

The Future of the Pacific Islands Families Study: a future with unlimited potential

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Introduction

As a longitudinal study, the Pacific Islands Families Study (PIFS) has the comfort of a more certain existence than many other types of research studies such as those that have a clearly defined end point. Potentially a longitudinal study like our PIFS could continue into late adulthood or more depending on how long PIFS children live for. For this to happen we need to keep participants engaged and attrition low to ensure findings are statistically robust. We need to ensure that information gathered is useful, continually analysed, reported on, disseminated and published – and in doing so prove the worth of the study. These factors will determine whether the study will be successful in securing continued investment from funders.

Eleven years on, and having passed the mid-way point of our current grant - work has long since begun to prepare the next grant application. Following submission in November 2011, a decision regarding the grant application should be forthcoming in mid-2012 and if successful will support the continuation of the PIFS from 2013 to 2017. This is a cyclical process that takes careful planning and co-ordination of and by a diverse team – and there is never a guarantee of success. As the study ages and staff become more permanent the risk of an unsuccessful funding round holds increasingly greater consequences. In spite of this we remain optimistic and look to the future of the study, planning on how things may evolve and be done better to increase its net worth in every respect.

The following few pages outline some concrete milestones we will achieve in the near future and identify some hopes and aspirations we aim to pursue far beyond. We have faith in that a decade from now many of the hopes and aspirations outlined in this paper will have been realised.

New Information Gathered at age 11 and 14 years

In the current 11 year phase there are new types of information being gathered for the first time in the PIFS. These include, among others, questions on men's health and attitudes related to masculinity, clinical measurement of children's hearing and auditory-processing, the identification of children's role models, and parental aspirations for their children and a measurement of parental involvement.³ Although still very much at a conceptual stage many new types of measures are being considered for the 14-year phase also - provided it is successfully funded.



The most precious type of information proposed for the 14-year phase is the collection of biological samples from which many markers of health can be extracted and possibly DNA, to enable gene identification. The move to the collection of biological samples has tracked a long and considered path. Initially in 2007, the value of such information was recognised by PIFS researchers and similarly were the sensitive factors surrounding its acquisition. This prompted the qualitative investigation of a small sample of PIFS mothers to gauge their thoughts on the proposition of gathering biological samples from their children.⁴

Findings were that PIFS mothers took a very pragmatic approach to determining their decision, with most agreeing to allow such samples to be collected provided there was a very good reason for doing so. A set of questions were then included in the 9-year phase to gauge the thoughts of the entire maternal cohort. From this it was found that majority of mothers (>85%) confirmed that they were open to allowing their children to give samples provided there was a very good reason (research objective) for doing so. This has affirmed that we are working within acceptable boundaries and thus propose the inclusion of biological samples at the 14-year phase.⁵

Contributing to Scientific Knowledge – a Pacific based measurement tool

Research findings from the PIFS during the last decade have emphasised the need for robust methods/ measures which are both culturally appropriate and applicable to Pacific populations.⁶ In response to this need a forthcoming research project led by a PIFS Post Doctoral Fellow, Mr El-Shadan Tautolo, will develop a Pacific focussed fathering behaviour and involvement measure for use amongst Pacific fathers in New Zealand. Currently, few measures exist to examine fatherly involvement, and most do not fully capture the range of behaviours that reflect the diverse approaches of Pacific men in their parenting roles. It is anticipated that this research will produce a robust tool encompassing Pacific ideologies, and be validated for use with Pacific populations. In addition, this measure will make a significant research contribution to the area of fathering, which will be of great benefit for our Pacific families in NZ.

Indeed the development of this specific Pacific fathering measure will give direction to the research community interested in fathering and it is foreseeable that this tool (based on Pacific-centred ideologies and a Pacific population) may be referenced internationally and modified by other researchers for use in their respective communities.

Migration to AUT's Manukau Campus

AUT has recently acquired the beautiful Manukau Campus that was the former Carter Holt Harvey headquarters. This campus is the first University campus in Manukau and was set up with the aim of giving our young people another option for getting the skills they need to do well in life.¹ Its first students attended classes in 2010 and the university is planning to enrol at least 5000 students at the campus by the year 2020. AUT's three-year Pasifika early childhood education teaching and midwifery degrees are some of the first programmes to be offered there. Both were relocated from their North Shore bases² (AUT's North Shore Campus).

The children that are the PIFS cohort were all born in Manukau City and approximately three-quarters still reside there now. It is a long-term aim for the PIFS team to relocate to the new campus and to be based near to the cohort sometime in the future. Already the PIFS has a permanent field work office at the Manukau campus situated next to Foundation Professor of Pacific studies Tagaloatele Professor Fairbairn-Dunlop.



Pacific Leadership & Development

Consistent with the principles outlined by the Health Research Council (HRC) of New Zealand for conducting research with Pacific communities⁷, the PIFS prides itself on building capacity and capability amongst Pacific academia, the Pacific health research workforce, and Pacific leadership. Currently two Pacific students are undertaking doctoral study, four have completed their Masters degrees and another is due to complete within the next year. Many summer studentships have also been part of the PIFS over the years.

Under the guidance of Founding Director Professor Janis Paterson, Dr Gerhard Sundborn has joined in the Co-Directorship of the PIFS having initially started as a Senior Research Fellow. Dr Sundborn's promotion to Co-Director is not only an example of Pacific capacity building but is also the first time a Pacific Co-Director has been a resident AUT academic. The PIFS has a strong, vibrant team with strong Pacific representation and leadership.

It is gratefully acknowledged that due to the significant investment in Pacific scholarships the HRC of New Zealand has made over the last decade that Pacific research capacity has been able to flourish (both in the PIFS and in the sector generally). All Pacific staff and students mentioned above have received some form of HRC Pacific scholarship during their study.

Introduction of Digital Data-collection

An innovative approach that we are trialling at the 11-year phase of the PIFS involves the use of computer-assisted personal interviewing (CAPI) with a sub-sample of fathers.⁸ An interviewer still completes a face-to-face interview with the participant in their home, however the interviewer (and where appropriate the participant him/herself in the case of sensitive issues) enters the information directly into a laptop or notebook computer.

There are many advantages of CAPI including cost-efficiency, because it eliminates the need for coding, data entry, and printing; timeliness; and greater accuracy, as the software incorporates routing 'rules' which guide the interviewer through the correct sequence of questions and can highlight any input errors immediately. CAPI can also be more interactive for, and offer more privacy to participants. Furthermore as the data is 'sunk' into the database as it is gathered, data quality can be monitored and the use of information is immediate. Provided the trial is successful CAPI may be used more widely in future phases. We believe the children in particular will appreciate the use of this technology.

Inclusion of non-Auckland resident Participants

There is a concerted effort to interview families who have moved outside of the Auckland region, now numbering more than 300. The majority of these families reside in Australia, mainly in the large urban centres of Brisbane, Sydney and Melbourne. The remainder are located domestically (scattered across New Zealand) and in the Islands.⁹ It is important to interview as many of these families as possible so that bias from differential attrition is minimised and the representativeness of the original cohort maintained. Clearly there are logistical difficulties and often additional costs associated with such interviews.

New and already trialled methods to contact out-of-Auckland participants have included posting questionnaires to participants, conducting phone interviews, and interviewers travelling to outer Auckland



locations. The possibility of using a web-based survey at future phases is under consideration. If the new methods described above are well-designed they will ideally increase our overall response rate and bolster numbers.

Maximising Data Use

Continued effort towards the recruitment, guidance and mentoring of Pacific postgraduate students is to be maintained in the PIFS. It is no exaggeration to describe the amount of information already gathered by the PIFS on the health and development of our Pacific families as enormous. The potential investigations that could be pursued using the existing database are seemingly endless. As time goes on and more information is gathered these possibilities become greater still. Having collected this information it is vital that opportunities for its use are maximised.

For this reason we continually consider the possibility of data-sharing. For data-sharing to occur, however, strict policy agreements designed to control the dynamics of any data-sharing relationships would need to be carefully written, and participants' approval sought. Any such agreements would ensure that research as a result of data-sharing would protect the integrity of the PIFS and serve its founding principles. If such relationships were successfully negotiated and enacted the PIFS could contribute to building greater levels of research capacity and increased capabilities as well as maximising the use of the cohort data.

Promoting Longitudinal Study in the Pacific

The PIFS researchers have engaged with researchers at the National University of Samoa (NUS) and administered parts of PIFS in Samoa to enable a cross-country comparison of Samoan parenting practices (reported earlier in this edition).⁹ This collaborative study gave rise to the thought and motivation behind facilitating the establishment of longitudinal research in the Pacific, whereby AUT University and the PIFS could provide the working experience and guidance needed to establish a birth cohort study in the Pacific that could then develop into a longitudinal study.

After initially proposing the idea to Cook Islands Health professionals in New Zealand and gaining support in principal from both Dr Kiki Maoate and Dr Joe Williams, a proposal was taken to the Annual Cook Islands Health Conference in July 2011.¹⁰ The initiative received a great deal of support from the Cook Islands Research community, as well as the Minister of Health, Hon. Nandi Glassie. With this support our team are now working with the Cook Islands steering group to prepare a proposal to secure funding which will enable this study to begin. If successful, the course undertaken between the PIFS and the Cook Islands may act as a model to establish other longitudinal studies in the Pacific.

Creating Independent Studies

As our PIFS children age they become increasing independent and there is less reliance on mothers to be the primary source of information on their lives. For this reason the children (whose mothers initially were recruited onto the study) will eventually replace their mothers as primary respondents. In doing so, mothers' and fathers' involvement will reduce. An idea under consideration is that eventually mothers and fathers could be approached and invited to become separate Male and Female cohort studies in their own right.



If there was significant interest, each study (PIFS children, Mother cohort, and Father cohort) would track its own path with the key area of interest being their own respective lived experiences rather than those of their child. A unique and obvious advantage that these studies would have is the ability to link each to the core PIFS study, and to each other.

PIFS Children and study at AUT University

A key goal identified in the AUT Strategic plan is that AUT be the University of choice for Pasifika students and that AUT encourage access, success and advancement of Pasifika students.¹¹ Furthermore, that AUT aim to conduct research that benefits Pasifika communities.¹² We are well aware that our PIFS children are rapidly approaching an age where they will soon be considering their tertiary study options. When the time comes for PIFS children to venture out to undertake tertiary study, we hope to provide a modest number of specific scholarships that are available only to our PIFS children.

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