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Community and Cultural Responsivity: Climate Change Research in Tuvalu

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The Community Mini-Grant was founded in 2010 with the intention of supporting small, time-sensitive community-based projects that are consistent with SCRA's mission, principles, and goals. We are happy to support the great work being done by SCRA members and their community partners, and even happier to be able to highlight examples of this work and share them with the GJCPP readership. Below, Dr. Laura Kati Corlew provides us with insight into research on the community and cultural impacts of climate change in Tuvalu, as well as a description of the impact that Community Mini-Grant funding had on implementing a culturally responsive research and dissemination process.

Research Overview

I first became interested in the cultural impacts of climate change through my interest in social and environmental justice. Living on the island of O'ahu, the unique threats of climate change to the communities in the Pacific region began to seem more personal. Before I began this research, I had no direct connection to Tuvalu itself, although the more I read about, thought about, and talked about the country, the more I began to hear about friends of friends and colleagues of colleagues who were from or had been to Tuvalu. We say in the Pacific that "we are a series of islands connected by the ocean" (as opposed to divided by the ocean). Community connections are important, even if one must follow the chain two or three degrees. I had never been to Tuvalu and I did not know anyone from Tuvalu. Regardless, connections were being made and I wanted to learn more.

My dissertation research on the cultural impacts of climate change in Tuvalu was funded by a series of small grants. The University Arts & Sciences Student Research Award funded a preliminary research trip, which ensured that I was able to develop a strong dissertation research proposal on site and in collaboration with the community I sought to learn more about (Corlew, 2011). The key to this preliminary exploration was that I would be able to ask Tuvaluans themselves how to best to study "the cultural impacts of climate change in Tuvalu" in a way that made sense in Tuvalu and from which the results would be useful to Tuvaluans. This was especially important since I was an outsider – any proposal I could develop on my own in another country could not possibly accurately address this research theme. The Gartley Research Award from the University of Hawai'i's Department of Psychology then funded travel and research materials during the major research data-collection period. This funding guaranteed that the research procedures, designed with Tuvaluan collaboration, could be carried out as proposed.

Finally, the SCRA Community Mini-Grant funded several culturally responsive elements that were specifically catered to this research in this community.

Overview of Tuvalu

Tuvalu is a low-lying island nation in the South Pacific (see Image 1). Its population is about 11,000 people who live on about 15 square miles of land that is divided into nine islands and atolls scattered across an ocean area roughly the size of California, Nevada, and Oregon combined. The primary language in Tuvalu is Tuvaluan, a Polynesian language closely related to the Samoan language, however as a result of colonization by the British, most Tuvaluans also speak English fluently. Tuvalu is a developing nation, considered a Least Developed Country (LDC) by the United Nations (2011). This research project took place on the capitol atoll of Funafuti, the most populous atoll, home to about 5,000 people. Funafuti is a major destination point for domestic migration because it is the center of government, job opportunities, education (i.e., Fetuvalu High School and the University of the South Pacific, Tuvalu campus), and has access to foreign commerce and travel. Funafuti is the site of Tuvalu's major seaport as well as its international airport.

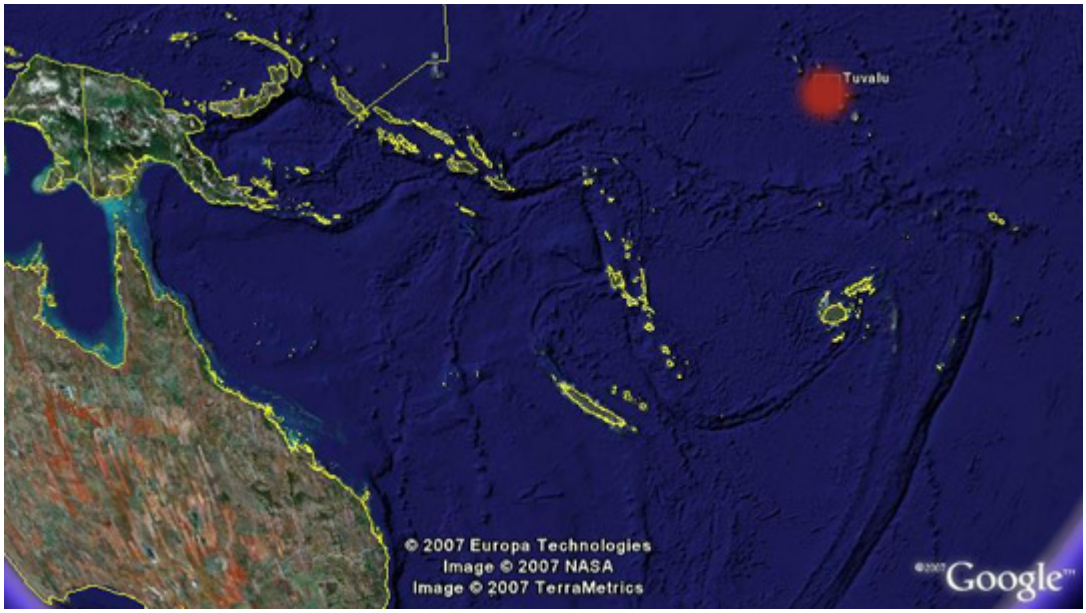

Image 1. Map of Tuvalu in the South Pacific. (Image retrieved from http://www.global-greenhouse-warming.com/images/TuvaluMap.jpg)

Climate Change in Tuvalu

As a low-lying island nation, Tuvalu is projected to become uninhabitable due to sea level rise in the next 50 to 100 years (IPCC, 2007; Karl, Melillo, & Peterson, 2009). The unjust paradox of climate change is that those who are least responsible for causing it are often the most threatened (see Image 2). Tuvalu and other states with similar levels of development are at the bottom of the list of countries whose emissions are the driving forces behind climate change (Ray, 2011). However, many adaptations require access to funds, infrastructure, and physical resources that are not readily available to a small island state, making Tuvalu differently vulnerable than the low-lying island of Manhattan, for example. Tuvalu has been active on the world stage with this inherent justice issue, advocating that wealthy, industrialized nations mitigate climate change

with emission reductions and assist small island states and other developing nations with expensive adaptations.

Image 2. Coastal erosion in the Funafuti atoll, associated with high tides and sea level rise. (Corlew, 2013).

The Human Dimensions of Climate Change

Climate change should not be considered solely in terms of the physical sciences, but also with the social sciences. Physical upheavals of weather and climate will directly affect social systems and community well-being. For example, many Pacific Islands are experiencing increases in drought and a simultaneous increase in storms (Keener, Marra, Finucane, Spooner, & Smith, 2012). Heavy rains that interrupt dry periods can be damaging to struggling crops, or cause flood runoff into the ocean rather than replenishing groundwater. Freshwater security is therefore a major issue in terms of drinking water, crops and cattle, and island ecosystems that Pacific Islanders depend upon to survive. Food and water insecurity, as well as repeated storms or disaster events, threaten societal structures and the daily community operations. Time and resources that could be devoted to daily lives and well-being are instead diverted to survival and recovery. In essence, when environmental stability breaks down so too does societal stability (Bender, 2013).

The long-term consequences are arguably more severe (and projected to occur on a shorter timeframe) in developing and island nations than wealthy, industrialized, and continental countries. With sea level rise, some coastal communities in the United States may have to shift roads and buildings inland up to a mile or more over the next hundred years. However, a narrow, low-lying atoll nation does not have “inland” space. There is no higher ground. There is no domestic land that will be safe from sea-level rise. If and when these communities are forced to move, they must migrate internationally (see Video 1).

[Insert video about here. Caption: Video 1. Tidal flooding in Funafuti, high tide at the January full moon. (Corlew, 2013).]

Tuvaluans have lived in Tuvalu for thousands of years, and despite a history of colonization, Tuvaluans still own every square inch of Tuvalu. Tuvaluan cultures were developed in their islands. Tuvaluan community practices and daily life are based in their islands. Their place, their community structures, their cultural practices, and their daily family lives are all highly integrated with each other. Therefore the threat of climate change to their place is a threat to cultural, community, and family practices. Tuvaluans today, when considering the impacts of climate change, must consider the possibilities of drastic changes within their lifetimes, the lifetimes of their children, and their grandchildren. If the islands do become uninhabitable in the next 50 to 100 years and Tuvaluans must move from their place, it will cause a wholesale change to the Tuvaluan way of life within the next few generations. The migration of an entire country means, at best, that the entire country must adapt their culture within a new shared space on foreign land. At worst it means many thousands of individuals or families will be scattered across the globe, experiencing their cultural shifts in relative isolation from each other.

Community and Cultural Responsivity in the Research Process

Beginning with the preliminary research trip to Tuvalu, I had the good fortune to be invited to stay with a Tuvaluan family. The Siones welcomed me into their home and made sure I knew about and attended as many cultural and community events in Funafuti as possible (see Image 3). My Tuvaluan family also took on the role of "key informants," patiently translating and explaining conversations, events, and cultural meanings to me. My Tuvaluan grandfather, Sir Tomu Sione, is a former Governor General and was the current Minister of Health at the time of this first visit. He answered all of my questions and spent countless hours telling me stories about past and present life in Tuvalu, and discussing the government's positions and actions on climate change. My Tuvaluan siblings and friends took me around to informal parties and formal celebrations. They told me about their jobs and education and the economic and cultural shifts they have seen in Tuvalu during the recent period of development.

Image 3. Segali Sione prepares the author to attend the Niutao island Boxing Day *fatele*, or celebration (Corlew, 2011).

I visited dozens of NGOs and government agencies that work with climate change, culture, and community affairs. Most people I spoke with offered candid opinions about elements of research and projects that were successful in and beneficial to the community. I was also able to establish a collaboration with the Office of Community Affairs to develop research methods and questions that make sense from a Tuvaluan perspective. Director Lanieta Faleasiu has been an invaluable resource for candid feedback as I developed and implemented my dissertation research, and she has been a good friend.

This preliminary research trip yielded extensive results in terms of what Tuvaluan community leaders and professionals perceived to be useful, beneficial, and culturally responsive from foreign research. These elements were then designed into the research procedures in five major ways. The SCRA Community Mini-Grant supplemented or funded in full these culturally responsive elements, thereby increasing the research's cultural validity and potential usefulness to the community.

First, despite foreign reports about the certainty of Tuvaluan migration in the future (see, e.g. Bayer & Salzman, 2007) or that it is already in progress (see, e.g., Al Gore's documentary, *An Inconvenient Truth*, Guggenheim, 2006), the official government position is not to negotiate for migration at this time (General Environmental Briefing, 2010). For now, the Tuvaluan

government believes it is far more important to keep the pressure on wealthy industrialized nations to reduce their emissions and support adaptations than it is to make a plan for migration in future decades. In fact, they believe the very act of planning for migration will reduce pressure on industrialized nations. If Tuvaluans make plans to leave, there is no longer an incentive to save the islands. Even higher levels of emissions, temperature increases, and sea level rise may be perceived to be acceptable. However, what is just and what is right is that Tuvaluans be able to stay in their homeland. The Tuvaluan government intends to pursue this course of action for as long as possible. Foreign research should take into account local perspectives on this justice issue, rather than relying entirely on the common perception among foreigners that migration is inevitable and should therefore be the sole pursuit of all Tuvaluans.

Therefore, this research was positioned within the social justice perspective that Tuvaluans ought to be able to stay in their homeland, and that migration should not be assumed to be the first, best, or only option available to current or future Tuvaluans. Specifically, my questions about the future did not assume migration or even mention migration. Participants were able to define for themselves "when" the future was, along with which decisions and options they and their families would face. As such, the conversations about Tuvalu's future ranged from near-future (five to ten years) to distant future (the lives of participants' grandchildren and beyond), and included a wide range of options I would never have thought to ask after.

I also learned that projects that are not based within the community and do not engage the collectivist nature of Tuvalu's cultures tend not to succeed. Additionally, other cultural contexts of Tuvalu must be considered and explored from a paradigm that centers that context within the norm. For example, Tuvaluans are the indigenous population of Tuvalu, which means that land and community connections are *both* highly integral to Tuvaluan well-being. Additionally, there is no *one* Tuvaluan culture. Just as different regions of the United States are home to different worldviews and ways of life, Tuvalu's nine islands and atolls are distinct cultural communities. A foreign researcher who is unfamiliar with these cultural norms may either overlook them entirely and proceed from their foreign norms, or may relate these Tuvaluan cultural contexts in patronizing ways that highlight their otherness. Multiple people I spoke with reported that this is a particular problem with foreign journalists who arrive in Tuvalu with a story already in mind, as well as with climate change skeptics and others who seek to discount the Tuvaluan experiences of climate change.

This research therefore sought to reflect multiple perspectives within Tuvalu rather than to document "a Tuvaluan perspective." Participants included men and women; young, middle-aged, and elder adults; professionals, government representatives, students, and homemakers; and people who are from or have extensive experience in every island.[1] By engaging with diverse community members, I hoped to show more accurately the variety of Tuvaluan experiences. With this in mind, I encouraged the people I spoke with to discuss their personal perspectives and how they were similar to or different from the perspectives of other Tuvaluans.

Third, the research was designed to utilize qualitative methods that engage Tuvalu's oral storytelling traditions. Interviews were conducted typically in participants' homes, and often with multiple participants or family members in the room. In most cases, participants would take turns being interviewed rather than speaking as a group, although periodically non-interviewees

[1] The population of the island of Niulakita is approximately 35, which created a challenge in finding someone from the island who was living in or visiting Funafuti during the research period.

(especially peers or elders) would interrupt with additional points.[2] The interviews were audio-recorded, and the transcripts reflect these interactions. The SCRA Community Mini-Grant funded gifts of food for participants which could then be shared with individuals and families before, during, or after the interview. Participants were gifted with food items because it is often appropriate in Tuvalu to offer a small gift or foods to people you are visiting. The interviews themselves were semi-structured to include the major themes of the study but also to allow participants to broach topics that were most relevant to them and their own experiences and perceptions of climate change. The conversational style of the interview was in line with *talanoa*, a Tuvaluan conversational style in which people talk in a relaxed manner and tell stories freely as they arise in conversation (see Image 4).

Image 4. *Talanoa* with Sir Tomu Sione in a *fale lau*.

Fourth, because Tuvalu is a small country in a remote area of the world, many potential audience members to this research may be unfamiliar with the country, the cultures, and the implications of the climate change threat. Therefore, this research was designed to include a photographic element in which the participants' stories and experiences could be augmented with pictures of

[2] Note that elders would not be interrupted by younger members of the family, and the women who were interviewed in their homes (as opposed to their workplaces) often chose to move to a more private area of the house than the front room or the central outdoor gathering space, *fale lau*, where the home interviews with men typically occurred.

land and community structures, events, and cultural items. The SCRA Community Mini-Grant funded digital cameras for distribution as well as a portable photographic printer and printing paper that allowed the photographs to be developed and printed in real time during the study. The original idea was to use Photovoice methodology as part of the interview process (Carlson, Engebretson, & Chamberlain, 2006; Foster-Fishman, Nowell, Deacon, Nievar, & McCann; Nowell, Berkowitz, Deacon, & Foster-Fishman, 2006). My Tuvaluan collaborators and other Tuvaluans I spoke with all agreed that this methodology would be appropriate for Tuvaluans and beneficial for relating their stories domestically and abroad. However, in practice, many participants admitted that they did not know what to take pictures of, and many others punctuated their stories with suggestions of places, events, or items which would illustrate perfectly what they were talking about that I could go take pictures of after the interview (see Image 5). Only one participant took and presented her own pictures. She drove around Funafuti and took 78 photographs of important places and examples of both cultural shifts and climatic changes. Although Photovoice as a methodology was not implemented with clear consistency and success, participants expressed clear and active support of the photographic element to the study, so that people could see what they were talking about even if they had never been to Tuvalu.

Image 5. The newly built preschool in Vaiaku village. One participant told the story of the youth group from her island volunteering to build this structure, and suggested I take a photograph of it (Corlew, 2012).

Finally, during the preliminary study I heard from multiple community leaders and Tuvaluan professionals that Tuvalu has had a repeated and consistent experience of foreigners who come to the country to conduct research, take this information with them, but then leave nothing behind. I received a specific request to donate my dissertation to the Tuvalu National Archives. However, there was a more general encouragement for me to create research based in the community for which the results were beneficial to and accessible by Tuvaluans. I therefore sought to make the research as accessible to Tuvaluans as possible. Much of the dissertation report is written in a narrative fashion, avoiding academic jargon, and including storytelling elements and as much direct reporting of the participants' words as possible. Because it is an academic dissertation, it also includes sections relating to psychological theory. However, those elements are kept separate from the results so that any English-speaking Tuvaluan will have access to the Tuvaluan knowledge and opinions that I gathered during the research without being hindered by unfamiliar academic vocabulary.

The SCRA Community Mini-Grant then funded the dissemination of the research in the community itself. The dissertation was printed and bound in a nice paperback format through CreateSpace, an online publication service. I ordered sufficient copies to be sent to every participant as well as to community members and leaders who had supported the study. For example, the Tuvalu National Archives now has multiple copies, as does the Tuvalu Meteorological Office. In addition, my collaborator Lanieta Faleasiu from the Office of Community Affairs requested additional copies that she could present to each of the schools in Tuvalu, to various governmental and non-governmental offices who might be interested in the study, and to each islands' *Kaupule*, or town council. The grant made it possible for over fifty copies of the dissertation to be printed and shipped to Tuvaluans at no cost to Tuvaluans. During a return visit earlier this year, then Tuvaluan Prime Minister Willy Telavi, a friend of Sir Sione, came by to visit. He and his wife both expressed that they enjoyed reading the book and were glad copies were being distributed in Tuvalu.

Conclusion

The SCRA Community Mini-Grant greatly augmented this research so that it was able to be implemented and disseminated in a manner that was specifically responsive to the needs, preferences, and requests of the focal community. The addition of food gifts during the data-collection period framed the interviews into a culturally responsive dialogue style common in Tuvalu. The goal was to create a relaxed and familiar atmosphere in which participant would feel comfortable expressing themselves as they would to friends, as opposed to how they would during a formal or professional interview. Although it should be noted that the interviews were indeed conducted in English (Tuvalu's secondary language) by a foreign researcher, the Mini-Grant increased my ability to turn a stodgy interview into a comfortable conversation, thereby encouraging more personal points of view.

Additionally, the inclusion of the photography supported by the Mini-Grant allowed for an illustration of participants' stories and experiences when they are related to each other and to a foreign audience. Although the original procedural intent of the photographic research method was not realized in practice, the photography itself continued to be supported by participants when they instructed me as the researcher to take specific pictures to illustrate their words.

Finally, and arguably most importantly, the SCRA Community Mini-Grant funded the first wave of research dissemination back into Tuvalu. One of the first and most frequent requests I

received during all research trips was to make this information available to Tuvaluans. With funds from the Mini-Grant, I was able to disseminate over 50 copies of the research report to participants and interested community members, leaders, and agencies. I recently visited Tuvalu and received very positive feedback from those who had read it or heard of it. Although such active dissemination is certainly a gesture of goodwill that seems to have been very well received by the community, it is also necessary within the major research paradigm of Community Psychology to create research that the focal community is able to benefit from. The support I received from the SCRA Community Mini-Grant allowed me to meet this professional mandate with my dissertation research.

Applications for the second round of SCRA Community Mini-Grant funding will be considered starting July 1st, 2013. The maximum award is $1200 and all SCRA members are invited to apply for funding in conjunction with their community and organizational partners. Applications are available on the SCRA website (www.scra27.org/practice). All project proposals will be considered as long as they are submitted within 2 months of their start date. We especially encourage applications from international SCRA members. For questions or more information, please email: SCRACommunityGrants@gmail.com

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