Humour in the Negotiations of Social Identity in the Tongan Diaspora

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The capacity to joke and perceive something as humorous is universal, but what is held to be funny varies (Driessen 2015). In this paper, we discuss humour, including joking and mocking, as a form of social control in the Tongan diaspora. In addition, we shall demonstrate that different conceptions of humour can negatively impact on the self and social identity of Tongan youngsters. A large number of Tongans have migrated to countries on the Pacific Rim, where different values are dominating the socio-cultural environment. The changes in the environment in which migrant children and adolescents are growing up are causing contradictory demands and expectations in behaviour. A significant difference between Tongan society and the neo-liberal nation-states of Australia, New Zealand and the United States concerns the nature of social hierarchy. As a consequence, the behaviour of Tongan youths is often considered as improper to the extent that it deviates from traditional Tongan forms of social stratification. In the diaspora, Tongan parents and elders can therefore be seen to use humour to comment on socio-cultural changes taking place with the aim of maintaining a so-called traditional social order that is extremely hierarchical by international standards. This paper, however, will argue that hybrid spaces inform the meaning of humour. In a

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quest for social conformity driven largely by parents and elders attempting to safeguard traditional forms of hierarchy by joking about and mocking the younger generation, Tongan young people are involved in performances of humour that impact negatively on their self and social identity.[1] We begin with a more elaborate sketch of the ethnographic setting, followed by a discussion of humour as a form of social control and the way it can impact on young people's emotional well-being.

Tongan social relations

Situated in the South Pacific, across 170 islands of which only 36 are inhabited, Tonga has a total population of 103,252 (Cowling 1990: 189; Tonga Statistics Department 2011a, 2011b). Due to limited opportunities on the islands, Tonga has experienced increased migration; first from rural areas to the capital Nuku'alofa and eventually overseas. The first Tongan migration wave occurred in the 1960s, with Tongans primarily migrating to New Zealand. This was followed by another wave in the early 1970s, during which the destination shifted to Australia as well as the United States (Sudo 1997). Today, the number of Tongans living abroad is estimated to be higher than the number of Tongans living in Tonga itself. In view of the distinct differences between the socio-cultural situation in Tonga and in the Tongan diaspora, the ethnographic setting of this paper is characterised by tension.

In Tonga, social identity is characterized first and foremost by descent into a hierarchical order of socio-political relationships. Indeed, Tonga is one of the most stratified societies in Polynesia. It is ruled by a divine king, who even today remains in the position of autocratic monarch with the executive power of government almost entirely in his hands. Below the king serves a small class of high chiefs who are also estate holders and as such have significant influence, although they are not the government. Lower chiefs and so-called working chiefs (*matāpule*) are in charge of the extensive protocol and serve as official spokesmen for the king and the nobles. All other people are just 'commoners'. This political structure is complemented by a ranked order of kin relationships, in which seniority is a key principle. Thus, Tongan individual and cultural identities are defined by the relationships each individual entails by being born in this hierarchical organisation (Clark 2005; Crane 1978; Helu 1999; Ka'ili 2005; Lee 2002; Van der Grijp 2004). This can, in turn, be linked to *anga fakatonga* (the Tongan way), a concept comprising past and present ideologies and practices of Tongan culture (Lee 2002: 139; Lee 2003: 1).

Author of *Becoming Tongan* (1996) and *Tongans Overseas: Between Two Shores* (2003), Helen Lee identifies the Tongan family as mirroring the Tongan socio-political order since it teaches the individual Tongan behavioural norms and values as well as principles such as *faka'apa'apa* (respect) or *talangofua* (obedience) (Lee 2004a: 134; Lee 2003: 95).[2] Being Tongan incorporates respectful behaviour measured by unique relations with others, who are invariably positioned into the traditional socio-political order. Based on Lee's discussion of respectful relations, anthropologist Paul van der Grijp (2004: 3, 175-178) distinguished four interrelated subfields in which being Tongan tends to be defined and learned: the distinction of nobles and

commoners, the family system, land allocation, as well as the subsistence and gift-exchange economy, all of which serve to reproduce Tongan hierarchy.

In Tongan society, humour is used to maintain social relations. Social conformity is safeguarded through combined strategies of verbal and physical disciplining. Such forms of social sanctioning are often based on judgements about 'insiders' and 'outsiders' defined by relationships of the individual with Tongan culture. As part of Karen Sykes' (2009) edited volume *Ethnographies of Moral Reasoning: Living Paradoxes of a Global Age*, Alexander discusses the role of humour for Soviet people at times of socio-cultural change. She explains that local humour helps Soviet people to negotiate changes in society including the merging of moral systems. Alexander (2009: 61) concludes that 'Soviet jokes and the genre of the absurd anekdot [sic] brought that dissonance to the fore, allowed contradictions to be expressed in a form that neither state rationality nor everyday reason could accommodate'. This is also the case for Tongan joking relations. To maintain the social order, Tongan individuals acting improperly face what Alfred Radcliffe-Brown (1965: 95) called 'modes of organising a definite and stable system of social behaviour in which conjunctive and disjunctive components... are maintained and combined' to avoid conflict. This classic anthropological insight is also relevant in the context of Tongan morality, which is traditionally taught through disciplinary punishment.

However, globalisation and transnationalism have changed the networks of relations in which Tongan disciplining such as mocking and gossip are applied. Intermarriage and the establishment of transnational family networks are rapidly changing the family system. More and more Tongans have migrated from rural areas to Tonga's capital, Nuku'alofa, and eventually overseas, impacting on traditional forms of land allocation. And while the Tongan gift-exchange economy still seemed to be intact for first generation Tongan migrants, changes in attitudes and practices among second-generation Tongan migrants and their gift-exchange or remittance practices have widely been recognised (Lee 2004b, 2006; Lin 2011; Tamasese et al. 2010). Finally, while van der Grijp's (2004) subcategories continue to define ideologies of Tongan relatedness and the ways Tongan young people learn to identify, Tonga's recent shift towards increased democracy impacted on the relations between nobles and commoners, and thus forms of Tongan identification as a whole (Hau'ofa 1994; Benguigui 2011). These changes in Tonga are reflected in the ways Tongan young people in Tonga, New Zealand and Australia internalise notions of self-becoming that are no longer exclusively associated with belonging in Tongan hierarchy but increasingly also with self-autonomy. Adapting Tonga's strict hierarchical order in which each and everyone's position in society and according behavioural relationships are clearly defined, to shifting socio-political contexts makes it particularly hard for Tongan young people to perform their identities to satisfaction. After all, Tongan behavioural norms and expectations do not easily translate into Western contexts such as New Zealand or Australia.

'The Tongan box'

Many Tongan youngsters living in Tonga and in the diaspora are experiencing multiple marginalisation due to social environments in which Tongan young people tend to be questioned for individual performances of difference (see Betz 2014). Tongan youths growing up in contradictory yet coexisting social systems that face difficulties matching expectations, are characterized by an amalgamation of behaviour based on what Catherine Alexander (2009: 50) labels a 'hybrid of logics'. Interviews with Tongan young people in New Zealand and Australia about how Tongan young people negotiate their self and social identity commonly linked this hybrid of logics to the 'Tongan box', a metaphor describing a cultural space created and negotiated by both individuals and collectives whose lives are increasingly associated with social disjunction.

The concept of the Tongan box is an emic concept used mainly by Tongan youths in New Zealand and Australia. They coined it to express the essentialist construction of Tongan culture by their parents and other Tongan elders, who refer to Tongan traditions in order to put them on the spot and tell them, in a seemingly funny way, that they are disrespectful of Tongan social norms. The concept of the box is used by young people to describe this traditional view of Tongan culture. For them, it is like a black box, an undefined space of assumptions from which time and again different rules and values might be conjured up to indicate their social exclusion from so-called authentic Tongan society and culture. For example, Tongan young people who wear Western fashion in Tonga such as singlets are often classified as westernised and thus outside the box.

This is also the case for Tongan youths in New Zealand or Australia who engage in modern leisure cultures marked by expressive dance such as hip hop. The way they move, dress and speak tends to be classified as outside the box and therefore as not belonging to Tongan culture. However, many Tongans engaged in hip hop clearly identify as Tongan personally and on stage. 6Pound, which is the stage name of a popular Tongan hip hop artist from Sydney called Charles, explained:

> Even though I was born and raised in Sydney, Australia, I have always referred to myself as a Tongan. Like many Tongans, I come from a very strong family unit and though we grew up during a time when Pacific Islanders were very few in comparison to nowadays, my siblings and I knew nothing more than the Tongan way of life. We attended a Tongan Church weekly, Tongan language school on weekends, formed a Tongan Cultural Dance Group with relatives that ran weekly for years, celebrated Tongan festivities throughout the entire time and spent 90 percent of our time around relatives and community members who spoke only Tongan and no English (Australia, 2012).

Thus, Charles reflects his close connection to the Tongan community and culture in his stage name 6Pound, which is based on his personal and cultural background. According to Charles, the name 6Pound stems from his grandfather's village:

> My Grandfather Siosifa Tongi is from [a village called] Leimatu'a, Vava'u in the Kingdom of Tonga. My Grandmother's … immediate family eventually all relocated and still reside in Leimatu'a. There is a story that exists of how long time ago in Leimatu'a the villagers were preparing a feast for a noble celebration. Part of that feast would include the serving of corned beef. However the tins of corned beef did not arrive in time for the feast and this disturbed the villagers very much. So the following day the villagers made their way down to the wharf to await the late delivery of the corned beef. Immediately upon arrival as the corned beef was being unloaded upon the dock, the upset villagers began grabbing the corned beef, which were packaged in tins weighing six pounds, and began smashing them all against the ground so that it not only displayed their disapproval of the late delivery but also left the dock covered in corned beef and witnesses looking on in disbelief. This incident earned the villagers of Leimatu'a the title 'Pauni ono' meaning 'six pounds'. Even today the title remains strongly affiliated with the villagers of Leimatu'a and during celebrations for any special occasion, the smashing of the six pound tin of corn beef is still featured, only no longer as an expression of disapproval but rather of village pride and excitement.
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> I was very close to my grandfather and when I wanted to become a Hip-hop artist it was detrimental [sic] that I maintained authenticity so I decided on the title 6Pound because it represented my role models (Grandfather and Grandmother) and a part of my roots (Leimatu'a, Vava'u, Tonga). The fact that the six pound tin of corned beef is a favourite amongst the entire South Pacific Islands only made the title that more meaningful and I began to view it as my role and responsibility as an MC to represent not only my Tongan heritage but also our Pacific People (Australia, 2012).

6Pound's explanation of his stage name emphasises his individual relatedness to Tonga in general and his family and village in particular.

Individuals such as 6Pound who are classified as outside the box, identify the behaviours and statements expressing social exclusion as very hurtful and as neglecting personal life histories and cultural determinants. Despite clear self-identification as Tongan, Tongan young people often feel existentially questioned by other Tongans who criticise them as being 'plastic', 'fake' or 'wanna-be white', as Tongan young people who do not behave according to Tongan behavioural expectations. One Tongan youth in New Zealand explained: 'it is because of the way we grew up… They think – "no you guys are white man because you were brought up in New Zealand", but we are not; we are Tongans too, we can speak fluent Tongan. They think they are the only ones inside the box and if you are outside the box, then you are somebody else' (Ryan, New Zealand 2011).

The following sections of this article discuss how Tongans use humour to adjust behaviour of Tongan young people classified as outside 'the box' to establish Tongan conformity. We argue that various forms of humour, including mocking and gossiping, are used to discipline others and to sanction behaviour that is considered as outside the so-called Tongan box. Subsequently, we analyse the impact this form of social sanctioning has on the emotional well-being and the self of

Tongan adolescents, who experience the hardship humour of their parents and elders as a form of bullying. We begin, however, with a broader outline of the role of humour in the negotiations of social relations and social hierarchy.

Humour in negotiations of Tongan identities

Confrontation with 'otherness' raises awareness of wider social contexts, in which humour tends to be applied to cope with changes in previous assumptions of oneself and one's surroundings. In such instances relational humour is applied and messages about proper Tongan behaviour are delivered through laughter. During research in New Zealand, one young girl of mixed Tongan-Fijian descent who identified as Tongan explained that due to her appearance she keeps being excluded by the Tongan community: 'they would say that I don't look like a Tongan [sad voice], but I tell them that I am … Because of my last name, which is Indian, they all think that I am Indian … But I tell them the truth and when they see my parents they believe me' (Naina, New Zealand 2011). However, when she took part in Tongan dance celebrations as a young girl, Tongan audiences laughed at her. This made her feel uncomfortable about herself and her performance. Despite her strong identification with and love for Tongan culture and dance, she stopped performing.

Lee (1996: 218) states that 'ridicule and gossip are activated when a person shows a lack of emotional control'. People take action and mock others when they are seen to be acting outside the 'box' and thus against expected cultural norms and values. Bernstein (1983: 53) links this form of humour to the Tongan concept of *fakakata pe*, which translates as 'only to make laugh'. *Fakakata pe* protects the attacker from accusations of personal attacks or any form of responsibility for his or her actions, as he or she is 'just joking' (Bernstein 1983: 54). Here, humour is used 'as a means of communicating painful insights within an affectively safer context' (Newirth 2006: 558). The perpetrator uses humour to shame people into behaving without actually directly shaming them in a negative way. Tongans use humour to correct improper behaviour and constantly reify what 'the box' should look like or contain. This includes 'correct' configurations of culture, including conceptions of hierarchy and associated forms of respect and modes of behaviour, into which misbehaving individuals are 'forced' through laughter.

The importance of social and cultural conformity within mainstream Tongan society, as referred to metaphorically through the notion of the box, cannot be overstated. In fact, many Tongans seem to develop negative emotions such as a sense of betrayal, envy or even hate when other Tongans are stepping out of the 'box'. Feliuaki explained: 'You have no position to be confident, you have no position to try something new, to break through your barrier - you stay in your comfort zone, if you step out of it - it's wrong' (Feliuaki, New Zealand 2011). Devolo linked this to aspects of jealousy that can even turn into hate: 'deep down it is really something like jealousy' (Devolo, New Zealand 2011). Josh explained: 'It forms from a little thing, that manifests itself into something bigger which becomes 'ugly' - so it starts: envy plus jealousy equals hate!'

The concept of jealousy is interesting as it implies a

mixture of envy and desire. Some Tongans who are jealous of Tongan youths acting outside the 'box' not only want them to conform to safeguard the integrity of the 'Tongan box', but because of much more personal and affective reasons, which, as illustrated in Josh's equation, can even result in hate. Anthropologist Maree Pardy describes 'hate' as an 'emotional response to disturbing, at times unbearable feelings of anxiety and fear … fears about the potential dissolution or fragmentation of the self, particularly in the face of another' (Pardy 2011: 51, 56). This is also relevant to more traditional Tongans who are confronted with hybrid Tongan performances that represent an otherness of which they might disapprove, be jealous or afraid. In this context, the famous words by Vaclav Havel also come to mind: 'It is as though these haters wanted to be endlessly honoured, loved, and respected, as if they constantly suffered from the painful feeling that others were not sufficiently grateful towards them' (Vaclav Havel 1996 cited in Pardy 2011: 51). However, it is important to note that Tongans usually frown upon hate, as in Tongan society it is shameful to express such extreme emotions openly. Hence, other tactics such as humour are used to maintain solidarity among all Tongans, both in Tonga and in the diaspora. This is reflected in the data on which this article is based. Although Tongan youths see some more traditional Tongans expressing envy, jealousy and hate, no data that document open expressions of such strong emotions have been obtained. Yet jokes about Tongans outside the box are abundant.

Joking relations

In Tonga, humour is embedded in stratified social relations. In line with Radcliffe-Brown's analysis of 'joking relations' and Anton Zijderveld's (1968) 'jokes and social reality', Tongans can be seen to use humour to keep the integrity of the box intact. Radcliffe-Brown (1965: 90) defined 'joking relationships' as 'a relation between two persons in which one is by custom permitted and in some instances required, to tease or make fun of the other, who in turn is required to take no offence'. Radcliffe-Brown's joking relationships are marked by hierarchical power relations, in which an individual can either 'joke-up' or 'joke-down' (Zijderveld 1968: 297). Most of the time, Tongan mocking is associated with 'joking-down'. This is in accord with Zijderveld's (ibid.: 296-297) analysis of joking relations in stratified societies, as characterised by certain joking behaviours:

> The powerful, namely, have the tendency to treat those of lower rank jovially and to pull their leg in a cordial way, thus demonstrating some sort of democratic inclination. Those of lower rank, not being allowed or expected to return this treatment, are urged to joke with individuals in ranks lower than those they occupy… joking with those in inferior and superior positions, is an important corroboration of the power relations in stratified societies.

This highlights the relational character of jokes that, in the Tongan context, tend to be embedded in an asymmetrical relationship of respect.

For example, many Tongans perceive transgendered performances (*fakaleitī*), which are very common in Tonga and other South Pacific societies, as based on western role models and thus as out of the 'box' (Besnier 2011: 144). This is illustrated through the linguistic positioning of the term *fakaleitī* between languages and genders. For example, the Tongan word *faka* (in the way of) and the English word 'lady' (*leitī*) are combined to *fakaleitī* (Besnier 2011: 139). Unlike the 'Tongan box', many Tongans establish *leitī* identity as inherently heterogeneous and polyvalent (Besnier 1994: 310). One participant, Viliami, was a transgendered youth from New Zealand who explained that Tongan gender identity categories do not capture his character. Personally, he has always felt feminine and referred to himself as a 'fem-boy' (female boy). He publically expresses his gendered identity through performance: 'During the week I am just in jeans, chucks [casual sport shoes], a day makeup and my hair, but on the weekend I am "shebang" and they see me in my whole outfit, in my stilettos, my makeup and my lashes' (Viliami, New Zealand 2011). Today, Viliami is part of a popular hip hop group consisting of 'fem-boys'. Some Tongans, however, perceive Viliami's appearance as a threat: first, in the context of customary Tongan gender performances, and, second, in regards to a form of transitioning into western culture. This fear is particularly obtrusive in the context of traditional cultural norms and values, which can result in some Tongans trying to correct Viliami's feminine identity performance through the use of shame and laughter. Viliami illustrated this through an incident from his childhood, in which laughter was used by older Tongans to make him conform:

> I remember the Princess coming here [in New Zealand] from Tonga and at school the boys would learn a *ma'ulu'ulu* and the girls would learn a *tau'olunga* and I used to think 'oh that is so cool' and every time we had a break I would get up and do the *tau'olunga* and everyone would always be laughing... then the performance day came... afterwards I walked back to the car and I remember my dad pulling me to the side and he was like 'there is so many people here that are saying that it was stupid what you did'.[3]

In Viliami's example, older generation Tongans (the teasers) use *fakakata pe* to 'joke-down' and discipline Viliami who ideally should have responded respectfully in what Lee (1996: 233) links to recipient or reaction humour: '*katakatatangi* (to laugh or smile when one feels like crying)'. Instead, having grown up in New Zealand, he misread the message and continued dancing which resulted in his father explaining the meaning behind the laughter to him afterwards: 'there is so many people here that are saying that it was stupid what you did'.

As demonstrated through the example of Viliami, Tongan youth growing up in the diaspora are expected to negotiate traditional understandings of Tongan mocking in new social contexts. Many either do not know the meaning behind the ridicule or they disagree with the moral reasoning applied. Rather than understanding mocking or 'joking-down' as a way of inclusion, in which the Tongan box is drawn on to inform individuals of their Tongan descent by alluding to their misbehaviour, many Tongan youngsters in the diaspora understand mocking as a way of painful exclusion.

Taufa, for instance, accentuated that while mocking tends to start off as fun, it has a tendency to end in pain: 'It is borderline - it is always pushing that boundary a little bit more' (Taufa, New Zealand 2011). Ryan described his experiences in this regard as a constant battle: 'I struggled a lot, but they just keep bringing you down… and I am not saying that they are bad people or a bad country, but that is just the way Tongans are - if you wanna be Tongan you gotta be on that level, you gotta be Tongan level' (Ryan, New Zealand 2011).

Traditional meanings behind mocking change in new social contexts, which led Elisa Everts (2003: 374) to describe mocking as 'hardship humour' - a form of communication encompassing 'surface forms of hostility but connection at the heart'. Based on this understanding, it was particularly interesting to hear the moderator of a South Auckland High School predominantly attended by Pacific Islander youths, announcing on a performance day that if any of the audience members had come to mock someone who performed, they should get up on stage and perform themselves. An official statement like this at the beginning of Pacific Islander performances highlights the commonality of mocking among these cultural groups, as well as the ambivalent meanings and effects it may have depending on the individual and his or her upbringing. Tongan young people growing up in household settings marked by a strong focus on cultural performances, which Mike, a Tongan youth in New Zealand, associates with pretty much 'being on the islands' (New Zealand, 2011), are familiar with such behaviours and able to interpret them correctly. However, young Tongans growing up in culturally hybrid spaces might not understand the reasoning behind such behaviours. Being ridiculed by peers and elders can thus be interpreted as a form of social exclusion rather than a quest for cultural conformity. This may have a severe impact on the way hybrid Tongan youngsters feel about themselves and their belonging to Tongan society and culture.

Joking relations and verbal bullying

In hybrid social spaces in contemporary New Zealand or Australia, social behaviour of Tongans, especially young Tongan people, carries multiple meanings and interpretations, which implies that traditional forms of social sanctioning may be interpreted differently. Although we stop short of claiming that all forms of Tongan disciplining are forms of bullying, we argue that the way Tongan people in positions of power use 'hardship humour' to demonstrate their cultural superiority to expatriates can be associated with the western concept of bullying. Laughing at someone performing her or his identity, or parts of Tongan identity, in a different way or style to what is perceived by the perpetrator as the 'norm' or in harmony with the 'Tongan box' can have a detrimental impact on the identities of the ridiculed. Terms such as social sanctioning coined by Bernstein (1983) in the 1980s to describe the ways Tongans use humour to discipline others, do not capture the effects that forms of mocking and belittling can have on the victims' sense of self. For that reason, we propose to use the term bullying in order to emphasize the negative impacts such behaviours can have on hybrid Tongan young people criticised for deviant

identity performances. The term bullying also indicates that cultural practices and behaviours are not necessarily translatable into other contexts without conflict.

In Viliami's case, for example, as part of growing up in New Zealand both Tongan and hip hop dance had become integrated parts of his self and social identity. Viliami identified dance as essential for his well-being, as it helped him to deal with the confrontations he faced in everyday life:

> to me dancing is somewhere that I can run to, where I can be me and express myself without having to hide or have a constant face on - but this is me dancing … when I dance in my room I feel at peace, I feel at home - I feel … I feel like I am standing there bare but comfortable … if it wasn't for dancing … I actually don't know where I would be … I probably wouldn't be alive (Viliami, New Zealand 2011).

The repeated ridicule he experienced by the Tongan community continuously criticised aspects of his self. However, dance was so existential for Viliami that he had no option but to endure the social pressure.

Bullying can be defined as intentional, repeated, harmful behaviour of an individual or group to show dominance over a weaker counterpart (Işiklar et al. 2012: 889). This is congruent with understandings of Tongan stratification and the kind of 'joking-down' used to maintain relational power among Tongans. Rhonda Chandler (2000: 31) states a 'need to be powerful' over others as a crucial part of bully-victim relationships. This dimension is also represented in Kathryn Holmes' (2011) description of different levels of bullying, of which she understood the most harmful to be bullying from authority figures. She explained: 'bullying from authority figures often feels like "tough love" gone wrong' (ibid.: 45). Viliami experienced this not just at his dance performances, but constantly through authority figures in his life: 'My uncles were always mocking me' (Viliami, New Zealand 2011). Holmes (ibid.) confirms that: 'Bullying is first and foremost an issue of power'. Thus, traditional authority figures trying to influence the identity performances of inferiors 'outside the box' demonstrate their hierarchical superiority.

Bullying can also be distinguished into direct and indirect forms (Işiklar et al. 2012: 890). Direct bullying refers to physical harm and indirect bullying describes verbal maltreatment targeting the emotional state of the bullied. Despite physical and verbal harm being part and parcel of Tongan disciplining (Lee 1996: 187), this article focuses on indirect bullying because only that form includes hardship humour, 'spreading rumours, not giving permission to be involved in a group or a game, teasing or nicknaming' (Işiklar et al. 2012: 890). Such behaviour serves the maintenance of social hierarchy. Gossiping and mocking therefore tends to be practised by people of higher social status targeting individuals of lower status. It tends to be embedded only in relationships that allow the perpetrator to verbally attack the personality of his or her opponent (see Mainwaring in Holmes 2011: 44).

In Tongan culture, verbal bullying and disciplining is perceived as an effective form of informal control and 'a potent method of influencing behaviour' (Bernstein 1983: 99). Tongans use forms of verbal disciplining as a way of status elevation. As Bryan put it succinctly:

'Tonga is all about looking good… they might say something about you to another person, but they seem to lie to make themselves seem higher than the next person' (Bryan, Australia 2012). Bryan described the differences between the way Tongans gossip and the way Australian girls gossip: 'I know a lot of Australian girls and you see them gossiping about things… they might say something about you to another person, but only they [Tongans] seem to lie to make themselves seem higher than the next person'.

Bryan provides the example of an incident in which he was involved when two of his cousins from Tonga had been chosen to play in a junior rugby competition overseas, but the Tongan team only had money to pay for one of their plane tickets. Bryan happened to pick up the phone when his relatives called from Tonga to ask for money to finance the missing plane ticket. He said:

> I paid for my cousin's plane ticket, but then when he had come - which I didn't know, because I didn't take any credit - my aunty said: 'oh yeah, I put in the money for it', and I was like: 'What?'… Later on he found out that I paid, but I didn't go around telling everyone that I paid, but she wanted everyone to know that she did, which she didn't.

In this incidence, Bryan's aunt, who is of higher social status, made herself look better by spreading the rumour that she paid for the youth's flight. This made her look generous which in turn raises her reputation within the Tongan community. This can be linked to Bernstein's (1983: 139) understanding of gossip as a form of verbal disciplining and 'a potent method of influencing behaviour' (ibid. 99). Similar to hardship humour, Bryan's aunty used gossip as a way to influence others' perception of her to elevate her status and thus the level of respect directed towards her. She made false statements to manipulate the behaviour of others, to make herself superior through gossip. The use of gossip was most effective in this instance, as the events slowly unfolded and did not eventuate as a direct interaction between victim and perpetrator. If this would have been the case, for instance Bryan voicing his side of the story in front of his aunty, it is not unlikely that his aunt would have used humour to indicate her status and control over the situation.

Humour, self-identity and emotional well-being in the Tongan diaspora

Although humour may be applied as a method to facilitate the internalisation of social morality and emotions among Tongans, this can be problematic in morally diverse social contexts. Many Tongan youths growing up in fragmented moral environments struggle to identify the context-dependent meanings behind their stigmatisation, which makes some feel uncomfortable about themselves. Josh, for instance, struggled with Tongan forms of indirect bullying. For him, having grown up in a western context, hardship humour and gossiping are associated with stigma. He described the feelings he associates with it as 'something [that] strangles you, it suffocates you, because you can feel it, you can feel the looks' (Josh, New Zealand 2011). Tongan victims of hardship humour are often suffering from public humiliation marked by feelings of powerless-

ness. Due to their hierarchically lower status, they are not supposed to speak back or question the actions of the perpetrators. This often leaves victims without explanation of what they have done wrong. Mike consequently asked for more self-reflection: 'people should be more wary or conscious of their laughing and why they are laughing and that' (Mike, New Zealand 2011).

To avoid being ridiculed or socially excluded, many Tongan youths who grow up in the so-called 'hybrid of logics' (Alexander 2009: 50), avoid certain behaviours in front of their family as they worry about ridicule and confrontation. Similarly, Delwyn Tattum (1993: 8) in her analysis of social bullying identified such avoidance behaviour in the context of unequal opponents as associated with stressful situations that can be sparked through the mere thought of possible humiliation. One way to avoid neglect and conflict is to prioritize the 'box' and hence to change one's behaviour in favour of collective recognition. Fai, for example, kept her passion and involvement in hip hop dance a secret from her parents. She said: 'I was doing something that I was hiding from them, because I thought I knew their reaction' (Fai, Australia 2011). Scared of her parents' reactions, she decided to align herself to culturally appropriate behaviour and neglect the parts of herself that were confrontational.

Some Tongans even go as far as purposefully 'staging' their behaviour to gain recognition from the 'Tongan box'. Jacobsen (2007: 289) describes this as living a 'make-believe life'. Thus, some younger Tongans alter their identity performances to fit inside the 'box' to avoid forms of disciplining from others. Viliami illuminated this by saying: 'I was afraid of the old, old Tongans ... I knew everything that I had to do was putting on my Tongan hat' (New Zealand 2011).

In fact, many Tongan youths perform their identities according to their audience. Erving Goffman (1975) discussed the concept of 'frame' as a contextual perspective that organises social experiences. Like a picture frame the 'Tongan box' represents an idea of social structure, albeit a rather conservative social structure, through or against which Tongans evaluate themselves and others in multiple contexts. The conscious adjustment of one's identity performance according to context and opposition can be enlarging for some but limiting for others. For Tongan young people, however, staging an identity performance out of fears of social humiliation is generally restricting.

Concluding remarks

In this paper, we have discussed the role of humour in negotiations about social status and changing identities of Tongans. The Polynesian archipelago of Tonga is affected deeply by migration with more than half of the population living in countries on the Pacific Rim, especially New Zealand, Australia and the United States. In the diaspora, Tongans encounter different modes of social rapport and political relations that are not principally characterized by hierarchy and where seniority is not automatically linked to status privileges. Cultural differences between the shores of Tonga and the Pacific Rim have generated an essentialised conception of Tongan culture described as the 'Tongan box', which is argued to contain the authentic principles of behaviour and is guarded by indigenous Tongans of higher rank

and status. In order to protect Tongan traditions, various forms of humour, including mocking and gossiping, are used to remind Tongan migrants of their descent and associated obligations. These strategies, however, are far from funny for those who feel increasingly uncomfortable identifying with the ancient rules of respect and obedience that are applied to corroborate Tongan hierarchy. Young Tongans especially experience appeals to their so-called traditional Tongan identity as a form of indirect bullying. Indeed, humour and laughter have a negative effect on their sense of self.

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Notes

1. This article is based on data collected through multi-sited ethnographic research including 60 interviews with Tongan young people and elders between 2010 and 2014 in the homeland Tonga, New Zealand and Australia. The research focussed on how Tongan young people growing up in between cultures marked by multiple behavioural expectations are using hip hop to negotiate identities (Betz 2015).
2. Helen Lee has published using a number of different names such as Helen Morton, Helen Morton Lee or Helen Lee. In order to avoid confusion she will be referred to in this article as Helen Lee.
3. The *ma'ulu'ulu* is a Tongan dance that is performed seated (Kaeppler 1993: 2). The *tau'olunga* is a dance performed by one or more women standing (Kaeppler 1993: 2).

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