being cared for across multiple households and family members, including their parents, grandmothers, grandfathers and other family members. As such, we have limited understandings of the everyday care work that extended family members, such as grandparents, aunties, uncles, cousins and so forth, provide for children whose parents have separated or divorced. In this article, I explore Pacific post-separation care practices, focusing on the role of extended family members in the lives of children with separated parents. Through *talanoa* with 30 Pacific extended family members involved in children's everyday post-separation care, I examine the actions that Pacific family members undertook to manage and mitigate the challenges experienced by children and parents in post-separation families, particularly in the period immediately following parental separation. In pursuing this inquiry, I pay special attention to how collectivised approaches to caring for children translate into practice, shaping how children are cared for following separation and the meanings that family members attach to their care. The findings are organised around three key themes: caring in times of transition, which highlights how family members support children and parents through transitional periods of uncertainty and change; collective caring ecosystems, which demonstrates how extended kin coordinate practical, emotional and cognitive support as a shared responsibility; and continuity of care, which shows how family members maintain caregiving environments across multiple households. Together, these findings demonstrate how care is relationally performed, morally guided and culturally embedded in Pacific cultural norms, underscoring the need to move beyond nuclearised frameworks to understand collectivist, intergenerational and culturally informed care practices.

Pacific family context

In Pacific cultures, family is understood in collectivist and communally based ways. Embedded within Pacific understandings of family are morally informed cultural expectations that family members—nuclear and extended—will collaboratively work together to provide one another with reciprocal care and support (Fleming, 1997; Stewart-Withers et al., 2010). Although parents are considered to be primarily responsible for children, it is common in Pacific families to share the physical, practical, cognitive, financial, emotional and spiritual care work associated with raising children with other, typically female, family members (Keil & Elizabeth, 2022a). In the context of parental separation, obligations and responsibilities of care for children are not understood in White Western and nuclearised terms as being private matters for parents to work out (Waldegrave et al., 2011). Rather, children's post-separation care arrangements are often treated as a concern of the wider extended family, who are actively involved in determining and facilitating the post-separation care of children (Robertson et al., 2008; Stewart-Withers et al., 2010; Sua'ali'i-Sauni et al., 2009; Waldegrave et al., 2011).

The culturally distinctive norms and values within Pacific cultures, similar to other collectivist cultures, about family and care for children means there is a need for research that explores how Pacific post-separation families care for children following separation. Such an inquiry is also pertinent given that 2023 New Zealand Census data found that 28 per cent of Pacific children lived away from one of their biological parents (Stats NZ, 2024). The high rates of sole parenthood in New Zealand's Pacific community, in combination with culturally distinctive family norms, make research into how Pacific families navigate post-separation care for children timely. Such an inquiry becomes even more important in the context of a shift towards shared forms of parental care and responsibility within socio-legal policy on post-separated families across many Western jurisdictions (Elizabeth et al., 2012a; Haux et al., 2017; Natalier & Dunk-West, 2019; Tolmie et al., 2010). The following section establishes the theoretical context of my examination by outlining Joan Tronto's (2015) notion of 'caring well' that will be drawn on to explore Pacific family members' post-separation caring practices.

'Caring well'

Tronto (2015) categorises care into distinct though overlapping classifications that she conceptualises as caring well. *Caring well* involves *caring about* and *caring for*, with the former referring to feelings of interest and concern that involves discerning and identifying a care need, and the latter involving the practical, physical and emotional labour involved in meeting those needs. Caring for thus involves recognising and acting on an identified care need and is embedded in a continuous process of needs anticipation and needs interpretation that includes the actual task of caregiving and, by consequence, care receiving. Giving care and receiving care are a cyclical process that involves anticipating, identifying, responding to and meeting care needs. However, as Tronto asserts, "care practices don't suddenly begin; they are already ongoing" (p. 4) and "care is not complete until the need is met" (p. 6). As such, "care is always present, rarely visible, always requiring something from us" (p. 6).

Care, caring and caring well are deeply relational; approaches to and understandings of care are relationally mediated by institutionalised norms of practice as well as connections with others. To elaborate, how care needs are identified—as well as who takes on the responsibility for meeting them—is embedded in broader family practices and influenced by a series of institutionalised and culturally produced activities and interactions. For instance, in the context of childcare, the organisation and delivery of care are shaped by social norms and values associated with both child-rearing and family life. These norms are not only culturally produced but also ideologically embedded, influencing how care is enacted in daily life. However, as David Morgan (2011) discusses in relation to family practices, individuals or family members do not routinely talk in explicit terms of 'doing family' life or engaging in family practices; rather, "they just do

them and live them" (p. 5). This is not to say that care and caring are simply passive or a static process of thought, action or activity, but that family members and families actively perform care even if it is not articulated it in these terms. Care practices can thus be understood as an ongoing activity embedded within everyday actions and interactions that are developed within what Allan et al. (2011) discuss as "the 'culture' of particular families and within their broader sociocultural milieu" (p. 33), or as Tronto (2015) discusses, a "culture of care" (p. 12). Thus, every society has a care culture that is congruent with its social and political institutions and its broader culture and practices.

Tronto's (2015) conceptualisation of caring well frames how I approach care in post-separation families. This is a transitional moment in family life when much of the taken-for-granted work of doing family becomes visible, as parents, children and wider kin must navigate family life in new and often unfamiliar ways (Pryor & Rodgers, 2001). Tronto's (2015) framework is pertinent because it moves beyond narrow individualised understandings of care that confine care for children to parents and within nuclear or bi-nuclear settings by conceptualising care as a relationally and institutionally embedded process. In this article, I examine what caring well looks like in Pacific post-separation family contexts by exploring in particular the care practices of extended family members.

Methods

Given my research focus, I employed qualitative research methods in the form of semi-structured, one-on-one *talanoa* with 30 Pacific family members living in New Zealand. Most lived in Auckland (n = 22), with additional participants in Wellington (n = 4), Rotorua (n = 3) and Ōhope (n = 1). *Talanoa* research methodology stems from Pacific oral traditions of producing, sharing and transferring knowledge through conversations and talk (Vaioleti, 2006, 2013). As a research method, *talanoa* gives people the opportunity to relate their experiences in their own words, and, significantly, in an environment and space that values and understands diverse Pacific cultural protocols, practices and worldviews.

With ethics approval, I recruited participants by placing advertisements in Pacific childcare centres and community organisation noticeboards across Auckland, and by partnering with community organisations to share invitations through email and social media. The call for participation invited Pacific family members who provided care at least one day per week for a child whose parents had separated. Of the 30 Pacific family members who participated in this study, 19 were grandmothers, 5 were grandfathers, 4 were aunts, and there were 1 uncle and 1 stepmother. To thank the participants for their time and *talanoa*, they were each given a $20 fuel voucher.

All the participants identified with at least one Pacific ethnicity: Samoan, Tongan, Cook Islands, Fijian, Solomon Islands and/or Tuvaluan. All the *talanoa* were primarily conducted in English. With the participants who identified as Samoan, though, the *talanoa* shifted fluidly between English and Samoan, with shifts between languages occurring organically throughout the *talanoa*. The ages of the participants ranged from 29 to 72 years, and 16 were in paid work and 14 were not in paid work. The number of children they cared for varied from one to four, with the children's ages ranging from 1 to 16 years. In terms of their living arrangements, 13 of the family members co-resided with the children and 17 lived in a separate household. It is important to note that these Pacific family members were highly involved in the children's everyday care both prior to and post the parental separation. However, none of the participants had a formal care arrangement nor did any of them have the primary care or custody of the children (that is, all the children were in the primary care of at least one of their parents). Although there was no formal child care arrangement in place, and care arrangements often changed from week to week or month to month, the participants who did not co-reside with children reported having the children in their care for at least one day per week, and for some, every day of the week, for sustained periods of time.

Although I created a *talanoa* schedule, the *talanoa* was conversational in style, with many topics and themes arising organically through the participants' talk. The *talanoa* took place between 2022 and 2023, at times, locations and on platforms convenient for the participants. Twenty-one of the *talanoa* were conducted in-person and nine via Zoom; each lasted 80 minutes on average, with the shortest running for 45 minutes and the longest for three hours. With permission, all the *talanoa* were audio-recorded and transcribed. To protect the participants' privacy and confidentiality, pseudonyms were assigned based on their names. Pacific names received Pacific pseudonyms, and English names received English pseudonyms.

Drawing on the guidelines set out by Braun and Clarke (2006), I analysed the *talanoa* through a four-step coding process. As a method of analysis, it enabled me to find patterned responses that point to similarities as well as differences across the data set. The first phase involved reading each transcript at least twice to identify points of interest. The second phase involved open coding of the *talanoa* data into discrete and broad thematic categories. For this article, the third phase involved moving beyond broad categories to a more detailed, focused coding process. During this stage, I systematically re-examined the thematic content in the 'everyday care of children' category looking for patterns that illuminated more specific aspects of the broader theme. This analytical step aligns with Braun and Clarke's description of refining codes to capture more meaningful patterns within the data. Through this process, five subthemes were created: practical care, collectivist care, security and stability, consistency and predictability, and caring morality. Importantly, this phase revealed that family members ascribed particular practical and symbolic meanings to their care work. Building on this, the fourth phase involved further refining and consolidating the analysis by re-coding these subthemes into higher-level interpretive themes. Following Braun and Clarke's emphasis on moving from descriptive to interpretive levels of analysis, I organised the data into three overarching themes: 'caring in times of transition', 'collective caring ecosystems' and 'continuity of care'. These themes reflected not only the practices of care but also the values and meanings participants attached to their care. In the following section, I present the findings that have been derived from patterned responses from the participants that demonstrate how they understood and enacted post-separation care for children. Given the small study sample, the findings are reflective of the particularities of the study and its sample.

Findings

Caring in times of transition

Across the study, the family members talked about the importance of creating stability for children. It was especially important to create a sense of security and predictability in the period immediately following separation, or what one grandmother called "that transition period where everything is up in the air". Grandmothers, in particular, were extremely attuned and sensitive to the needs of their grandchildren. For example, one grandmother talking about the impact the separation was having on her grandson said:

> Sina: "There's a real trust issue of, 'Is Mumma picking me up? Is Daddy coming?' You could see [my grandson] was already fretting before he went to school. … I said to [my daughter and her former partner], 'We all need to work together on this' … He needs to know what's going on, who's picking him up, and they need to be on time, too! … It's something very small to us [as adults] because we [know] they're going to get picked up. … But for them, it's the certainty and the security of knowing … I try to create that 'normal' … just some stability. I try as best as I can to give them a routine and tell my daughter that they *need* a routine right now; they can't be in the middle of all of your mess." (grandmother, 3- and 4-year-old grandchildren).

As demonstrated by the quote shared above, Sina was highly involved in caring about and caring for her adult children and grandchildren. This care included the cognitive and emotional labour involved in caring about children, such as anticipating her grandchildren's needs and communicating them to their parents.

Throughout the study, grandparents took it upon themselves to fulfil care wells, including orchestrating and supporting parents to create routines that offered children a level of security and predictability in their daily routines. The Pacific concept of *vā*, which encompasses nurturing relational spaces and upholding relational responsibilities (Anae, 2016; Fairbairn-Dunlop et al., 2014; Tuagalu, 2008), helps make sense of grandparents' work as both relational and moral, highlighting how it sustains care wells during periods of transition, particularly in the immediate period following parental separation.

Talking about the significance of providing support and doing the cognitive caring in times of transition, another grandmother said:

> Mary: "Everything is so unknown—they still have the family home, and my daughter is sometimes there and sometimes not there. I feel for the kids, because they have no idea what to expect; they can't expect anything because even the parents don't know what's going on. … They [the parents] are trying their best … So, I try to be that 'known' [for the children]." (grandmother, 6- and 9-year-old grandchildren)

Or as one grandfather said:

> Sione: "Everything in the children's world has changed … new family home, new schools, everything you can think of but Papa and Mama's house hasn't … but kind of I guess, because we have them more. … It's a good thing for them to be here with us; it's a familiar environment and we love having them. It's just hard for us to see them sad. … But when they walk through the door, they are all smiles." (grandfather, 5- and 7-year-old grandchildren)

Many of the Pacific family members in this study used words like 'normal', 'known' or 'familiar' to describe the sense of stability, security and predictability they sought to provide. This was framed as especially important to the children as it offered a way of balancing out all the unknowns and mitigating the uncertainties associated with post-separation family life. The Pacific family members in this study often felt uncertain themselves about the state of the inter-parental relationship and care arrangements for children; they were not always fully informed about the situation and either felt unable to ask for details or found it difficult to explain to the children. For example, in one of my *talanoa* with a pair of paternal grandparents, we were talking about whether they ever talked to their grandchildren about what was going on—so not just creating stability through actions and practices but also conversations with children, and they said, "What would we even say?" They didn't ask their son what was going on or what was going to happen because, they said, "It's like asking a question that no one really knows the answer to right now." However, they saw this period as a transitional phase, where everything—including care arrangements and living situations—was in flux and subject to change. It was thus important to them to be there and support their adult children and grandchildren as they navigated a new post-separation family life, highlighting both grandparents' key role in sustaining family continuity during transitions (Davies, 2015; Lussier et al., 2002) and the culturally informed emphasis in Pacific cultures of collective responsibility and relational care (Anae, 2016; Fairbairn-Dunlop et al., 2014; Tuagalu, 2008).

The care and security the grandparents aimed to provide operated on multiple levels; they sought to support children through the transitional period by bridging the gap between pre- and post-separation family life, while also providing parents the time and space to work through care-and-custody and living arrangements as well as navigating the 'new normal' of family life apart. As this grandmother said:

> Lupe: "I've professionally worked in the field for 30+ years in New Zealand and Samoa, and then I come here and I watch this with my own family, it's heartbreaking, because there's so much you can think of to help them, but like I said, I just have to walk very carefully and guide them. … Now we've all come to the point where we're all starting to be a bit more … I don't know if the word is 'civil', but we're just a bit more relaxed. … Being separated is something

> they need to work on, and I have allowed them to have lots of space [to do this], and I notice they come late to pick up the kids sometimes, about 7pm, and I say, 'It's okay but they just need to go straight to bed. They've had dinner.'" (grandmother, 2-, 7- and 10-year-old grandchildren)

Collective caring ecosystems

The Pacific families in this study operated as a collective caring ecosystem that came together to provide practical, cognitive and, importantly, emotional support. To illustrate, one grandfather said:

> Paul: "My daughter was struggling after the separation; she cried and was worried about the kids— you know, stuffing them up. … I'm not going to pressure them; they can make the choice themselves. … I'm her father, I want to protect her, I wish I could protect her from all of this, it's hard. … So, we just do all that we can … We pick up the kids and drop them home with a full belly." (grandfather, 3- and 5-year-old grandchildren)

The Pacific family members in this study relationally situated the care work they did within their broader family context, using phrases like 'we' to capture the involvement of their broader kin network. For example, the grandfather quoted directly above uses "we" to capture the involvement of his wife, adult children and young adult grandchildren. This finding resonates with research highlighting collectivist and kin-focused caregiving practices among Pacific families, where extended family networks coordinate care and support as a shared responsibility (Cunningham et al., 2022; Keil & Elizabeth, 2022a; Saunders Bowen, 2018). However, what sets this research apart is that in the context of parental separation, the Pacific family members in this study talked about stepping up and stepping in in a bigger way than they had prior to the parents' separation. On separation, for example, the Pacific family members supported parents by offering care that might have otherwise been organised and shared between parents. Prior to separation, family members talked about providing practical and physical care of children, thereby enabling parents to balance work commitments and care responsibilities. However, on separation, the meanings attached to their care extended to include emotional and symbolic support. The meanings and motivations attached to their care shifted from providing support to making sure that children and parents *felt* cared for and supported. Thus, Pacific family members were highly reflexive and intentional about the care they provided and the role they played in children's and parents' lives, and shared deeply held desires to provide steady, stable and reliable care in the aftermath of parental separation. One grandmother, for example, talking about the inter-parental relationship between her son and his former partner, said: "They're really struggling right now … we want to lighten that load so that he knows that he is not alone, we are always here holding him up, praying for him. He can lean on us right now." Thus, extended family members enabled and supported parents to 'pass out' (Tronto, 2015) or pass on caring responsibilities for their children, because they could rely on extended networks of family support.

Relating to the care of parents going through separation and/or divorce (and for the grandparents, their own adult children), *caring about* parents (i.e., feelings of concern and identifying what care they need) meant *caring for* their grandchildren (i.e., practical, physical and emotional labour involved in meeting care needs). For example, this grandmother said:

> Akela: "I saw every day the struggle that my daughter was going through. She lost weight; I think she was depressed. She didn't really want to talk too much about it. She was trying to work everything out and I didn't pressure her or ask too many questions. She kept a lot to herself. … I had to give her that space. … So, I was just there for the kids. … she'd come home late … and I'd say, 'They've had dinner, they've already [bathed], they're already in bed.'" (grandmother, 5- and 6-year-old grandchildren)

Thus, caring about adult children/parents was deeply connected to caring for their grandchildren/children. As previously mentioned, in Pacific families, caregiving responsibilities are often understood as relational and intergenerational, where the well-being of one family member is inextricably linked to the well-being of the collective (Cunningham et al., 2022; Saunders Bowen, 2018). As such, caring among the Pacific family members in this study was rooted in intergenerational and communally based understandings of care, where the benefits of caregiving extended beyond the direct recipients of practical care. The Pacific family members *talanoa* clearly conveyed that care responsibilities were shared, forming a collective support system that sprang into action after separation:

> Rachel: "When I first found out [about their separation], I first thought that they would work it out, but then it was different this time and they did separate. … My sister was not coping, I don't think she was coping with it. … I knew I had to come to help, I felt helpless. … I had a lot of accumulated leave, so I used it all in one go and ended up staying for over three months, mostly with my [annual] leave and then I worked remotely. … I'm trying to find work here so that I can stay here permanently." (aunt, 7-year-old niece).

> Sela: "I was [living] in Samoa, and the first thing I heard when she was not with her husband and [that] her and the kids had moved out [of their family home], I panicked, because I know she's got nobody else [in New Zealand]. I thank God I'm [back] because … I could tell with the body language they were very unsettled. They would cry, 'I want to go see Daddy.' … I could see now that I'm back, it's helped a lot. I don't say too much to them [the separated parents] about their issues. … I'm close enough to support them as 'Grandma' and 'Mum'. … [The] COVID [pandemic] made it harder taking kids to day care and both [parents] working full-time jobs to pay their mortgage. I said, 'Okay, let's just wind it down a little bit, I'm here.' … So, they put [my grandchildren in] a school near where I am, to make it easy … It's just all that little support. … So now as a family, we're getting there, but it's taken me [months] to get to the point where I think I can breathe calmly now, and say, 'Thank God, the dust is settling a bit.'" (grandmother, 2- and 4-year-old grandchildren)

The family members in this study were deeply embedded in intergenerational care networks, forming a collective caregiving ecosystem that provided invaluable support for separated parents and children.

Continuity of care

The Pacific family members in this study also emphasised the importance of providing continuity of care for children following separation. As evidenced by many of the quotes shared above, the Pacific family members, especially grandparents, sought to create a level of consistency and predictability in children's care, where family life with their parents might be different, but their family lives with their grandparents remained the same. While care in times of transition focused on care in the immediate aftermath of parental separation, continuity of care involved consistency in care beyond the transitional moment of moving from pre- to post-separation family life. One way Pacific family members in this study did this was by creating a place the children could call 'home'—a space that always looked and felt the same. While the children's home life with their parents had changed significantly, their family members' homes remained a stable and familiar environment. Talking about her efforts to make a home, one grandmother said:

> Vinasini: "They've got a room here. They come in and it's home to them; they come in and they help themselves, grab the toys, make their mess, run around. … They come nearly every day. I go pick up my grandson and then we go together and get his sister. ... I did explain to my son-in-law [about continuing to have my grandchildren every day after school], even when they separated and it was 'his' days to have them. He wanted to put them in [after-school care] but I begged him, saying it's a waste of money and at least they can be here with me, they are happy here. … He wasn't that keen at first, I really had to hold my tongue because at the end

> of the day, it's about the kids. … It's my job to hold [the family] together." (grandmother, 3-, 5-, 7- and 16-year-old grandchildren)
>
> [Interviewer]: "What did you have to hold your tongue about, or what did you want to say but didn't?"
>
> Vinasini: "I really wanted to tell him to stop being selfish, to think about the kids; it's not about what he wants, it's not about what's going on between them; I'm not taking 'sides'. It's about what the children need. … Well, I did really say what I wanted but just in a nicer way [laughs]."

Pacific grandparents in this study, in particular, expressed a deep sense of responsibility for managing and maintaining post-separation family relationships, including between separated parents. This marked a shift from the primarily child-centred focus during the transitional phase to bridge the gap between pre- and post-separation family life to a broader relational role over time. Their caregiving extended beyond direct support to nurturing *vā* or relational space. As Lilomaiava-Doktor (2004) asserts, the *vā* is not an empty space that separates but a social space that connects. Grandparents felt a strong duty to *teu le vā*, to care for and uphold these relationships within the post-separation family, and *tausi aiga*, to take care of the family. Whereas transitional care emphasised routines and predictability for children, continuity of care emphasised grandparents' ongoing mediation of post-separation family dynamics. Just as Hau'ofa (1994) describes the moana (ocean) as linking scattered islands and enabling connection, extended family—especially grandparents—acted as the metaphorical ocean and bridge, holding family members together during the transitions of post-separation life. As such, grandparents acted as *vā* mediators playing a crucial role in maintaining post-separation family harmony. This, however, was not without its challenges: it required the grandparents to set aside their personal feelings (about, for example, the separation and parenting choices) in order to nurture their shared world. Many Pacific family members in this study spoke about the need to "hold their tongue" or "hide their true feelings" to *teu le vā*—caring for and maintaining the relational space within the post-separation family.

One grandmother described her role as "the glue that stuck the family together", emphasising the importance of maintaining peace and stability within the post-separation family dynamic. She, like many other grandparents in the study, felt a deep responsibility to nurture their shared world by caring for and about the entire post-separation family. When I would express to these family members how fortunate their children and grandchildren were to have such a strong support system, especially considering that many sole parents and others going through separation face isolation and limited social and financial support (Stack & Meredith, 2018), and that some grandparents lose contact with their grandchildren altogether (Deblaquiere et al., 2012), their responses were strikingly similar: they consistently described what they did as simply "normal" or responded with, "Of course, I would." Their caregiving was not viewed as an extraordinary effort but rather a natural extension of their familial role, deeply rooted in Pacific cultural norms, expectations and practices. In this way, childcare was not seen as a separate or isolated activity but as something that was intertwined with broader caregiving responsibilities. The act of *doing family*—the relational work of maintaining connections and providing care—was inherently linked to *doing culture* in Pacific and collectivist families.

Discussion

The Pacific family members in this study played a crucial role in post-separation care, supporting both children and parents through the transitions from pre- to post-separation family life and extending far beyond the confines of the nuclear (and bi-nuclear) setting to multi-family households. The family, and the idea of assisting kin, are central to Pacific cultural norms and values, demonstrating morally informed

cultural commitments to engage in intergenerationally focused and communally based approaches to caring about, caring for and caring well.

As also evidenced by the *talanoa* shared in this article, family members outside of the parent-child and inter-parent dyad play a central role in managing family care economies. The Pacific family members performed care in highly reflexive ways that were shaped by Pacific family norms associated with caring for children and enacting relational responsibilities. The Pacific family members' *talanoa* demonstrates the complexity of care and how care for children and adult parents were deeply embedded in networks of intergenerational care and support and influenced by institutionalised and culturally produced Pacific family values that centres the *vā* and takes care of the entire post-separation family.

The *talanoa* shared throughout the article highlights the moral values attached to caring well in Pacific post-separation families. In Pacific cultures, care, caregiving and care work are deeply tied to moral values and practices that reflect one's sense of responsibility and belonging within the family. These values shape understandings of what it means to be a 'good' Pacific family and family member. Because Pacific cultures emphasise a collectivist and relational approach to family life, the way family members provide care plays a crucial role in shaping both individual and collective moral identities. Tronto's (2015) concept of caring well helps illuminate how these relational dimensions operate in practice, showing that care is not merely instrumental but also morally and culturally infused. The care work performed by Pacific family members extended to both children and adult parents, and was deeply tied to their moral identities and understood as a fundamental part of being a good family member. In other words, the care work that the Pacific family members performed demonstrated care for children as well as their adult parents, and embodied the enactment of culturally grounded, morally infused caregiving practices that were interpreted as what good Pacific family members do.

In Tronto's (2015) terms, family members were simultaneously attentive to emerging care needs (caring about) and actively responded to those needs through practical, emotional and relational labour (caring for). Yet, this study deepens Tronto's framework by showing that caring well in collectivist Pacific contexts also involves actively managing relational spaces (the *vā*) and balancing multiple overlapping intergenerational care responsibilities across extended kin networks. In Pacific cultures, the prevailing moral discourse that guides individual actions and decision-making focuses around how to dutifully fulfil and enact individual roles in ways that benefit the broader kin community, and in this context, the post-separation family. By enacting care in collectivist and relational ways, thereby adhering to institutionalised and culturally produced Pacific family norms, individuals and families affirm and strengthen their identities as *good Pacific* family members. Thus, caregiving was not only an act of support but also a reflection of moral identity, reinforcing the belief that caring for both children and their adult parents is a core family responsibility. This study demonstrates that Tronto's concept of caring well can be enriched by including collectivist and intergenerational understandings of care, operating as a culturally mediated practice that shapes what it means to care well in diverse family contexts.

Conclusion

The findings of this research demonstrate the value of intersectional research that moves beyond normative White Western and nuclearised understandings of care and family to consider how culturally distinctive modes of doing family shapes how care is socially organised in post-separation families. As demonstrated, the Pacific family members facilitated and fostered collective caring practices that de-centre the parent-child relationship, while also demonstrating the limits of centring care for children within normative nuclear understandings of family that hold only parents to be responsible for care work. The findings thus echo those in other studies by highlighting the need for approaching and understanding post-separation care beyond parent-child and couple dyads (Davies, 2015; Marschall, 2014) and as being embedded within

broader kin connections (Pitama et al., 2002; Ruru, 2005). Integrating diverse forms of cultural relationality into research on family life is crucial, as it shapes how we conceptualise and understand care. Western notions of family continue to dominate the field of family research and policy. However, Pacific Peoples, similar to other Indigenous and collectivist cultures, bring distinct values, norms and ways of structuring family life that have significant implications for families, communities and societies. It is especially important in settler colonial and multicultural societies (such as New Zealand, where this study is based) that research reflects diverse cultural understandings of family to better inform the work of policymakers and professionals who support families after parental separation, including Family Court judges, lawyers, psychologists, counsellors and social workers. This research echoes calls from other Indigenous scholars for state institutions, law and policy to better acknowledge culturally informed family norms and practices (Pitama et al., 2002; Ruru, 2005).

Given the small study sample, the arguments made throughout this article are limited and reflective of the particularities of the study and its participants. Notably, this study did not include Pacific family members who had formal primary care or custody of children on a daily basis. As such, the findings highlight supportive kin connections and collectivised caring practices but may not capture the experiences or challenges faced by caregivers with sole or primary responsibility for children. Further research is needed to examine caregiving practices among Pacific family members who hold primary care or custody, including how care is negotiated and enacted when the caregiving responsibility is concentrated in one household. Thus, not only do the conclusions reached require more investigation, but many questions also remain. For example, the study focused on exploring the caring practices of Pacific family members who were involved in the everyday care of children living in post-separation families—it did not include experiences of Pacific people who are not involved in children's care or do not have supportive kin connections. As such, the study highlights supportive kin connections within collectivist cultures. Further research is needed to examine the challenges in child-rearing within these cultures, such as differences in caregiving styles. Additionally, many of the family members who participated in this study were retired and co-resided (at least some of the time) with children, which enabled supportive kin connections. Questions also remain about the role of extended family members in conflictual inter-parental relations or post-separation family dynamics, including family violence. Despite these limitations, the article illustrates some of the experiences of Pacific family members supporting children and their adult parents through post-separation family life.

Ethics approval

This study was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee on 25 February 2022 for three years. Reference number UAHPEC23866.

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