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Using the Past to Guide the Future: Criminal Deportee (Re)integration in a New Homeland

Moana Hafoka
Utah Tech University, United States

Abstract

The United States regularly deports individuals to Tonga due to criminal convictions, and these deportees often struggle to reintegrate into Tongan society. This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 12 such criminal deportees through semi-structured interviews to elicit participants' personal stories of deportation and transition. Common themes of family, religion, and Tongan culture emerged in their responses. These results are discussed, as well as recommendations to aid deportees. The study emphasizes that successful deportee reintegration can be facilitated with the collaboration of government, religious groups, and families.

Keywords: Deportation; reintegration; Tonga.

Introduction

Waves of migration from Tonga in the 1980s and 1990s brought many children to the United States (U.S.), some of whom would later be deported upon criminal conviction as adults. Criminal deportees returning to their "home nations" are an understudied intersection of the criminal justice system and immigrant communities. Unlike other released prisoners, they are returned to a different community, with cultural barriers to reintegration that the current literature on reentry does not fully discuss. Accordingly, this study explored how Tongan deportees from the U.S. experienced the challenges of transitioning to a home country that many found unfamiliar.

Statement of the Problem

Tonga is small, compared to countries with larger amounts of deportation research. Yet, the U.S. deported over 500 individuals to this country of 100,000 people between 1999 and 2019 (Figure 1; United States Department of Homeland Security 2004, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2020). Australia and New Zealand are two main host countries that add to the number of deportees to Tonga; however, this research only investigated deportees from the U.S. Deportees to Tonga may struggle due to ignorance of cultural traditions and expectations. Many of them have been raised in the U.S. and feel more American than they do Tongan. Exploring their experiences can provide significant insights into the challenges faced by this group and help establish programs and policies that are essential for deportee reintegration.

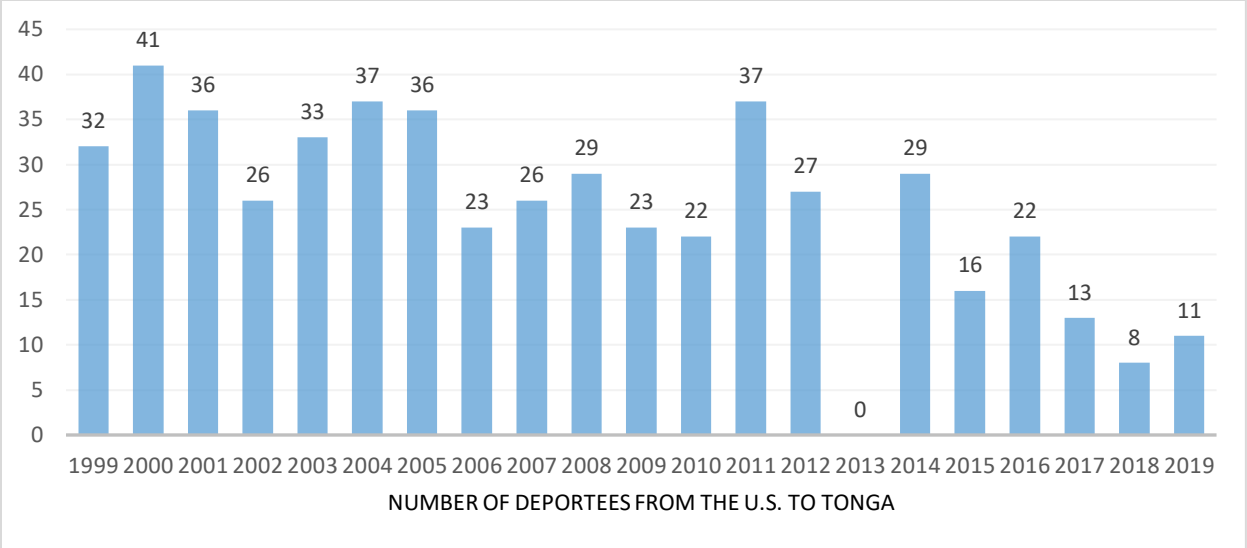

Figure 1: Deportations to Tonga from the U.S. Adapted from United States Department of Homeland Security (2004, 2012, 2016, 2017, 2020). Data for 2013 not available

Studying U.S. Deportees to Tonga

Research on Tongan deportees is scarce, but the experiences of deportees worldwide share commonalities. Deportees experience what is known as "downward assimilation" (Moniz 2004; Portes and Rumbaut 2001), guaranteeing difficulty and hardship upon arrival. Further, deportation orders can separate them from family for a lifetime if their families lack the means to travel (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008).

The political and historical context of Tonga makes the study of its deportees unique. It has never relegated control to foreign powers, but over half of the world's Tongan population lives overseas. Many of Tonga's cultural beliefs and practices have survived through centuries of global contact. Much effort is put into preserving culture, language, and transnational ties, even if they are an ocean away from Tonga.

However, Tongans are not exempt from the reality that second- and third-generation ethnic minorities have higher crime rates than first-generation immigrants (Martinez and Valenzuela 2006). As they become acculturated into U.S. society, some immigration experiences of early generations have resulted in deportation. This study of how Tongans experience deportation sheds light on re-acculturation back in Tonga, filling a gap in the deportation literature of the Pacific. The purpose of this article is to illuminate the participants' personal stories and experiences through the reintegration process and highlight the major concerns and needs of deportees in Tongan society.

Literature Review

Deportation and U.S. Immigration Laws

Deportation is the removal of non-citizens from a particular nation for breaches of immigration or criminal law (Boehm 2016; Gibney 2013). Since the mid-1990s, the U.S. has passed harsh legislation leading to millions being deported (Brabeck, Lykes and Hershberg 2011; Brotherton and Barrios 2009; Gibney 2013; Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008). The *Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty (United States) Act 1996* (AEDPA) did away with judicial review for all categories of immigrants eligible for deportation (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008), redefined aggravated felonies (Martin 1998), and operated retroactively, making immigrants who had committed crimes decades ago deportable (Morawetz 1998).

In the same year, the *Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility (United States) Act 1996* (IIRIRA) increased removals by expanding the categories of non-citizens who were deportable (Hagan, Castro and Rodriguez 2009). This Act also restricted immigrants' ability to appeal deportation, added further offenses for which immigrants could be deported, and expanded the definition of aggravated felonies to include any prison sentence of a year or more (Hagan, Castro and Rodriguez

2009; Moore 2004). Crimes committed pre-IIRIRA could now lead to deportation even after completing the sentence (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008; Morawetz 1998).

The AEDPA and IIRIRA together added 28 more distinct offenses for which people could be deported (Peterson 2009; Trinh 2005). They eliminated legal barriers that protected immigrants, restricted due process, and established mandatory detention provisions for aliens who committed crimes (Brisbois et al. 2016; Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008; Martin 1998). In 2001, the *USA PATRIOT (United States) Act 2001* further expanded state power to detain and deport immigrants who were perceived to be a threat. This Act was intended to protect the nation from terrorists but created a partial policy that targeted immigrants and became a symbol of the expansion of power and government surveillance.

The policies established by these laws led to an explosion in the number of deportees from the U.S. Before the 1996 legislation, the average number of deportees was 40,000 a year; from 1996 to 2005, it averaged more than 180,000 per year (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008: 66).

Impacts of Deportation on Families and Individuals

Since 2007, deportation has divided over 1 million families (Gonzalez and Consoli 2013). Zayas and Bradlee (2014) report that in 2014, 5,100 children were in foster care as a result of having a detained or deported parent. More often than not, deportation terminates parental rights to children who remain in the U.S. (Ferguson 2007). Children of deported individuals often experience post-traumatic stress disorder, separation anxiety, and depression (Kaskade 2009). Families also suffer financially when deportees stop sending remittances overseas; Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez (2008) found that 72% of deportees were remitters.

Although deportation may have severe effects on others, the starkest are felt by the deportees themselves. Deportation and reintegration can cause post-traumatic stress disorder (Brotherton and Barrios 2009; Gibney 2013). Deportees feel social separation from family in the U.S. and displacement in their new homeland (Brisbois et al. 2016). Though they may share physical features with others in their homeland, they are socially and culturally distanced. Many deportees also reach out to family in the U.S. to plead for remittances, which may help them survive in their home country but serve as a sharp reminder of what has been lost (Golash-Boza 2014). Deportees feel shame because they were once the breadwinners for their families, but deportation severs them from their income-generating activities (Hagan, Eschbach and Rodriguez 2008).

In Tonga, deportees are blamed for rising crime rates and are regarded with hostility (Lee 2017). Deportees in Tonga are seen as failures of immigration to the U.S. and as people who have lost connection with Tonga (Kinikini 2005). After riots in the capital of Nuku'alofa, where six people died and hundreds were injured, some government officials blamed deportees for the violence (Conway and Potter 2009). As Radio New Zealand (2006) reports, Drew Havea, president of Tonga's National Youth Congress, said "some of the blame can be placed on deportees from the U.S. who ... brought with them an expertise in gang violence" (para. 7). These rumors were never substantiated, yet they have persisted over the years and continue to influence people's negative perception of deportees.

Headley (2006) discusses the conception of the constructed enemy of the community, who becomes detested nearly from the moment of arrival in their homeland because they are labeled as enemies and failures. Wacquant (1999) argues that immigrant actions have been criminalized and given special attention by police, then reinforced and amplified by xenophobic media and politicians. Those who are different become scapegoats for crime and social ills. This stigma as the "suitable enemy" can lead to social isolation and shame for deportees (Gibney 2013). As Guarnizo (1994) shares, natives can easily spot them by their language, dress, and walk (Brotherton and Barrios 2009). Kinikini (2005) connects the dress and the walk as markers of otherness. She adds that U.S. deportee mannerisms or appearances may differ from those of Australian or New Zealand deportees because of the proximity of those host nations, compared to the U.S. Experiencing these labels makes reintegration difficult for deportees, and many are denied work opportunities because of the stigma (Miller 2012).

Individual deportees also face culture shock. Language, of all acculturation behaviors, is the best predictor of psychological and sociocultural adjustment (Masgoret and Gardner 1999). A lack of language skills in their new country can isolate deportees and further exacerbates the difficulties of transitioning into a new community.

Acculturation and Assimilation of Tongan Americans

To better understand Tongan deportees from the U.S., it is important to understand Tongan Americans and Tongan transnationalism. Religion and other sociocultural factors influence how individuals experience acculturation in the U.S., as well as how deportees meet challenges in Tonga.

Though Tonga was never colonized by a foreign power, it embraced the colonial practice of Christianity, which influences many Tongans' reasons for migrating to Western countries (Small 1997). Churches provide social support networks and educational opportunities for Tongans migrating to the U.S. (Maron and Connell 2008) as well as a chance for Tongan identity to be developed overseas. On the other hand, support from local churches in Tonga can help deportees cope with challenges of reintegrating into the community.

Tongan culture is also influenced by the traditional concept of *anga fakatonga* or "the Tongan way" (Morton 1998). A majority of Tongans identified *faka'apa'apa* or "respect" as the core of *anga fakatonga* and crucial to the preservation of culture that must be passed on to future generations (Lee 2004). Disproportionate delinquency among Tongan youth may be an indication of cultural alienation and loss of *faka'apa'apa* (Lee 2004). As they begin to lose *faka'apa'apa,* younger and second-generation Tongans have seemed to follow the trend of other immigrants by becoming more involved in crime than the first generation. Migration evidently impacts the value and practice of *faka'apa'apa* (Hafoka, 'Ulu'ave and Hafoka 2014.

Many Tongan permanent residents who migrated to the U.S. at a young age have assimilated by learning American culture and losing their immigrant culture, defined by Portes and Rumbaut as "dissonance acculturation" (Morenoff and Astor 2006). Much emphasis is placed on becoming American, blending in, and conforming. The Tongan identity becomes a secondary identity.

Assimilation can be perceived as success for Tongans who move to the U.S. for employment and educational opportunities. However, it becomes a hindrance for Tongan deportees from the U.S., who must reverse course and become Tongan as a first identity. This resetting of mentality poses a difficult hurdle for deportees. They face a new acculturation without the support of family, especially parents who might be familiar with Tongan culture.

Methods

This study used qualitative methods to better understand the experiences of criminal deportees to Tonga. Although they are less used in criminal justice research, qualitative methods can explore "the social aspects of how crime occurs and how the agents, structures and processes of responding to crime operate in culturally-grounded contexts" (Tewksbury 2009: 39) and provide an in-depth understanding of issues that is not possible through quantitative methods. Moreover, Tongans have traditionally passed down stories, histories, and practices through oral methods for centuries. The phenomenological approach in this study allowed for the subjects to reveal perceptions and lived experiences not yet documented in the literature (Dew 2007).

Specifically, this study aimed to answer two research questions:

1. *How do Tongan deportees experience the process of deportation?*
2. *What factors obstruct and assist deportees in their reintegration?*

The research questions were designed to illuminate the participants' personal stories of transitioning and reintegrating into a 'home' country that was not home to them, and bring to light cultural, religious, and community influences.

Interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was the approach chosen for this study. IPA has become increasingly popular to illuminate subjects' perspectives and how they make sense of their experiences (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009; Smith and Osborn 2004. According to Smith and Osborn (2004, there are no definitive theories or predetermined hypotheses in IPA. An advantage of this approach is that it gives both researcher and participants the flexibility to balance the methods and research concepts with cultural sensitivity to how knowledge is shared and passed.

Participants

The participants in this study were Tongans of at least 18 years of age who had been deported from the U.S. back to Tonga after a criminal conviction, excluding individuals who overstayed visas, refugees and asylum seekers, and those who entered without inspection. They were recruited through snowball sampling of identified deportees, as well as through associates in Tonga who had contact with deportees.

As shown in Table 1, there were 12 participants who fit the criteria. Their average age of migration to the U.S. was 4, and they spent 13 to 52 years there before deportation. Only two females participated in the study, which reflects the scarcity of females who are deported, and the unwillingness to be interviewed.

Table 1. ***Participant Profile Summary***

Pseudonym	Gender	Age immigrated to U.S.	Years in U.S.	Year deported	Children in U.S.
Fehi	M	9 years	29	2007	Yes
Faumalila	M	7 years	17	1996	Yes
Kuta	F	5 years	35	2010	Yes
Ngata	M	3 years	40	2010	Yes
Hiva	M	10 years	13	1999	No
Vaka	M	2 years	52	2014	Yes
Mohokoi	M	2 years	32	2012	Yes
Akataha	M	8 years	15	2006	Yes
Misi	M	3 months	29	1999	No
Tapu	M	10 months	23	1998	Yes
Mana	F	2 years	19	2003	Yes
Fua	M	9 years	16	2010	Yes

Note. Pseudonyms were used to protect the identities of the participants

Past IPA studies used a homogenous sample, which is expected where research subjects are selected based on their relevance to the research question and the topic. This study examined Tongans who were deported because of criminal convictions, so homogeneity in this sample naturally existed because of their relevance to the topic and because of the small number of willing participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

Semi-structured interviews permitted the participating deportees to express their feelings and tell their stories effectively, and were advantageous for discussing sensitive issues (Hennink, Hutter and Bailey 2010). Further, the interview acted as an event that facilitated the topics that would be discussed, setting up the research question to be answered via analysis (Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009). The semi-structured interviews were also similar to indigenous methods of storytelling, or *talanoa* (Tecun et al. 2018). Understanding *talanoa* assisted in understanding and overcoming social and cultural barriers.

Because these were semi-structured interviews related to *talanoa* sessions, the fluidity and direction of the interviews were mostly dictated by the participants. Open-ended questions allowed the participants to share experiences they were comfortable with, which allowed me to identify which topics were more important to participants.

Upon completion of the interviews, the voice recordings were transcribed and transcriptions were analyzed using NVivo 12 Plus qualitative analysis software, which helped to identify beliefs and constructs emerging from the interviews.

Findings

The experiences of participating deportees were unique in many ways. However, these overall common themes emerged from the interviews: family, religion, Tongan culture, and legal status.

Family

All participants in this study discussed their families in one way or another. The family is key to understanding one's place in Tongan society (Gifford 1971). It is within the family that Tongans learn and connect with their motherland, especially those living abroad. Family networks can expand to several branches and generations of a consanguineous family (Hafoka, 'Ulu'ave and Hafoka 2014.

Family Support. Participants shared experiences of being supported by family after their arrival in Tonga, as well as support from family in the U.S. Akataha spoke about how his father supported him: "Only your family will be there. Just my dad, Kaho

… they went try go get me a lawyer, try find a way for me to get release over there [U.S.].” Although he knew his case was serious, his gratitude towards his father was evident.

Cash remittances from family abroad are an important form of support for many Tongans. A few participating deportees mentioned remittances from family in the U.S., including Ngata: “My son had wired me some money, so it was all good. He wired me $2,000.” Ngata’s transnational relationships were strengthened through the remittances he received to help his transition to Tonga. They also helped him carry out his cultural duties to family, village, and church.

For some deportees, like Misi, family support came through phone calls or visits:

> Biggest support, it was, even though I had contacted my families, through the phone and some visits that was probably the only support … whatever support they give us, you just have to take it and use it the best way you can.

By visiting and calling Misi, his family was able to maintain a strong relationship and provide emotional support. However, he also received important support in the form of land. Misi’s father encouraged Misi to take his land and learn to farm, which was a great advantage because not many others, especially deportees, had an allotted piece of land as per the Constitution.

Lack of Support. Lack of support from family was a common hindrance to the reintegration of deportees. In some instances, family support and lack of support were experienced by the same individual: Mana was emotionally supported by her father but shunned by family members in Tonga. Other deportees experienced support and lack of support from the same person: Ngata received remittances from his son, but later his son stopped answering his phone.

Deportees discussed that some family members were the first to be uncooperative and unaccommodating when they reached out for help with reintegration. Misi shared his experience of living with extended family, being told he could not stay there any longer, and feeling uncomfortable and unwelcome. Deportees also experienced unsupportive family members in the U.S. Mana shared that her father was too old to be able to assist her financially.

Family Responsibilities. As deportees strengthened ties to family in Tonga, they learned the responsibilities that come with Tongan culture. When there is a wedding, birth, or funeral in a family or village, members have a responsibility to help carry the load of the occasion. Many deportees carried the responsibilities their parents would have if they were in Tonga but lacked the cultural knowledge and the resources expected of them. Ngata shared his experience struggling with carrying out his responsibility to hold a *putu*, or a funeral:

> Soon the phone calls [to family in the U.S.] will not be answered. Honestly, you know what I mean? They know that ‘oh, man, this fool is calling again? For money?’ You know what I mean? Some people don’t even understand that *putus* are expensive, or whatever. So they wouldn’t even pick up their phone.

Support is incredibly important for deportees to reintegrate into Tongan society. When obstacles arise, especially in navigating a culture full of protocols and *tapus*, or cultural taboos, it is important to have as much support as possible.

Family Separation. All participants in this study had family members in the U.S. As noted in Table 1, 10 of the 12 were separated from their children by deportation. Fehi, separated from his four children, described the struggle when he was asked about difficulties he experienced adapting to life in Tonga: “Probably not having the family around. You know, that was hard. Tonga is nothing but families, the way I see it.”

Faumalila was deported when his son was 3 years old. When asked what he missed most about the U.S., he said, “First of all, I think my family. I had a son in the States, I think that’s the first thing I missed, was my son.” When asked if deportation had affected his relationship with his son, he stated:

> Of course when I came here he was really young. So it really didn’t affect that much, but as time grew, and him getting older, asking me, ‘Hey, when you coming back?’ and stuff like that, really grew into me and really had me going, ‘Hey, you gotta start doing something if you want to go back, you got to start doing something positive’.

Several participants discussed maintaining ties with people in the U.S. through social media. Misi was deported to Tonga in 1999, and recent technology made it easier for her to stay in touch with family:

> Well, I send pictures through Facebook, stuff like that. Visitors come down here, I send letters, I send pictures. So usually we just use like Facebook if we sending stuff like that. They, you know, send me pictures and stuff like that of the kids. So, technology …

Kuta also used Facebook to deal with separation: "But I'm always on Facebook talking to my kids, talking to my other friends."

Mohokoi brought up a few topics related to family. First, he discussed the concern for his family when he was going through the deportation process. Second, he had visited Tonga only once since he and his family migrated to the U.S.; though he was confident that he was familiar enough with Tonga, it had been about 28 years since his last visit. Third, the Tongan concept of *famili* incorporates extended family even where connections can go back many generations. Mohokoi was not closely related to the family he was able to locate in Tonga, and felt that he was comfortable living on his own.

All 12 participating deportees mentioned separation from family. For some deportees, all their siblings, uncles and aunts, and parents remained in the U.S. Many were able to locate family members in Tonga, though some were very distant. Some deportees who found family decided not to stay with them. Other deportees lived with family before being kicked out for various reasons. Though deportees acknowledged the desire for family support, they experienced family separation and support differently.

Religion

The discussion of religion by all participants in this study further supports its centrality in Tongan culture. Several shared how being accepted into a church helped them feel acknowledged as human beings. Others shared how religious repentance motivated them to accept their deportation and make positive changes in their lives. Though all participants mentioned religion in some way, they did not all discuss its positive influence on their reintegration.

Religion is a large part of Tongan culture but is also a transnational phenomenon, as many of the participants grew up attending Tongan churches in the U.S. A few participants mentioned seeking out a church in the early days after their arrival in Tonga. Ngata shared that going to church in Tonga reminded him of the U.S.: "It was easy to find a church that spoke English. I think that was the easiest part for me. On my second Sunday here … I said, man, just like back in the States, I gotta go to church." As posited by Golash-Boza (2014), deportees utilized transnational practices as coping strategies in dealing with their reintegration hardships.

Religion also played a role in forming social ties that were sources of support (Merino 2014). With that transnational connection, links developed between the deportees and the local congregants of their churches. Tapu shared his connection to his church through his grandfathers, who were influential in establishing his religion in their respective villages:

> I was lucky because my grandfather worked in government for years, [and] he was a pioneer in the church here. So everywhere I went, people go, 'Oh, so-and-so's grandson,' and so both of my families, my great-grandfather on my mom's side and my grandfather on my dad's side. They were pretty much pioneers, and they are the ones in those church history books. I kind of have advantage because of them.

His connection with his grandparents and their legacy gave Tapu more connections with local Tongans. Tapu understood that these connections were integral to his reintegration and acceptance into the church and their community.

Without such connections, it could take some time and effort for deportees to break into local groups. The deportees in this study seemed to easily connect with other deportees, but struggled to make more connections with religious groups and people, as they fought the stigma of criminal behavior:

> I mean, they think we are all drug dealers, we all have something to do with the underworld. Because some of them [deportees] do, but because we know each other and hang around each other, they think that we all on the same page. But we just hang around each other because that's all we have, was each other.

Misi, who at the time of his interview held a high position in his church, experienced stigma attached to being a deportee:

> I think they stigmatize people that are sent back. As in, probably, for example, church. I think they stigmatize people there. They think we are not worthy enough, they don't think we can carry out our callings in church. For example, to become a leader or something. When deportees were accepted into religious circles, the support was reassuring for many.

Fehi spoke about the importance of having a connection to a church group when arriving in Tonga. On the topic of institutions that could assist deportees in Tonga, he stated:

> I think the church. I think they should know more about it [deportation]. If the government is not going to do anything, at least give them an option. Give them that option or probably talk to them before they get shipped down, asking them their church, is anyone picking you up at the airport or who you going to stay with, at least something like that.

Fehi identified two means of assisting deportees in Tonga: first, a connection with members or clergy of their religious affiliation, and second, the early involvement of an institution in their lives. Even for those deportees who were not as active in Sunday church attendance, the church they affiliated with in the U.S. remained a source of support.

Going to church, for some deportees, enabled them to make changes in their lives. Fua found that church members kept him in line by not allowing him to make bad decisions. Many who turned to religion for support shared how their spiritual development led to better reintegration and positive changes. Faith and spiritual change are not new avenues for released prisoners on track to reintegration; religious involvement leads to learned prosocial behaviors and may steer individuals away from potential criminal career paths (Johnson 2009). For many deportees, a spiritual change was a personal change outside the scope of institutional and social agencies that highlighted a pathway to integration.

Some deportees returned to Tonga with the attitude that there was nothing else to live for. Ngata learned by experience that coming to Tonga gave him an opportunity to work on his vices. He also shared his experience of overcoming drug addiction through his religious journey and his determination to become more self-reliant. Without overcoming his addiction, he was not able to take care of himself. In doing so, he made a transformation that helped him with reintegration:

> As soon as I got here I was like, drinking. Even though I did come straight out of lockup, I was locked up for 9 months, but before that, so a lot of the guys would come here and [drug and alcohol] dependency is what they would fall into. And it's what would hold us down. That there is support, you know. The religion should be a support.

For all participants, religion was a constructive, positive, and reliable institution that was there for support regardless of service attendance or spirituality levels. Issues such as substance abuse and mental health could be addressed by and through religion and spirituality, according to these Tongan deportees. Those deportees who developed an intrapersonal commitment to spiritual growth found a supportive track to reintegration.

Tongan Culture

Tongan culture has been intact for centuries, passing on traditions, protocols, and also taboos, or *tapus*. Deportees who migrated to the U.S. at younger ages struggled more with speaking the Tongan language and reintegrating into this culture.

Language. Before they came to Tonga, the language barrier crossed the minds of several deportees. Kuta's concern was centered on being able to communicate with other Tongans when she arrived: "It was more like the language barrier. Because I eat Tongan food in America, you know. When you have Tongan functions and stuff like that. So that was fine."

Mohokoi expressed an experience he shared with many other deportees: speaking English in the home was common in the U.S. and English became easier to pick up and preserve. Mohokoi also shared his struggle with understanding the different form of Tongan spoken and used in religious settings, another hurdle for deportees in learning their culture. Vaka's experience with the language was comparable to Mohokoi's: "We were like the first generation, so we were all speaking English. I grew up speaking English, I just lost the Tongan language and culture."

Several were able to share the background of why their Tongan language skills were not up to par, and some shared how that affected their lives in Tonga. Akataha was scorned for being Tongan and not knowing the language well enough: "Nah, didn't speak good Tongan. I had a hard time. They think I was pretending. They just like, 'Pfft, are you playing stupid or what?'" Not understanding or speaking Tongan well marked the deportees and categorized them as different and dense. Ngata's language skills also easily marked him as someone from overseas; as he observed, this was a setback when he strove to fit in and be accepted as Tongan.

Some of the deportees did not struggle with language. Tapu's parents put great effort into speaking Tongan to their children in the U.S. and Fehi also reported experiencing no language barrier, saying, "I think because when I left here I was about 9 years old. So, I pretty much kind of remember things. So, when I came back, it didn't take that long to pick it back up." He also mentioned spending a year as a teenager in Tonga.

As shared by the deportees, each of them had unique experiences of language reintegration. Besides being a means of communication, language carries much of the Tongan values, traditions, and heritage. A majority of participants—10 deportees—reported some difficulty in learning the language.

Culture. Some of the deportees shared how "lost" they felt because they did not know how to navigate through the Tongan culture, traditions, and protocols. The disconnection of Tongan Americans raised in the U.S. from the Tongan culture has been documented (Hansen 2004).

The disconnection also highlights the problematic terms of *home*, *home country*, and *homecoming* in this field. The revolving door analogy and concomitant discussion that applies to offenders who are American citizens fails to consider the exit door that deportees experience. In addition, when they did not truly grow up in their "home" country, deportees face cultural barriers in their reintegration process that the current literature on reentry does not fully discuss. Because many deportees have migrated at a young age, cultural disconnection can obstruct the reintegration process and may be misinterpreted as misbehavior or misconduct by community members in the "home" country. As Golash-Boza (2014) has found, the notion of "home" is complicated for deportees because many have spent most of their lives in the U.S. Deportees, even after years of their removal, still struggle with referring to the receiving country as their home (Khosravi 2018). Hiva stated, "I struggled you know, because there wasn't really much support from my mom back home because we kind of ran into a lot of issues." Similarly, Mana commented: "Never take anything for granted back home. Cuz out here you don't get it, like anything back home. Simple things like food and clothes and stuff. Just all those good necessities that you get back home on a daily basis." Hiva had been in Tonga for 18 years and Mana for 12 years, yet they both still referred to the U.S. as home. This clearly illustrates their struggle to fully integrate in Tonga.

Deportees had to adjust to other aspects of life. Akataha shared how he thought Tonga would be as developed as Hawai'i, but in Tonga, there were no malls, so deportees looked for different social spaces to mingle. Hiva discussed his struggle with the lack of hot and running water in homes: "Oh, it was harsh and culture shock. It was like, I didn't know what to expect." He also mentioned that without close family like his parents there in Tonga, it was difficult for him to navigate through daily life.

Understanding cultural expectations and duties took time. As goods became more expensive over time, Ngata and other deportees had to carry the expensive burdens while learning the cultural responsibilities. Ngata realized that cultural responsibility sometimes superseded education and other priorities. This taught him how important it was to understand the culture, which became more difficult without parents there to pass down cultural knowledge.

Social support groups and organizations are beneficial for deportees in their reintegration. They provide social support outside of the family and assist as cultural brokers for deportees. Ngata formed a social support group called DPRT or "Determined People Return to Tonga".

Two organizations were previously created to assist deportees and their reintegration in Tonga. The Ironman Ministry, founded by a deportee, focused on Christian principles and bodybuilding (Besnier 2011; Pereira 2011). The second, Foki ki 'Api (Return to Home), received support from the Free Wesleyan Church (McNeill 2023; Pereira 2011). The programs provide examples of the kinds of attention and support deportees received from religious groups in the past, as well as a path churches can take to assist their deported members. More recently, the Dare to Dream organization, which, in collaboration with the International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination (ICAAD), provided a report highlighting the economic, social and cultural barriers to reintegration as well as legal issues of deportation (International Center for Advocates Against Discrimination (ICAAD) 2023).

Kuta also experienced difficulty in landing a job. Although she felt she had credentials and the experience for certain jobs in Tonga, she was not hired because she lacked social connections: "Here in Tonga it's not what you know, but who you know." Kuta experienced the double hurdles of being female and a deportee, as Tongans had gendered expectations of behavior that did not include women performing labor such as welding.

She and other deportees discussed other reintegration complications arising from the differences in mentality of native Tongans. Kuta explained that it could be harder for men to reintegrate because of the expectation to fight others:

> It's easier for me to cope … I don't have to fight nobody. They are very territorial here in Tonga. Like, if you weren't raised in Fasi (a neighborhood in Nuku'alofa, the capital), don't let me catch you walking around Fasi. If you're walking in Fasi, don't be speaking English. They want you to walk quiet and with your head down, don't say anything.

Vaka believed that it was taught at a young age in Tonga that fighting was an accepted problem-solving strategy. The biggest hurdle for him was finding employment, but after he began working as a tuktuk driver, his main concern became his safety. Several weeks before the interview, a group of young men had jumped him for the money he made, leaving him with a broken

leg and a torn rotator cuff. It was obvious why Vaka wanted to see programs that addressed attitudes toward violence in Tongan society.

Legal Status

Several deportees revealed they did not know they were eligible for deportation. Mana shared, "I shouldn't have been deported because my parents, they both got papers and stuff, but I was, … I was just a permanent resident." Mana was not aware that Lawful Permanent Residents (LPRs) or Green Card holders, are eligible to be deported if convicted of a crime. The list of crimes was increased by the AEDPA and IIRIRA and the law could be enforced retroactively.

Ngata shared his perspective on helping deportees pertaining to legal issues:

> Sooner you get your citizenship, the sooner you get locked in (staying in U.S.). And with the Trump situation, it might be the sooner you're out [deported], you know what I mean? But it's an education. That's one, education on that part of it, to let them know that you're on thin ice out here, act right or you're gonna be out. We are the examples of being out. That's part of the education.

Ngata shared this because he was married to a U.S. citizen but did not file his citizenship papers. As an LPR, Ngata was escorted from the jail to an immigration holding facility preparatory to his removal from the U.S. These examples underline a major issue: deportees may not understand citizenship status types. Many LPRs believe that being a Green Card holder is synonymous with being a citizen. LPRs have nearly identical rights to citizens, which does lead to many LPRs believing they cannot be deported, even after being found guilty of a crime. Legal citizenship and the discussion are of importance due to the AEDPA and IIRIRA laws (Golash-Boza 2014).

Recommendations

Where do we go from here? There are four directions proposed that should be pursued simultaneously; they are independent, but collectively they can assist the deportee experience, particularly based on the concerns shared by the subjects. Understanding how deportees experience reintegration into Tongan society is only the starting line. The themes that emerged in this study point specifically to factors that assist deportees arriving in an unfamiliar land: family, religion, culture, and legal status and proceedings. These themes are common in the research on Tongan deportees (Esser 2011; Kinikini 2005; Lee 2016; McNeill 2023; Pereira 2011) and weave into these recommendations.

1. The U.S. must reconsider laws that deport migrants who have already served their sentences in a U.S. criminal justice institution. Deportees expressed that they were law abiding for years after a successful prison sentence, yet were deported because of these policies. The further penalty of deportation for those who have served sentences represents a biased system that continues to target and "other" immigrants to the U.S and continues to separate families.

2. Education for Tongan Americans on deportation and citizenship issues is essential. Deportees in this study mentioned not knowing they could be deported as LPRs; several said they did not know their rights in immigration holding facilities, or that they were not U.S. citizens. Furthermore, many of the deportees were unaware they could be deported for past offenses. These are matters on which the general Tongan population in the U.S. should be informed, especially if they are not yet citizens.

3. The findings of this study point out the lack of support for reintegration programs in Tonga. Reintegration programs are not the same as prisoner reentry programs in the U.S., which can connect prisoners to immediate family and familiar communities. Deportees are integrating into an unfamiliar community, and programs must be designed to address the spectrum of needs, ranging from someone who has not been back to Tonga in 50 years to someone who left in the last several years. Foki Ki Api and Dare to Dream must receive support to assist in overcoming cultural barriers that could lead to economic opportunities for deportees.

4. Many Tongan deportees integrate through religion, and Tongan American culture is rooted in religion, so relying on churches for support is crucial. *Kaingalotu*, a term for fellow church members, essentially means that individuals who worship together are family (Ka'ili, 2007). When deportees attend church, it is familiar and it gives them a sense of belonging. Hence, this recommendation calls for support of these churches so that they may fulfill this vital role effectively.

Because religion is a central part of Tongan culture, deportees are likely to have a religious organization to which they can turn upon arrival. The Tonga Service Center, operated by the LDS church, provides employment-related and social services and resources. Hiva and Mohokoi received support from the Tonga Service Center and were enrolled in an online program that

would lead to certificates and degrees. Though the deportees' reports about using the Tonga Service Center varied, there were clear individual connections to the Center that were also related to the religious connections.

Conclusion

This study explored the lived experiences of 12 deportees to Tonga from the U.S., who shared their stories from the beginning of the deportation process to the day of their interviews. The findings demonstrated that religion, family, and familiarity with Tongan culture played strong roles in their reintegration. However, religion and family also challenged this process, and stigma and cultural shame further complicated it. Finally, the deportees' acculturation highlighted the value of maintaining culture for migrants.

Currently, the literature on deportees from the U.S. lacks research from the Pacific Islands. This study aimed to fill that gap and recommend steps to give deportees the best chance of reintegrating into a country where they are essentially foreign in terms of language and practices. It also provided a framework of the pathways leading deportees to reintegration. As maintained in this study, successful deportee reintegration can be facilitated with the collaboration of government, religious groups, and families, and by using what already works in deportee reintegration to guide future programs.

Correspondence: Dr Moana Hafoka, Assistant Professor, Utah Tech University, United States. Moana.hafoka@utahtech.edu.

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