**National Endowment for the Humanities: Collaborative Research Grant**

***Radiality at the Root of Polynesian Collectivism:***

***Representing and Expressing Quality Distinctions in Polynesian Languages.***

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**Statement of Significance and Impact.**

The goal of this research is to investigate the mental organization and the linguistic expressions of quality distinctions in Polynesia, specifically in three Polynesian languages and cultures representing three major branches of the Polynesian language family: East Futunan, Tahitian, and Tongan. We hypothesize that Polynesian speakers focus on the primary qualities of objects when linguistically expressing quality distinctions. These qualities, such as extension, size and motion, do not depend on ego’s subjective perception, they are universal, objective by nature (and available to the collective). Secondary quality distinctions, typically appearances, are dependent on ego’s construction (perception/conception).

We propose to test the presence of radiality in organizing and expressing quality distinctions. Radiality is a foundational cultural model, a minimal organization of knowledge in several domains that represents a focus on other-than-ego and that consequently is at the root of collectivism. We hypothesize that this foundational cultural model participates in the choices made before the use of quality descriptors. If confirmed, this would support the claim that radiality is a cognitive and cultural principle used in distinguishing and describing objects among Polynesian speakers. Such a finding would support previous research identifying the centrality of radiality (and collectivism) in Polynesian culture and cognition.

Polynesians have been documented as collectivists or socio-centrists. Using Cultural Model Theory, Bennardo’s research on Tongan language and culture revealed a cognitive preference, a foundational cultural model, for radiality—privileging other-than-ego—in several domains of knowledge (ontological primes) such as space, time, and relations (including kinship). The presence of such a preference differs from individualism or egocentrism and dovetails with Polynesian collectivism or socio-centrism. In fact, privileging other-than-ego—the fundamental feature of radiality—is the cognitive posture that makes the construction of collectivism possible. This project seeks to corroborate the suggested collectivism in the wider Polynesia region with cognitive and linguistic evidence from three Polynesian languages and cultures. Our assumption is that by examining linguistic behavior one can arrive at specific cognitive preferences that participate in the construction of that behavior.

An NEH grant would support collaborative research by humanities scholars who are experts in Polynesian languages and cultures, including an anthropologist and two linguists. These three scholars will contribute their respective expertise in three languages and cultures in order to address a pressing need to obtain appropriate insights into a salient Polynesian cognitive posture.

The results of the research project contribute substantially to three areas of investigation: 1. Oceanic linguistic, by expanding our knowledge about commonalities in Polynesian languages in expressing and mentally representing quality distinctions; 2. Anthropology (linguistic and cognitive), psychology (cognitive and cultural), and sociology, by providing empirical support for Polynesian collectivism or socio-centrism; 3. Cultural model theory, by refining our knowledge about the role cultural models play in human cognition and behavior (linguistic).

The successful completion of this project can foster a renewed interest in research on quality distinctions in Polynesian languages. The presence of a foundational cultural model across Polynesian ontological primes would support the fundamental role that space plays in the construction of human cognition. The large ontological distribution of radiality in Polynesia may be applied to educational settings. In fact, this cognitive characteristic may be used to facilitate learning experiences, if taken into consideration when planning and implementing school curricula and practices. Finally, students and members of the communities investigated contribute at various stages of the research project.