**Research Proposal**.

Fijian Networks of Cooperation: A Longitudinal Study of Cohesion and Conflict for Testing Hypothesis of Social and Religious change in Fiji

**1. Introduction**

1.1. The Fijian Networks of Cooperation (FNC) project is funded by the Royal Society of Aotearoa New Zealand’s Marsden Fund and led by Associate Professor Dr John Shaver of Otago University. The three-year longitudinal and comparative social research project seeks to map networks of care and mutual support in four communities in Ovalau, Fiji. By repeatedly measuring practices of cooperation, indices of health and well-being and religious change in these communities, FNC seeks to clarify how and why practices of care and mutual support may be changing over time, and understand the theoretical and policy implications of these changes for public health and social development.

1.2. By comparing data from four sites in and around the township of Levuka (two villages, two informal settlements) over three years, the project will analyse how networks of social cooperation are being remade, in villages, and in peri-urban settings marked by conditions of economic precarity, social diversity and religious change. Through such a comparative and longitudinal approach, FNC will identify the leading causes and primary effects of such transformations to individuals’ and households’ cooperative networks, particularly those relating to mental and physical health and well-being.

**2. Background**

Cooperative networks and social change in Fiji

2.10. Social practices of care and mutual support bond individuals and households into a community. In Fiji, for example, community members may help each other with childcare and domestic chores, share food, look after those who are sick, dig each other’s fields, help harvest crops, weave mats, exchange cultural items, pray for each other, donate money and offer advice.

2.11. These networks of cooperation distribute the moral, temporal and material resources of the community in ways that often escape the logic of the market. They are also crucial social mechanisms for providing for the public welfare, including individual health and well-being.

2.13. Cooperative networks can be analysed in regards to the individuals and households in the network (nodes) and the relationships between these individuals and households (ties). For example, flows of care and support along these ties may be reciprocal or unidirectional and this will shape processes of resource distribution around the group (Isakov et al., 2019; Koster, 2018).

2.14. The cooperative network structure can also be understood in terms of its cohesion or compartmentalisation, and in relation to what types of cooperation bridge different sub-groups, and what types of cooperation circulate more narrowly within sub-groups (Koster, 2018).

2.15. Factors that influence the dynamics of cooperative networks, the frequency, breadth and intensity of their cooperation, and what specific tasks are cooperated on, vary across settings. Though the most common factors include proximity (i.e. who one’s neighbour is), kinship, gender, age, household income, social status and religious affiliation (Everton, 2018).

2.16. As Fiji’s economy is increasingly geared towards a model of liberal capitalism, traditional networks of care and mutual support are coming under strain. When Fijians relocate from rural to urban settings and enter into the market economy they become subject to unprecedented demands on their time, labour and resources, while also often having to abandon their old support networks (Barr, 2007a; Gounder, 2013). Living conditions in informal settlements – where large numbers of rural-to-urban migrants end up – tend to be characterised by uncertain land tenure, social transiency and higher levels of ethnic plurality, and this can limit the effectiveness of traditional cooperative networks based primarily on kin (Barr, 2007b; Reddy et al., 2003).

2.17. In such contexts, individuals and communities are likely to innovate new cooperative networks that will draw on alternative ideological and institutional resources to facilitate their material and psychological needs. For example, one hypothesis of this project is that new Pentecostal churches gain relevance as primary clusters of coordination and cooperation in these novel and challenging settings, though operating with markedly different dynamics and effects (Ernst, 1994).

Religious change in Fiji and the Pacific

2.20. Profound changes to the structure of Fiji’s networks of cooperation have been tied to the rapid rate of religious change in the Pacific, especially the rise of Pentecostalism (Ernst, 2006).

2.21. Pentecostal converts in Fiji seek religious alternatives to the village Christian orthodoxy (typically Methodist), headed by the chief and the talatala (church minister), and claim a personal relationship with God unmediated by customary authority structures (Brison, 2007b). In this centring of the individual, Pentecostals open themselves up for the direct and personal receipt of the gifts of the Holy Spirit, particularly this-worldly blessings of health and wealth (Robbins, 2004; Yong, 2005)

2.22. When these Pentecostal churches question the traditional village order for its attachment to pre-mission norms and beliefs, this can upset the cultural foundations of a holistically-structured and highly communal village life (Tippett, 1955; Tuwere, 2002). As a result, Pentecostalism often pulls converts outside of customary practices of governance and sociality (Gershon, 2006; Newland, 2004; Ryle, 2010), including important institutions of food, labour, resource sharing and mutual support embedded in the old socio-ritual order (Eriksen et al., 2019).

2.23. The founding of new churches, however, may also be understood as *symptomatic* of the difficulties that traditional cooperative networks have regulating equitable social relations in a rapidly changing modernity. Individuals may be incentivised to join new religious movements in order to attain greater personal control over their net community contributions (Besnier, 2020, p. 209; Eräsaari, 2013).

2.24. Yet it is important to also go beyond accounts of religious change and cooperative practices when thinking about matters of public health and well-being. For it is notable that religious change in Fiji also entails new rules of behaviour which help individuals adjust to their changing social and economic conditions. The lifestyle requirements of new religious movements, such as prohibitions on alcohol, tobacco and kava, can provide converts a better standard life by establishing new technologies of the self that encourage good health and lead to a more skilful navigation of the market economy (Besnier, 2020; Brison, 2007a).

Theoretical implications: Religion, health and well-being

2.30. The interplay of Fiji’s contemporary experiences of economic, social and religious change offer an important opportunity for understanding a long-observed correlation in human society:***the positive effects of religion on human well-being****.* In the human sciences, religious belief and participation is found to positively correlate with a variety of measures of individual success, from life-expectancy, to fertility, to economic performance (Deaton, 2011; Levin, 1994; McCleary & Barro, 2003; McQuillan, 2004)

2.31. Two explanatory theories predominate for this relationship. The first is that religion predicts a person’s deeper embedding within cooperative networks, and that this richer participation in the community supports better health and general well-being. The second is that religion predicts behavioural norms that are conducive to good health and self-governance, such as alcohol and tobacco avoidance (Eckersley, 2007).

2.32. As rural Fijians move from social conditions shaped by a cooperation-focused Methodist village establishment, to a healthy lifestyle ideology of Pentecostalism in townships, these two theories appear to hold different explanatory weight. It remains unclear, however, how these two positively-geared effects on well-being may inter-relate.

2.33. In a time of global pandemics, cost of living crises and community fracture, studies into the relationship between religion and public health have never been more pressing. Yet social science studies into this relationship lack ethnographic depth, and are based on high numbers of research subjects without sufficiently detailed contextualisation of individual or group conditions. For example, it remains unclear precisely how different individuals, under specific social and ideological conditions, or located in a specific position within a given community network, may experience the relationship between religion, cooperation and health differently. It also remains unclear how and why this relationship may be changing over time.

2.34. A study of Fijian cooperative networks and religious change that is comparative, longitudinal and ethnographic promises a greater contextualisation of data in a dynamic and socially-embedded setting, offering a more accurate analysis of the complex factors in play. This in turn can provide a firmer empirical footing for research-grounded policy making in public health and social development initiatives.

**3. Researchers and Host Institution**

3.1. Dr John Shaver is the lead researcher for FNC and holds a Ph.D with distinction in Anthropology from the University of Connecticut (2012). He is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Science at Otago University. His thesis enquired into the social ecology of Fijian religion, involving several years of fieldwork in rural Vanua Levu. John has worked previously on longitudinal research projects, including the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study,

3.2. Dr Tom White is the research coordinator for FNC, and responsible for the day-to-day running of the project. He is a postdoctoral researcher at Otago University and a Senior Research Fellow at Leipzig University’s Centre for Advanced Studies in Germany. His thesis examined the constitutional politics of religion in Fiji, involving ethnographic fieldwork in the townships of Suva, Nadi and Lautoka. Prior to doctoral studies, Tom lectured for four years in the School of Social Science at the Fiji National University

3.3. Dr Patrick Vakaoti, a Fijian, in addition to contributing theoretical and methodological expertise, is the primary cultural advisor for FNC. He is an Associate Professor in Sociology and the Dean of Maori, Pacific and Indigenous Studies at Otago University. Patrick previously lived in close proximity to the research area, worked as a Lecturer at the University of the South Pacific, and continues to conduct research with disadvantaged and impoverished communities in the general area of the proposed research.

3.4. Professor Joseph Bulbulia at Victoria University of Wellington is FNC’s quantitative social research methods expert and has conducted cross-cultural psychological research in Spain, Mauritius, and New Zealand, and is an investigator for Marsden-funded Pulotu, a database of 116 Pacific cultures purpose-built to investigate the evolutionary dynamics of religion. Bulbulia is one of four core team members leading the New Zealand Attitudes and Values Study, a 20 year national longitudinal study.

3.5. The host research institution for the FNC is the School of Law and Social Sciences of The University of the South Pacific. The project liaise with the host institution in terms of the dissemination of research findings in terms of seminars and workshops.

3.6. The FNC will also employ and train local researchers in quantitative ethnographic research methods. The researchers will be responsible for much of the on-the-ground data collection and will be encouraged and supported in writing up research for publications, or to pursue other related opportunities made possible through participation in this project.

**4. Research Questions**

The FNC investigates how cooperative networks operate under different social conditions in Fiji, and examines their respective effects on public health and well-being. It asks:

4.1. What are the structural dynamics of cooperation in Fiji (i.e. what do Fiji’s networks of care and mutual support look like, what resources circulate and how?)

4.2. What are the primary structural differences between cooperation networks in rural and urban settings in Fiji, why do they differ, and how are they developing over time?

4.3. What are the key predictors of cooperation between individuals and groups in these diverse settings? (e.g. proximity, kin, religion, other?)

4.4. How do different ideological and religious contexts influence – and are influenced by – these structures of cooperation?

4.5. How does physical and mental health and wellbeing correspond to different types and intensities of religious belonging in villages and informal settlements, and is this changing over time?

4.6. How does physical and mental health and wellbeing correspond to cooperation network structures overall, as well as in regards to the positionality of individuals and households within a given cooperative network?

4.7. What is the relative predictive strength of quality of life as a factor of healthy behaviour practices and positionality within a given cooperative network vis a vis religion.

**5. Research Objectives**

The four primary research objectives of the FNC are:

5.1. Create the Pacific’s first systematic and public multi-sited longitudinal ethnographic study, placing Fiji and the Pacific Islands at the forefront of innovation in a promising area of interdisciplinary research in the human sciences.

5.2. Empirically examine causal hypotheses regarding the relationships between cooperation, public health and religion in a rapidly globalising context.

5.3. Communicate findings to local Fijian stakeholders including inhabitants of informal settlements, villagers, development and health officials, and local government and religious leaders in efforts to inform development and public health initiatives in empirically grounded research.

5.4. Facilitate research capacity building in Fiji by training local researchers in ethnographic research methods and support and encourage local researchers in their efforts to publish research.

5.5. Widely disseminate novel project outcomes in academic journal articles and op-ed pieces in online publications with a global reach.

**6. Research Methodology and Field-sites**

Protocols and consent

6.10. FNC’s compliance with its ethical obligations to informants, researchers and stakeholders is pursued at multiple levels. This has included the attainment of Ethics approval from the Otago University’s Research Ethics Board, which was approved before the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic on September 18, 2020.

6.11. In terms of compliance with Fiji’s own national standards for research within its borders, we are attaining institutional permissions from the Ministry of iTaukei Affairs and the Ministry of Education, Heritage and Arts. FNC is also soliciting community support and promoting local ownership of FNC outcomes by following Unaisi Nabobo-Baba’s Vanua Research Framework Methodology (Nabobo-Baba, 2010).

6.12. The first step in Nabobo-Baba of the Vanua Research Framework, na navunavuci (conceptualisaton) combines the theoretical framing of the project with the seeking of research permissions (Nabobo-Baba, 2010, p. 146).

6.13. The project is advantaged by engaging a leading Fijian social scientist from the area to co-lead the project (Patrick Vakaoti – see above). Consent-seeking facilitated by a “cultural broker” allows space for frank communication between the community and research team, at both formal and informal levels (Coxon et al., 2002; Fitzpatrick et al., 2016).

6.14 In June 2022, John Shaver and Dr. Patrick Vakaoti visited the four research sites to discuss the proposed project with community leaders, and attained the approval of the Tui Levuka. Both researchers speak Fijian. Following a sevusevu (Meo‐Sewabu, 2014), the visiting researchers briefed the four communities about the intended research, and asked the communities of the kinds of research they would like to see done by the researchers (Lovo et al., 2021; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014). These responses have now been incorporated into the research design.

6.15. The next step, ‘preparations’ made (na vakavakarau) (Nabobo-Baba, 2010, p. 146), includes arranging dates for a second, more pro-longed visit (the pilot study), with a further sevusevu on arrival to the research sites. This will include the donation of a substantial community gift chosen in consultation with community leaders.

6.16. In addition to consent-seeking at the group level, the solicitation of informed consent will be repeated for each consulted household every time their participation is sought for the study (Fitzpatrick et al., 2016; Lovo et al., 2021; Meo‐Sewabu, 2014). Compensation for community members time will be offered on each visit, and take the form of locally appropriate foodstuffs such as breakfast crackers, flour, noodles, tinned fish, or powdered milk.

Research Sites

6.20. The research sites, selected through discussion with the communities themselves and in consultation of the project’s cultural adviser Dr Patrick Vakaoti are all on Ovalau and in close proximity to the township of Levuka.

They are the villages of Levuka Vakaviti and Vagadaci, and the informal settlements of Baba and Wailailai.

6.21. These sites comprise a mix of settings with and without land tenure, and are either overwhelmingly iTaukei or ethnically plural communities, including peoples with Fijian-Melanesian and Fijian-Chinese ancestries. This variation will help to distinguish between kin, ethnic and religious structuring of relationships

6.23. There is also a diversity of economic behaviours found across these four sites, including small scale farming and fishing, and low-income peri-urban work in Levuka, and a range of employed roles including those at a local fish factory.

Research Tools and Methods

FNC uses quantitative, ethnographic and longitudinal research to measure networks of cooperation over time, and across different social and religious contexts, in order to understand their potential effects on health and well-being.

6.30. The research process is iterative, requiring different geographical and social survey instruments to be applied at different stages in the three-year project’s life-cycle.

6.31. Initial work entails mapping the geographic layout of the households in the four communities as proximity is a significant variable affecting cooperation. This mapping process also allows the researchers to create relationships with everyone in the communities. Alongside kinship mapping, ethnographic interviews will collect demographic data (e.g.: household composition, ages, reproductive histories).

6.32. In order to identify key vectors of locally relevant instances of cooperation (Jaeggi et al., 2016), small samples of randomly selected participants from each community (10 men, 10 women; n=80) will be asked to free-list (Weller & Romney, 1988) all of the forms of cooperation and support they have given and received in the past month. We anticipate that food, labour, money, other material goods, and childcare will be frequently exchanged.

6.33. With this initial data collection in place, social networks will then be created through a survey instrument similar to the “name generator” approach (Isakov et al., 2019; Power, 2018). Here we ask participants to list the people who have provided them with different types of cooperation and support in the past month, as well as lists of the people who they have helped, along the culturally salient dimensions uncovered in earlier data gathering.

6.34. This cooperative network survey, however, will not solicit specific names but log the type of relationship that connects the cooperating pair or group (i.e. neighbour, parent, sibling, cousin, colleague, co-parishioner, charitable group…etc). This more modest data-collection mitigates the risk of researchers being unable to survey the whole community, as missing ‘nodes’ in network analysis can otherwise quickly degrade statistical accuracy.

6.35. Network data gathering will repeat at yearly intervals over a three year period, and combine with surveys enquiring after income, social status and wealth, as well as levels of religious participation and potential movement between religious groups.

6.36. Through the use of local survey teams under the management of an employed elder in the community, who in turn collaborates with the project coordinator – Dr Tom White – FNC will interview the male and female heads of each household (N ~ 1,000) across the four communities to assess differences in the composition of social networks, as well as how differences in the resources and social support exchanged accord with ethnicity, kinship membership, gender, religion and status.

6.37. Community informants will also be asked to complete survey questions regarding personal physical and mental health and well-being, such as whether they have had experiences of stress or anxiety in the past few days/weeks/months. This will provide original and vital data for the formulation and delivery of public health policy in conditions of profound social change. All questions are vetted by the Otago Research Ethics Board.

6.38. The requirement of repeated and prolonged visits to local communities over a period of several years will help establish enduring personal relationships, built on and informed by local norms of respect and reciprocity and immersion in the community (Bennett et al., 2013; Nabobo-Baba, 2010; Putt, 2013; Tecun et al., 2018; Vaioleti, 2013).

6.39. Local researchers trained in the collection of this data will be able to access survey questions in English and Fijian, and all survey questions, especially ones regarding health and well-being will be piloted for accuracy in translation in the trial run of the survey instruments.

Analysis and Community Feedback

6.40. The latter stages of the research process, following data collection, are when statistical techniques can begin to map out how global forces and ideologies, such as Pentecostalism, may be affecting cooperative behaviours and individual health and well-being in these villages and settlements. In our analysis and evaluation of data we will model the extent to which religious involvement, after assessing and adjusting for status, is associated with the number of cooperative partners (network ties), reciprocal exchanges, and unidirectional exchanges, as well as quality of life.

6.41. At milestone dates and at the project’s conclusion, data visualisations of networks, and how they change over time, will be presented to community members for their feedback and interpretation. We hope such milestones will help carry momentum through the project’s course and build accountability into the research process (Nabobo-Baba, 2010, p. 145).

6.42. At the close of the project and the final presentation of the research findings, a period Nabobo-Baba labels the vakarogotaki lesu tale (Nabobo-Baba, 2010, p. 147), further talanoa will seek to learn from the community’s own interpretations of the results. This will be done in advance of publications so that we can incorporate local insights into complex social phenomena.

6.43. Dynamic social networks will also be available on our project’s webpage (https://www.fijiannetworks.org), and this will allow for accessible and interactive engagement, in visual form, with the shifting patterns in Fijian cooperative networks.

6.44. Data protection will be provided through the replacement of specific personal data with number codes as soon as possible following data collection, while non-anonymous data used for revisiting informants for repeat surveys will be destroyed when FNC finishes its field research.

6.45. The concluding step of Nabobo-Baba’s framework, me vakilai/me na i vurevure ni veisau se na vie ka e vou ka na kata mai an bula e sauta (transformative processes/change as a result of research reports) concerns the provision of tangible beneficial effects from the research for the consulted community (Nabobo-Baba, 2010, p. 145; Thaman, 1997).

6.46. We anticipate these outcomes to be largely directed by FNC’s informant communities. In assembling statistical evidence of social change that does not focus on the individual as the basic unit of analysis, but on the community-as-a-whole (i.e. the cooperative networks that compose community), we intend to generate data and analysis that is readily accessible and actionable for Fijians who are resident at these sites, and help inform and empower their community responses to a range of urgent social governance issues.

**7. Workplan**

October-November, 2022. Research permissions from relevant Ministries.

November 2022. Pilot study to test research tools in a controlled setting and begin recruitment of local ethnographic researchers.

January-February, 2023 Training local ethnographic researchers

Initial GIS mapping

Household Census

Network data collection 1

Wealth, Health and Well-being survey data collection 1

February, 2024 Network data collection 2

Wealth, Health and Well-being survey data collection 2

Community feedback

USP seminar discussion

February, 2025 Network data collection 3

Wealth, Health and Well-being survey data collection 3

Community feedback

**8. Contact Details**

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