

## Families: universal functions, culturally diverse values

JULY 2017

### THE FOCUS

When thinking about the wellbeing of diverse families, it is important to consider the influence of cultural values, as these shape not only who is part of the family unit, but also the overall levels of wellbeing of the family.

Knowing about the influence of cultural values will enable the development of culturally responsive policies and services.

To help build shared knowledge, this *At a Glance* presents key findings drawn from research undertaken for the 2015 and 2016 Families and Whānau Status Reports to describe how cultural values influence family functioning in a society that is increasingly diverse.<sup>1,2</sup>

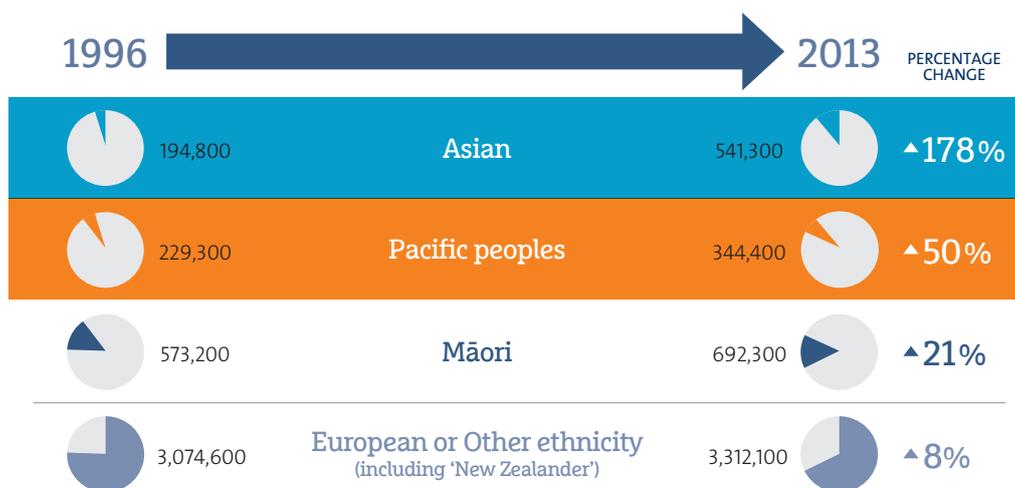
### About *At a Glance*

Superu's *At a Glance* series uses infographics to illustrate research findings or key information about a priority topic.

### NEW ZEALAND'S GROWING CULTURAL DIVERSITY

As New Zealand's population becomes increasingly diverse we need to consider different cultural perspectives on families so that policies and programmes can be relevant, inclusive and useful. This *At a Glance* has chosen to focus on pan Asian and pan Pacific cultural groups as they are some of the fastest growing populations in New Zealand.<sup>b</sup>

#### Growing diversity of New Zealand population 1996 to 2013<sup>3</sup>

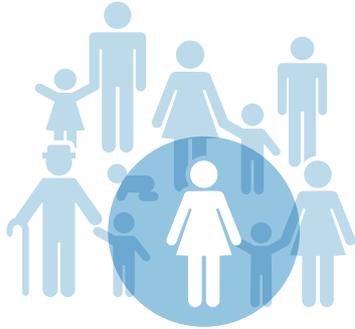


a It is important to note that when we talk about pan Asian and pan Pacific cultural groups that we do not consider these groups as large homogeneous ethnic groups. Rather, they include a variety of unique cultural sub-groups with distinct values and norms.

b Families are diverse in their cultural influences and not all families are necessarily embedded in their traditional cultural values. Migration patterns, urbanisation, generational differences and the multi-ethnic make up of families mean that the concept of family, including its structure, kinship models and the roles each member plays, can be both fluid and dynamic.

## CULTURAL VALUES AND THE INFLUENCE ON FAMILY AND WELLBEING

Cultural values refer to a set of beliefs and attitudes that guide behaviour, define what is acceptable, and give a set of standards for evaluating oneself and others.<sup>4</sup> Cultural values differ in what values they endorse, how families are structured, and the role the family plays in promoting wellbeing.

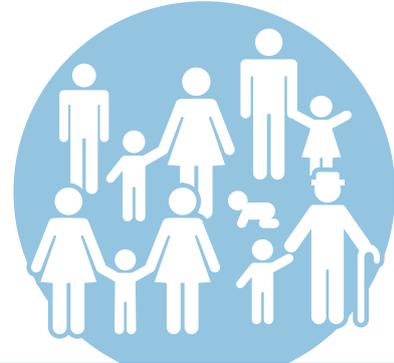


### Individualistic

The wants and needs of the individual

### Independence

Autonomy and personal accountability

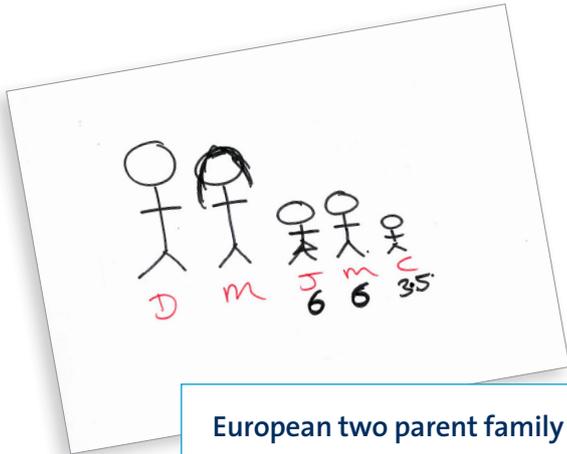


### Collectivistic

The wants and needs of the group

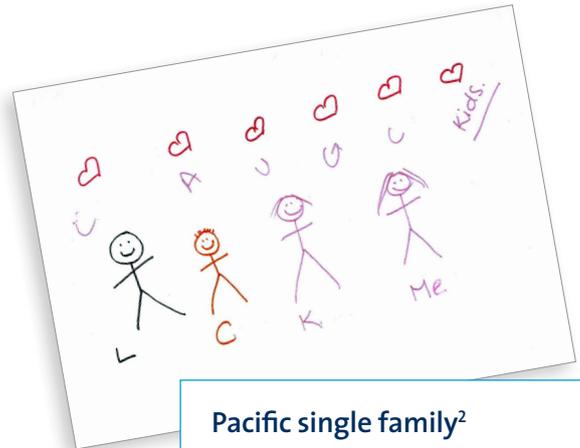
### Interdependence

Material and emotional interdependencies among family members  
Reciprocal relationships



#### European two parent family

Although including extended family was discussed, these participants described their family as a traditional nuclear family, with just themselves and their three children.



#### Pacific single family<sup>2</sup>

Close family in this instance included parents, child, older Australian-based siblings, best friend and best friend's husband and children.

These theoretical viewpoints are valuable when thinking about family wellbeing and tend to be associated with who is included (or not) in definitions of family.

When considering these cultural dimensions of wellbeing it is important to understand that culture is a dynamic concept that is constantly changing and evolving. This is particularly true for migrants who balance their traditional cultural values with cultural influences from their new home. For some migrant families in New Zealand the cultural emphasis remains on the traditional culture of home lands, for others it may be a dynamic mix of traditional cultural values with aspects of New Zealand culture. For all families however, they will be represented on a continuum that is informed by the environment, time and place.

## FAMILY FUNCTIONS ACROSS CULTURES

Four core family functions that contribute to family wellbeing have been identified in Superu's family wellbeing framework. These are to: care, nurture and support; manage resources; provide socialisation and guidance; and provide identity and a sense of belonging. The extent to which a family can and does fulfil these functions has an impact on a family's overall wellbeing and also on outcomes for individual family members.



### To care, nurture and support

Families provide day-to-day care, nurturance and support to other family members, including children and family members with illness or disabilities, and those needing support because of their age.

Individualistic The wants and needs of the individual	Collectivistic The wants and needs of the group
<b>Independence</b> Autonomy and personal accountability	<b>Interdependence</b> Material and emotional interdependencies among family members Reciprocal relationships
Parents support children until they are adults	Parents support children throughout their lives
Support is expected from children, but there is little obligation for reciprocity	There is an obligation of reciprocity of support among family members
Support is both emotional and instrumental and is often expected to diminish after children have reached maturity	A greater value is placed on practical support in comparison to emotional support, and this support is often expected to extend into adulthood
Support networks tend to be small and localised	Support networks tend to be large and span across geographic and kinship borders
Extended families are often not included in support network	Extended families are integral to support networks

A key cultural concept for collectivistic cultures is reciprocity. In interdependent cultures there is often an expectation that children will care for their parents just as they were cared for when they were young.<sup>8</sup>

The important thing is to take care of old people. Don't desert them. Don't leave them alone, uncared for

Giving older adults allowance is important but not the most important. The important thing is to take care of old people<sup>7</sup>

For Cook Islands Māori for example, the understanding that family members have a duty to each other is critical to the maintenance of their turanga (acknowledgement of their position and potential within the collective). Accepting the obligation towards family and the older generation was also found to be positively related to feelings of happiness among Chinese immigrants in New Zealand.<sup>9</sup>

This is similar for many Pacific cultures. Fijian families demonstrate high levels of sautu (family wellbeing) by showing vakarokoroko (respect) as well as providing veitokoni (mutual support) and reciprocal care.<sup>10</sup> This can also be seen in the quote below by a Papua New Guinean, who states:

... as children grow old and parents age, children are expected to support parents and become food givers to them. This is seen as a form of delayed reciprocity for indebtedness incurred in childhood<sup>11</sup>

This is in contrast to independent families. Although independent families provide emotional support across the life course, the caring role is often expected to provide instrumental support to family members only until they reach adulthood.

Yes, we need to have our young ones have extensions in their houses so that the elders can live with them and our families look after us (Tokelau women's Fa'afletui group).<sup>13</sup>

*This has implications for the provision of services for families with collectivist cultural values.<sup>12</sup> One place in particular that these cultural values could be considered is in the provision of social housing. Where there is greater emphasis on reciprocal care, providing social housing where multigenerational families can live becomes more important.*



## To manage resources

Families draw on shared resources, including time, money and skills to solve problems and overcome setbacks (which provide material and financial support beyond what they can access as individuals).

Individualistic The wants and needs of the individual	Collectivistic The wants and needs of the group
<b>Independence</b> Autonomy and personal accountability	<b>Interdependence</b> Material and emotional interdependencies among family members Reciprocal relationships
Economic resources are provided by the proximal family network	Economic resources are provided by the larger family network
Over the life course individuals become self-sufficient	Over the life course reciprocal economic ties remain between family members
Economic ties tend to be distinct from community and social relationships	Economic ties to the community and to the diaspora are strong
Economic resources and security are seen as a component of personal pride	Economic resources and security are a component of collective pride where resources are used for the wellbeing of the family and wider community

For many Pacific families, values around collective responsibility, respect and service influence how resources are shared and with whom they are shared. Collective responsibility means that financial resources are shared among extended family both in New Zealand and in the Pacific. The management of resources in this way represents a reciprocal relationship within and between family and community, and often means that in times of difficulty the family will support the individual and vice versa.

**...owing things was not a concept Samoans are familiar with and so we lack skills to repay debts...I remember when we were growing up the idea that is we did not have any salt, you could send someone next door to get salt...it was the concept of sharing rather than borrowing<sup>14</sup>**

Value is placed on meeting obligations to community and extended family before meeting personal needs. Meeting these cultural imperatives is necessary to fulfilling the Pacific Islands person's sense of place within their cultural group, to both confirm identity and to demonstrate affiliation.<sup>14</sup>

There are also cultural differences in prioritising how resources will be managed. It is common for Asian families to become 'transnational' by moving family members to different countries as a way of pursuing education and career opportunities, increasing wealth and social standing, and expanding their material resources. In this way, they strengthen the family as an economic unit and increase overall wellbeing by ensuring the family has enough resources to thrive in a secure environment.<sup>15</sup>

**...I'm graduating [with a] Masters of Science and Bachelor of Education, and I got a really good job back in India, but I think we can go somewhere and make more money. So, thinking to come here and doing some courses and that's good for my whole family...**

*As is illustrated, the prioritisation of resources can vary significantly across cultures and families. This has a direct impact when considering providing services such as financial literacy and budgeting advice to families from different cultural perspectives.*



### To provide socialisation and guidance

Families provide socialisation of family members and guidance on commonly held social norms and values (such as education, good health and positive connections).

Individualistic The wants and needs of the individual	Collectivistic The wants and needs of the group
<b>Independence</b> Autonomy and personal accountability	<b>Interdependence</b> Material and emotional interdependencies among family members Reciprocal relationships
Values are communicated through socialisation by parents and the wider society (e.g. school, media)	Values are communicated by extended family and community networks, and these may be compromised by values from the wider society
The concept of family or collective identity is constrained to a small group, and tends to be de-emphasised in comparison to personal identity	The concept of a collective identity (family, ethnic, religious) is broad and collective identity tends to be prioritised in comparison to personal identity
The individual is ultimately responsible for their life decisions	The collective family unit is responsible for important life decisions

The social norms and values that parents pass onto their children are culturally determined, and therefore the cultural orientation of the family is a fundamental influence on socialisation and guidance.<sup>16,17</sup> Families from independent cultural orientations tend to promote and teach qualities such as self-reliance, assertiveness and autonomy, whereas interdependent families often endorse values and norms relating to obedience, harmony and collective identity.<sup>18</sup>

In Western Samoan culture for example, infants and young children are valea (ignorant of social norms) and the pattern of socialisation emphasises teaching the child to learn its place, appropriate to its status, in a household group and a community, and includes learning to surrender self-interest to the common good.<sup>19</sup>

Another key family value that takes different forms across cultures is respect for parents. This has particular meaning for Asian families of Confucian orientation, where it is known as filial piety. For interdependently oriented families, filial piety means that children are obligated to obey, respect, support and care for their parents throughout their life, and defer to their parents' wants and needs above their own.

In every aspect of life we always guide them<sup>21</sup>

We always tell them the wrongs and rights of each and everything<sup>22</sup>

...their childhood had taught them to love and obey their parents, elders and family and to behave the way their parents wanted them to behave. The word love, [to most], referred to the practical demonstration of their affection through obedience, by paying heed to what they were told, by having consideration for the feelings of others, particularly elders, and by learning and practising approved forms of behaviour<sup>20</sup>

*The delivery of social services such as parenting programmes and education can benefit from understanding these nuances in socialisation and guidance of children. For example, parenting skills programmes which advocate self-sufficiency for children (because emotional independence is seen as an asset) may not suit ethnic minority families because of cultural differences in what is considered best for the child.<sup>20</sup>*



## Identity and sense of belonging

Families promote a sense of identity, trust, belonging and security including through expressions of love, affection, happiness and respect and building social cohesion.

Individualistic The wants and needs of the individual	Collectivistic The wants and needs of the group
<b>Independence</b> Autonomy and personal accountability	<b>Interdependence</b> Material and emotional interdependencies among family members Reciprocal relationships
Self is defined as distinct, but embedded within the family	Self is defined as embedded within the collective family and wider community
Focus is on the individual and their unique characteristics	Focus is on the collective and wellbeing for all members, not solely for individual family members
Promotion of independent thought and action as well as accountability and responsibility	Promotion of obligations, respect, face saving and accountability to the collective
The degree to which an individual prioritises their relationships is flexible and fluid	Relationships are prioritised over the wants and needs of the individual

The family function of developing identity and sense of belonging is accomplished by learning the values, language, and belief systems of one's family and cultural groups, while also participating in important customs and traditions. While the promotion of identity and a sense of belonging can be seen across all families the ways of encouraging the growth and maintenance of various aspects of identity will differ in content and emphasis across cultural groups.

A person's identity (i.e. the sense of self) in an individualistic society tends to be based mainly on one's personal experiences. The early primary emphasis on the development of sense of belonging and identity rests with the immediate family.

**I want them to feel unconditional love from us and our [traditional nuclear] family and that they always belong. You know, they've got identity...** (nuclear family)

For collectivist cultures such as those from the Pacific, identity is thought about in relationship to others as opposed to the individual. Identity is formed through an individual's sense of belonging within the family and village, its genealogy, language, land, environment and culture.<sup>21</sup> For Samoan families for example, the concept of the self can only be understood and have meaning within the context of relationships with other people, rather than as an individual.

**I cannot say that I am a person, just me; (because) then I will be nothing without my other connections<sup>23</sup>**

**The lack of acknowledgement of the roles of family and significant others (such as community members and ministers) when dealing with Pacific clients is one of the prime concerns** (service provider)

**Engagement should primarily involve the core family, the extended family, village and church contacts, depending on the child/young person and the family<sup>24</sup>** (service provider)

*Ensuring that services and service providers are aware of and empathetic to cultural differences is imperative. Research has found that families from collectivistic cultures, "...may be concerned that they will be judged as **deficient** rather than **different**. For example, they may be concerned that they will be seen as being overly dependent on their family or not sufficiently independent..."*

*These differences in how identity is constructed also have an impact on the way the provision of social services should be delivered. For example, when thinking about delivering services to Pacific families, consideration of the vital role an individual's wider social networks play in supporting the individual could be critical to successful intervention.<sup>12</sup>*

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## About Superu

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Superu is a government agency that focuses on what works to improve the lives of families, children and whānau.

### What we do:

- We generate evidence that helps decision-makers understand complex social issues and what works to address them.
- We share evidence about what works with the people who make decisions on social services.
- We support decision-makers to use evidence to make better decisions to improve social outcomes.

### We also provide independent assurance by:

- developing standards of evidence and good practice guidelines
- supporting the use of evidence and good evaluation by others in the social sector.

### Related publications:

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Families and Whānau Status Report 2016 (June 2016)



Families and Whānau Status Report 2016. Technical report (June 2016)



Families and Whānau Status Report 2016. Executive Summary (June 2016)

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