

12-16-2013

Commentary on "Family Roots: Sustenance for Samoan and Tongan American Elders"

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Recommended Citation

Godinet, Meripa T. (2013) "Commentary on "Family Roots: Sustenance for Samoan and Tongan American Elders";" *Journal of Family Strengths*: Vol. 13 : Iss. 1 , Article 10.

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.tmc.edu/jfs/vol13/iss1/10>

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The article entitled "Family Roots: sustenance for Samoan and Tongan American Elders" discussed findings from the study that examined family- community- and culture-based factors that contribute to the health and well being of Samoan and Tongan elders. As immigrants to the United States, Samoans and Tongans have faced numerous challenges that impact their health and well-being. These challenges include disproportionate rates of life-threatening illnesses such as cancer, diabetes, and heart disease to overrepresentation in crime and under-education. Struggles due to language barriers, lack of resources, and discrimination have plagued the experience of Samoan and Tongan immigrants as they strive to adjust to the American context. Consequently, confronted with a host of barriers, access to needed services as well as culturally sensitive programs is very limited to non-existent. The article highlights the essential role of elders in their respective communities and families for the "survival of their indigenous cultures and people." While elders play a key role, negotiating the two often-opposing contexts (indigenous & American) within their families and communities can be a risk factor to their health and well-being. Thus, the authors emphasize the role of the family with regard to "cultural values, beliefs, and practices" as fundamental in supporting the well-being of elders.

Several themes emerged from the study that are worth noting. First, the elders in the Samoan and Tongan cultures, regardless of place of context, are crucial in the sustenance of their cultural ways of knowing and doing, and the transmission of their legacy and history to future generations. They are entrusted as part of their role in the culture to serve as leaders in their communities and families. With this in mind, the second theme recognizes the role of family in supporting the elders. As indicated in the study, family relationships, communication, and responsibilities can be either protective or risk factors for the well-being of elders. When relationships are strained among family members with regard to roles and responsibilities, risk factors are present. When communication is open and consistent among children and elders, protective factors such as joy and happiness are reflected in the relationship. The third theme speaks of the importance of maintaining their ethnic language. While elders recognize the importance of the younger generation's fluency with the English language, they believe that knowing the indigenous

language fosters communication between the generations. Language is also a means to embracing one's cultural identity and increasing understanding of the indigenous context. The fourth theme is expectations of elders from their families and communities. The article indicates that when families expect their elders to "...be healthy and live long" lives, they are encouraged to focus on health and longevity. Elders feel a sense of being needed and are able to see their role and contributions to the overall well-being of the family. Finally, the importance of a holistic and balanced life is a theme that is integrated into the lives of Samoan and Tongan elders (Lui, 2003). Fundamental to these cultures is the role of spirituality in coping with physical and emotional challenges (Sabada, Tanjasiri, Mata'alii, & Hanneman, 2010). Thus, it is significant to understand that, for Tongan and Samoan people, the balance between three core elements (God, people, and land, as referenced in the article) reflects health and well being (Lui, 2003).

This article enhances knowledge of the relevance of elders in the Tongan and Samoan communities as leaders and transmitters of ways of knowing and doing for the survival of indigenous culture. These cultural values and practices within systems such as families and communities create protective factors that are essential to the health and well-being of the elders. The focus on elders honors their contribution and acknowledges the need to support their well-being for not only themselves but for the future well-being of their families and communities.

References

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