



Fa'a Sāmoa Criminology: An Aspect of Pacific Criminology Counternarrative

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Abstract

Criminological imagination requires that criminologists adopt multiple perspectives on their study subjects, shifting backwards and forwards between the personal and remote, the micro and the macro, or the theoretical and the empirical. Criminology should thus be 'refractive' (Frauley 2015: 21), harnessing the multi-perspectivism of social life to produce fuller, sharper analyses that reveal links between individual lives, social structures, and historical context. One such perspective is *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology. Not much is known about this worldview or its relationship with criminology, let alone its application as a credible epistemology. This article argues that Western criminology is not the only way to generate new knowledge and recommended solutions and that instead *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology offers an alternative way. Two qualitative case studies demonstrate how Sāmoan thinking and doing applies in the contexts of Sāmoan young people's interaction with the youth justice system and hard-to-reach gang-involved Sāmoan peoples. Key implications are highlighted and recommended.

Keywords: Pacific criminology; Fa'a Sāmoa; youth justice; gangs; criminological imagination.

Introduction

Both authors of this paper are of Sāmoan descent and born in Aotearoa New Zealand. We travel on New Zealand passports as our nationality but are both Sāmoan and live in New Zealand, a country hosting eight main Pacific nations: Sāmoa, Cook Islands, Tonga, Niue, Fiji, Tokelau, Tuvalu, and Kiribati. Our backgrounds are Pacific, but we are Polynesians, not Melanesians or Micronesians, and we were mostly socialised in the host nation in which our Pacific parents chose to settle, not in the Sāmoan Islands. Nonetheless, this paper draws on a Sāmoan perspective, whose ethnic group has the highest population out of all other Pacific nation settlements in New Zealand, to represent one aspect of a Pacific criminological perspective. In our narrative, Sāmoan people and their *fa'a Sāmoa* (the Sāmoan way of life) worldview illustrate a criminological imagination based on an understanding and analysis of Sāmoan criminology (see Barton et al. 2011; Frauley 2010; Young 2011). This includes exploring what it is, why it forms a significant component of non-Western production of criminological knowledge, and how it is applied in research and therapeutic interventions. Ultimately, the Sāmoan or *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology is validated by its insightful and in-depth analytical utility, establishing its legitimacy, and positing it alongside other criminological theories, applications, and values, both Western and non-Western.



This paper consists of four sections. Section 1 sets the scene, provides definitions, and explains *fa'a Sāmoa* as a research method. Section 2 discusses two case studies. The first involves *fa'a Sāmoa* and youth justice, and the second examines *fa'a Sāmoa* and gang research. Both case studies illustrate how a *fa'a Sāmoa* lens is applied in context. Section 3 discusses the implications of triangulating the key points identified in the previous sections, with the authors' critical self-reflections on *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology. We encourage non-Pacific researchers to step outside of their comfort zones to understand what *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology is and to ensure their research approach considers the visible-invisible dynamics and multilayered complexities of the Pacific diaspora. In Section 4, we conclude by recommending a change in mindset and culture of research theory and the upholding of the validity and credibility of *fa'a Sāmoa* as an aspect of Pacific and mainstream criminology.

1. *Fa'a Sāmoa* as a Research Method

1.1. *The Need for Broadening the Criminological Perspective*

A great deal has been published on Sāmoan socio-cultural development, including research on beliefs, customs, practices, and behaviours within Sāmoan society (e.g., Agee et al. 2012; Autagavaia 2001; Culbertson, Agee and Makasiale 2007; Fairbairn-Dunlop and Makisi 2003; Faleolo 2003, 2009; Macpherson 1984; Macpherson and Macpherson 1990). Yet, to date, there has been limited discussion on how this influences the study of crime. Given the aims of this paper, Mulitalo-Lauta's (2000) concept of *fa'a Sāmoa* is explored in detail as an exemplar of the Sāmoan worldview. This perspective provides a Sāmoan lens for studying crime, justice, and victimisation, distinct from mainstream offerings. Such alternative perspectives have been scarce and limited until now. The closest work we have found that examines crime, justice, and victimisation using a worldview approach like *fa'a Sāmoa* is Vigil's (1998) research on gang activity in the Mexican American barrios of Los Angeles. Northern hemisphere research into cultural identity in ethnic minority urban street gangs has explored the role of traditional social practices and cultural customs amongst gang members, identifying the loss of cultural identity as gang members assimilate into the dominant culture (Belitz and Valdez 1994; Freng and Esbensen 2007; Lopez and Brummett 2003; Miller, Barnes and Hartley 2011; Moore 1991; Portes and Rumbaut 2001; Vigil and Yun 1996). Previous research on Sāmoan people's involvement in hard-to-reach gang communities such as Bloods youth gangs in New Zealand, however, has uncovered the opposite (Faleolo 2014). Gang-involved Sāmoans draw on cultural practices from their *fa'a Sāmoa* heritage, and worldview to counter assimilationist influences that erode their cultural identity.

1.2 *The Concept of Fa'a Sāmoa*

According to Mulitalo-Lauta (2000), the concept of *fa'a Sāmoa* represents and encompasses both the visible and invisible aspects of *fa'a Sāmoa* culture. The visible aspects of *fa'a Sāmoa* include physical elements, such as the social structures of *alga* (family), *matai* (chiefly system), and *lotu* (religion and spirituality), and ceremonies and cultural practices (for forgiveness, for welcoming visitors, for crisis situations like farewelling the loss of a loved one, or celebratory activities, such as marital union and 21st birthdays). The invisible aspects, on the other hand, include variables such as ideas, beliefs, values, skills, moods, passions, attitudes, and knowledge. For instance, social structure expectations require members to act collectively and communally, such as in decision-making. The behaviours and body language involved in these would be only identified and understood by a Sāmoan. Another example is in how Sāmoans are expected to behave in certain situations. For example, eye contact can be perceived as confrontational, while avoiding eye contact can also be confrontational. Additionally, not asking questions, or asking questions of the teacher while she/he is teaching, is considered disrespectful because they are authority figures who have done the training, which deserves respect. Another key social etiquette expectation is that young people should help in preparing, cooking, and serving food, and adults, especially the older surviving family members, eat first, followed by other adults, then young people and children eat last and help clean up. There are many more examples, but the main principle is that every behaviour or mannerism is attached to adhering to specific protocols, as acting in accordance with these protocols adds status to the family name. All these visible and invisible aspects of *fa'a Sāmoa* are interdependent and cannot exist in isolation from one another (Table 1).

Table 1: The concept of *fa'a Sāmoa* (adapted from Mulitalo-Lauta 2000)

Dimensions	Meaning	Example
1. The Sāmoan heart	Thinking from the heart	Instincts, gut feelings, reading your eyes or intuiting how you are feeling in their presence, E.g., decision-making.
2. The Sāmoan way	Behaving in a particular way, depending on the situation	Elevating the other person while lowering yourself, reciprocity, knowing your place. E.g., young people, not asking questions in the classroom.
3. Protocols and values	Adherence to protocols. By following Sāmoan-specific protocols and values, this increases a person's <i>mana</i> or integrity as well as their <i>aiga</i> (family)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>vā fealoaloa 'i</i> (means fostering good relationships, sound ethical practice). ○ <i>tapu</i> (forbidden) and <i>sā</i> (sacred) compliance to rules. ○ <i>fa'aaloalo</i> (respect: lowering oneself to elevate the other). ○ <i>tautua</i> (unconditional service).
4. Social institutions	Sāmoan society is made up of four interconnected institutions: <i>Aiga</i> (family), <i>lotu</i> (church), <i>matai</i> (chiefly authority), and <i>nu'u</i> (village) structure	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Aiga</i>/family structure is the foundation of Sāmoan culture where learning Sāmoan heart and Sāmoan way begins. ○ <i>Lotu</i> (church) structure is the foundation of moral reasoning and beliefs. ○ <i>Matai</i> (chieftainship) structure is the foundation of social order and rules. ○ <i>Nu'u</i> (village) structure is the foundation of communalism and collectivisation.
5. Ceremonies and rituals	Sāmoans draw on cultural processes and approaches depending on the situation or context	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ <i>Ifoga</i> ritual for seeking forgiveness. Underpinned by a restorative justice focus. ○ <i>Si'i</i> or gifting ritual, E.g., to a grieving family over a recent loss of a loved one. ○ <i>Ava</i> ceremony to welcome a V.I.P., organisations, or neighbouring villages and their villagers.

From a qualitative research perspective, Table 1 offers a clear and comprehensive example of what a Sāmoan worldview means for those members within and for those observing from a distance. It also serves as a Sāmoan/Pacific research framework. There are many other Pacific research methodologies developed by Pacific researchers, such as the Tongan *Kakala* by Konai Helu Thaman (1993), the Cook Islands *Tivaevae* by Teremona Maua-Hodges (2001), the NZ-born Sāmoan *Talanoa ile I'a* by Moses Ma'alo Faleolo (2003 and 2009), and the Niuean *Vaka* as cited in Agnew et al. (2004) and Nakhid et al. (2007). These methodologies represent a unique Pacific worldview in producing knowledge and methods. In this paper, we will not philosophically debate the merits and limits of Western and Pacific research science, as this will be presented in a forthcoming paper. Instead, we will elaborate on why Table 1 serves as a research framework, and briefly describe and justify our decision to utilise a case study approach. This approach demonstrates the utility of employing a Sāmoan worldview or lens to study and report on Sāmoan youth, their experiences of youth justice, and Sāmoan gang-involved young men, exploring how *fa'a Sāmoa* fits in or contrasts with this gang sub-culture in Aotearoa New Zealand.

1.3. Unpacking Fa'a Sāmoa's Five Dimensions

The five dimensions of *fa'a Sāmoa* outlined in Table 1 are avenues for cultural and criminological socialisation inquiry, allowing us to question how, amongst the myriad inter-relationships apparent throughout the developmental lifespan, criminality and victimisation emerge as a key analytical dimension. Adherence to protocols and values is the central core of *fa'a Sāmoa*, influencing the thinking and behaviour of Sāmoan individuals (the Sāmoan heart and the Sāmoan way) and collectively expressed in social institutions, ceremonies, and rituals. Values such as *teu le vā fealoaloa 'i*, which emphasise the importance of fostering good relationships by respecting others (*fa'aaloalo*) and elevating them while lowering oneself, represent important prosocial life skills. These values not only enhance *mana* or prestige for oneself and one's family but also prepare individuals for interactions beyond the *fa'a Sāmoa* environment, equipping them to engage with non-Sāmoans in varied contexts. *Tautua*, or unconditional service, is another significant protocol and value, which is underpinned by love (not the romantic kind, but a caring, altruistic love), humility, obedience, and commitment. It is another life skill that fosters a strong work ethic across various areas like schooling, sports, the workplace, church, and family life. It also helps individuals maintain good relationships with teachers, coaches, players, colleagues, parishioners, and family members, while adding integrity to

both one's family and village. At the same time, the aspects we have described are overseen by the *lotu* (church institution), which provides moral education as part of the *fa'a Sāmoa* socialisation experience (e.g., understanding right and wrong), and the *matai* (chiefly authority institution), which imparts lessons on law and authority, including consequences for non-compliance, also as part of the socialisation experience.

Fa'a Sāmoa is thus a protective factor. If risk factors are characteristics at the biological, psychological, family, community, or cultural levels that precede and increase the likelihood of negative outcomes (e.g., alcohol and substance misuse, the propensity to be violent through exposure to violent behaviour, family breakdown, and poverty), then protective factors are characteristics associated with a lower likelihood of negative outcomes or that reduce a risk factor's impact. Protective factors may be seen as positive countering events that equip Sāmoans with good coping and problem-solving skills, high self-esteem, emotional self-regulation, and a sense of social connectedness and engagement. By tracing the *fa'a Sāmoa* socialisation experience, three key features of risk and protective factors can be identified. First, risk and protective factors exist in multiple contexts as *fa'a Sāmoa* and people do not exist in isolation. For instance, risk factors in relationships include parents who use drugs and alcohol or who suffer from mental illness, child abuse and maltreatment, and inadequate supervision. In this context, parental involvement is an example of a protective factor. In communities, risk factors include neighbourhood poverty and violence. Here, protective factors could include the availability of faith-based resources and after-school activities. In society, risk factors can include norms and laws favourable to substance use, as well as racism and lack of economic opportunities. Protective factors could include hate crime laws or policies limiting the availability of alcohol.

Second, risk and protective factors are both correlated and cumulative. Risk factors are typically positively correlated with one another and negatively correlated with protective factors. In other words, people with multiple risk factors are more likely to encounter additional risk factors and are less likely to have protective factors. Risk and protective factors also tend to have a cumulative effect on the development—or reduced development—of behavioural health issues. Young people with multiple risk factors are more likely to develop conditions that impact their physical or mental health, while those with multiple protective factors are at a reduced risk. Additionally, individual factors can be associated with multiple outcomes; for example, negative life events can be associated with substance use as well as anxiety, depression, and other behavioural health issues.

Lastly, risk and protective factors can influence a person's entire lifespan. For example, risk factors such as poverty and family dysfunction may contribute to mental and/or substance use disorders later in life. Factors within one context, such as family, may also influence or be influenced by factors in other contexts. Effective parenting, for example, has been shown to mediate the effects of multiple risk factors, including poverty, divorce, parental bereavement, and parental mental illness. Succinctly, if early socialisation establishes *fa'a Sāmoa* as a foundation, it ideally acts as a buffer throughout the lifespan, protecting Sāmoans from risk factors by forming a barrier against incompatible influences and moderates their impact. However, in practice, this hope may not be fully realised.

2. *Fa'a Sāmoa* Through Two Case Studies

To illustrate the application of the *fa'a Sāmoa* lens as an aspect of Pacific criminology and its validity in understanding and responding to Sāmoan criminality and victimisation, we present two case studies, one from each author.

Both case studies provide a snapshot into in-depth topics within their natural settings, allowing for researcher flexibility in methods and analysis, with the aim of describing the phenomenon in detail in its real-world context. First, author Naomi Fuamatu's case study relates to Māori and Sāmoan experiences of youth justice/juvenile justice in Aotearoa, Australia (Brisbane and Queensland), and the United States (San Francisco) (see Suaali'i-Sauni, Tauri and Webb 2018; Suaali'i-Sauni et al. 2021). Second, author Moses Faleolo's case study is an excerpt from his PhD research which involved 18 months of fieldwork, during which he collected over 200 hours of audio recordings from Sāmoan Bloods youth gangs in New Zealand. This research covered their childhood-adolescence-adulthood socialisation experiences, including cultural, familial, religious, educational, neighbourhood, social services, and gang membership experiences (Faleolo 2014; see also Faleolo 2015, 2020). While case study research can focus on individual(s), as seen in Fuamatu and her team's project, this differs from narrative research methodology, which involves a detailed study of individual life histories, which is Faleolo's approach. This reminds us of Wright Mills's (2000 [1959]) conception of 'sociological imagination', which exhorts researchers to study individuals within their broader historical context. It makes a researcher conscious of the interrelations between the 'personal troubles of milieu' and 'public issues of social structure' (Wright Mills 2000 [1959]: 8). Combining a sociological imagination with a worldview like *fa'a Sāmoa* enables a pellucid analysis of the contextual embedding of social phenomena or individual(s) or events and demonstrates how the *fa'a Sāmoa* lens can be applied in criminology and criminological research methodology.

2.1 Case Study I: *Fa'a Sāmoa and the Study of Youth Justice*

Author Fuamatu provides perspectives from a cohort of Sāmoan young people, which included three participants. One of the key themes participants shared within their *talanoa*¹ was their encounters with the police. The cohort lived and resided in the South Auckland area and their age ranged between 18–25 years. The scenarios and reflections provided occurred when they were minors between the ages of 14–17 years. Their retelling revealed experiences of mistreatment, oppressive tactics, and discrimination, issues that persist for Māori and Pasifika² youth and communities (Latu and Lucas 2008; Webb 2009). Participant 1 (male, 25) shared the following about a particular constable in Mangere, South Auckland, who was well known in the community for his brutal, violent, and oppressive policing tactics and approach towards locals:

Everyone in Mangere knows [Constable X], you know you are getting it. Everyone knows [Constable X], that guy used to whip everyone's ass behind the car. The system is the system. What are you doing to do, who are they going to believe. Me or the cop. All I know is that fuck this guy, fuck the system. Fuck being treated like this. That was inhumane.

Being treated as a worthless nothing. By someone who has a badge. And what if this guy was in a supermarket without a badge and we crossed paths, this is the nigga that did something to me at the back of his car. And you want to do something to him so bad. Let's just say everyone knows who [Constable X] is. I didn't like the fella. Everyone knows the fella.

It's dumb because. When you are young, they would take you home. When you are a certain age, and they interview you. I didn't know that you had to have your parent with you. I was like sitting there like I was a thug, like fuck this. Answer the question and go. That was me, I didn't know what these cops meant. But everyone knows it's statements all the way. Yeah, they put answers into your mouth. They ask, do you want to me to record or write anything down. That's why you just say nothing and give them nothing. (Participant 1)

Clearly, the police officer is not representing his organisation and the youth justice system in a positive light. The officer's abuse of his power and authority remains a lasting memory etched in Participant 1's mind, along with a lack of faith in the justice system. From a *fa'a Sāmoa* point of view though, as a Sāmoan female researcher born in New Zealand, Fuamatu is cognisant of the ethics surrounding appropriate conduct, impartiality, and reporting objectively. But to herself, she could not help but question the police officer's thinking and actions towards Participant 1, who comes from a Sāmoan upbringing that emphasised thinking from the heart and feeling instinctually, an approach socialised into him early on. While Participant 1 might not be fully aware that his actions will reflect on his family's status in the Sāmoan community, for him, the police officer has crossed his threshold of respect and self-control. Consequently, Participant 1 might feel compelled perhaps to show disrespect and vilify the officer, despite this being contrary to *fa'a Sāmoa* values.

It might be unfair to judge police officers on their inability to apply cultural competency and diversity knowledge to the many different individuals they encounter. Officers are trained to understand both their rights and the rights of those with whom they interact. Moreover, young people often do not know what their rights are when confronted by the police. These facts make it even more concerning that the officer in Mangere did not even take the time to inform Participant 1 of his rights, suggesting either an oversight or exploitation of the situation.

For Participant 2 (female, 20), her first encounter with the police also involved not knowing what her rights were. Police officers turned up to her family home one night, shortly after an incident relating to her sister had been reported. Aged 17 at the time, she recalled the event as follows:

And then I saw the policeman and he said not to be alarmed; this is all part of the protocol. And if they were filming my face, that it would be blurred out anyways. I was just like; I didn't know what to say. I didn't know my rights at the time and what I could have said. So that was like really, that was traumatising. And they still hadn't sent an ambulance for my sister yet. So, my sister um. So, when they saw my sister's situation and then they said something like to ring the ambulance. And I was thinking wow. What if my sister was like badly hurt or something. Yeah.

I don't mind when they do their job. But like, they didn't know I was a minor. They were treating me like I was like, you know an adult. They kept asking me questions and they kept saying, 'you already know this. Yeah'. And when they took me, they just threw me into this room, with all these people who were arrested as well. I was like crying so hard and I don't know. I didn't get to talk to anyone for three hours. (Participant 2)

From the *fa'a Sāmoa* perspective, the word 'respect' means that during the exchange (be it verbal, non-verbal, or written) between two people or a person to a group, it is delivered from one person to the other where the receiver is elevated and the sender lowers himself/herself down. There is no deference being shown by this police officer in the engagement with Participant 2's family. The family's encounter with the police is cold, insensitive, non-empathic, and a self-centred experience, according to Participant 2. Police officers quickly judged who was a suspect and who was not. This black and white attitude is often what members of the public like Participant 2 react to. Her sister's situation did not require an urgent ambulance call-out, but the

police called out an ambulance irrespective of what family members wanted. The police officers further decided to question Participant 2 at the police station, removing her from her family home and placing her in a cell (detained not arrested) with offenders, despite not being one herself. This detention, which lasted for hours, likely diminished her confidence in and respect for the police and their actions. There are many situations where the police did not show respect from a *fa'a Sāmoa* lens, consequently missing the visible-invisible signs.

Whether it is targeting, profiling, or stereotyping, Participant 3's encounter with the police is typical of how policy use criminal records to identify patterns, historical trends, and interconnections. Police often rely on family history to make judgements, reflecting the adage 'once a criminal always a criminal' or 'it runs in the family'. Fuamatu has even overheard police officers say this. As to what 'runs' in the family, it is assumed to be criminality and deviance. And even though Participant 3 is not involved in, and does not follow, her family's criminal ways, Participant 3 finds it challenging to separate herself from her family's criminal past, as the police struggle to make this distinction:

It's challenging, like when it comes to like police and stuff too, because I feel like lately, young people have been getting based off their parents and how they were as kids. So that's probably one of the biggest challenges I've had, having to deal with my dad and his sibling's shit. When I got older, because then they [the police] sort of just looked at me as the second lots of trouble.

Every argument I've had with the police have been a white-headed blonde cop, like a chick. Like it's always like, and they I feel like they always target the street, like the street kids and like I've watched cops like beat up like it's just like gruesome shit! (Participant 3)

Methodologically, a *fa'a Sāmoa* approach offers a broader and alternative interpretation and analysis. Every Sāmoan person carries with him/her a *fa'asinomaga*, reference points or indicators of identity and belonging. This refers to one's role, place, and responsibilities to others in the *aiga*, village, and extended family. Connected to *fa'asinomaga* are *fa'alupega* and *fa'alagiga*, which are genealogical and honorific references and salutations of the child's, young person's, and their family's specific home district, village, and family. It is a very sensitive issue for every Sāmoan when his/her family members are being grouped and classed as a generation of troublemakers by police officers, even though not everyone in the family is involved in criminal activities. Despite the valuable work police accomplish in solving homicides, recovering stolen property, and ensuring victims are supported, negative encounters with the police still occur.

All three participants reported negative experiences with police, including abuse in the back of a police car, cold and insensitive behaviour, and biased targeting and stereotyping. It is hardly surprising that all three participants have had mostly negative encounters with the police, given the many accounts of biased and discriminatory treatment by police of ethnic minorities or Pacific peoples in New Zealand. The intersection of race, ethnicity, and crime with police bias and racist treatment of people from these backgrounds is not new. These factors cannot be separated from the negative experiences of the participants, as accounts worldwide frequently document ethnic minority urban peoples living in host countries facing daily ostracism, oppression, and discrimination by the police. While the *talanoa* touched on some uncomfortable and confronting truths about how Sāmoan youth experience negative aspects of the youth justice system, particularly at the hands of the police, a *fa'a Sāmoa* lens reveals many 'invisible' elements that mainstream approaches might overlook. A *fa'a Sāmoa* approach enhances the subliminal messages of the lived experiences Sāmoan young people have when encountering the youth justice system, which often remain silenced, their voices suppressed.

2.2 Case Study II: *Fa'a Sāmoa and Gang Research*

Author Faleolo shares this excerpt from his 2014 doctoral study on Sāmoan Bloods gang as the second snapshot underpinning the case for a *fa'a Sāmoa* approach. One of the key themes participants reflected on and shared within their *talanoa* followed the question: 'What do you know about *fa'a Sāmoa* and was it a reason why you joined the gang?'. As the Bloods gang members were all of Sāmoan ethnicity, a key focus was exploring whether these gangs drew on *fa'a Sāmoa*, given their Sāmoan heritage and identity. The cohort all lived and resided in the South Auckland area. At the time the *talanoa* was carried out, the group's age range was between 16–25 years. Three (B-Red, J-Red, and B-On—gang members from PBS³) of these *talanoa* have been selected to show how a *fa'a Sāmoa* praxis is applied, how the research was done (theory and/or methods), and what *fa'a Sāmoa* can contribute to theorising in Pacific criminology.

Consider the life history interview between B-Red and Faleolo:

MF: Yeah. Okay, was it being a Sāmoan a reason why you joined the gang?

B-Red: Ah that had, that was that was part of it, cos when I was growing up and I saw gangs it was mainly Tongans versus Sāmoans and I didn't want to blend in with Tongans cos it's not my culture, that's why I followed Sāmoans. We always speak Sāmoan to each other in the gang.

MF: Did you do a *lotu* (prayer) before you did your *meais* (eat food)?

B-Red: Oh yeah, bro one of the aww usos, Cap B he does his *lotu*, he's like 'sole yous guys wanna eat?' we're like, 'eh?', do your *lotu*, this dude he just, does his cross and doesn't say anything, and we go, 'sole we even praying', he goes, 'nah but still at the same time it's good to, at least do the sign of the cross before you eat'.

MF: Yeah bro but that's out of it eh you know this is a gang and you still doing a *lotu* bro. What other things did you do that was like you know?

B-Red: Ah like we went to one of the boys' dad's birthdays, the dad wanted us to come over for drinks and we wanted to make him enjoy his night so we all *fa'a siva* (dance the Sāmoan way) Sāmoa, we all just dancing Sāmoans around him while he was dancing and all the family. Mom, she said something loud, like she told everyone to be quiet, she goes 'Aww I like to thank my friends aww my dad aww my son's friends, these guys made this night even better, you's guys just showed us that we can you know, you's guys maybe bad, look bad, dress bad, but you's guys got a heart for Sāmoans'.

MF: Shot bro, honestly bro that's good.

B-Red: Yeah, we were just standing there going, yeah Bloods! Mom didn't care she was just happy what we done and how we were drinking like respectfully, like we were just stand on our corner and we're just drinking we didn't put up any gang signs we hide our colours but when she goes thank you, yeah Bloods! And like the whole family all of them were laughing at us, the dad was saying to ____, 'I love you boys', like that's the R—A—, the like, parents started being all good with us then, they knew we were doing bad but like...

Faleolo felt his Sāmoaness and deep knowledge of *fa'a Sāmoa* revealed more than what this *talanoa* would project to a researcher who did not know anything about the *fa'a Sāmoa* worldview, and that he probably achieved a greater depth of understanding than another researcher could have. It is clear to Faleolo that B-Red understands and practised various aspects of *fa'a Sāmoa*, a unique and not widely known aspect of gang membership found perhaps only in ethnic minority street gangs like B-Red's gang. Faleolo's Sāmoan background is certainly an advantage to the research context and applying a *fa'a Sāmoa* approach not only elicits findings that would have been invisible to a non-Pacific researcher, but his lived experiences as a Sāmoan add more value to the analysis, interpretation, and translation of the findings.

B-Red refers to the 'Sāmoan heart'. This is an instinctual decision, not a calculated one, shown when it comes to doing a *lotu*/prayer before eating. This is the Sāmoan way, behaviour, and mannerism that distinguishes a Sāmoan from a non-Sāmoan. Before eating, a prayer must be said. It is a habit. And if older people were around, then the gang members would have eaten last. While not referred to by B-Red, there is dancing and celebrating described in his response, providing another illustration of the Sāmoan heart and Sāmoan way. Sāmoans do not spend time thinking about how to show their acknowledgement of someone's birthday; instead, singing and dancing come naturally to them, as do acceptance and love. Each is highlighted in B-Red's observations of how he and his gang were treated when they turned up dressed in gang clothes. This all reflects adhering to the protocols and values spelt out in the *fa'a Sāmoa* worldview, enhancing the *mana* of B-Red and his gang friends, as well as his gang friend's family. The *aiga* (family) and the *lotu* (prayer) are key social institutions in the *fa'a Sāmoa* worldview. The ritual of saying of prayer before a meal exemplifies these dimensions in action in Faleolo's *talanoa* with B-Red. More importantly, it is crucial to Faleolo's analysis, interpretation, and translation as a Sāmoan researcher.

Another essential attribute for a Sāmoan researcher is intentionally investing time in building relationships. This is very important for accessing hard-to-reach communities, requiring the researcher to take the time to get to know the target group and waiting patiently for trust to form before earning access. Even before Faleolo applied for ethics approval, he had already begun reaching out through his existing networks to identify target group members, especially the leaders and charismatic members of the target group, because getting on their good side would give the needed backing to approach prospective participants. Eighteen months after gaining ethics approval and meeting with key Bloods gang leaders, Faleolo used these life history interviews as pilot interviews, lining up next participants through snowballing or asking the gang leader for recommended participants to speak to next. A case in point, Faleolo's *talanoa* with J-Red picks up where the role of family members in ensuring *fa'a Sāmoa* is passed on to the next generation:

MF: What has been or who has been a positive influence in your life?

J-Red: I say grandpa cos he knows I'm doing the gang ways but he knows ah he says that you can still do it but just remember your family cos the family is always gonna be there, if you get in trouble your families gonna be there, ah yeah everything he says for example he wants me to go take up the church cos he knows, he says that I'm not like my other cousin that straight gang bang every single day, see a *ba'a*⁴ straight away rush him I'm not like that. I still do the *fa'a Sāmoa* way um strict ah like whatever the family asks I'm on it I'll do it for them, that's just how grandpa's life is like yeah, he says that I'm just like him but little. One of the advice's that grandpa passed on to me was ah ... was when I was probably seventeen or sixteen was when he told me that there was a thing my cousin did that was wrong, I think it was ... ah my grandpa gives me advice every single day, every time I see him. The last was on Monday he told me to remember church don't miss church.

Most of the life history interviews featured long, detailed, emotional, and deep insights and information because of the importance Faleolo placed on building a relationship. It is another natural thing as a Sāmoan to look to fostering a relationship first and foremost—the Sāmoan heart—and hang out to experience what is encountered with your gang leader, and share in the emotion and learning, which is the Sāmoan way. Why? Because it is about adhering to the protocols and values of how one

Sāmoan treats another Sāmoan, respectfully and sensitively, so the *mana* of both the gang leader and the researcher and our families are elevated in status. It is not easy to get gang leaders to share, especially in detail. An outsider non-Sāmoan researcher might never have been told the things that J-Red shared, nor have understood the importance even if told. This is *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology, an aspect of Pacific criminology.

Fa'a Sāmoa not only influenced these gang members' actions but the researcher's own. Faleolo's last *talanoa* with B-On begins with him being unsure if *fa'a Sāmoa* had influenced him and his gang involvement. Further reading suggests that *fa'a Sāmoa* had indeed influenced the purpose, actions, and moral nature of his gang, while it made Faleolo rethink what he thought about gangs and their actions:

MF: Is *fa'a Sāmoa* a strong influence in your gang?

B-On: Ah I don't know but for us hard cos we got respect the family especially that's why its strong in us cos we got a respect our boy's family that's the main thing for us that's how strong in like the boys *aganu'u* (cultural heritage) cos we got a respect them. The other thing about *fa'a Sāmoa* is that we're not, we're not into stealing and stuff, um I don't know why cos most gangs do it but nah we wouldn't do that, we're not into stealing and stuff because like cos nah cos we're Sāmoans we're taught better, we're taught up in a way we're like don't steal like you know like yeah we don't, I never like me and my boys like we don't steal or stand over steal cars I don't even know how to pop cars like yeah we don't do stuff like that we don't even sell weed like, we just fight if we have to.

All members of B-On's PBS gang mentioned that they do not steal, damage property, slang or sell drugs, or bully and intimidate people, a finding that certainly surprised Faleolo. It seemed to Faleolo that he had made another unique finding because the gang literature, according to his knowledge, does not refer to a positive slant on gang life, such as drawing on *fa'a Sāmoa* cultural practices. As an aspect of their PBS gang activity, doing so distinguishes them from other Bloods youth gangs. Defending their territory, community, and their cultural heritage and identity is paramount, so they patrolled local retail outlets and if their gang networks discovered rival gangs were planning to raid a store in their territory, they defended it. This approach was new to Faleolo as a Sāmoan, yet clearly it is *fa'a Sāmoa* that prevents B-On and his gang from being involved in criminality, despite their physical fights with rival gangs. Faleolo had assumed that their upbringing and *fa'a Sāmoa* teachings would have instilled in them the importance of controlling their temper, avoiding vice that are *tapu* (forbidden), and engaging in activities that are regarded as *sa* (sacred). The irony is that despite PBS gang's moral stance on certain issues, it did not prevent their ascendancy to becoming one of the most feared Sāmoan gangs in South Auckland. The key finding is that dimensions of *fa'a Sāmoa* can be perceived both positively and negatively.

3. Discussion: *Fa'a Sāmoa* Criminology

The findings from Fuamatu's and Faleolo's case studies, analysed alongside the key points of *fa'a Sāmoa* as a research theory and our own understandings as Sāmoan researchers, culminates in two critical discussion points. First, to have a sociological imagination, a person must be able to pull away from the situation, think from an alternative point of view, and look at it with fresh critical eyes. In other words, the significance of a cultural lens to make sense of, and to yield further in-depth inferences of, what is being observed, discussed, and conceptualised is a key feature of *fa'a Sāmoa* criminology. If 'cultural' is to be a guiding principle of criminological imagination, then it is essential to consider how individuals perceive their environment and interactions based on the knowledge, values, attitudes, and traditions of their primary group. There is a clear correlation between the Fuamatu and Faleolo case studies and the concept and practice of *fa'a Sāmoa*. The application of a *fa'a Sāmoa* lens over the Fuamatu and Faleolo case studies shows the term, 'respect' as a common denominator. According to Sāmoans, the word 'respect' means thinking and acting in a way that the exchange results in you lowering yourself down while elevating the other person. Thus, while police officers failed to show respect, the interviewer continued to respect each police officer. Or, in the case of a family birthday celebration attended by Bloods gang members, respect was shown between both parties. While, as researchers, we may assume that all Sāmoan young people are brought up learning *fa'a Sāmoa* and, thus, are equipped with prosocial life skills (see Table 1) to avoid involvement in the youth criminal justice system police organisation or gangs, the reality is often otherwise.

Secondly, mainstream criminology theorising and research has tended to overlook the subtleties identified, described, and reported in the Fuamatu and Faleolo case study analyses. Analysing both the Fuamatu and Faleolo cohorts through a *fa'a Sāmoa* lens, revealed deeper, more detailed insights that might be missed by a non-Sāmoan researcher. *Fa'a Sāmoa* criminology makes what is invisible to the non-Sāmoan researcher visible, encouraging Sāmoan researchers to utilise and trust *fa'a Sāmoa* methods rather than just relying on Western research science and methods. A Pacific criminologist analysing the Bloods youth gang members using a visible-invisible framework would observe their interactions with family members and ceremonial rituals from church encounters. While a non-Pacific criminologist might overlook these aspects as invisible, a Pacific criminologist would recognise that the gang members integrated *fa'a Sāmoa* into their gang culture, viewing the gang as a site of cultural expression and creativity rather than merely a criminal organisation, as often assumed. This perspective is often missing from

gang research literature, which typically involves outsiders studying communities they know nothing about, often representing these groups as criminal outlaws/outsideers. As insider Pacific criminologists guided by *fa'a Sāmoa* principles of importance to our participants, we reveal a different picture, one highlighting shared humanity.

There is an invisible force expressed as *alofa sili* or unconditional love, that J-Red's grandfather referred to. Despite J-Red's mistakes and how they embarrassed the family (*aiga* social institution), *alofa sili* meant the family would forgive and still be there for him. This unconditional love is a key element of the Sāmoan heart, the Sāmoan way, reflecting adherence to protocols and values, ritual, and social institutions. When this love extends to gang membership and culture, it distinguishes the gang from other ethnic-specific urban street gangs, as highlighted by B-On, who emphasised that his gang was unique. His gang adopted the *fa'aaloalo* (respect) protocol and value (see Table 1) as well as *tapu* (forbidden) and *sa* (sacred) to filter out prospective members who wanted to join with the aim of participating in alcohol and drug consumption and crime and instead recruit members who wanted to know more about their Sāmoan culture and keep their neighbourhood safe from rival gangs.

You are not necessarily disadvantaged if you are a non-Pacific criminologist, but you must genuinely invest the time to learn and apply knowledge outside your usual expertise. Like most life experiences, truly understanding *fa'a Sāmoa* and Pacific criminology requires immersing yourself and actively participating in relevant encounters to grasp its principal elements, rationalisations, justifications, and totality. You will need to spend time stepping out of your comfort zone. Attend a Pacific church service; observe and engage in Pacific celebration festivals; eat and drink at a Pacific family home; work with and serve Pacific peoples; and spend time living with Pacific peoples. You will need to invest time in building relationships, even if it takes 18 months or more. This is something the authors have done to learn about, fit in with, and adapt to non-Pacific worldviews and ways of life, especially European ones, since childhood. A non-Pacific criminologist may be able to identify the invisible dimensions of Pacific criminality and utilise Pacific criminological theories to broaden their Western understandings and challenge the West's dominance in criminological knowledge production and deployment of Western-influenced responses to eliminate criminality.

Conclusion

The need to theorise using a Pacific criminological lens like *fa'a Sāmoa* to challenge implicit bias within the discipline of criminology is overdue. Criminology as a discipline must learn from Pacific peoples' histories, including in settler colonial countries, to advance in ways that are more coherent, inclusive, and responsive to diverse cultural perspectives. A 'Pacific-centred criminology' should focus less on unravelling an individual's motivation towards crime, and instead address the wider structural determinants that generate the conditions from which criminality emerges. It should focus on utilising Pacific-specific theories like the concept of *fa'a Sāmoa* rather than relying solely on mainstream theories like strain (Agnew 2001), control (Gottfredson and Hirschi 1990), and social learning (Akers 1998). To effectively address Pacific-specific precursors to criminality, including the impact of institutional, societal, and global racism and discrimination towards ethnic-specific minorities living in host-settler countries, it is crucial to embrace the concerns and worldviews of the oppressed and colonised, seeking understanding through their own assumptions, concerns, and perspectives. Chilisa (2012) emphasises that researchers and related disciplines must actively engage in decolonisation to counteract the silencing, marginalisation, and alienation of transformative perspectives. Scholars within these disciplines have a crucial role to contest and challenge oppressive and restrictive paradigms that reinforce racialised privileges. In seeking redress, Chilisa (2012) concludes that restitution may enable minority concerns to be situated differently. Repositioning criminological epistemology to be more inclusive of minority, Indigenous, and First Nations perspectives requires recognising that rigorous academic research is impotent without applied efforts and social policies that empower marginalised and disenfranchised communities worldwide.

There is a pressing need to produce a counternarrative to challenge implicit biases within so-called mainstream criminology. This includes speaking out against those conservative criminologists who seek to stifle wider debates within the academy concerning the need for more diverse perspectives on the racialisation of crime. In pursuing this counternarrative, it is essential to advance the integration of *fa'a Sāmoa* within criminological theorising and research. This will enrich the field and ensure a more inclusive and accurate understanding of crime and justice.

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¹ The word ‘*talanoa*’ means ‘to talk’ or ‘speak’. The term is recognised as ‘communicate’ within the Pacific region (Tunufa’i 2016; Hindley et al. 2020), and has been described as ‘a conversation, a talk, or an exchange of ideas or thinking’ (Vaiotei 2006: 23).

² The term ‘Pasifika’ refers to two Pacific communities: those who were born in the Pacific (Pacific born) and migrated to host countries like New Zealand (NZ) to forge a new way of life and those who were born in the host countries (NZ born) and whose cultural lineage traces back to the Pacific. This term has been used interchangeably with the term ‘Pacific’.

³ A Sāmoan Bloods Youth Gang in New Zealand who used their street name as the name of their group, which is initialled as P.B.S.

⁴ The Sāmoan word for crabs. The Bloods rival gang are the Crips. Instead of calling them Crips, Bloods gang members call them Crabs.

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