The socio-cultural impacts of visiting friends and relatives on host communities – a Samoan study

R.G. Taufatofua ¹ & S. Craig-Smith ²
¹ University of Queensland
² School of Tourism, Queensland

Abstract
This paper considers and compares the key impacts of the VFR traveler and the holiday tourist on the socio-cultural fabric of Pacific Island communities. Research was undertaken in the island nation of Samoa. A socio-cultural capital approach provided recognition of the dynamic natures of the communities considered.

The VFR traveler is a particularly important yet largely under-estimated visitor segment in many small Pacific islands where VFR travelers comprise a considerable percentage of visitors. In Samoa the VFR traveller segment makes up approximately 29 percent of total visitors, slightly behind the holiday sector (around 33 percent) (CBS, 2007). Earnings from VFR travellers (US$7.7 million) are higher than holiday tourists (US$5.7 million) Central Bank of Samoa [1].

Socio-cultural and economic impacts can be significant on host communities, particularly as the VFR traveler can slip beneath the cultural barrier separating the local resident from the tourist/traveler. The current research suggested that VFR travellers were considered to impact the socio-cultural fabric in not dissimilar ways to the holiday tourist. However the host respondents accorded less concern to the VFR traveller impact than they did to holiday tourists. Impacts were considered positive in many instances, enhanced by the importance of this traveller segment to the economy through overseas remittances.

Elements impacted showed a variance in strength of impact and the interrelationships by traveller type. For example, respondents considered that reciprocity was impacted more so by VFR travellers, changing the nature of reciprocity from an intrinsic value to a more extrinsic value based on monetary exchanges. Results of this research offer a glimpse into ways the socio-cultural fabric inherently operates particular resilience mechanisms to protect its integrity from undesirable external influences, yet embraces the more favorable influences. This research identifies that holiday and VFR tourism in Samoa does impact the socio-cultural fabric in a myriad of ways, some positive and others negative.

Key words: socio-cultural resilience, social and cultural capital, visiting friends and relatives.

1. Introduction

This report will consider the impacts of the Visiting Friends and Relatives (VFR) travel market on 4 host communities in the Pacific Island nation of Samoa, The socio-cultural and economic impacts from tourism can be significant on host communities, often more pronounced in those countries where there are high levels of visitation. Tourism impacts have received widespread consideration; however, impacts have not been differentiated by traveler typologies. In particular VFR travelers have been largely overlooked with respect to impacts, planning and management strategies.
There has been criticism that research has failed to adequately explore socio-cultural and socio-demographic variables and behaviours of hosts and their visiting friends and relatives in the host country [2], Young et al [3], McKercher [4]. Some studies have even indicated that this relationship is not discernible Belisle and Hoy [5], Liu, Sheldon and Var [6], Lankford and Howard [7], Milman and Pizam [8], Ryan and Montgomery [9]. Jackson [10] filled some of the void studying resident characteristics and behaviours to provide some understanding of the social and economic implications of entertaining VFR travellers. However this consideration has fallen short of acknowledging that the Pacific VFR traveler may be a significant contributor of socio-cultural change in their respective communities.

This research specifically considered key impacts of the VFR traveler on the socio-cultural fabric of Pacific Island communities and where relevant compares them to the impacts of the mainstream holiday tourist market. Research was undertaken in Samoa, a Pacific Island nation boasting consistently high numbers of VFR travelers.

2. Methodology

The VFR traveller was considered as part of a larger study which researched the impacts of tourism on local communities of Samoa. This research looked at two traveller types, the holiday tourist and the VFR traveller. Three distinctly different touristic locations were considered:

- Larger tourism operations, hotels and accommodation in the capital of Apia;
- Medium Tourism operations. These consisted of family operations, beach fales / bungalows, in Lalomanu (Upolu) and in Manase (Savaii);
- Community with no tourism development in close proximity, the community of Aopo (Savaii) which acted as the control for the research. It was assumed at the onset of the research that a non-touristic area should show a different level of cultural change than the touristic areas, if tourism did indeed affect cultural change and erosion.

Forty nine community members were interviewed individually and through focus group discussions. Perceived impacts (as identified by host residents) by holiday tourists and VFR travellers were identified and compared.

2.1 A Socio-cultural capital approach to the research

A social and cultural capital approach was used to understand the complexity of communities, their networks and relationships in a dynamic and comprehensive way. This includes many dimensions of community norms, values and behaviours, utilised to understand the processes of change and what constitutes resilience to change in communities. This provided a means to measure multidimensional aspects of communities in contrast to singular dimensions of traditional measurement tools.

With the wide recognition that economic growth is not enough to attain quality of life, the importance of social and cultural capital in terms of connecting the past, present and future is highlighted Mercer [11]. Put simply, a ‘Social Capital’ approach looks at the patterns and qualities of relationships within a community or society, and considers their capacity to address and resolve issues and change, which they collectively face Saunders [12], Black and Hughes [13], ABS [14]. Cultural capital identifies individuals varying degree of ability to learn and carry out culturally favoured behaviour and attitudes, differentiating their relative worth to a cultural group Bourdieu [15]. Those with greater amounts of cultural capital are in a better position to dominate and influence a cultural group.

The socio-cultural elements of social and cultural capital explored in this research included: reciprocity; trust and trustworthiness; self efficacy; land ownership, family, shame, face and respect, the chiefly system, oratory, religion and spirituality, social cohesiveness, craftsmanship, building styles, tattoos, sense of belonging, sense of support, sense of inner peace and contentment; and values and beliefs. A combination of participatory action research techniques and critical ethnographic methodologies were used to guide the research interaction with respondents. Analysis and interpretation of results was undertaken using both quantitative and qualitative analysis methods. Significant cross-relationships between nominal and ordinal variables were analysed and strongly significant interrelationships were investigated further in line with multidisciplinary literature discussions.
3. Discussion of Research Findings

The research clearly identified that VFR travelers impacted several key elements of the socio-cultural fabric of those communities considered. The outcomes of the research showed both similarities and differences between the impacts of the VFR traveler and the holiday tourist. The critical aspects will be discussed in line with community resilience aligning discussion to enhancing sustainable community growth. The following aspects will be considered under the research findings:

- VFR traveler typology to understand relevant characteristics of the travel segment.
- Links between the Pacific VFR and a remittance culture
- Impacts on the socio-cultural capital of the communities.
- Links to socio-cultural resilience.

3.1 Typology of travelers

Tourism impacts may vary considerably by traveller type. Consequently this research considered differences and similarities between holiday tourists and those travellers who visit their friends and relatives in Samoa. What is clear from research and literature is that the VFR traveler segment is not a homogenous segment. Characteristics of these travelers may vary between countries, cultures and in response to other influences.

Little research has been undertaken in the area of VFR travellers, let alone clear definitions of the typologies of the market segment, yet some researchers recognise the value of the VFR traveller market Lehto et al [16], Moscardo et al [17] Lee et al [18], Duval [19]. This is in contrast to other authors who considered that the value of VFR travel is small compared with other forms of tourism Seaton and Palmer [20]. Literature has largely considered VFR travelers from a western context in UK, Canada, US, Australia and Europe. Recent studies in Australia have considered the VFR definitional typology, essentially separating the traveler into two main groups, defined “by purpose” or “by accommodation” Backer [21]. Yet this typology may have limited use in providing a comparative understanding of the Samoa VFR travel scenario, as ‘purpose’ is the predominant instigator of travel, ‘accommodation’ is generally secondary.

What can differentiate the Samoan VFR traveller from those from many other countries is that the social ties of the overseas Samoan remain strong and return visits remain an essential part of maintaining their Samoan identity McGrath [22]. Many overseas Samoans consider themselves “Samoan first and foremost” and remain keenly interested in Samoan life and politics. Furthermore, most Samoan leaders have lived and studied overseas and hence been termed VFR travellers at some stage of their overseas lives. These people have introduced and guided Samoa in its integration of both fa’asamoa (Samoan) and fa’apalagi (Western) ways UNESCO [23].

The VFR traveler is a particularly important visitor segment in many small Pacific Islands where they comprise a considerable percentage of visitors to the island nations. Indeed, in Samoa the VFR traveller segment makes up approximately 29 percent of total visitors, slightly behind the holiday sector (around 33 percent) Central Bank of Samoa [1]. Despite recent declines in the market, earnings from VFR travellers (US$7.7 million) are higher than holiday tourists (US$5.7 million) Central Bank of Samoa [1]. The Central Bank assessment considers formal market earnings, whereas informal sector contributions (household goods, food and other assistance) have largely not been assessed and may provide a greater influence on households and the economy than formal sector earnings. This highlights the importance of this market segment and the need for socio-economic planners to better understand the impacts and needs of this valuable segment in order to manage and sustain the segment more effectively.

3.2 The Pacific VFR and links to a remittance culture

Links between VFR travellers and out migration from the Pacific have been explored by several authors Jackson [10], Feng and Page [24], Springer [25], Duval [19] directly linking migration and remittances to the VFR traveller. What is ironic is that although the Pacific Islands attract tourists who seek the Pacific paradise, inhabitants of these paradise locations leave in large numbers to seek better employment and educational opportunities. Migration has occurred in significant numbers from some island workforces, particularly from Polynesian countries, including approximately 50,000 Cook Islanders and 8,000 Niue Islanders. By 1993, one third of Samoans lived overseas, mainly in American Samoa, United States, Australia and New Zealand Shankman [26].
Development of a remittance culture has occurred mainly in Polynesian Islands. These VFR travellers remit money while resident in overseas countries to help provide for their families needs. Samoan VFR traveller [27], NZ Ministry of Women Report [28]. Remittances, in the form of money and goods are sent back to the islands, particularly by Tongan, Niue Island, Cook Island and Samoan family members living overseas. Remittances have continued to rise over recent years to Samoa (an increase of 8 percent in 2005 worth approximately US $248m) and remain a key source of family income Joint Samoa Program Strategy [29]. This growth in remittances has provided a positive impact on the Samoan economy.

Many VFR travellers were brought up with the same norms and values as the host, yet they have also adopted certain traits of their adopted homes, especially cash oriented traits. Once people migrate, they take on certain characteristics of their new home, adjusting to both ‘identity and speed’ McCall [30]. Although further adaptation occurs, it is the very speed of the adjustment that provides the major impact. With these visitors come the potential to significantly impact the culture with new ideas from their adopted country, particularly as there is a parallel reliance on the same relatives for daily subsistence in their home community through remittances. This traveller can go deep into the traditional culture, past the superficial barrier imposed by hosts. As Duval [19] suggested, after migrating, people can become guests in their former homes. These migrants can return to ‘home’ on a remarkably regular basis as this journey remains one of the resilient socio-cultural attributes, and with low cost airlines the cost of travel has become very competitive. This has encouraged a decreased level of seasonality around travel, spread more evenly throughout the year. Despite this price insensitivity occurs in many VFR traveller markets, largely due to the segment’s social motives for travelling, the sense of obligation and even fulfillment, fulfilling personal needs Bull [31]. Returning ‘home’ for a visit remains important, maintaining ties, duties and obligations and reaffirming their very identity. A study in Seattle looking at Samoan residents found journeying back to Samoa was a defining element of what being Samoan meant to those overseas migrants McGrath [22].

This traveller segment is also important to Samoa due to the inelasticity of demand as it is largely unaffected by the cost of travel, despite incomes of the travellers, due to the importance the Samoan expatriate places on the ‘journey home’. Barker [32] studied Samoan migrants in the US and identified that 25 per cent lived below the level of poverty; comprising the largest immigrant group living in poverty. Yet remittances and travel to the homeland remain important for nearly all of these immigrants Barker [32], NZ Ministry of Women Report [28]. With low incomes, the cost of the air ticket is a significant part of the total cost of the trip; and bringing home gifts and money is more important than expensive holidays. Consequently, most VFR travellers to Samoa stay with family or friends, whereas most holiday tourists stay in hotels.

Paci [33] suggested that a deeper understanding is required regarding migration, mobility, ethnic differentials and motivation surrounding VFR travel to understand the holiday/obligation incongruities. Yet little further understanding has been gleaned regarding the characteristics of this market segment since Paci’s study in 1994.

4. Impacts

Only one respondent (total of 49 respondents) indicated that they did not have an overseas relative who visits them periodically. Furthermore, 94 percent of respondents considered that VFR travellers impacted the Samoan socio-cultural fabric in a myriad of ways, some positive and others negative. Perceived impacts varied across socio-cultural elements and inter related variables indicating the level of complexity in understanding healthy community dynamics. Level of influence is cited by respondents as dependent upon:

- Frequency of visits;
- Commodities and services that individuals and communities must provide;
- Frequency of provision of these commodities and services;
- The level that VFR travellers participate in community activities.

The VFR traveller did not provide significantly different impacts to the socio-cultural fabric than did the holiday tourist. The main areas whereby VFR travelers were perceived to impact the socio-cultural fabric more so than holiday tourists included: chiefly system; reciprocity; building styles; the family and the emotions of shame, face and respect. This impact was considered positive in many instances, probably enhanced by the importance of this traveller to the economy through overseas remittances. This may also be due in part to the local response, whereby visitors were expected by the hosts to remain involved in cultural activities. The host respondents accorded less concern to the VFR
4.1 Chiefly system

The migration of relatives overseas has encouraged greater individualism UNESCO [23], which can undermine the traditional dependency underlying the matai system. Through remittances, community members have access to money and other resources, decreasing dependency on their family and chiefs, whom had traditionally supported and made decisions for them. Individuals now have the opportunity to live outside the community using their resources to look after immediate families, leading to a more individualistic and self-reliant lifestyle. Furthermore, remittances are generally sent to parents, siblings and close relatives rather than to a matai who traditionally managed family affairs, strengthening individual power and weakening matai control UNESCO [23].

Another issue which has arisen is that some visiting relatives have challenged the authority of the matai and the village fono, in different ways, bringing new ways of thinking and social organising skills. On behalf of their relatives, they challenge the rights of the village to constrain individual rights as stated in the Samoan Constitution UNESCO [23].

What this discussion indicates is that the way VFR travellers impact the chiefly system is strongly influenced by money; including providing community individuals access to money resources that they previously had little access to, resulting in less dependency on the chiefly system, offering opportunities that may not have been accessible in the past. This greater financial self-reliance is largely augmented through both remittances and visits home. Financial independence can also enable community members to contribute more to their community and towards obligations to their chiefs. To what extent this may occur is unclear as it can impinge on the non-formal economy. Various scenarios can emerge from these outcomes.

- Ideally the chiefly system can strengthen its leadership and decision making role. This would strengthen the contemporary Samoan culture, based on traditional social ties and elements of social and cultural capital, yet become more responsive to contemporary economic needs. In a spin off this would maintain the cultural product that tourism currently so heavily relies upon.

- On the other hand change can diminish the role of the chiefly system, whereby the culture will also become more western and individualistic. This can be challenging for the tourism product, as Samoa would then have to compete for tourist dollars with other island destinations which are more competitive in mainstream tourism. This is the scenario occurring to a degree in some communities studied, spurred on by the lack of understanding of the relevance of culture to the tourism product.

4.2 Reciprocity

The current research supported the assumption that reciprocity remains strong within the Samoan culture despite the cash economy contributing to a growing imbalance of wealth within the communities. Yet the nature of reciprocity has evolved whereby ceremonial exchange has integrated a monetary value Young [3] and a shift from mutual benefit towards more individual benefit. Consequently the current research has contributed to recognising the importance of maintaining the intrinsic basis of reciprocal exchange process, controlling levels of monetary exchange. This in turn supports a greater equality in communities, based on culture rather than wealth.

This is supported by Putnam [34] who recognised the importance of social networks and the rules which dictate how these networks are conducted, involving mutual obligations and sturdy norms of reciprocity. Furthermore, different forms of reciprocity can include; “I will do this for you if you do this for me” and also “a norm of generalized reciprocity: I'll do this for you without expecting anything specific back from you, in the confident expectation that someone else will do something for me down the road” Putnam [34]. Communities based around the latter type of reciprocity are more effective and efficient than distrustful communities with weak social networks Putnam [34].

Within the context of the VFR traveller, the cash economy and consequent social inequalities have made it more difficult to practice this generalised traditional reciprocity. Hence the VFR traveler influences the nature of reciprocity from an intrinsic value to a more extrinsic value based on monetary exchanges. The current research identified that a higher number of respondents (42 percent) considered that VFR travellers impacted reciprocity, more so than holiday tourists (35 percent).

Relatives have arrived and stayed at family homes, bringing food and helping with household activities for generations. This continues, but at times there is some resentment on the part of the host and shame on the part of the guest especially amongst those who cannot provide much to guests Hezel...
[35]. The VFR traveller in the community must conform to appropriate behaviours expected in a community, whereas those who reside in liberal societies are reluctant to follow traditional ways as rigidly. Moreover, many VFR travellers lead busy working lifestyles, and seek a more relaxed holiday than what is expected of them in the community. What this can mean is that the host and the guest may have differing ideas of what hospitality and reciprocity means to the other and place ‘unreal’ expectations on each other. These expectations and the recognition of the need for reciprocity by many VFR travellers has led to many across the Pacific ashamed to ask for hospitality from their relatives as they recognize that ‘everything costs money these days’ Hezel [35].

Consequently those VFR travellers who can afford it tend to stay in hotels and guesthouses. This can offset the obligations underlying reciprocity. It can also allay the feelings of shame on the part of the host, being unable to provide a high level of hospitality and with respect to the guest recognizing that they are putting their family at a disadvantage. This is reflected in the high number of predominantly budget accommodation operations available across Samoa, many catering for VFR travellers, who can relax and do not have to conform as rigidly to Samoan cultural expectations. Hence, in some areas Samoa manages both VFR travellers and cultural preservation within its tourism product, indicating a degree of socio-cultural resilience.

### 4.3 Building styles and VFR travelers

As literature has suggested, many tourists seek to experience a westernized and comfortable view of island cultures Douglas [36, 37]. This indicates an incongruity between tourists’ wealth and understanding of local conditions, whereby although tourists want to see different things, they want to experience them from a place of comfort without actually being part of reality Urry [38], Muzaini [39], Kaplan [40]. Tourists seek to see unique cultural attributes, yet they also want comfortable and air conditioned accommodation. This can support the assertion that ‘tourists and hosts mutually shape the social realities they share’ Hunter [41]. This will impact building styles, whereby although they may have a traditional flavour, they are adapted to meet tourist comfort demands.

How this affects the VFR/host relationship is interesting as it shows that the friends and relatives have changed since their migration. For example, as Samoa is very hot, many travellers find it difficult to acclimatise when visiting from a cool place of residence and seek air conditioning when they visit. Many VFR travelers also want hot showers, which are often unavailable in the communities. This will not be further explored in the current research.

### 4.4 Impacts on host families

VFR travellers affect family differently than the holiday tourist. Firstly, they bring gifts of household and personal items to their families as well as money which can be used to improve the home. Secondly, these travellers can provide financial support which can influence community decisions including nominations for specific family members to become a matai. Yet, on the other hand the host also faces extra costs as they participate in activities they do not normally engage in to accompany their relatives, spending larger amounts of money than normal, such as going to cultural shows and restaurants. This influence on host activities by their guests can encourage them to “act like tourists in their own backyards” Johns and Gyimothy [42]. This can put considerable financial and cultural pressure on host families as they feel compelled to undertake activities which they cannot afford and may not be comfortable with. A report from the UK indicated that VFR travellers can stimulate additional spending by their hosts Beioley [43] and Paci [33] suggested, an unseen multiplier effect, whereby additional expenditures are incurred by hosts entertaining guests. It can also place hosts in a difficult position when they must ensure their overseas relatives uphold appropriate and sensitive behaviours to maintain family ‘face’. These studies supported the findings of the current research.

### 4.5 Shame face and respect

Shame, face and respect constitute quite different emotions and meanings for the Samoan society than for mainstream western society. Mesquita [44] strengthens this statement by suggesting that virtually every aspect of emotion is under indigenous cultural influence (such as Samoa) and Western cultures should not be set as the norm of human psychological functioning, measuring other peoples against this norm. These self-conscious emotions may be ‘appraised, displayed, and regulated’ differently in Westerners and Samoans based around their very different cultural models. When people show respect, their attitude and feelings also arise from their cultural model which recognizes people’s dignity,
deservingness, acknowledgement, and entitlement Barreto and Ellemers [45], Heuer et al [46]. Yet while respondents considered these emotions are impacted by both VFR travellers and holiday tourists, hosts are more willing to endure impacts from relatives as they are ‘family’ and also these same relatives also provide remittances.

5. Links to socio-cultural resilience

This research offers a glimpse into ways the socio-cultural fabric inherently operates resilience mechanisms to protect its integrity from undesirable external influences, yet embraces more favoured influences. It confirms that VFR travellers to Samoa do impact the socio-cultural fabric in a myriad of ways, some positive and others negative.

Putnam [34] suggested, it is important to strategise how the positive consequences of social capital can be strengthened and negative consequences minimised. To understand which aspects of social and cultural capital need to be strengthened there is a need to: recognise which elements and inter-relationships are impacted by VFR travel; measure the impact on these elements and inter-relationships; identify which elements and inter-relationships remain strong; recognise and acknowledge where VFR travel contributes to socio-cultural resilience.

Taking from literature, ‘resilience’ is seen as a useful concept to understand human adaptation Holling and Goldberg [47], Holling [48], Vayda and McCay [49], Dutra [50]. A key concept of resilience is based on the idea that culture is the force in which people confront nature and mould it to meet their purpose, constraining behaviors to fit in certain moulds which sustained societies at an ecological equilibrium Anderson [51], Moran [52], Wolf [53]. In this definition cultures maintain a societal balance. Dutra [50] suggested it is the lack of awareness of these social and ecological systems which contributes to socio-cultural erosion. Dutra [50] further suggests ‘…the concept of resilience shifts policies from those that aspire to control change in systems assumed to be stable, towards managing the capacity of social-ecological systems to cope with, adapt to, and shape change’. This links the current discussion to that of Putnam [34] regarding strengthening resilience of socio-cultural elements and relationships in communities to strengthen the community health and capabilities.

Conclusion

The report has opened up discussion on the interrelationships between VFR travellers and hosts previously only assumed and alluded to. More specifically what the current research recognized, was the complexity and multifaceted nature of the interrelationship between VFR travel and the socio-cultural fabric. Moreover those socio-cultural systems which have a greater level of resilience can absorb and respond better to shocks and change, having an inherent ability to ‘cope with, adapt to, or reorganise’ around human and economic opportunities without losing their original identity. The information gained through this research has offered a glimpse into critical aspects of the VFR travel product which can offer planners some control over socio-cultural adaptation.

References


