

# Brown glass ceiling career inequalities? Empirical evidence from Samoans in New Zealand

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## Abstract

This study draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews conducted with a cohort comprising 31 Samoan CEOs and senior managers across various New Zealand industries to explore the phenomenon of a ‘brown glass ceiling’. The results reveal that Samoans encounter barriers in their career trajectories, hindering or stalling their progression into senior management roles. Our study indicates that cross-cultural differences in communication led to missed opportunities in addition to issues, such as racism, occupational segregation, and tokenism. Notably, some Samoan women experienced interracial and gender discrimination, particularly as *afa-kasi* (half-caste). Samoan career facilitators included mentorship from ‘white’ New Zealand Europeans, establishing future legacies, and a commitment to embracing their Samoan cultural identity. Our results have significant implications regarding how barriers to the glass ceiling shape and impact the careers of Samoans within New Zealand organisations. Consequently, our study contributes to the existing glass ceiling literature by incorporating insights from indigenous Samoans, who have received limited attention in glass ceiling and management research.

**Keywords:** Career barriers, cross-race mentorship, glass ceiling, Pacific Peoples, Samoans

## Introduction

*“Someone’s got to break the glass ceiling, and once it’s broken,  
everybody else comes clamouring up behind”.*

Helen Clark, 2001 (Former New Zealand Prime Minister, 1999-2008)

A closer look at the ethnic composition of the New Zealand (NZ) labour force in 2020 reveals a notable overrepresentation of Samoans (and, by extension, the Pacific peoples) in manufacturing, utilities and construction, healthcare, and social assistance industries. However, there is a corresponding underrepresentation of Samoans in managerial roles (Stats NZ, 2021). The data indicates a higher concentration of Samoans and Pacific peoples as labourers and plant workers than in managerial positions (Stats NZ, 2021). The gap between Pacific peoples and other ethnic groups in managerial and non-managerial occupations is growing. This disparity is underscored by the fact that Pacific peoples earn significantly less than Pākehā (NZ-European) men and women

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## Acknowledgements

The author wishes to acknowledge the support and guidance from Helen Delaney and Nigel Haworth throughout this journey, and thank the journal article reviewers for their comments and feedback.

(Human Rights Commission, 2021). This income differential is coined as the ‘Pacific Pay Gap,’ attributed to factors such as racism, unconscious bias, and discriminatory workplace practices. Given that Samoans and the Pacific peoples represent one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in NZ, with future projections estimating their contribution to nearly one-third of the NZ labour force (Ministry for Pacific Peoples, 2018) highlights a growing urgency to comprehend and support their managerial journeys. Accordingly, this study aims to identify the career barriers experienced by Samoans that impede and obstruct their career ascension to senior management positions within NZ organisations.

Research on the glass ceiling phenomenon highlights the role of systemic racism, organisational practices, and individual biases as contributors to stalled careers. More specifically, gender stereotyping (Hoobler et al., 2009), the lack of available mentors and developmental opportunities (Wilson, 2014), unfair hiring and promotion practices (Kurtulus, 2012) and individual personality differences are other identified factors. Choi (2019) found that women often possess smaller social networks with fewer co-worker connections than their male counterparts. Additionally, Zeng (2011) found that ethnic minorities, upon reaching senior roles, encounter less support in terms of networks and mentors, primarily due to dissimilarities between ‘cross-race’ and ‘same-race’ relationships. Thus, existing studies emphasise the importance for women and ethnic minorities to actively cultivate and expand their networks to bolster and advance their career trajectories.

A greater understanding of the organisational, individual, and cultural barriers and strategies that either deny or support managerial career progress for Samoans is imperative. Adopting Cotter et al.’s (2001) definition of the glass ceiling, which characterises it as racial discrimination that increases with upward career mobility, this study draws on empirical evidence derived from the experiences of Samoans in NZ. Employing Teu le va methods, which emphasise Samoan relationships and context and based on 31 semi-structured interviews involving 16 female and 15 male participants, we explore the notion of a ‘brown glass ceiling.’ This phenomenon, comprised of career barriers, is perceived as hindering Samoans from reaching the upper echelons of the managerial hierarchy.

This study is organised as follows: we commence with a discussion of the literature on glass ceilings to establish the need for a contemporary and nuanced comprehension of the experiences encountered by Samoans. In doing so, we extend the research to explain the impact of glass ceiling barriers on Samoans. Thus, we answer the research question: *What barriers impede Samoans from attaining senior management positions in New Zealand?*

Next, we introduce the context of this study, focusing on Samoans living and working in NZ, and address the limited research on Samoans and their experiences with barriers to senior management. Here, we underscore the significance of culture, value systems, racism and discrimination and their potential impact on career trajectories. Following this, we describe the indigenous methods employed in the study before presenting the results derived from various themes identified through our empirical analyses. This answers the next study question: *What facilitators contributed to supporting the progress of Samoans in managerial roles?*

We then discuss the results, conclude with our study’s theoretical and practical implications, and acknowledge its limitations.

### *Glass Ceiling literature*

The term ‘glass ceiling’ is one of the most recognisable metaphors employed to analyse gender and race inequalities. Its history spans over four decades; its definition remains relatively the same. That is, distinctive barriers that control and limit the actions of specific individuals and groups, such as women, ethnic minorities, disabled persons, LGBTQ and older workers, regarding ascension into senior management roles (Morrison & Von Glinow, 1990). ‘Ceiling’ signifies the maximum threshold individuals can aspire to reach in the metaphorical ‘corporate ladder’, whereas ‘glass’ symbolises the subtle and transparent barriers that are unseen but palpably ‘felt’ or experienced. While individuals might be able to see the next rung on the corporate ladder, transparent and invisible barriers prevent access to it. Notably, the rate at which these groups advance to management positions is much slower or halted when compared to privileged groups such as WASP (white Anglo-Saxon protestants) or white men. Unfortunately for some individuals, these barriers worsen with further upward career movement (Cotter et al., 2001).

Some authors suggest that the glass ceiling exists at the entry to mid-levels rather than confined to senior management (De la Rica et al., 2008; Yap & Conrad, 2009). However, Meyerson and Fletcher (2000) posit that the glass ceiling is everywhere in the organisation, implying the existence of barriers at various hierarchical levels. Interestingly, other researchers contend that beyond the glass ceiling are ‘homosocial’ males or ‘gatekeepers’ who restrict entry solely to individuals resembling themselves (Bihagen & Ohls, 2006; Helgertz, 2011). Similarly, Kanter (1977) and Maume (1999) assert that men in senior management tend to favour individuals with similar cultural preferences that align with their male identity, self-reflection, and social support.

Despite the extensive body of literature exploring the glass ceiling and its effect on earnings and careers, most studies primarily focus on women’s outcomes in the United States. By comparison, research on the effect of the glass ceiling on indigenous and, more specifically, Oceanic-Pacific cultures located in the southern hemisphere remains relatively scarce. Numerous American-based studies focus on the experiences of African, Hispanic, and Asian Americans who encounter specific barriers impeding their career advancement (e.g. Carpiuc, 2016; Hekman et al., 2017; Kwong, 2018). Using glass ceiling metaphors, the *Black ceiling* (McGirt, 2017) emphasises a thick, almost impenetrable layer of constraints that block African-American women in their careers. These barriers include a lack of support, exclusion, racism, and discrimination (Bloch et al., 2021). African-American women are constantly overlooked regarding their credentials and career opportunities (Beauboeuf-Lafontant, 2003). Additionally, their cultural traits, including skin colour, hair, weight, and parenting skills, are subject to heightened criticism (Curtis, 2017). The *Bamboo* and *Rice Bowl ceilings* (Chin, 2016; Oguntoyinbo, 2014) pertain to the experiences of Asian Americans, such as Chinese, Indian, and Filipino individuals. Racial stereotypes like the ‘China doll’ (Bassett, 2002) and ‘robots’ (Hossfeld, 1994) depict them as passive and non-confrontational, and, therefore, deeming them unfit and unsuitable for management positions.

Several competing theories attempt to enlighten the glass ceiling phenomenon for ethnic minorities. This study focuses on biculturalism, racism and discrimination, tokenism, and occupational segregation to establish the context for understanding some of the unique characterisations of Samoans in senior management. We discuss these theories briefly to

demonstrate the value of understanding how glass ceiling barriers influence the career trajectories of Samoans.

### *Biculturalism*

Biculturalism concerns individuals (biculturals) who have internalised two cultures and value systems, namely their culture of origin and that of the host country (Berry, 1997). Biculturals include ethnic minorities, refugees, indigenes and mixed-ethnic groups and their children who may have been born and raised in the host country. Biculturals tend to be multilingual, maintain friendships across cultural backgrounds, and immerse themselves in dual societies. However, some biculturals struggle to accommodate two cultures and value systems while endeavouring to uphold a positive or 'revamped' identity. This internal struggle may manifest as confusion at work and home and a pervasive sense of cultural alienation (Baffoe, 2011).

For example, Samoans continuously contend with the experience of being perceived as the 'other' at work while expecting to be a 'New Zealand Kiwi' (Seiuli, 2016). Biculturals continuously navigate cultural norms and values systems that are sometimes collectively contentious. As such, the psychological stress of incessantly negotiating ethnic boundaries within a predominantly Western-white environment increases stress and anxiety for many ethnic minorities (Witenstein, 2020). Ironically, biculturals are more likely to display advanced reasoning skills, empathy, and creativity, stemming from their nuanced understanding of multiple perspectives, cultural contexts, and diverse value systems (Tadmoor et al., 2012). Nevertheless, the challenge lies in effectively managing the opposing realities in these cultures and value systems while upholding a favourable view of both and performing well at work. Consequently, biculturalism is perceived as a glass ceiling barrier for ethnic minorities.

### *Racism and Discrimination*

One of the most profound glass ceiling barriers that continue to exclude ethnic minorities and perpetuate division is racism and discrimination (used interchangeably). This barrier is premised on the belief that some individuals are perceived by dominant groups as unsuitable for management roles based on the colour of their skin (Cook & Glass, 2014). Therefore, race and skin colour are determinants of perceived success in work relationships, organisational 'fit' and attainment of senior management positions (Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014).

Race and racism are embedded in society as a function of historical, political, social, and economic contexts that permeate all aspects of work and society insofar as normalised (Rocco et al., 2012). For example, the infamous Dawn Raids of the 1970s and 1980s in NZ exemplify the entrenchment of racism, wherein the government unjustly targets Pacific peoples, labelling them 'Pacific Island overstayers' and attributing them as the cause of the economic recession. This resulted in the illegal deportation of Pacific individuals, predominantly Samoans and Tongans, despite the majority of overstayers originating from 'white Commonwealth nations', namely Britain, North America, and Europe (New Zealand Race Relations Office, 1986; Ofe-Grant, 2023).

More recently, the precarious status of low-skilled and temporary Pacific migrants has rendered them susceptible to harsh conditions, exploitation, and modern slavery. This vulnerability is

compounded by inequitable employer agreements and discriminatory entry prerequisites to NZ (Collins & Stringer, 2023). Consequently, deep-rooted racism permeates the NZ landscape, where numerous historical and contemporary racial injustices continue with long-lasting harmful consequences (Beehive, 2021). Such systemic approaches cement the vulnerability and over-representation of Pacific peoples in low-skilled and low-paid occupations.

### *Tokenism and Ethnic Representation*

The glass ceiling is associated with the combined effects of tokenism and representation. A ‘token’ refers to a person promoted to a position primarily based on a dimension, such as race or gender, often in response to external or internal diversity and inclusion pressures or affirmative action programmes (Kanter, 1977). Numerous studies indicate that some tokens experience ‘survivor guilt’ from breaking negative ethnic stereotypes attached to low employment statuses (Akhtar, 2014; Holmes, 2006).

While tokenism does provide access to senior and exclusive positions that are less accessible to ethnic minorities, it unintentionally promotes performance pressures (McDonald et al., 2004). This heightened scrutiny stems from the tokens’ visibility as the ‘other’ and their perceived ‘differentness’ (Gustafson, 2008). Ethnic tokens find themselves burdened with the expectations, hopes, dreams and aspirations not only of their families and friends but also of other ethnic groups that are underrepresented in senior management roles but harbour aspirations for such positions. Therefore, the unspoken pressure to do well and represent a particular ethnicity may lead to stress, performance pressures, and unconscious guilt, acting as barriers to senior management roles from internalising feelings of unentitlement, unworthiness and inferiority (Holmes, 2006). Should these tokens ‘fail’, for example, miscalculating, making mistakes, or misjudging costly situations at work, the repercussions extend beyond individual failure to include failure as an ethnic representative. Accordingly, tokens may experience unfavourable evaluations, less support, exclusion from formal and informal networks and meaningful mentoring relationships (Briggs et al., 2011).

### *Occupational Segregation*

Scholars have long recognised the consequences of occupational segregation on glass ceiling inequalities primarily based on specific demographics mapped onto discriminatory processes (Archer, 2011; Hultin, 2003; Maume, 1999). Within this context, gender and race tend to define and classify the capabilities and characteristics that shape career trajectories and limit access to rights and opportunities for women and ethnic minorities (Hultin, 2003).

One of the explicit manifestations of occupational segregation is wage discrepancies (Tonoyan et al., 2019). More specifically, the core sector of the labour market offers stability, high-paying jobs, and career opportunities (Dixon, 1994). Alternatively, the peripheral sectors rely on low-cost labour that is labour-intensive, offers low pay, and is disproportionately represented by women and ethnic minorities (Spell & Blum, 2000). As such, the distribution of these groups across different occupational categories varies according to stereotypes. For example, manufacturing work (industrial segregation) in NZ involves disproportionate numbers of Pacific people (Parker et al., 2022). Such structural inequalities for ethnic minorities indicate barriers to career progress with little means of getting out. Therefore, understanding the cause of occupational segregation is vital,

given that ethnicity or race is a criterion for creating socially hierarchical spaces that lead to a segmented occupational structure (Maciel, 2021).

In the next section, we will discuss the advancement of the Samoan workforce in the context of NZ in order to shed light on their working status as Pacific migrants and examine the limited studies investigating their working experiences.

### *Samoans in the New Zealand context*

Samoans are individuals whose ethnic background, identity, language, and cultural customs originate from the islands of Samoa situated within the South Pacific hemisphere. Within the NZ demographic landscape, Samoans are grouped as 'Pacific peoples' constituting a significant ethnic cohort alongside Māori (indigenous people of NZ), NZ-European and Asian. In this study, the term Pacific peoples refers to Polynesians from Tuvalu, Tokelau, Fiji, the Cook Islands, Samoa, Niue and Tonga and the smaller islands of Rotuma and Kiribati (Ministry for Pacific People, 2018). Samoans represent a well-established migrant group, comprising almost half the Pacific population (48.7 per cent) (NZ Statistics, 2018). More Samoans (66.7 per cent) are NZ-born and speak English as their first language (90.2 per cent). Nearly half of all Samoans (45.8 per cent) are bilingual and religious (80 per cent). As for occupations, more Samoans are employed as labourers (18.6 per cent), professionals (14.1 per cent) and machinery operators and drivers (13.1 per cent), surpassing the percentage employed in managerial roles (9.4 per cent) (Stats NZ, 2018).

There is limited research that addresses the glass ceiling phenomenon and career barriers experienced by Samoans and the wider Pacific community in NZ. While explicit references to the glass ceiling are notably absent in extant research, these studies provide valuable insights into the work challenges that Samoans and Pacific peoples faced as new migrants to NZ. For example, empirical evidence indicates limited cultural intelligence among NZ employers, who often exhibited a lack of awareness of the heterogeneity of Pacific peoples (Pitt & Macpherson, 1974; Spoonley, 1978). Lee's study (1974) found that NZ employers often grouped Pacific employees with Māori, applying a 'blanket approach' to work issues without recognising the unique ethnic cultures, languages, and protocols of individual Pacific groups.

Spoonley's (1978) ground-breaking study of 44 NZ firms and their interactions with 'Pacific Islanders' revealed discrimination wherein factors such as 'racial features', lack of English-speaking skills, perceived 'poor hygiene' and 'deceit' were reasons for the non-hiring of Pacific peoples in senior management roles. Furthermore, the former New Zealand Department of Labour (1979) reported that employers failed to recognise qualifications and skills held by Samoan applicants. These early NZ studies highlight the prevalence of systemic barriers, including limited opportunities, racism, bias, and ignorance. Such barriers collectively denied Samoans and Pacific peoples' entry into senior management despite their demonstrated proficiencies and expertise within the corporate domain.

In the mid-1980s and over the next 20 years, the NZ government implemented specialist groups, committees, initiatives, and conferences to boost Pacific representation in senior management (State Services Commission, 2004; 2015). For example, the 'Pathways to Leadership Conference' initiative focused primarily on enhancing Pacific capacity by increasing the pool of 'high calibre

Pacific candidates' for senior management positions within the public sector, achieved through the implementation of career development plans (Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2004). Thus highlighting the government's role and commitment to foster Pacific leadership and share best practice approaches through the specification of agreed actions and goals. Despite these efforts, an assessment revealed that numerous government departments offered limited opportunities to Pacific peoples to access training and development, gain work experience, pursue higher education opportunities, and failed to recognise the significance of Pacific cultural competencies as essential skills within the workplace (State Services Commission, 2015).

Two qualitative master dissertations explored the barriers to the glass ceiling for Pacific people. In Tupou's (2012) study, consisting of ten interviews that included two Samoans, findings indicated that gender bias, racism and the concept of 'Pacific Island Respect' delayed career progress. Amoa's (2016) investigation focused on the careers of 15 Pacific workers at a single tertiary institute in Auckland. The study identified organisational culture and practices, individual choices, and the lack of skills, competencies, and confidence as factors hindering career progress. Although 'Pacific culture' was mentioned as a barrier, Amoa (2016) did not specifically identify which Pacific nation was referred to or elucidate how cultural factors manifested as barriers. Interestingly, both Amoa (2016) and Tupou (2012) 'lightly' allude to Pacific cultural respect as a hindrance, yet further research is needed to determine its precise impact on managerial careers.

A recent quantitative study by McAllister et al. (2020) about glass ceilings in NZ universities uncovered significant disparities Māori and Pacific academics face, leading to lower chances of senior promotions. The study revealed that racism, institutional discrimination, and an inadequate and outdated performance model are prominent barriers to career advancement. Recommendations from this study advocate for equitable recruitment and promotional processes, cultural sensitivity, and fostering inclusive workplace practices.

The existing literature review on Samoans and the glass ceiling desperately requires new research to explore the depth and breadth of this phenomenon. While prior studies acknowledge barriers, such as racism and organisational culture, very little is known about other barriers that delay progress or the enablers supporting career progression, including the impact of cultural values and institutions. The present study seeks to address this lacuna in the scholarly discourse.

## **Methods, Data, and Analysis**

This qualitative study utilises the Samoan *Teu le va* (Anae et al., 2001) framework that emphasises relationships and contexts that strengthen collaborations within the Samoan community. This methodological approach not only celebrates and acknowledges the Samoan worldview but also contributes to the growing interest and articulation of indigenous methodologies and studies (e.g. Ofe-Grant, 2022; Pidgeon, 2018; Staniland et al., 2019). *Teu le va* (Anae et al., 2001), is derived from the principle of *va*, highlighting the importance of maintaining and nurturing relationships to facilitate collaboration. The cultivation of peaceful and harmonious relationships is posited to contribute to better outcomes and well-being in terms of *tino* (body), *mafaufau* (mind) and *agaga* (soul) (Seiuli, 2016). In this study, *va* refers to the quality of the work relationships between Samoans and their employers, examining the dynamics and conduct of these relationships.

The study consisted of semi-structured interviews involving 16 female and 15 male Samoan participants. Semi-structured interviews are appropriate given the well-established documentation and studies of the glass ceiling phenomenon. However, a notable gap exists in understanding Samoans and their experiences with the glass ceiling.

In response to the author's interview on TV3 regarding this topic, participants were recruited through a LinkedIn advertisement. Employing purposive (McMahon & Patton, 2002) and snowball sampling (Neuman, 2011), methods facilitated the inclusion of participants from 'hard to reach' sub-populations. Participants were recruited from the North and South Islands of NZ, encompassing 21 participants from the public sector and ten from the private sector. Participant ages were either disclosed during the interview or obtained from online sources, ranging from 26 to 35 years to 76 to 85 years, with a mean age bracket of 46 to 55 years observed in 16 participants. Among the participants, 20 identified as NZ-born, ten as Samoan-born, with an additional 'other' for one participant. Furthermore, nine participants self-described as *afa-kasi* (half-caste), and ten identified as *Matai* (Samoan Chief). The educational backgrounds of the participants were disclosed, indicating that all possessed higher degrees (e.g. MBA) primarily attained in New Zealand.

The eligibility criteria for participants were that they had to be of Samoan descent occupying higher-level occupations, including CEOs and senior managers. As stated above, this study contends that interviewing Samoans in senior occupations provides optimal insights into career barriers, drawing from their unique experiences, mobility, and work history. In the context of this study, a 'manager' is defined as an individual engaged in routine managerial tasks such as planning, organising, administering staff responsibilities, and coordinating work activities (ANZSCO, 2024; Kinicki et al., 2020). Prospective participants received Participation Information Sheets explaining the study's aims and participation, along with Consent Forms, which were disseminated via email. The author, a NZ-born *afa-kasi* Samoan researcher, conducted all interviews.

Teu le va informed the construction of pre-interview questions for Samoan participants. Using reflection, the first question sought to acknowledge the participant's Samoan status, achievements, and the duration of their experience in a senior managerial role: *How did you attain a managerial or CEO position within your organisation?*

The second question focused on specific barriers and career facilitators, including Samoan cultural elements, career development, and higher education: *Were there challenges and barriers that hindered your progress or strategies that facilitated your advancement?*

The final question acknowledged the principles of *va*, reciprocity and relationship-building by emphasising the concept of 'giving back' – encouraging participants to share cultural and professional knowledge to support the next generation of Samoans: *What advice would you offer to the next generation of Samoans or Pacific peoples aspiring to enter high-level, high-paying jobs?*

Interviews occurred at various locations, including the participants' workplaces, cafes, or homes. Acknowledging the principles of reciprocity and respect, participants were offered \$30 shopping



vouchers. Some participants graciously provided delicious Samoan meals. Recorded interviews often began with a *lotu* (prayer), concluded with a *pese* (song) and involved the exchange of familial *aigapotopoto* (extended genealogical connections) to ascertain potential ‘blood’ connections. Establishing rapport with Samoan participants before delving into discussions about their career experiences aligns with the *teu le va* principle, emphasising the nurturing of relationships and establishment of new connections that contribute to an ongoing narrative aimed at improving outcomes for Samoans in the workplace (Ofe-Grant, 2022).

The transcripts were typed and subsequently emailed to participants for verification. Participant names were anonymised to hide their identity. The transcripts were subjected to two types of data analysis. First, the transcripts were uploaded to NVivo (qualitative software version 9) and thoroughly read through before grouping themes into nodes. The content of the nodes was rechecked for duplications that might impact the final tally of references (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014). From here, the highest number of sources and references generated the first set of preliminary themes.

Second, a manual analysis was conducted, involving colour-coded annotations performed ‘by hand’, identifying patterns of codes (using fluoro highlighters and coloured Post-it notes) to encapsulate themes for interpretation and sense-making (Braun & Clarke, 2006). This part of the analysis was iterative and adapted as emerging themes unfolded. The advantage of manual analysis is that it has the ability to pick up contextual cues, Samoan institutions, values, cultural phrases, and terminology that are not identifiable by NVivo. Hence, the manual analysis process was invaluable in refining crucial cultural concepts and revisiting transcripts with enhanced clarity (Bazeley & Jackson, 2014). Comparing both analyses synthesised the final themes.

## Results

In this section, we present the results of the thematic analyses, drawing on explicit quotes from the Samoan participants to provide illustrative examples. Commencing our discussion, we highlight the four main barriers: (1) *Looking down and saying nothing*; (2) *Coconuts, cleaners and troublemakers*; (3) *Only one of my kind*; and (4) *Afa-kasi, female and untitled*.

### *Career Barriers*

#### ***“Looking down and saying nothing”***

*Palagi [NZ-European] doesn’t understand fa’aaloalo [respect], and they regard our fa’aaloalo as a weakness. So, because we were like that in everything that we did, they looked at us as if we’re weak because we don’t stand up and fight back, and things like that (Muga).*

Samoan participants disclosed the same message about cross-cultural differences in communication styles between Samoan and NZ-European cultures, particularly regarding respectful conduct. In fact, the Samoan value of respect was mentioned 134 times in the interviews, surpassing any other Samoan cultural value. Within Samoan cultural norms, ‘Looking down and saying nothing’ during conversations is considered an act of respect. However, Samoans

acknowledged the potential misinterpretation, recognising that it might indicate weakness or disengagement.

*For me, it was having an interview, and I have the utmost respect for him by looking down, and that still happens today. How do you overcome that? (Salepa).*

For example, Salepa confessed that his “*respectful behaviour*” might have influenced the direction of his performance review, where he was encouraged to be “*more assertive and take charge.*” However, Salepa added that navigating the cultural nuances of eye contact with colleagues became “*easier with time and experience*”. Concurrently, other participants highlighted ongoing challenges in sustaining eye contact.

From the interviews, the act of respect was also linked with ‘silence’. In this context, silence refers to the varying lengths and quantity of talk-time, where some participants observed that NZ colleagues “*tend to talk too much and too fast*” while Samoans “*say very little or nothing*”. According to some participants, the act of “*saying nothing*” during discussions was not indicative of a lack of knowledge but rather a deliberate choice to pause or engage in turn-taking while their colleagues spoke. This practice reinforces a particular style of expressing respectful behaviour during conversations by Samoans that could be misunderstood and lead to missed career opportunities. As such, this finding implies that the Samoan perspective on communicating respect may pose a disadvantage and act as a barrier to advancing in senior management careers.

### **“Coconuts, cleaners, and troublemakers”**

*I remember my supervisor saying quietly, “Yeah, we just hired another fucken coconut, man, those fucking Samoans” (Maluelue).*

*I went with another colleague with a proposal that needed tweaking, so we met the Marketing person who gave me her rubbish bin. She saw my brown skin and thought I was the cleaner! (Mautu).*

Samoans experienced multiple forms of racism and racial profiling at their jobs. Examples include being misidentified as junior staff, window cleaners, receptionists, catering crew, security personnel, warehouse employees, and even categorised as the “*air-conditioner guy*”. Samoans expressed anger and frustration and recalled other public media stories where they and other Pacific peoples were stereotyped as orderly staff, uninvited guests, and event crashers (Orsman, 2016; Tupou, 2017).

Samoans shared their experiences of explicit racism, characterised by derogatory remarks involving references to their ethnicity and body size, and labelled as ‘coconuts,’ an offensive term directed at Pacific peoples. Added to that was exclusion, where Samoans found themselves systematically left out of numerous team meetings, social events, essential work emails, and collegial conversations at work insofar as they chose to distance themselves from other colleagues to avoid shame. Interestingly, a few Samoans did challenge discriminatory and racist attitudes, although they perceived themselves as being labelled as “*troublemakers*”.

It was noted that some NZ employers implemented proactive diversity processes to circumvent racism. While some took substantial steps, others exhibited minimal or no effort. As a result, some Samoans either tolerated racism, gradually disengaged from their roles, or opted to resign from their positions. This exposed them to vulnerability, potentially leading to desperation, given the formidable challenges associated with seeking new jobs and starting all over again.

**“Only one of my kind”**

*I've got to keep working hard because I am the only one of my kind. You have to realise that in life that whatever we [Samoans] do, we're two steps behind the Palagi [NZ-European] (Muga).*

It was very noticeable from the discussions that many participants were the only Samoans in managerial roles at their respective organisations. This heightened visibility placed Samoans under significant pressure to do more, often resulting in working longer hours or the perception of needing to “*work twice as hard*” to validate their worth and value, as mentioned by Muga’s statement. Participants articulated a sense of being compartmentalised or “*put into a box*” as though they were “*another group of people who were different from everyone else.*” Furthermore, there appeared to be a sense of caution and suspicion that senior managers paid extra attention to Samoans. Hence, it was noted in the discussions that when Samoans “*stuffed up*” or made mistakes on the job, their “*individual*” errors were magnified. Conversely, their achievements and successes were downplayed, characterised as a mere “*team effort*”. Consequently, they felt subjected to specific performance expectations. As tokens, these Samoans conveyed exhaustion, frustration, and discouragement from experiencing heavy scrutiny to excel, a pressure not similarly experienced by their counterparts.

The “*Pacific quota*” was mentioned, whereby some Samoans felt that their managerial positions were attributed to meeting diversity quotas and public pressures for inclusivity rather than appointments based on meritocracy:

*The underlying theme is “You got this role because you’re Pasifika and male”, and that line was thrown to me when I won the appointment here from an ex-colleague (Ta’ifau).*

Ta’ifau conceded that his promotion was likely influenced by gender and racial disparities rather than unique skills, qualifications, or experience. Other Samoans conveyed mixed emotions, experiencing both disappointment and appreciation. They were happy and grateful for their new managerial positions, considering that Samoan representation in top jobs is rare. Simultaneously, they felt disheartened about meeting diversity targets for under-represented groups. For these reasons, tokenism was recognised as a barrier for Samoans.

**“Afa-kasi, female and untitled”**

One unexpected finding in this research concerned Samoan women and Samoan cultural norms relating to gender and race. Notably, Samoan women identifying as *afa-kasi* (having both Samoan and NZ-European or another ethnic race descent) faced ridicule, were ignored, and excluded by Samoan men as a reminder of their inferior place within Samoan socio-political and patriarchal

relationships (Evening, 2004). From the Samoan perspective, women's roles are underpinned by Christian beliefs, reinforcing their subordination to men, with responsibilities in the home, family, hospitality, church, and community service (Ofe-Grant, 2022).

Afa-kasi women were regarded as “*not real Samoans*”, lacking the perceived purity of being solely of Samoan descent. As such, these women were deemed as either “*too white or black*” to be considered authentically Samoan, or they exhibited identifiable characteristics from another culture (e.g. Asian-shaped eyes). Moreover, Samoan women lacking cultural titles, such as Matai, were also perceived to hold lower status within the Samoan community. Consequently, many Samoan men were reluctant to collaborate or work with untitled, half-caste women in senior positions.

The bullying and exclusion experienced by these women were extreme insofar that recounting humiliating and oppressive events at work elicited tears from some individuals. Despite perceiving themselves as progressive Samoans, they were branded as “*fake, plastic Samoans*”, lacking racial purity and cultural authority. Further, it was alarming to hear that these women deliberately avoided engaging in strategic work collaborations and events upon learning that Samoan males were scheduled to attend. The expressions from the Samoan female CEO and senior managers were unmistakable: the glass ceiling barriers that held them back originated from within their community: fellow Samoans. We now focus on the career facilitators that enhanced and supported Samoan managerial careers.

### *Career Facilitators*

The analysis identified three main facilitators contributing to the advancement of managerial careers for Samoans. Similar to the preceding section, themes and quotes from the participants are employed to elucidate these findings. These themes include: (1) *Find your voice: the journey of self* (2) *Role models and legacies*, and (3) *White, non-Pacific mentors*.

#### **“Find your voice: the journey of self”**

*It took me a number of years to find my voice, to speak up not just for me but for everyone that I represented and I found my voice; a strong voice within (Simi).*

The number one facilitator promoting career advancement for Samoans is “*finding your voice*” and the journey leading to this self-discovery. In this context, the term ‘voice’ pertains to the personal journey of reconnecting with ancestral cultural roots constituting a significant component of the Samoan identity. Participants talked about ‘growing’ their voices, signifying the development of building confidence to ask for help and guidance. However, this process necessitates an understanding of ‘who they are’ and ‘where they come from’. In other words, Samoans are encouraged to re-establish potentially lost relationships with their cultural heritage, particularly for those born in NZ, and to stand firm with their spiritual ancestors as “*proud, confident Samoans*”. Thereby ‘owning’ their cultural identity as stipulated by Simi’s comment above.

‘Voicelessness’ was a common theme in the discussions, appearing to stem from a lack of cultural status in Samoan culture. As mentioned, Samoans holding Matai titles are positioned at the top of

the social hierarchy, while those without titles experience restricted or non-existent speaking privileges. Moreover, participants also recalled that their parents served as authoritative figures who spoke on their behalf during their childhood. In many instances, this upbringing disadvantaged them in adulthood, hindering their ability to be assertive, proactive, and express their opinions in the workplace.

The theme of finding your voice underscores the pivotal role of cultural reconnections for Samoans, providing a basis for cultivating confidence and resilience. This process enables individuals to articulate their thoughts, take on leadership roles, express opinions, and seek assistance without fear of judgment. The outcomes of this journey of self-discovery contribute to reinforcing other facets of the Samoan psyche, including *va* (spatial relations) and *tautua* (honourable services). Thus, highlighting the intricate *mélange* of elements that constitute Samoan identities.

### **“Role Models and Legacies”**

*There is this responsibility of being the eldest and leading so that your siblings, nieces, and nephews can be inspired. I feel quite honoured about that. It makes everything worthwhile (Taulopepe).*

*I often think about Mum and Dad and how they worked hard so that we could live in a home and have shoes and go to school. That must have been hard back in the day when islanders weren't really welcome here in New Zealand. If they could do that, then I can, too, in my own way (Tupu).*

Interestingly, the notion of future legacies and role models for the next generation of Samoans and Pacific peoples was common. Samoans expressed a sense of honour and privilege in serving as inspirational role models for their younger siblings and other family members. Similar to the sentiments articulated by Taulopepe and Tupu above, Samoans conveyed that they were modelling a legacy established by their parents – the first migrants to NZ who left their homeland islands. Many of these parents worked several jobs, including day-shift jobs in factories and night-shift cleaning, to support their families. The stories shared highlighted the legacy of *alofa* (love), *tautua* (honourable services) and *fesoa'aiga* (reciprocity) through diligent and honest work that sustained them during their upbringing, thereby imprinting this legacy for succeeding generations of Samoans.

This mindset of serving as role models and implementing legacies seemed to have positive consequences, particularly in the face of stress and challenges. For example, we found that Samoans could regulate how certain events regarding racism were experienced at work. Ta'ifau (CEO) expressed that redirecting his focus 'beyond' being the only “*brown token at work*” helped realign his attention to job-related tasks, mitigating present workplace struggles' impact. Maintaining a job-centric perspective infused with ambition enabled Samoans to foster positive thoughts, preventing them from straying into 'negative' territories that could otherwise consume valuable effort and energy better allocated to work goals and performance emerges as a powerful tool for Samoans in the workplace.

**“White, non-Pacific mentors”**

Another unanticipated finding is that more participants preferred NZ-European ‘white’ mentors over Pacific mentors. Cross-race mentors were perceived to offer insights into white leadership and managerial styles, furnish access to strategic connections, and provide career guidance that resonated within the context of NZ organisations.

Elena (CEO) noted that *“the people who are hiring are most often Palagi [NZ-European] with non-Pacific worldview”*. Furthermore, white mentors were characterised as possessing *“a certain type of personality”* and *“leaders without judgment”*. The discussions revealed that these mentors had prior cultural knowledge, including familiarity with Samoans and Māori. Consequently, Samoans felt that NZ-European mentors offer a more profound understanding and experience of *“how things work in New Zealand”*.

*I don’t agree that only Pacific people can mentor or coach Pacific. I’ve had some fantastic, superb mentors who are not Pacific but have been open to learning my worldview and can see that I bring value into their context (Mamafa).*

*Building networks and relationships with people that you hold in high regard and people that you are not afraid to contact and use as sounding boards for life and career decisions are hugely valuable in where you want to go and how to deliver things. These networks and relationships can be with both Pacific and Palagi [NZ-European] (Sieni).*

However, the dynamics of cross-race mentoring were not always agreeable, as some Samoans found these relationships awkward, influenced by preconceived notions about Samoan cultural values. For example, Ta’ifau expressed irritation with a mentor who provided irrelevant advice about fitness and Pacific players, while Fiasola described having conflicted thoughts because his mentor lacked an understanding of Samoan culture. Overall, participants in this study highly valued their relationships with NZ-European mentors, considering them more constructive, influential, and preferable over Samoan mentors.

**Discussion**

These Samoan participants occupy prominent positions within their respective organisations, demonstrating considerable passion, determination, and resilience in attaining their roles while navigating their identities as Samoans within a predominantly white, NZ-European society. While their stories share similarities with studies of other ethnic minorities and the glass ceiling, these Samoans offer distinct and alternative perspectives rooted in their experiences and cultural backgrounds. Their unique upbringing as Samoan migrants, or as children of Samoan migrants, introduces an additional layer of challenges, rendering discussions on status and occupational segregation more nuanced and politically charged. Similar to other ethnic minorities (Adamovic & Leibbrandt, 2023; Baldwin et al., 2022; Welch et al., 2021), Samoans frequently encounter racism leading to emotional distress and humiliation. Moreover, Samoan women highlight significant challenges related to gender and intra-ethnic racism perpetuated by Samoan men, creating fear

and hesitation in pursuing higher careers. Therefore, the prevalence of brown glass ceiling barriers obstructing or delaying promotion to senior managerial careers among Samoans comes as no surprise.

The findings also suggest that behaviours, such as limiting eye contact, looking down and maintaining silence during conversations, aligned with the Samoan value of *fa'aaloalo* (respect), are problematic within the context of NZ organisations. This dilemma demonstrates cross-cultural differences, as NZ-European and Westerners generally are more acute to direct forms of communication, valuing words, expressions, and the emotional nuances of conversations (Thomas & Inkson, 2004). Additionally, these cultures prioritise eye contact to share information, express solidarity, and foster cohesiveness (Rauthmann et al., 2012). Alternatively, individuals who avoid eye contact may be perceived as deceitful or 'shady'. As revealed by this study, this starkly contrasts accepted Samoan protocols for showing respect during conversations. Thus presenting a unique example where two communication dimensions are diametrically opposed and, consequently, in conflict.

This result is significant for Samoans as it highlights the misconceptions that can arise from cross-cultural differences in communication, potentially resulting in missed career opportunities (Thomas & Inkson, 2004). Moreover, it sheds light on the challenges that HR practitioners and managers may encounter in discussions with Samoans, including performance appraisals and interviews. This underscores a dual responsibility: on the one hand, Samoans may need to adapt their communication styles to align with prevailing norms, while on the other hand, management should undertake cultural competency training to gain insights into diverse communication approaches. Thankfully, there is a silver lining to this finding, indicating that over time, Samoans have demonstrated an ability to modify their communication styles to fit different forms of social interactions at work.

Some participants were over-achievers, working twice as hard to disprove inaccurate perceptions of Samoans. This feeling of 'over-compensating' was more pronounced for some who viewed themselves as brown tokens on elevated platforms, attempting to surpass their peers in performance measures. Despite all participants having higher degrees and scholastic achievements, there was a pervasive belief that such efforts were necessary to validate their worth within the organisation and counter negative stereotypes associating Samoans with low-paid and low-skilled jobs. Sadly, initial immigration policies that allowed them entry to fill labour shortages further entrenched the stereotype of Samoans and Pacific peoples as labourers, cleaners, catering crew or construction workers. Across various labour markets, social inequality tends to persist due to intersecting policies, institutions, and practices that contribute to the concentration of ethnic minorities in sectors offering low pay, limited job mobility, and precarious working conditions (Wang & Pandit, 2007).

The women in this study present a counter-narrative, challenging perceived cultural norms that dictate Samoan women's roles in domestic and nurturing capacities at home, in the community, and at church, which are then mirrored in the workplace (Ofe-Grant, 2022). Despite a higher number of women occupying higher-level positions compared to men, their experiences were notably more oppressive. While intra-ethnic racism aligns with other Pacific-themed research concerning identity (e.g. Berking et al., 2007; Fozdar & McGavin, 2017), the intersectional strands

(Crenshaw, 1991) of race, gender and cultural status are seldom explored in the glass ceiling and management literature.

Moreover, these women stipulated that, although gender bias was rampant, the most significant barrier stemmed from being *afa-kasi*: their ‘half-blood mix’. This prejudice may be rooted in the historical perception of mixed-blood Samoans as “troublesome, mischievous people with bad heredity” who experienced prejudice, antagonism, and imprisonment during and post-colonisation (Salesa, 2000, p. 111). According to the interview data, it appears that issues of pure-blood identity persist for some Samoans to this day. As such, Samoan women must navigate both gender bias and intra-ethnic bias, experiencing a “double whammy” of discrimination in NZ organisations.

The interview data also shows that having a career facilitator is imperative for Samoans to embrace their cultural heritage so that fragmented identities are renegotiated and restored (Seiuli, 2016). Participants described this journey of the self as a cultural exploration, reawakening the depths of the self that may have been unconsciously ignored or dormant. Efi (2007) highlighted that the essence of the Samoan self is relational, shared with the collective, ancestors, the cosmos and the land. Once their spiritual, physical, and emotional ties are balanced, other aspects such as work, mind, health, and wellness should become harmonious or *teu le va* (nurturing spatial relations) (Ihara & Vakalahi, 2011). This process is likened to a ‘pilgrimage’ aimed at healing the gap of consciousness and identity, recognising Samoans as integral to both worlds – Samoa and New Zealand.

For indigenes and ethnic minorities, reconciling cultural heritage is seen as a pivotal step toward personal growth and cementing their identity. As recommended by the participants, embracing Samoan identity contributes to inner confidence and the courage to voice opinions, grounded in the supportive framework of the *aiga* (family), *va* (spatial relations) and cultural entitlement. This pathway aligns with the perspectives of other indigenous scholars, positioning it as a precursor to moving forward, leading individuals toward a self that reconnects with their ancestral lines and spirituality (e.g. Nabobo-Baba, 2004; Seiuli, 2016).

The notion of modelling a legacy for young family members and the next generation of Samoans was a familiar sentiment shared throughout the discussions. The participants agreed that transcending challenges, such as racism and bias and focusing on the positive aspects of ‘passing the mantle’ – instilling values of working hard and doing well, leaves an indelible impression on the lives of other aspiring younger Samoans. The participants exhibited a certain defiance in their refusal to dwell on the negative aspects, with sentiments expressed by Elena, who advocated for “*not thinking about the negative stuff*”, and Tupu, who emphasised the need to “*be courageous, be positive*”. Indeed, developing positive attitudes, ‘rising above’ unproductive and harmful disruptions at work, and maintaining a focus on resilience, aspirations, and commitment were highlighted as important aspects that supported their professional careers.

Another significant finding from the interview data was the preference for white NZ-European mentors over Pacific mentors. In other words, the participants perceived non-Samoan mentors as integral to their personal and professional development, crediting their NZ-European mentors for contributing a great deal to their success and providing a strategic support network. This



preference contradicts prior studies advocating for ethnically matched mentors as a precursor to successful outcomes for ethnic minorities (e.g. Campbell & Campbell, 2007; Santos & Reigadas, 2002; Wilson, 2014). This unexpected outcome suggests a departure from traditional views and aligns with more contemporary perspectives reflecting changes in the globally interconnected world regarding diversity, equality, communities, and culture.

One of the benefits of cross-race mentorship is that both parties gain insights into each other's cultures and personalities. This exchange broadens perspectives and challenges preconceived notions, particularly those related to ethnicity and stereotypes (Johnson-Bailey & Cervero, 2004). The transfer of cross-cultural knowledge is vital for ethnic minorities facing career barriers, such as lack of privilege, isolation, and exclusion, which hinder their career progress (Nkomo & Al Ariss, 2014). However, it is acknowledged that cross-race mentoring was not always amicable for a few Samoans who felt the mentoring relationship was awkward due to cultural differences. There is a potential concern that cross-race mentoring may unintentionally reinforce white colonialist ideals (Rhodes et al., 2002). Despite these considerations, the participants valued their relationships with their NZ-European mentors, viewing them as more constructive and influential.

## Conclusion

This study identified the brown glass ceiling barriers and strategies that deny and support managerial progress for Samoans in NZ. Cross-cultural differences and misconceptions contribute to misunderstandings, resulting in missed career opportunities. The impact of value systems profoundly affects the ambiguities and conflicts at work. Persistent issues, such as racism, racial profiling, and tokenism continue to hurt Samoans, impeding their progression to senior managerial positions. Intra-ethnic barriers expose the cultural underpinnings of hierarchy and social stratification that stigmatise and alienate some Samoans, particularly disadvantaging afa-kasi women. Strategies such as fostering an authentic voice through personal cultural journeys and engaging in cross-race mentorship assist with overcoming institutional and cultural hindrances. Implementing future legacies as role models for the next generation of Samoans and Pacific peoples enriched the efforts of these participants to successful careers.

This study illustrates the importance of a nuanced understanding of how brown glass ceiling experiences shape Samoan careers, influencing specific behaviours that impact decision-making processes and engagement. The call for ongoing research is encouraged, especially as other ethnic and marginalised groups face increased scrutiny at work, often with little regard to their cultural identity. Finally, some limitations should be acknowledged. First, the conclusions from this study are limited by the relatively small sample of 31 Samoan participants. In addition, the author acknowledges that some participants may have felt intimidated and perhaps 'insulted' during the interviews conducted by an afa-kasi, female, and untitled Samoan academic, given the socio-political hierarchy that stratifies some Samoans based on gender, race, and cultural status.

We hope our study will inspire and comfort Samoans navigating the path to senior managerial careers. Furthermore, we encourage the NZ workforce to consider the impact of the brown glass ceiling and its profound impact on the experiences of Samoans.

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