Title of Issue/section: Volume 18, Issue 1, 2018

Guest Editors: Sashi Sharma and Carol Hamilton

Editor: Noeline Wright

A Pasifika research methodology: Talaloto

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Abstract

A number of researchers have done extensive work on ontologies, epistemologies and pedagogies in relation to Pasifika research, but little on methodologies. Vaioleti describes talanoa as a phenomenological research approach which is ecological, oral and interactive. Halapua's article Talanoa Process: The Case of Fiji (2008) emphasises talanoa as a potential model for conflict resolution following Fiji's coup in the year 2000. Recently, talanoa as a research methodology has become widely used in the Pacific research arena. It has been defined by scholars as creating meaning out of nothing or simply to talk, gossip, share or chat about nothing. 'Talaloto' – a research methodology that I introduce and outline in this article is closely related in many ways to talanoa. While talanoa is the co-construction of knowledge/ideas by two or more people, talaloto is a person's testimony of constructed knowledge or lived experiences. There is a scarcity of information on this traditional practice yet like talanoa it is rooted in Tongan oral tradition. This paper foregrounds talaloto as a traditional cultural practice and it explains its use as a research methodology. It is hoped that more researchers will consider using this method in the future, recognising its place within Pasifika methodologies and its ability to generate rich and authentic data.

Keywords

Talanoa, talaloto, Pasifika research methodology

Introduction

In this paper, I introduce and argue for *talaloto* (a personal testimony of the lived reality experiences of an individual) as a new Pasifika data collection methodology that enriches and permits authentic, raw and meaningful information to be generated via Pasifika research. As kakala (Thaman, 1992) and talanoa (Vaioleti, 2006) research frameworks provide alternative and authentic research methodologies for Pasifika, the utilisation of talaloto provided me, as a Tongan researcher, with both a Pasifika and a uniquely Tongan traditional practice for my research. I have used talaloto as my data collection method for my PhD and found the depth of the data to be rich and significant compared to the semi-structured interview method I used for my Masters. In this paper, I provide a context for thinking about Pasifika research methods and detail the form of the Talaloto approach I have used.

Pasifika research frameworks

The development of Pasifika research methodologies in the Pasifika research context is gaining momentum and contributing to the decolonisation of the dominant Western research methodologies that have prevailed in Pasifika contexts until recently. Fa'avae, Jones and Manu'atu (2016) encourage Pasifika researchers in Pacific contexts to use research methods that reflect the lived realities of participants, rather than reproduce what is seen as Western methods of research. Over time a number of Pasifika research frameworks such as 'kakala' by Helu-Thaman, (1992), 'fonofale' by Pulotu-Endemann (2001), 'talanoa' by Vaioleti (2006), and 'vanua' by Nabobo-Baba (2007) have been initiated but only a few have been further developed. Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) emphasise that of the small number of Pasifika methodologies in Pasifika academic literature, perhaps only two research frameworks, the Kakala Research Framework and the Vanua Research Framework have been expanded as comprehensive indigenous research methods specific to the cultural contexts in the Pacific region. However, talanoa methodology, which is very much similar to talaloto but very unique itself, has recently been adopted by Pasifika researchers and others as an appropriate research method in Pasifika contexts. In the following section kakala, vanua and talanoa are discussed in slightly greater depth, in order to provide not only context to talaloto, but also a valuable comparison.

Commonly used Pasifika frameworks

Kakala

Developed by Thaman (1992), the 'kakala,' as a metaphor for teaching and research, includes three key concepts or processes that link to the valued Tongan custom of flower arrangement. Thaman describes kakala as a collection of fragrant flowers that are woven together as a garland to mark a special occasion or for gifting to a special person. Thaman's original kakala framework has three processes called *toli* (picking or gathering of flowers – data collection stage), *tui* (weaving or making the flower garland – data analysis) and *luva* (to give away the flower garland to someone – dissemination of findings). The kakala was further developed to enhance teaching and learning that is culturally inclusive for Pasifika teachers and students (Helu-Thaman, 2007). More recently, kakala has been expanded by Taufe'ulungaki, Johansson Fua, Manu, and Takapautolo (2007) who added the 'teu' stage (conceptualisation). Previously, Manu'atu (2001) argued the inclusion of 'malie' (relevancy and worthwhileness) and 'mafana' (application, transformation, and sustainability) are necessary components of this research framework. Yet as a framework metaphor, while kakala firmly focuses attention on the alignment of research with traditional Tongan cultural practices, it does not allow me to gather the depth of responses from participants that I require.

Vanua

The development of the vanua research framework (VRF) by Nabobo-Baba (2007) has its position informed by the ideologies of Kaupapa Māori, kakala and other Pasifika research frameworks where academia is being targeted to be decolonised through the influence of indigenous practices, ideologies, values and knowledge. The term 'vanua' means tribe and it is organic in the Fijian context where each tribe has its own Fijian ways of doing things in terms of knowledge, language, culture, worldview and philosophies. Nabobo-Baba incorporates eight principles in the Vanua Research Framework. These are that: research is carried out on Fijians needs to benefit people, especially the researched community; it should focus on indigenous peoples' needs, cultural values, protocols, knowledge processes and philosophies; there is a need for researcher fluency in the Fijian language and or dialect of the researched community, indigenous persons should be included in the research team as principal researcher(s) in team research situations, and respect and reciprocity are essential. In addition,

researchers need to acknowledge and affirm existing elders and vanua structures and protocols. Researchers need to ensure as far as possible that local people are included in the research setting and that they build accountability into their research procedures through meaningful reporting and meaningful feedback to the relevant people and community. Lastly, vanua chiefs, as well as village chiefs and elders at all levels, must give permission to all research done in the vanua.

Vanua provides a strong Pasifika research framework. However, a limitation for non-Fijian researchers like me is that it is solely embedded in indigenous Fijian worldviews, values and culture (Nabobo-Baba, 2007), I recognise that there is potential for the underlying principles to be adapted to other contexts. For example, the principles may also be applicable in a Tongan setting. However, like kakala, vanua does not allow me to easily delve more deeply into the lived experiences of my participants through its data generation mechanisms.

Talanoa

Vaioleti (2006) introduced talanoa as a research methodology in his article 'Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research.' He argues that talanoa is a cultural synthesis of the information, stories and emotions for producing relevant knowledge and possibilities for addressing Pacific issues. He refers to talanoa as a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal. He defines *'tala'* as to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply and *'noa'* as being of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary. There are other definitions of talanoa. Halapua (2008) refers to talanoa as to engage in a dialogue or to tell stories 'to each other absent [of] concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds' (cited in Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012, p. 2). Nabobo-Baba (2007) describes talanoa as to offload. Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) state that there are different forms of talanoa including formal and informal and note there are a vast variety of protocols and expectations that each form needs to follow depending on who you talanoa to, for example, to a chief, tapu (sacred) person or someone in general.

The talanoa method can be problematic if examined using conventional interpretations of research validity and reliability (Vaioleti, 2006), since the unpredictable nature of changes in viewpoints and ideas between participants and interviewers could be a concern for talanoa's reliability and consistency. Fa'avae, Jones and Manu'atu (2016) argue that to improve the "practice and understanding of talanoa requires open discussion about the practical dilemmas sometimes experienced by researchers attempting to use this approach" (p. 138).

The Pasifika research frameworks that have been discussed to this point incorporate and acknowledge, in the world of research Pasifika values, beliefs, knowledge, ideas and protocols that are common and familiar to Pasifika peoples. This commonality is emphasised by Alkema (2014) in her report where she proposes that the main role of Pasifika research is to generate understanding and knowledge about, and for, Pasifika peoples and their environment. Amituanai-Toloa (2009) argues that not only is using Pasifika methodologies responsive and culturally appropriate to Pasifika audiences but that also, this approach can yield positive outcomes for future directions and illustrate the richness and uniqueness of the Pacific. In the following section, I introduce Talaloto, outlining its origins and definition, and provide detail around how the process works.

What is 'talaloto'?

Origins

The term 'talaloto' has existed for a long time in a number of Tongan protestant churches. When I discussed talaloto with Tongan elders in New Zealand and Tonga, most of them argued that talaloto

had originated from Tongan Churches (Free Tongan Church, Tonga Hou'eiki Church and Uesiliana Church) in Tonga after the arrival of the missionaries. It was used during an evening prayer service called 'Po Lotu' on special Sundays. This understanding can also be found in Churchward's (1959) definition of talaloto: "fakataha (meeting) or Po lotu (evening prayer)" (p. 447).

However, according to Milika Pusiaki (from New Zealand's Tongan 5.31 Radio) who is a descendant of Tatuila Pusiaki (a well know Tongan spokesman and composer), talaloto was used prior to the arrival of the missionaries principally by the early Tongan music composers. Music of the early period (pre-European) was an expression of the composer's true feelings. The composer told his or her story through the lyrics of songs. These songs are thought to have been the earliest example of talaloto within Tongan culture and precede its adoption by the church.

While the early Tongan composers told everything through song, often listeners did not understand the meaning behind the lyrics and sometimes required composers to explain their meaning. This tradition still continues and is known as 'heliaki' (indirect expression) where composers incorporate old Tongan vocabulary within their songs. Smith and 'Otunuku (2015) argue that the use of heliaki not only represents an indigenous approach to reading and writing but also exists as a cultural strategy for critique. Kaeppler (2007) defines heliaki as a means to say something which means something else and asserts that it requires cultural skills and a knowledge base to be able to carry it out.

Defining of the term 'talaloto'

Talaloto is a Tongan word compromised of two words: 'tala' and 'loto.' Tala is described by researchers as a form of communication, talking, sharing, and telling stories or face to face exchange of ideas (Halapua, 2008, Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). As above, Vaioleti (2006) defines *'tala'* to inform, to relate, command, tell, and announce. Churchward (1959) defines *'loto'* as the mind, heart's desire, will, purpose; anger, ire, temper; to be minded to, desire, consent, or assent (p. 302). Churchward (1959) defines talaloto as "to relate one's religious experience…relating one's religious experience, giving a testimony: testimony meeting" (pp. 446-447). Therefore, in my view, talaloto can be interpreted to tell all, reveal or share honestly lived realities that are deep within your mind and heart at a particular time. Talaloto is about mo'oni (truth), to'a (bravery), totonu (honesty), fakamo'oni (testimony) and nothing else but the true lived experiences of a person.

'Talaloto' within a church setting

Talaloto is a habitual practice within church settings in Tonga and New Zealand. Members of the congregation are frequently asked to perform a talaloto on specific concepts such as abstaining from alcohol, their relationships with God for the month, acceptance of Christ into their hearts, and other topics. On the last Sunday of every month, a Po Lotu (evening prayer service) is dedicated for talaloto. During this service the church minister will invite church members to do talaloto. The talaloto cannot happen spontaneously at any setting or time because there are protocols that need to be followed to a build up to the talaloto. Often the church minister is a master orator setting the scene for the talaloto adeptly. The participants will then proceed to the front and begin to speak uninterrupted. Often talaloto participants are very emotional and the length of time they speak varies.

During a discussion with Sione Molitika, one of the well-known Tongan elders in Hamilton and a Methodist church steward (the next authority level down from the church minister), he stated that talaloto is arguably one of the most heartfelt aspects of their church. The talaloto consecrated the whole congregation with an extra form of spiritual energy from above that helps to 'fakakoloa pe fakaivia' (enrich or empower) and 'fakamāfana'i (to give warmth) to the gathering. The talaloto is a time of 'fola koloa' (laying of inner wealth before you) and 'fola'osi' (laying everything you've got before you). I have experienced and felt the 'mafana' (warmth) of talaloto when one of the proficient

'matu'a' (elders) has facilitated this practice. It is a time when members of the congregation express gratitude to their God for the wonders and blessings He has done in their lives.

Current use within other settings

The usage of talaloto is currently increasing in other settings such as the Tongan radio, newspapers and television, on Facebook and YouTube. These are pre-recorded talaloto of church members that are loaded onto Facebook and YouTube. While the church settings may have one question at the beginning of the talaloto, other settings use prompts for clarification and to accumulate more information. Facebook and YouTube represent talaloto on a large scale. Nonetheless, within these other settings, talaloto is used by participants to talk about their relationship with God, describe how God has helped to change their lives and additionally as a vehicle for giving advice or forming a sermon.

Talaloto as a research method

Smith (1999) highlights the disparity between traditional Western and indigenous worldviews which stem from, very different epistemological and metaphysical foundations. Talaloto seeks to cut across the dominant research approaches which perpetuate the legitimacy of Western knowledge systems. In discussing their utilisation of a shared narrative and reciprocal storytelling in a Northern Australian community research project, Golding, Steels and McGarty (2015) identify the creation of a "more balanced relationship," (p.790) and more equitable power distribution between participants. Similarly, talaloto is concerned with authentically representing indigenous knowledge and gaining participant-researcher power-sharing through the use of narrative.

In 2017, while working on my PhD proposal, I was confronted with conflicting expectations on which research methodology to employ. I required a method other than a semi-structured interview that I had utilised for my master's degree. The semi-structured interview well-suited my master's topic which was looking at the 'inspirations and expectations of Tongan parents in their children's early learning,' however, at the PhD level I am delving deeper into the lived realities of Tongan parent's educational engagement in their children's learning. Therefore, I wanted to pursue a data generation methodology where ideas could be shared of ones' own accord, voices could be heard equally, where there were minimal interruptions by the researcher (which may inadvertently sway contributions); and real, true lived experiences would be shared rather than ideas constructed 'in the moment' or the sharing of responses designed to please the interviewer. I also desired a method that was indigenous to my Tongan participants. This resulted in the invention of 'talaloto' as a research method which aligns well with my research goals which seek to capture the truly lived realities of my participants. In essence, I was able to utilise and re-purpose a culturally sanctioned church ritual which elevated the status of the participant within a research setting.

How it works

The following table summarises the different stages of talaloto, the process you go through and the rationale behind each stage. This process begins with making initial face-to-face contact with participants and explaining the research purpose and process, then following up with more detailed information which includes the consent form and the questions. The table also outlines the process of the talaloto itself, including opening and closing with a prayer, building rapport through talanoa and then allowing the participant the opportunity to share their thoughts and feelings.

Table 1.   The different stages of talaloto

Stage	Process	Rationale/comment
Initial contact	Meeting face-to-face with the participants; visiting with them. During this visit: Explaining the purpose of the research; Their role in the research; Answering any questions that they have.	This is fakamahu'inga'i, or their value. While phoning, texting or emailing may be acceptable for follow-up communication, the first contact needs to be made in person as a sign of respect and to assist engagement.
Sending of a formal letter, including an informed consent form and research questions	Method of delivery does not matter (can be hand delivered, posted or emailed) as long as the scene has been set correctly in the initial contact. If the initial contact resulted in some hesitation or uncertainty then I decided that face-to-face delivery was a wise idea. If the researcher did not talk through the initial meeting then I think they would do so at this stage. Either collect the consent form later or leave a stamped, addressed envelope.	Part of the ethics approval process and formalising of participation. It is important not to assume that the participant will send the consent form back; it is the researcher's duty to organise how this will happen and it is respectful to do so. It is important that the research questions are understood before the talaloto takes place. Participants need to have the questions for at least two weeks prior to the talaloto. This allows them to be well prepared in advance and have time to discuss with anyone else the questions. The purpose of this is the interest of the researcher gaining an understanding of the lived experiences of participants and what these experiences mean to them.
The actual talaloto	Step 1: Talanoa After greeting each other, begin with a prayer, use talanoa to set the scene. The talanoa can be about anything. Make sure you initiate the talanoa. This may take three to five minutes.	The talaloto is done in the home or at an agreed venue. If you are hosting then it is appropriate to offer refreshments. If going to a participant's home, they are likely to offer you refreshments. You do not necessarily need to take food with you, but a small thank-you gift will be appreciated e.g. card and voucher. The use of talanoa is like an ice-breaker or re-affirming your relationship with the participant. In Tongan settings, it is important to begin with a prayer. If you are confident, pray yourself, or ask the participant. This is empowering the participants and allowing them the opportunity to take control or lead the talaloto.

	Step 2: Fakamafana'i (empower)	
	This is your turn as the interviewer to start introducing the topic, asking and encouraging the participant to begin the talaloto.	The questions need to be written in such a way that they prompt sharing and comment by the participant i.e. open questions.
	Step 3: The Talaloto This is where the participant speaks to the research question/s, uninterrupted.	If English is not the first language, then translating the questions is appropriate.
	The researcher may need to prompt from time to time to encourage more sharing; or if needed to re-direct the talaloto.	Care needs to be taken when prompts are used so as not to influence the response, even inadvertently.
	It does not matter if the participant does not exactly follow the order of the questions. They should be left to speak on the topics as they choose – assume that they are well-intentioned and even if you do not see the link with what they are talking about it is relevant from their point of view.	This is part of giving the participant autonomy within the talaloto. Be prepared for a flexible time frame. A talaloto may take up to an hour. Pasifika participants may be emotional when speaking. This is quite natural and does not mean that there is anything wrong with the process, rather it is an indication of the depth of feelings.
	Step 4: Ending Once the talaloto is finished, thank the participant and end with a prayer (self or participant). Reiterate here the confidentiality of what they have said and outline the next steps in the research process.	
After the talaloto	Offer gift/s of appreciation	To signify how you value your participant's contribution to the study.

Discussion

In using talaloto in my research as a data generation method, several benefits emerged which signify its potential as a research method. Firstly, the 'flow' of the talaloto was far more successful than I had initially assumed or hoped for. The use of talanoa as an ice-breaker helped to set the scene and settle things down before talaloto commenced. The talaloto then began, taking participants about two minutes to really take command of their sharing. From then on participants continued uninterrupted for between 45 to 100 minutes of non-stop sharing. Secondly, I did not have to use any prompts at all because the participants appeared well prepared with their talaloto; prompts had been given to them in advance. Some participants even had written notes or written speeches in front of them. Thirdly, I sensed that the participants felt that their lived experiences were being listened to and valued. Most participants were fully engaged, confident and at times emotional. They told heartfelt and sincere stories that to me sounded completely genuine. Fourthly, the data appears far richer than what I had gained earlier through the semi-structured interview method used for my Masters. The quality of participants' sharing was raw and deep and did not need clarification from them or for me. For example (*pseudonym used*):

However, the burden the church is dishing out is so much. We at times feel obliged to give to the church in-case we get mocked by other followers for not giving. If we don't donate money then others will say we are poor and many other reasons that they will come up with to make you feel bad for not giving. (Talaloto 5).

While my intent with talaloto had always been to gather data which was richer and deeper than that previously gained, I was still taken aback by the depth of emotion and feelings which were presented through this research method. It was as though I was not simply asking my participants what they thought, but what they felt as well and I was being given a unique opportunity to capture this. Yet on reflection, this should not have come as a surprise to me as I was taking a spiritual or religious practice and applying it to my research setting. In Tonga, the spiritual and emotional infuse all aspects of daily life and are inseparable.

In semi-structured interviews, I asked more questions and allowed less time for responses. While I did gain a layer of feelings and emotion in responses, the comparison between this and the talaloto is striking. That is, the talaloto provided the vehicle for a more comprehensive and heartfelt representation of true feelings and a deeper level of sharing of beliefs by the participants. Additionally, I recognised in the talaloto of my participants, the strength of commitment to their views as they were articulated. Again, this aligns with the traditional church ritual or practice of talaloto where the act of speaking in front of the congregational audience denotes a commitment to what one is saying.

One consideration is whether sending the interview questions in advance to participants negatively influenced their answers. However, I thought that if participants had my questions in advance, they could make sure they understood what the questions were about and also be better prepared to answer them. Stacey and Vincent (2011) concur. When working on multimedia interviewing in a structured format they sent participants questions on a CD. They stated that "The opportunity for interviewees to reflect on questions and edit responses resulted in high quality data and interviewees found the electronic interview convenient and satisfying" (p. 1). My participants talked non-stop for between 45 to 100 minutes. While some had prepared notes or speeches in front of them, most rarely referred to them. In addition, most of the talaloto did not follow the order of the questions given. Participants had their own way of organising the order of their talaloto and covering all the questions. Overall, I do not think that advance knowledge of my interest had any negative impact on participants' answers.

Potential shortcomings of talaloto

No examination of a research method is complete without addressing of its potential drawbacks. While I did not encounter any of these in my study, I am aware that other researchers may face some shortcomings with talaloto. These, and possible solutions are summarised as follows:

Table 2.   Talaloto: Issues and solutions

Potential issue	Proposed solution
Participants going off topic due to the broadness of the main question and opportunity to extemporise.	Use prompts (sparingly) to re-focus participants
Participants becoming quite emotional while speaking.	Allow them time to collect their thoughts and continue to speak (this is not uncommon in Pasifika settings).
Language barriers	Translate questions into Pasifika language if required. Use a translator at the interview (or for prompts).
Understanding (by the researcher) of cultural protocols.	Seek advice before undertaking research in order to gain confidence and the potential of damaging the relationship with participants.

Data collection is of course only one part of the process and careful attention should be given to the method of analysis, particularly if a goal of the research is to, as accurately as possible, capture the rawness and depth of emotions of the participants which was reflected not only in words but in non-verbal cues (markers). For example, the widening of eyes for emphasis, tears where emotions were strong, either happy or sad, as well as firm clapping of hands or the seat to show the strength of a point they were making. This has implications for transcription and analysis. Regardless of the method of analysis selected, a challenge as I move forward with talaloto is to ensure that the method chosen allows the feelings imparted by the participants to be recognised and presented.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that *talaloto*, as a research methodology, has value for conducting research in a Pasifika context. *Talaloto* comprises a deliberately planned (prompts are provided to participants in advance); culturally sanctioned, ritual that generally occurs in a church setting with its communal relationships. While clearly in its infancy as an approach, I am confident that the use of *talaloto* has not only enhanced my current research through the richness of the data I have collected but that it is also a valid and applicable research method for other Pasifika researchers and Pasifika research contexts. Working alongside talanoa, talaloto allows us to probe more deeply and tap into the raw, lived experiences of participants through the alignment of data collection with a cultural practice from within Tongan churches. Through talaloto I was able to capture lived realities and inner thoughts so that the Pasifika voice represented in my research may be as authentic as possible.

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