

TALANOA‘I ‘A E TALANOA— TALKING ABOUT TALANOA

Some dilemmas of a novice researcher

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Abstract

Pasifika social science researchers in Pacific contexts are encouraged to use research methods that reflect the lived realities of their participants, rather than reproduce what are seen as Western methods of research. As a Pasifika process, talanoa has become a popular research method, often likened to narrative interviews. It has been defined as an open, informal conversation between people in which they share their stories, thoughts and feelings (Vaioleti, 2006). This paper is a critique of how talanoa as a research method is represented in the literature, based on an account of the difficulties I have encountered as a beginning researcher grappling with the idea and practice of talanoa in my own research practice. I argue that improving the practice and understanding of talanoa requires open discussion about the practical dilemmas sometimes experienced by researchers attempting to use this approach.

Keywords

talanoa, Tongan, Pasifika, narrative interviews, method, methodology

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Introduction

Pasifika scholars trained as qualitative social science researchers often come to think about, and practise, research according to traditions that reflect social norms they take for granted. As a postgraduate student in education, I was introduced to interviews as an opportunity to collect research participants’ responses to my carefully thought-out research questions. I was not aware that the social event of the interview includes cultural assumptions about how relationships work. In my understanding of interview method I tended to take for granted these hidden assumptions—for instance, that the research participants would merely give me information I wanted when I asked for it. As a novice Tongan education researcher studying my own people, I simply assumed that such interviews were the correct way to do my qualitative research.

Then, after reading literature about talanoa as a culturally appropriate practice for Pasifika research, I decided to implement this process in my study of the educational stories of Tongan grandfathers, fathers and sons. Implementing a talanoa method to gather stories proved difficult because how I perceived and carried out talanoa was very much influenced by what I believed to be good academic research practice learned in my research methods classes. I approached talanoa as though it was another, more Indigenous name for friendly interviews with Tongans carried out in Tongan and English. I tended to overlay my existing knowledge about, say, interview methods onto what are called Pasifika methods. I followed interview practices that were structured and systematic. Talanoa, however, is not like that. I knew this in theory, but not in practice.

I turned to the literature to help, and it did—in theory. I still stumbled through “doing” talanoa, and this article is about the practical things I wish I had known when I started. I have titled it “Talanoa‘i ‘a e Talanoa”. “Talanoa‘i”, a derivative of the word “talanoa”,

is a Tongan term that means “to talk about, or to relate” (Churchward, 2015). In talanoa‘i, the “researcher is not a distant observer but is active in the talanoa process and in defining and re-defining meanings in order to achieve the aim of what is being talanoa‘i” (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 203). To talanoa‘i ‘a e talanoa is to engage in critical discussions about the difficulties of gathering the stories. This is what I want to do here.

Before I talk about the complex process of learning to talanoa, it is culturally appropriate to situate myself in this conversation with you, the reader. I am a Tongan man with Samoan heritage, born in Niue and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand (hereafter referred to as New Zealand). I went to school in South Auckland and then attended university, after which I returned to South Auckland as a secondary school teacher. Like other Pasifika people, I grew up in a large extended family. I married a Tongan girl and we have a six-year-old son. I am now embarking on a doctoral degree in the field of education.

“Insider and outsider”

As a Tongan male, I am naturally positioned as an insider in research on Tongan men. As a researcher, though, I have the job of trying to look more from an outsider position. Looking from the outside as an insider means I am more able than outsiders to explain my research participants to other outsiders. In the past, outsiders looking from the outside was the norm for Western researchers doing research on Pacific people. Being both an insider and an outsider in my research represents a privileged position because I am able to think critically about how Western ideas have influenced my Tongan cultural practices (as well as those of the Tongan men I speak to). As an insider, I notice that when doing research on the ground my automatic Tongan ways of doing and knowing tend to challenge—or make me

feel uncomfortable practising—the dominant research ideals in which I have been trained.

“Privileged” is not a term used lightly here. Because of the rigid requirements of Western academia, Pasifika researchers have an extra burden to negotiate the best ways to carry out research that understands and reflects Tongan (or other Pasifika) realities. For some Pasifika researchers who may not be well versed in their own ethnic language and culture, “seeing from the inside” can become too hard a task, and they revert to the relative safety of the dominant academic practices. For me, seeing from the inside as a New Zealand-raised Tongan has compelled me to think critically about Indigenous research practices. Although talanoa is used by Pasifika researchers more generally, the examples in this paper are mainly related to Tongan people, because that is my research site.

Talanoa as a concept

I have spoken of talanoa as a research method thus far but it should also be understood as a methodology—that is, talanoa encompasses a practical method and the theoretical concepts used to enact that method, as well as the analysis of the information collected. Method and methodology are connected—something I became more aware of as I experimented with talanoa. The method (of talking with people) is deeply interconnected with the concepts of cultural engagement—which I look at below. This is not just the case with talanoa; all research practices are methodological, because all involve the mobilization (consciously or unconsciously) of theoretical ideas about collecting information.

Talanoa is an existing cultural practice of the Pacific. As an oratory tradition, talanoa is a concept recognized in Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, Hawai'i and the Solomon Islands (Prescott, 2008). In Tonga, the word “talanoa” usually refers to an informal conversation. Talanoa is made up of two conceptual parts: “*tala*” which means to tell or to talk,

and ‘*noa*’ which means anything or nothing in particular” (‘Otunuku, 2011, p. 45). Talanoa can be between two people or within a group of people. The nature and focus of the talanoa is determined by the “interests of the participants themselves and their immediate surroundings and worldviews” (Johansson Fua, 2014, p. 99).

The context in which people engage in talanoa can be either formal or informal. Linitā Manu‘atu (2000b), a Tongan academic, has separated the different levels of talanoa. The verb “fakatalanoa” relates to the talanoa between people who have just met for the first time. To relate and connect on first meeting, Tongan people create a sense of maheni (familiarity) and fe‘ilongaki (to know of each other’s place and identity). Talanoa is all about relationship building. Without the relationship building, the kind of talanoa that takes place can only be at the fakatalanoa, or superficial initial meeting, level. The talanoa at the level of fakatalanoa is more like an informal conversation where the interaction may be polite and friendly, but not necessarily grounded in mutual trust and respect (Vaiotei, 2011). The relationship and level of trust between participants during fakatalanoa is not as intense as that between participants involved in pō talanoa. Pō talanoa is a process whereby Tongans, usually people who already know each other, create, exchange, resolve and share their relationships through talking; here they tell stories and relate their daily experiences. The next level, talatalanoa, is where people talk about selected topics endlessly. Tongan elders, ministers and teachers often engage in talatalanoa which can be somewhat profound in nature. Finally, fokotu‘u talanoa usually takes place during a formal setting where important and official concerns are to be discussed.

Manu‘atu (2000a) developed the concepts of mālie and māfana as aspects of talanoa. Mālie relates to the energizing and uplifting of spirits to a positive state of connectedness and enlightenment. Talanoa mālie occurs when the sharing of stories, emotions and experiences

leaves the participants energized and uplifted. The inwardly warm feelings they possess as a result of the talanoa is referred to as māfana. The talanoa conversation usually ends when mālie and māfana are no longer present in the dialogue. That is, when nothing new is added into the conversation, and it comes to a natural conclusion.

An informal conversation between friends who attend the same school can be different from that of close friends who regularly hang out and share their personal experiences. Despite the context of the conversations being informal, and the relationship and trust levels being different, these kinds of engagements can all be called talanoa.

Talanoa in research

Although talanoa is a traditional Pacific concept, it was developed as a methodological concept in research and in formal negotiation contexts by Sitiveni Halapua and Timote Vaoleti. Halapua, a Tongan researcher who at the time was the director of the Pacific Islands Development Programme for the American East-West Centre, is recorded in research literature as one of the first to use talanoa as a “method” (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014, p. 333). After the Fiji coup in 2000, Halapua (2000) was sent to facilitate talanoa sessions with diverse groups of people to address some of the challenges facing the nation. Talanoa, as a Pacific method, was nominated by him as a way to negotiate dialogue between national organizations working towards conflict resolution. Talanoa, Halapua claims, involves an open informal dialogue where people can speak from their hearts, where they are not guided by a “pre-determined agenda” (p. 3). This opinion is not shared by all researchers—Tongan academic Semisi Prescott (2008), for example, claims talanoa as a research method cannot be an open conversation guided by the participants because every researcher seeks to understand a certain

problem and therefore must guide the conversation rather than allowing it to be free to “go anywhere”. Prescott employed talanoa in his research to “collect information” (p. 128) from individual Tongan entrepreneurs in Auckland.

Vaoleti (2006), a Tongan academic in the field of education, is based in New Zealand and has been a leader in developing talanoa in the research context. He is widely cited when talanoa is involved in any research, and maintains that talanoa is “a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations. It allows for more mo‘oni (pure, real, authentic) information to be available for Pacific research than data derived from other research methods” (p. 1). Vaoleti claims that while talanoa is somewhat similar in approach to narrative interviews, it is different in the sense that talanoa requires cultural connectedness between those involved, and the researcher and participants are both involved in the “kaungā fa‘u (shared and co-construction) of knowledge” (Vaoleti, 2013, p. 194).

Vaoleti (2013) has suggested at least eight sorts of talanoa that are possible in the research context: talanoa vave (quick and surface verbal exchange between two or more people); talanoa faikava (focused talanoa by males who share similar interests while drinking kava [traditional alcoholic beverage from crushed kava root]); talanoa usu (deep and more intimate talanoa which is mālie and māfana and involves humour); talanoa tevolo (spiritual talanoa which involves sharing about supernatural visitations, dreams or visions of people who have passed); talanoa faka‘eke‘eke (closest to a modern interview and involves verbal searching and more probing questions); pō talanoa (talking in everyday matters such as politics, church matters, children, television); talanoa‘i (talking which involves high-level analysis, synthesis and evaluation); and tālānga (similar to a debate or constructive argument about issues that require attention).

Depending on the purpose and intention of the researcher and the direction of the talanoa,

Vaioleti (2013) maintains, “one dimension of the talanoa may be dominant although others will be employed fluidly, interchangeably to set and maintain a good atmosphere, pass [on] or obtain information holistically, triangulate while observing all technical and cultural protocols during the data collection or data co-construction [phases]” (p. 199). This means that a researcher can be engaged in different levels (or dimensions) of talanoa at different times in the research process. The nature of the talanoa and stories shared may be more superficial (talanoa vave) at the beginning and then more intimate during later sessions of talanoa (pō talanoa). Vaioleti (2006) also reminds that participants behave differently in research talanoa depending on the age, gender, cultural rank or community standing of the researcher. The interactions in talanoa are not guided by the standard ethics or rules used in traditional interviews because hierarchy, rather than imported rules such as signed informed consent, or the researcher’s focus, determines how the talanoa will proceed.

Vaioleti (2006) lists five principles related to ‘ulungaanga faka-Tonga (Tongan behavioural characteristics), necessary for a Tongan researcher engaging in research talanoa: faka‘apa‘apa (respectful, humble), anga lelei (tolerant, kind, calm), mateuteu (well-prepared, hard-working, culturally versed, professional), potu he anga (knowing what to do and doing it well), and ‘ofa fe‘unga (showing appropriate compassion, empathy, love for the context). For Vaioleti and other Pasifika academics, such cultural characteristics form research protocols or practices that must be followed for respectful, ethical engagement between people. Importantly, these ‘ulungaanga faka-Tonga are not merely superficial cultural rituals; they are key to research quality. The richness and type of research knowledge made available to the researcher depends on the depth of the respectful relationship between the researcher and participants. These principles of talanoa determine how to behave when interacting with all Tongan people, not only in a research setting.

Another Tongan researcher, Mo‘ale ‘Otunuku (2011), has outlined principles of talanoa specific to the research context—in his case a study of Tongan parents’ views of their children’s schooling. Some of ‘Otunuku’s principles of talanoa are similar to Vaioleti’s, though ‘Otunuku suggests additional methodological elements he found useful. For example, fe‘ilongaki (meaningful engagement) and potu‘ianga (cultural competency) required that before and after each talanoa either he or someone in the group was nominated to say a prayer. Potu‘ianga also helped ‘Otunuku not to talk about himself or his family too much as this could show arrogance. He also wore appropriate Tongan attire such as a tupenu (loincloth wrapped around male’s waist) and ta‘ovala (traditional woven mat) suited to the occasion (p. 48).

Seu‘ula Johansson Fua (2014), an academic based in Tonga, has suggested four other principles to adhere to when researching in Tonga, which are related more closely to emotions. These principles are faka‘apa‘apa (respect), lotu fakatōkilalo (humility), fe‘ofa‘aki (love, compassion) and feveitoka‘i‘aki (caring, generosity). Like Vaioleti’s (2006), Johansson Fua’s (2014) general principles are values related to ‘ulungaanga faka-Tonga and are important for the maintenance of effective relationships for Tongan people in Tonga. Without these values, researchers risk engaging in talanoa that is short in duration and with participants only providing surface-level material, similar to when people meet for the first time during fakatalanoa (Manu‘atu, 2000b), or talanoa vave (Vaioleti, 2013). Without these elements, the research interaction will look like an interview or a focus group carried out within a Western context, probably resulting in poor-quality data.

In relation to this point, Setsuo Otsuka (2005), a non-Pacific researcher of Japanese descent, used talanoa to collect data from students and parents in Fiji. He found that, despite focusing on his relationship with his participants, some

of their responses were “white lies” (p. 10). When Otsuka asked a high-school boy about whether he was performing well at school, he said yes. His school reports, however, showed he was failing. Otsuka argued the white lies were a result of participants wanting to please him. He therefore recommended that researchers first build trust, care and empathy with families before collecting data. Trisia Farrelly and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2014) make the point that such empathy is good Pacific research practice, and claim it has the potential to decolonize research in the Pacific through challenging the power imbalance in researcher–participant relationships. Although Pacific researchers have offered useful guidelines on “how to do ethical research with Pacific peoples” (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014, p. 340), the practicalities of talanoa in research are often missing from their written reports.

Critical questions

Researchers who write about talanoa provide a lot of methodological guidance about talanoa. My own beginning attempts to put into action these ideas have been patchy at best. In the spirit of addressing novice researchers wanting to use talanoa, I will share some key aspects of my experience to highlight what might not be evident in existing methodological guidance. While preparing to do my doctoral research on/with Tongan men and boys, and wanting to know more about talanoa, I spoke with my mother about what the practice involved. She spoke about the need to be “poto he talanoa”, which is a Tongan saying used to describe a person who is not only wise but skilful in carrying out talanoa. My mother said:

Ko e koloa 'a e talanoá, ke poto he talanoá.
Ko e tokotaha 'oku poto he talanoá, ko e tokotaha ia 'oku poto he tãnaki 'enau koloá. Koe poto he talanoá 'oku te tangutu 'o fanongo. Kapau 'e lea ha tokotaha, pea tokanga ki

he'ene leá. (F. Fa'avae, personal communication, October 3, 2015)

The significance and value of talanoa is to understand and be able to conduct talanoa. A person who understands and is able to conduct talanoa is a person who harbours their knowledges and values. To understand and be able to conduct talanoa, you dwell (in the talanoa) and listen. If a person talks, you take heed of what s/he says.

Her comments are clear that conducting talanoa is a demanding task for any person, whether Tongan or not, researcher or not (a point made too by Vaioleti, 2013). To properly engage in talanoa might take years of learning. I could not just go out as a researcher and “do” talanoa with my participants. My mother’s remarks made me think about the practical demands of talanoa, and my first attempts made me think about practice even more. I came to realize that the popular idea of talanoa as a research method is often idealized because the trivial, everyday and complicated interactions involved are not always discussed in articles by the more experienced researchers who use talanoa.

I summarize below four aspects I found difficult to enact in my beginning talanoa research practice: (1) talanoa as an enactment of cultural competency; (2) talanoa as open engagement; (3) talanoa as a data collection tool; (4) reporting talanoa.

Talanoa as enactment of cultural competency

For successful talanoa, cultural competency is a crucial research skill, as my mother and researchers like Vaioleti (2006) and 'Otunuku (2011) reminded me. Cultural competence—like any competence—takes time to develop; it has no easily defined characteristics described in advance of a social situation—such skills are fluid and context dependent. For instance, 'Otunuku (2011) considers it culturally

competent to establish open and equal communication channels with his participants by introducing himself and making connections to them, and thanking them for talking with him. In my own work, I could not foresee making connections in these terms. 'Otunuku might have been able to make such connections because he was a similar age to his participants. But some of my participants were older than me. My own cultural learning—my cultural competency—involved recognition of social rank and hierarchy marked by age and generation (Vaiotele, 2006). The grandfathers in my study were always my superiors. I could not initiate connection building—they did. They asked questions about where my parents were from in Tonga, and I made it clear that I was there to learn from them. Equality—and the openness that goes with it—was not a value I saw as culturally appropriate in the context of our talanoa.

The willingness of Tongan families to share their stories with me depended on more than my cultural competence that might be expected as coming naturally to me as a Tongan man raised by Tongan parents. Rather, their relationship with me, and their willingness to talanoa, depended on several factors related to my cultural and social identities: my age, where my family was from in Tonga, where I was raised, my proficiency in the Tongan language and Tongan ways, being the father of a Tongan boy, my connection to my wife's family, my schooling background and the duration of my time in Tonga.

This fact—that the participants were most interested in my social identity—reminded me that I could not assume that an insider or researcher of Tongan descent is always the best person to research Tongan families, and that families are more willing to share their knowledge through talanoa with them. The wrong answer to questions about my social identity might have had negative consequences for me. An outsider, from elsewhere in the Pacific, or a non-Pacific person—while having

to adhere to principles and cultural protocols within a talanoa context—might be more welcome. Being an insider may not always be an advantage.

Another of my cultural assumptions was that talanoa with the grandfathers in Tonga would and should take place at their homes. But the families in Tonga all chose their workplaces—government departments and schools, in this case. These places were where they felt comfortable for research-related talanoa. The families in New Zealand chose locations including McDonald's, a bar, a car park in front of an estuary, and on Facebook. These familiar sites were preferred places where participants and their families and friends regularly hung out. Their chosen sites for talanoa challenged my idea of cultural competency. Tongans will talanoa anywhere that feels appropriate to them!

An aspect of cultural competence that I had not anticipated from reading the talanoa literature involved participants bringing other family members to our talanoa. I had planned to talanoa with particular boys, but they chose to bring cousins and sisters along. A father and a grandfather chose to have their wives and children present. All these aspects of Tongan cultural behaviour (often feeling most comfortable with family members present at events) had to be engaged with, and incorporated in my study whether I planned (or wanted) it or not, if talanoa was to work for my research.

Talanoa as open engagement

Talanoa is referred to as an “open conversation” because participants engage in dialogue about matters that concern them most (Vaiotele, 2006). However, as part of my doctoral study I was required by my university's ethics committee to prepare a Participant Information Sheet (PIS) laying out my pre-determined research agenda, prior to getting each of my participants' consent. It seemed that talanoa as an open conversation was an impossible research methodology.

In New Zealand the participant families were part of my wider Tongan community with whom I had already established trust. I spoke with them briefly about the purpose of the study when I asked them to participate. I gave them the PIS sheet, though none were interested in it (they had heard from me and seen me face to face, and that was sufficient). Some were reluctant to sign the accompanying (and required) Consent Form. They did not think it was necessary because they already knew me. Signing something seemed too formal, as though they could not trust me. What were they signing up for? By definition, a talanoa as open engagement cannot be signed up for because no one really knows what to anticipate.

Prescott (2008) points out that open conversations are impractical given the time constraints of research. Having an open conversation—even on the topic subtly guided by me—could take hours and spread across several talanoa sessions. Given the time constraints of a research project, open conversations are rarely practical. Talanoa, however, has no time limit. I found this out the hard way. Sometimes my questions were not answered until towards the very end of our meeting or only told to me after our talanoa had ended as we walked out of the room, or on the way to the car. The duration of one talanoa session was six hours. I learnt to not try to keep to a time frame.

Then there is the difference between participants' views of an open research process and those of the researcher. Prior to our first meeting, Viliami (all names are pseudonyms), the chief executive officer of a government-based organization in Tonga, advised that our initial talanoa would be short. The plan was to fe'iloaki and engage in what Vaioleti (2013) terms talanoa vave (quick, surface talanoa) and at a later date engage in pō talanoa (deeper exchange and sharing of ideas). After we fe'iloaki, he advised me that our talanoa would be even shorter because of an urgent meeting. Before I could propose we delay our talanoa, Viliami advised me to start asking him the research

questions. Viliami's view of research talanoa seemed to resemble the standard interview. As I had already learned, the main focus of an interview is to gain knowledge and information, whereas talanoa is, and should primarily be, about building and enhancing relationships (that then lead to information sharing). I knew that "openness associated with talanoa is a product of the underlying trust relationship and sense of cultural connectedness between the [researcher and participants]" (Prescott, 2008, p. 130). Can openness and trust between a researcher and participant allow an interaction that resembles a modern interview, but can be understood as talanoa?

Or maybe—despite having Tongan cultural assumptions in common—maybe talanoa between a researcher and participant is not possible because the assumptions about research culture are different. Viliami—a man practised in the arts of talanoa—considered research conversations to be governed by different cultural rules than those that govern talanoa. So he behaved culturally appropriately in what he considered to be a research context. This is an interesting view of cultural competency not usually discussed in the talanoa research literature. More commonly, the discussion is about Tongan cultural (or other ethnic cultural) competency.

Talanoa as a data collection tool

Prescott (2008) describes talanoa in his study on Tongan entrepreneurs' business practices in New Zealand as "a means of appropriately collecting data" (p. 128) and a tool for data collection (p. 130). In the method section of their research reports, researchers seem to use "talanoa" interchangeably with "interviews" (e.g. Otsuka, 2005, p. 8; Vaioleti, 2011, p. 132) for the purpose of describing their method. To think of talanoa as a tool or method for data collection raises a number of questions. The word "tool" implies a fixed purpose—that is, to collect data. As the literature I discussed

above has implied, talanoa cannot be thought of as an interview tool because it is necessarily grounded in much more than that: in mutual and ongoing development and maintenance of relationships of care and trust between the participants and researcher, characterized by the researcher (listener) feeling the *mālie* (upliftedness) and *māfana* (inward warmth) of the story told (Manu'atu, 2000b). An interview invites researchers to prioritize the research questions and collect specific data within a specific time frame, above actually getting to know and forming a relationship—or actively empathizing—with the people involved.

All this raises the question whether or to what extent talanoa is possible given the constraints of modern research. Prescott (2008) raised this concern, that it may be impractical to try to follow an ideal definition of talanoa (as an open conversation with no pre-determined agenda) in research settings. 'Otunuku (2011) suggests a compromise: when employing talanoa as a research instrument, the researcher should invest considerable time over several sessions in order to cover the research agenda, so that when the talanoa deviates from the researcher's priorities, the researcher can allow for such digressions because it is respectful to allow them to happen, and it is part of the rhythm and flow of talanoa. Consequently, Tongan (and other Pasifika researchers) have to invest a lot more time than others in their qualitative research programmes for data collection.

But the act of data collection can derail a talanoa. I needed to tape my research conversations in order to “gather the stories” from the talanoa. The families agreed to have their stories recorded, transcribed and then returned to them for checking and approval. Simone, a New Zealand-raised Tongan in his thirties, chose for us to meet at a local restaurant. After ordering food, we walked towards the back of the restaurant and found a quiet place to sit. We started talking about our children. As a rugby fanatic, he talked about his sporting aspirations for his children and I shared my hopes for my son. But

as I pulled out the A4 sheet of paper on which were my semi-structured interview questions approved by my university's ethics committee, Simone's demeanour changed. After asking for permission, I placed the tape recorder on our table. Simone quickly sat upright. His voice changed and his responses to my questions were short compared to the relaxed and detailed conversation we had had earlier. I realized we had moved from *pō talanoa* to “interview mode” (similar to talanoa faka'eke'eke as described by Vaioleti, 2013) both in his mind and mine. So I removed the sheet of paper from the table, and the mood changed again. We regained some aspects of our talanoa. Rather than use the voice recorder, I asked Simone whether I could use my phone to record our conversation. He agreed. In our next session, we simply hung out and engaged in conversations that allowed us to share our stories, which I wrote up later. I was conflicted about these changes in engagement mode, but decided that maybe we could talanoa (*pō talanoa*) and do interviews (talanoa faka'eke'eke) at different times, or on different occasions. The talanoa seemed necessary to the interviews, and the interviews opened up topics for subsequent talanoa.

Reporting talanoa

Reporting talanoa is a difficult task. When participants trust researchers, they are more willing to share their emotions and personal stories (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Johansson Fua, 2014; Vaioleti, 2006). When talanoa works well, people may talk about all sorts of things that should not be reported even if they look like rich data. The researcher, however, must respect the information or knowledge that is passed to them and not merely discard it. In my research, people told stories during talanoa sessions that I could not include in my research report. As noted above, the stories gathered were transcribed and returned back to participants with the reports for editing, clarification and approval. Some information

was not relevant to my study, or had been edited out in order to focus the writing; some I could share more widely due to its sensitivity. The relationship between the information shared in talanoa and the information shared in a research report is complicated, and the person who gave information may become confused when they see their stories shortened, edited or not included in the report. Large or small parts of the talanoa will appear in writing, but always edited. This necessary “editorial domination” may undermine the processes of relationship building developed during talanoa. Participants in a talanoa may expect that the researcher will tell their story in writing when, in fact, the researcher is bound to tell the researcher’s story (i.e. his or her argument) in the article or thesis.

Vaioleti (2006, 2013) alludes to the fact that researchers involved in talanoa become intimately a part of the qualitative inquiry process. This means the narratives of the participants and researcher become a shared narrative construction and co-construction (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 194). The researcher, therefore, has to be ready to be self-revealing in any research report based on talanoa. Again, this requires an openness not considered in the conversation about openness above. It is one thing to be open in a dialogue but another to be open in written work produced for a degree or an academic journal or book.

In a similar vein, Halapua (2007) describes talanoa as “talking from the heart” that involves storytelling “without concealment” (p. 1). Is storytelling without concealment possible in a research context? Concealment implies the purposeful act of hiding something or preventing it from being known. Such was the case in Otsuka’s (2005) talanoa-based study where participants told “white lies” about information related to their schooling. Concealment usually has negative connotations in a research context—some information is not shared, resulting in thin description or lack of openness. However, concealment can be about positive self-protection. Given the negative outcome of Western research

for Pacific and other Indigenous peoples in the past (Smith, 1999), it is perhaps expected that Pacific researchers and research participants might associate the idea of concealment with protection from the negative interpretations of readers with whom they have no relationship.

Conclusion

As I attempt to use talanoa as a research method, I continue to grapple with difficulties that challenge my own thinking and practice as a Tongan male researcher. I have found that existing accounts of the principles of talanoa cannot guide me in relation to the variability of talanoa in practice. Despite methodological guidance from the literature about its ideal characteristics (Johansson Fua, 2014; ‘Otunuku, 2011; Prescott, 2008; Vaioleti, 2006), there is very little written about the practicalities of using talanoa as a research method. As a result, new Tongan (and Pasifika) researchers may not feel competent enacting talanoa because its principles seem difficult to put into practice.

In this article I have attempted to indicate some of these difficulties and complexities facing a novice researcher. Rather than looking for solutions to questions such as “Is this talanoa or not?” and “Can I use an audio recorder in talanoa?”, I have merely tried to raise questions for conversation about the complexities of putting talanoa into research practice. We have to use elements and principles of talanoa in our research unevenly, in patches, or with ambivalence, without feeling inadequate. What is most important is that we openly explore our experienced difficulties when we write our research reports. In our methodology sections of our theses, we need to voice these complexities and tensions, rather than ignoring the failures and problems in practice. Simply repeating the principles of talanoa, without also being open or curious about their practical complexities, can perpetuate feelings of inadequacy that we cannot live up to the ideals we believe

in, and that form our identity as Pasifika—or Tongan—researchers.

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Glossary

anga lelei	kind, calm, tolerant
fakatalanoa	talanoa between people who have just met for the first time
faka'apa'apa	respectful, humble
fanongo	listen
fēfalala'aki	establishing appropriate confidentiality
fekau'aki	relationship
feveitoka'i'aki	respect, caring, generosity
fe'iloaki	meet face to face and introduce oneself
fe'ilongaki	meaningful engagement
fe'inasi'aki	reciprocity
fe'ofa'aki	love, compassion
fokotu'u talanoa	discussions in a formal setting
kaungā fa'u	co-constructer of knowledge
kava	traditional alcoholic beverage

koloa 'a e Tonga	valuable stories shared with researchers
loto fakatōkilalo	humility
māfana	inwardly warm feelings
maheni	familiarity
mālie	energizing of spirits to a positive state of enlightenment
mateuteu	well-prepared, hard-working, culturally versed
noa	anything or nothing in particular
pō talanoa	the talking, exchange, sharing and resolving of relationships of people who know each other
poto he anga	knowing what to do and doing it well
poto he talanoa	wise and skilful in carrying out talanoa
poto'ianga	cultural competency
potupotutatau	establishing equality
tala	to tell or to talk
talanoa	talk/open informal or formal conversation
talanoa faikava	focused talking while drinking kava
talanoa faka'eke'eke	talk involving probing questions, modern interviews
talanoa tevolo	spiritual talk about dreams and visions
talanoa usu	deep and intimate talking, involves humour
talanoa vave	quick talk
talanoa'i	talking which involves analysis and evaluation
talatalanoa	where people/elders talk about selected topics endlessly
tau'ataina	autonomy
ta'ovala	traditional woven mat
tokanga	pay attention
tokanga ki he ngaahi 'ilo moe poto	learn from the knowledge and stories shared

tupenu	loincloth wrapped around Tongan male's waist
'atā ke fakaanga'i	freedom to disagree
'ikai ke fakangatangata	no enforced, artificial or arbitrary boundary
'ofa fe'unga	showing appropriate compassion, empathy, love
'ulungaanga faka-Tonga	Tongan behavioural characteristics, the Tongan way

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