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Cultural discernment as an ethics framework: An Indigenous Fijian approach

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Abstract: *The praxis of an Indigenous Fijian researcher who is both an insider/outsider offers some valuable lessons for ethnographic work. This paper introduces 'cultural discernment' as a concept used to ensure that the research process is culturally ethical within the research setting. An insider will always require a sense of cultural discernment, recognising that actions taken have implications that are critical and remain with the researcher for life. The paper contextualises the concept of cultural discernment in relation to Fijian epistemology. Although there are risks within any research project with regard to ethics processes and the conduct of research, this paper will illustrate how Western paradigms associated with 'expert knowledge' and the 'lay knowledges' of an Indigenous population group produce competing understandings about ethical practice. The paper draws on a doctoral research project exploring the cultural conceptualisation of health and well-being, conducted in Fiji and New Zealand. The research process and steps carried out in this study ensured those actions were culturally appropriate and ethically sound from an Indigenous Fijian perspective.*

Keywords: *cultural discernment, ethnography, Indigenous epistemology, Indigenous research ethics, insider/outsider research*

Cultural discernment: Fijian knowledge as an ethics framework

Tuhiwai-Smith (1999) argues that at a general level, both insider and outsider researchers have to have ways of critically thinking of their processes, their relationships and the quality and richness of data and analysis. However, the main difference is that insiders have to live with the enduring consequences of the research process on a day-to-day basis (p. 137). Doing anything that goes against my cultural values marks me and my family for a lifetime. Therefore, what I refer to as '*cultural discernment*' was an essential component of my research process and community. I refer to my relatives who were part of my research community as the '*cultural discernment*' group as they were responsible for all the cultural arrangements in the research process. Cultural discernment is a process in which a community or a group of people collaborate to ensure that the research process is ethical within the cultural context of

the research setting (Meo-Sewabu, 2012). The concept of cultural discernment evolved as I was asked by the academy about the purpose of taking my maternal relatives on this research. It was essential for me as an Indigenous researcher 'to get into place' in Goffman's (1989) term. Getting into place meant following through with the protocols and processes of the *Vanua* guided by the cultural discernment group. *Vanua*, as defined by Nabobo-Baba (2006: 155), refers to 'a people, their chief, their defined territory, their waterways or fishing grounds, their environment, their spirituality, their history, their epistemology and culture'. The formality of the New Zealand university human ethics protocols complicate this process for me as an Indigenous researcher. Culturally, I knew respect for the *Vanua* was imperative, but how would I portray this to the academy? To do so I have had to discuss the cultural discernment process in the context of Fijian knowledge.

It has been argued that expert knowledge (as used within dominant Western notions of what

constituted valid research) often subjugates Indigenous frameworks of knowledge construction (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Connell, 2007; Kenney, 2009, 2011). Epistemology for Indigenous population groups includes the role of the land in social structures and dynamics, cosmology and spirituality and ways of knowing that are our daily realities. The fact that the lay knowledge of Indigenous populations is not written in the Western context does not make that knowledge any less important. Initiatives such as that of Suaalii-Sauni and Aiolupotea (2012) describe developments in transferring Indigenous practices or lay knowledge into academic frameworks that are relevant for researching Pacific communities. They call for more proactive collaborations between universities and Pacific-country-based researchers in the development of Pacific research methods and methodologies. This paper proposes one such method in the area of ethical requirements from a Fijian worldview.

What is ethical within the Fijian cultural context can only be understood by exploring Fijian epistemologies and worldviews. Fijian ways of knowing are complex. A number of writers have extensively documented Fijian knowledge systems including Nabobo-Baba (2006), Ratuva (2007), Ravuvu (1987) and Tuwere (2002). Ratuva (2007: 91), for example, refers to the knowledge system in the village context at three levels: *kila ni vuravura* (knowledge of the empirical world), *kila ni bulavakaveiwekeni kei naitovo* (knowledge of the social order and socio-cultural relationships) and, the third, *kila ni bulavakayalo* (knowledge of the cosmos). Nabobo-Baba (2006) identifies the *Vanua*¹ as the main foundation of learning and encompasses spirituality, customs and relationships. She unpacks these further when researching Vugalei village, referring to epistemology as the way of knowing within that village context. Tuwere (2002) and Ravuvu (1983, 1987) also explore these concepts of the *Vanua* as the basis of our way of being or how we relate to others and with our environment. I draw on these literatures to discuss the knowledge that guided my actions about what to 'discern' in the village context.

The paper opens with some background to the context of the research, and then discusses the 'proportionate reason framework' and the notion

of communal and cultural discernment in the context of Fijian episteme. Nayau, Lau, Narocivo is my maternal village, considered my *vasu*, which will explain *vasu* later. I then define and explain how cultural discernment was applied during the research process in acknowledging relationships in the village, adhering to cultural protocols, arranging the reciprocity process and selecting research participants. Narratives from field notes, personal reflection, critical analysis of the processes and questions from the academy highlight themes at work in relation to the ethical requirements for this study.

Research and methods

My doctoral research explores the cultural constructs of health and well-being among Fijian women living in Fiji and considers how these understandings have evolved among Fijian women who have migrated to Aotearoa. Fijians in this context are those Indigenous to the land of Fiji. Exploring Fijian epistemology in the context of health and well-being is an integral part of this research. The study is situated in two geographical locations: Fiji and New Zealand. The study focuses primarily on Fijian women who have migrated to New Zealand. However, in order to gain a better understanding of Fijian perceptions of health and well-being, data was first collected at a remote Fijian village that has remained primarily traditional within the village's social structures and lifestyle. This was done first to capture a cultural understanding of health and well-being at village level, where the population group is confined and livelihood is structured around the village. The overarching methodology in this study is ethnography, defined as research that 'attempts to understand the reality of the researched' (O'Leary, 2004: 129). To accomplish this, the study used a 'combination of observation, participation and unstructured interviewing' (Sissons, 2007: 276). This ethnographic approach used individual narratives about health and well-being through focus group discussions using *talanoa*, defined in Fijian, Tongan and Samoan as sharing a conversation and knowledge (Otsuka, 2005; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Vaioleti, 2006). Nabobo-Baba (2006: 27) defines *talanoa* as 'a process to which two or more people talk together, or in which one person tells a story to an audience of

people who are largely listeners'. *Talanoa* is further explained by Farelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012: 1) as an 'embodied expression of the Vanua'. In the focus group discussion, the form of *talanoa* used involved a group of women talking together.

Talanoa as a method

Talanoa has been discussed by many authors, such as Nabobo-Baba (2006), Otsuka (2005) and Vaoleti (2006), Lātū (2009) as a methodology. These same authors refer to the methodology as subjective. *Talanoa* is subjective because its purpose is to give meaning to whatever is being discussed. *Talanoa* is an effective tool for collecting and analysing data within an oral tradition such as that of Fiji and many other Indigenous cultures. Vaoleti (2006: 23) translates the word *talanoa* from a Tongan context with: '*Tala* means to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply. *Noa* means of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary or void'. Nabobo-Baba (2007), from a Fijian perspective, defines *tala* as 'to offload'. *Noa* is often used with a prefix '*na noa*' meaning yesterday, so *talanoa* means literally offloading stories of recent events.

According to Tuwere (2002), early Fijians expressed oral tradition through several means. One of these was *talanoa*, when stories were relayed by the old to young people about recent events. Another was what Tuwere (2002) refers to as '*tukuni*', or legends about the past. Legends, he suggested, can be 'both true and false so the authenticity was measured by remembrance. If the legend is remembered then it must be true' (p. 21).

Talanoa can take place in both formal and informal settings. *Talanoa* in the formal setting within the context of this research took place the cultural protocols associated with entry into the land were adhered to. When conducting *talanoa*, regardless of whether it is a one-on-one conversation or in a group, one has to be aware of the nature of the *talanoa*. When called or when asked to participate in a *talanoa* session, the word used in the request allows one to gauge if it is a formal or informal discussion. For example, the prefix '*vei*' or *veitalanoa taka* would imply an exchange of the current events to resolve something and it may be both formal

and informal. Even the tone used by the person requesting the *talanoa* can usually allow one to gauge if the *talanoa* is going to be formal or informal. For example, in the statement '*tou mai talanoa tu ga*' meaning 'we will just talk', the addition of the '*tu ga*' (just) at the end means it will be informal whereas '*tou mai veitalanoa mada*' meaning let us have a talk or discussion, usually means it will be formal with the aim of resolving an issue.

For this study, I chose to conduct *talanoa* in an informal discussion with my participants. This meant that all social status within Fijian society, including age differences, were put aside and participants were made to feel at ease, there was a sense of equality and participants were able to candidly discuss experiences.

These *talanoa* comprised stories, metaphors, jokes and explanations that allowed other participants to agree, disagree or tell their own stories in relation to what was being discussed. My role as the facilitator of the *talanoa* was to guide the conversations according to the open-ended questions I had prepared. Rather than reciting the questions, I had a fair idea of what information I was to gather and as stories were being told I would look for cues, asking participants to elaborate or add to their stories or sharing jokes with a purpose in mind.

These *talanoa* sessions are often filled with laughter and shared light-heartedly, but there were instances where stories were relayed to me in confidence and addressed by participants and once the issues were discussed thoroughly, the laughter would begin once again. I felt that in all the *talanoa* sessions, a sense of trust had developed, and women were able to share openly. There was no time limit of the *talanoa* sessions. At the end of the *talanoa*, it often felt as if we were all just relating stories back and forth but, in reality, the purpose of the study had been achieved.

As far as analysing data, *talanoa* allows participants to agree or disagree about what is being discussed. In doing so, the data are being scrutinised and debated to the point where the data can then be discarded or included in the study. It is in the researcher's best interest to clarify and authenticate data through this process. As noted above, Tuwere (2002) suggested gauging authenticity through 'remem-

brance': if the majority of participants remember events and incidences then the events are regarded as true.

In both Fiji and New Zealand, *talanoa* sessions provided the platform where discussions about what hinders and enhances participants' health and well-being took place. With these explorations, I was able to attain a better understanding of the participants, lay understanding of health, illness and well-being and how these perceptions were constructed among participants in both locations. This paper focuses on the ethics process used for my research rather than on the findings on health and well-being that were explored in the doctoral thesis as a whole.

Proportionate reason and communal discernment

The 'discernment' process used in the research evolved from a framework by Angrosino and May de Perez (2003) referred to as 'proportionate reason' framework.

Angrosino and May de Perez's (2003: 236) use of proportionate reason relates to how social research can be linked to an ethical framework where moral judgements have to be made. They state that making these judgements relates to subjective relativism, and every researcher will have to base their decision on what they consider ethical. The concept of 'proportionate reason' is a framework that places values on alternatives (Angrosino and May de Perez, 2003). The value of the alternatives reflects that an action taken is in proportion to the reason it was taken in the first place. Sets of understandings about right and wrong or good and bad are based on the values and morals determined by a combination of norms and the belief systems within a community, society or culture. However, the decision can also be based on the 'wisdom of the past' and the expertise derived from theories and people within the research community.

Angrosino and May de Perez (2003) refer to the guidance of the decision-making process as one that will ultimately be directed by a 'community'. This community decision-making process is in turn based on what Gula (1998: 287) refers to as a form of 'communal discernment'. Discerning that the actions taken in the

course of the research are based on the sum of what the community considers is regarded in this framework as ethical. This 'community' may include the ethics committees, supervisors and stakeholders in the research settings (Angrosino and May de Perez, 2003). In addition, the 'community' can also include the researcher's own knowledge and understanding of what is relevant and appropriate. Hence, the tangible and intangible come together, creating a 'community' that discerns whether the actions taken in the research are ethical and ensures that the greater good is achieved or, in research ethics terms, that 'harm is minimised'.

As I am an Indigenous researcher, this 'community' also includes adhering to my own cultural values as a Fijian. The concept of 'communal discernment' as a group to consult should cultural ethical dilemmas arise during the course of the research was accepted by the academy's ethics framework as a reasonable argument for my relatives being an essential part of my research community. They were part of my communal discernment mechanism, ensuring all things were conducted in a culturally ethical and appropriate manner, allowing me to consider all angles to minimise harm, within the village and with participants.

Knowledge of what is culturally ethical is often not verbally expressed as it is a part of the 'way of knowing' or is a given within a culture. The framework of proportionate reason is linked to participant observation in that proportionate reason allows us to account for an action or actions that has/have a whole range of meaning(s) or to acknowledge that there is a wider context within which an action or actions has/have taken place (Angrosino and May de Perez, 2003). I will explore how actions are taken through a group consensus on what is ethical in a cultural context. The insider (cultural discernment) group came to a consensus on protocols to be conducted, gifts to be taken and visitations to occur in the village. As insiders, the group consents to ensuring that the research process is appropriate and that there are no negative implications, as any repercussions would fall on the extended family rather than the researcher. The Indigenous researcher is not an individual when going into the research field, especially when it is within his/her own culture. Therefore, it is important that the Indigenous

researcher is culturally ethical in their approach to the research setting to avoid any cultural repercussions that may befall them or their family. Consensus processes are part of all cultural activities within Fijian communities, including weddings, funerals or local village ceremonies and take place not only within extended families but also within larger groupings for occasions such as provincial cultural events. Therefore, consensus and decisions are made by groups of people and almost never by individuals. To describe the context in which these consensus processes occur in terms of the Fijian worldview, I will use the Fijian language to explore how the group making the decision may be described.

Even though there is no name for a 'consensus group' in the Fijian language, in the first instance I would refer to such a group as '*dau ni vakasala*' or a group that gives advice. The group's role, however, was much wider than to simply 'give advice'. I refer to the discernment process in the context of a Fijian worldview as '*na kila vakayalomatua*'. '*Na kila*' means knowledge, and '*vaka*' is a transition meaning 'likened' or similar to. '*Yalo*' means in spirit, and '*matua*' literally means older or an elder but implies someone who is wise or full of wisdom. So the term would mean the group has the knowledge or the wisdom to make decisions ensuring that the greater good is achieved at the end of the study, and hence harm is minimised in the cultural context. The wisdom to make decisions is based on having grown up in the culture and understanding the norms, nuances and traditional values based on the Fijian ethos.

I did not preselect who would make the decisions about my research in the Fijian village setting; up to nine close maternal family members (including males and females) came together on my behalf to plan the various cultural protocols of the research. This is all part of representation as a collective: the clan and the *Vanua*, which can be defined as an all-encompassing concept that is inclusive of belonging to a place, and ways of knowing and relating to others. Every process was deliberated by my cultural discernment group before I went into the wider village community. Every so often, experts or knowledge holders would be called in to discuss areas of concern, ensuring all that was being done in the village was

ethical within the village cultural context. The group changed in size according to who had the knowledge of and the expertise required for the particular issue.

It would not be fair to think that the 'decision making' process during the research always went smoothly. There were several incidents when a consensus was not reached. In such cases, the group would have to either come back to the issue later, or aim to resolve the issue by asking for an expert who knew more about what was being discussed. Examples used in the following paragraphs show how cultural discernment took place in the research process.

Discernment of research site: Vanua and Vasu²

The research was conducted in my maternal village known as my *koro ni vasu*. Protocols of the *Vanua* using the *Vanua* research framework were adhered to (Nabobo-Baba, 2006). This framework involves methods that are grounded in the realities of Indigenous Fijian values, protocols of relationships, knowledge and ways of knowing (p. 24). Within Western research tenets, conducting the study with participants known to the researcher is often not considered ethical because of the suggested lack of objectivity included in such circumstances. As an Indigenous researcher, it was important for me to conduct the study at either one of my parent's villages or my husband's village because, based on Fijian 'ways of being', this is what is expected. Conducting this research in any other village in Fiji could imply that I do not belong to a village or may imply that I have been ousted from my own village or do not know my position in reference to the land. This may also imply that I know little or have no common courtesy or knowledge of my own culture. The blame for not conducting the research in one of these villages, however, would rest with my family (my parents). In the Indigenous world, I am never an individual but always part of a collective (Ravuvu, 1987, 1993; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Nabobo-Baba, 2008). Therefore, to go alone would be an insult first to my immediate relatives, and those receiving me at the village. This does not mean that I cannot go to another village. If I do go to another village, it would involve another set of complex cultural proto-

cols and obligations, and extended members of my paternal and husband's family would have to accompany me. This process would be done by Indigenous Fijians when entering any village. The required protocols and behaviour is called '*i tovo vakavanua*' or *vakarau vakavanua*: literally protocols or behaviour associated with the *Vanua*. In her study of Vugalei epistemology, Nabobo-Baba stated that:

Appropriate customs and behaviour are determined by a system of kinship relationships and life principles. Appropriate behaviour is based on the tenet that spiritual and material worlds are interconnected; respect for people, resources, the ancestors, and God, governs all important behaviours and values. (Nabobo-Baba, 2006: 88)

In conducting these protocols, we are carrying out appropriate customs within the *Vanua* and the Fijian community. The belief is that not performing the appropriate protocol could provoke anger, curses and consequently the wrath of the ancestors within the land we have entered. Because of the Fijian spiritual connections with the land and our ancestors, the belief is that not conducting the appropriate behaviour has negative implications from the spiritual world that may manifest in the physical world (Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Ravuvu, 1983).

For an Indigenous researcher, knowledge of the appropriate research site can be based on what the literature refers to as our connection to the *Vanua* and knowing the empirical world and social order or socio-cultural relationships in the village. The cultural discernment group understood that not adequately discussing this process of deciding where to conduct the research and not adhering to the associated cultural protocols had implications not only in terms of damaging the social order and relationships within all the extended families involved but could also lead to spiritual curses and other repercussions within my extended family from the *Vanua*.

Discerning relationships in the village

When we first arrived in the village, an aunt from another clan in the village came and told me that I should come and stay at her home for

the duration of the research. I was very fond of her as she once lived with us in the city when I was growing up. I did not see a problem with that and was excited about being able to stay with her. I told my cultural discernment group and when they all gave me a quizzical look, I knew I was about to get a long explanation as they told me to sit down. They explained that the house in which we were currently staying belongs to my mother's clan. To live in another clan's house will not only offend the elders of my mother's clan but also would also reflect negatively on the cultural discernment group who were perceived by the villagers as the moral compass in the context of my research. Therefore, the assumption is that this cultural discernment group should be teaching me the values of the *Vanua* and knowing the ways of being in the village. Of course this was met initially with a lot of resistance on my part as I did not really see how staying with another relative could be wrong. Eventually after all the explanation of what may occur if I did stay with the relative, I felt that it was in my best interest, and more respectful of village ethics, not to go.

The group knew relationships in the village because they grew up in the village and understood the relations and boundaries within the village context. The group also understood the genealogy of the village, where the physical and social boundaries were, which relative needed to be visited, who needed to be recognised with certain gifts which we brought and who needed to be acknowledged (including those who were deceased or absent). Most importantly, they knew how I should carry myself in the presence of others to show respect at all times. These protocols are an accumulation of the villagers' knowledge about maintaining social order, understanding local socio-cultural relationships and the manner in which these relationships needed to be respected.

Respect was displayed several ways. During our stay in the village, food plates were brought at every meal from different households referred to as *itabetabe*³ or *takitaki* (food brought to guests). Any leftover food would be taken over to the neighbours to be shared. In addition, members of the extended village community would bring yams, livestock, mats and *masi*⁴ or tapa cloth to acknowledge and honour our rela-

tionship; this cultural practice is referred to as 'veisiko'.⁵ The villagers' gift-giving gestures signified the importance of honouring our relationships or *veikauwaitaki* (to care for another) that emulates *veidokai* (respect). At every visit, the 'cultural discernment' group would explain the relationship and tell me how I should refer to them as my aunt or uncle; naming the relationship accorded the level of respect I needed to display. Knowing how to show respect is learnt from any early age within the Fijian culture. Processes associated with honouring relationships are part of Fijian village norms and practices and are thus a way of maintaining harmony and acknowledging and honouring relationships within the village structure (Ravuvu, 1987, 1993; Nabobo-Baba, 2008).

Discerning cultural protocols and links to the Vanua

The importance of a display of knowledge of the empirical world and the relationships and social-order and our links to the *Vanua* can also be illustrated by the protocols that had to be conducted as part of this research. The cultural protocols, including materials to be given to groups and participants of the study, were discussed by the group. They decided that a *tabua*⁶ and *yaqona*⁷ would be needed for the *sevusevu*⁸ ceremony. The cultural protocol of the *sevusevu* not only honours the land but, if accepted by the village elders, it implies a blanket consent for us to be in the village and for all villagers to participate and support our work, whether research or otherwise. With this approval, individual consent was redundant. From the university's perspective, I was required to seek the individual consent of each research participants, but from the Indigenous Fijian perspective this may be considered an insult to the collective permission already given by the village elders.

To meet the demands of both worlds, I explained to the women that in the Western world, individual consent is required. I had to reassure the women the consent was in no way disrespecting what has been done at the village level. Instead, I asked them to consider the option and to be aware that they are in no way obligated to sign the consent. I felt awkward explaining this and felt that I was solely doing

this for the university's ethics process, knowing that what we were going to discuss was understood to be confidential and that in our Indigenous world this did not have to be stated outright.

An additional component of the cultural protocols included the '*kida*',⁹ which required that a whale's tooth (or *tabua*) be presented (the biggest one we had) to the village chief to acknowledge our ancestors and close relatives who have passed on and to apologise for our absence from their funerals. As a result, it was decided that five *tabua* were needed, and these were given to me by the cultural discernment group. *Yaqona* or *waka* (eight kava roots) were provided to account for all the ceremonies plus visitations that might occur during the stay in the village. We also took ingredients for tea and Western food items considered valuable in the village, as shipments take several weeks to get to the village. Also included were bales of fabric, laundry powder and soap, everyday consumables, as well as church hymnals and bibles considered precious to the villagers. In addition, we left for the village assuming that everything we took might not come back with us, as relatives might request it. Therefore, giving things away valued the relationship regardless of the value of the item being given. This giving, similar to the way the villagers brought food to be shared, contributes to the overall sense of reciprocity built into the research, maintaining relationships in the village and reinforcing the value of *veikauwaitaki*. Knowing what to do and what to take relies on the norms of the village and is what is expected. The cultural discernment group assigned roles to ensure that each cultural protocol was conducted appropriately, therefore strengthening our links to the *Vanua*. An integral part of strengthening our relationships is through gift giving and the reciprocity process. What and how much to give was a huge area of debate among those in the discernment group; there was a lot of discussion, and some frustrations had to be resolved before research could begin within the village setting.

Discerning reciprocity and gift giving

The notion of reciprocity and gifting is a good illustration of Fijian ways of knowing as it

relates to knowledge of the cultural system and relationships within the village. My mother was expected to give back to the villagers by way of her profession. She is acknowledged as a Church minister's wife, a trainer or teacher in Christian education and women's issues. I had to incorporate her role into the ethics application along with a guideline of how the research and my mother's training and teaching would take place alongside the research. This role was not an addition to the process but a necessity in order to fulfil what is viewed as culturally appropriate in accordance with the *Vanua* and to the maintenance of social order and socio-cultural relationships. According to the academy, though, my mother's role conflicts with the standard section on ethical issues present in the project in all New Zealand university human ethics approval forms that seeks to ensure that there is no 'conflict of interest' in the project.

The academy fully supported most of the elements of reciprocity built into this research project (giving of gifts, sharing of knowledge, etc.). However, the committee was concerned over the possible linking or interference of religious or missionary activities with the project and felt that a focus on community development initiatives might be more appropriate. I was able to successfully mediate and resolve this tension by explaining how status is understood within a Fijian worldview. Taking part in the religious activities is viewed as part of the reciprocity process expected by the village (Miyazaki, 2004; Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Brison, 2007; Ryle, 2010). Our participation ensured that relationships are maintained in the village and in doing so became part of the reciprocity process. As an academic, I clearly understood what the concern was; at the same time I know that I am accountable to my people for the rest of my life.

'Discerning' selection of participants

The human ethics approval form submitted through the university human ethics committee had a set of criteria, required by all New Zealand universities. The process was quite rigorous as I had to critically think about ethical requirements of the academy and also as an Indigenous researcher. After a few days in the village, I realised that in order to engage partici-

pants and to ensure that they fully participated, I had to stop controlling the process. Goffman (1989) refers to this process as 'fully penetrating a place', allowing yourself to be vulnerable to the culture of the place and letting go of the rigid process required of me from the university's ethics process. As explained by Gege (2001: 278), '. . . it is about our ontology and what we want to create for our future generations. What good is political independence if we remain colonised epistemologically?' The ontology of the research process required that I work alongside participants and allow villagers to have some control: for example, in selecting participants for the study and the activities we did together during the research process. All these research processes conducted alongside participants would not have been possible if I had controlled the process as required by the university's ethics protocols. The research process encouraged by the 'cultural discernment' group did not see villagers as 'objects' of the research but rather as participants that have a voice in how the research process was to take place. What was ethical as an Indigenous researcher was to ensure that the villagers agreed on the process and that I did not disregard their knowledge of what was appropriate. This was not an easy for me as I thought initially that I had broken every rule in the ethics protocols of the academy.

Within the Indigenous context, the women felt they had to take care of me¹⁰ and immediately wanted to help with what was needed to make the research possible. After explaining the purpose of the study, one of the elders spoke to the women and they collectively selected participants for the study. The women ensured that there was an equal distribution among the three clans in the selection of participants and that each extended family was represented in the sample. Sets of understandings within the Western academy about individualised, voluntary participation in research appeared to be breached by the collective selection process employed by the villagers. Collective decision-making about participating in research, as described here, is an example of the disconnection between ethical requirements within the academy and what took place in reality in the village setting – potentially placing me in an awkward position as an Indigenous researcher.

Another example of the disconnection between Western research ethics and village ethics was the individual photo consent required by the academy.

Photo consent during the research process

The whole village was in control of what should be included in the photos; therefore, the process of photo consent became redundant and almost an insult to the villagers. Participants and villagers wanted me to take pictures of everything. There was an initial hesitation on my part as I felt that this was far from what the academy required. Participants felt that every picture taken should be shown to the world. They wanted the world to catch a glimpse of who they are. Villagers wanted to teach me everything. Not taking their picture, or not wanting to photograph an event, would make the villagers feel that they were not important enough to be included in the study. I, therefore, took pictures of what the participants and villagers told me to take. The university human ethics approval form required clarification on whom or what will be photographed, when, and for what purpose, and what the consent process was for the photographs taken. The university's ethics process, was concerned with the way the photos would be used. The story, however, illustrates how this worked out differently in the research setting: if I did not take photographs, the participants and villagers felt that the activity (and by implication the person) was not important enough for me to notice.

Concerns expressed by the ethics committee about the support people involved in the research, as well as consent processes for participating in research or for taking photographs in the village, suggest that Western understandings about ethical research do not translate easily to Indigenous settings. Existing literature (Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999; Kenney, 2009), feedback from conference presentations, as well as discussions with fellow Indigenous researchers also confirm that I am not alone in experiencing discomfort with Western ethical frameworks. To paraphrase Goffman (1989), ethnographic research is about getting into place and making yourself (and your culture) vulnerable; for this reason Western research ethics need to be open to alternative ethical practices.

Conclusions

The cultural processes that took place during my work in Fiji as an Indigenous researcher suggests that when working within Indigenous population groups, new forms of ethical practice are required and should be considered as expert knowledge. Human ethics processes as organised within the academy may be viewed as technologies for the calculation and management of risk. As an Indigenous researcher, cultural discernment ensured that the research process was ethical within the cultural context of research setting. In this research, the knowledge of the cultural discernment group was based on having an understanding and knowledge of the Fijian way of life and an understanding of the *Vanua* and associated cultural processes and protocols. The insider role, the reflection processes, the role of the family members and the discussion process with elders and relational support throughout the research process collectively formed the basis of the 'cultural discernment' mechanism. The group discerned or made judgements on cultural processes to ensure that those actions taken in the course of the research were culturally appropriate and ethically sound within this particular research setting. When Indigenous ways of knowing are misappropriated or misunderstood, more damage and harm can be created and neocolonisation perpetuated.

Notes

- 1 *Vanua*, in the context of the way of knowing, refers to 'a people, their chief, their defined territory, their waterways or fishing grounds, their environment, their spirituality, their history, their epistemology and culture' (Nabobo-Baba, 2006: 155).
- 2 *Vasu* is primarily defined as the village connection through the mother or the maternal links to a village.
- 3 Food brought by village members to acknowledge and honour relationships, usually their best food or if a delicacy is being made, this was done throughout our stay in the village.
- 4 Traditional Fijian bark cloth made from Mulberry tree (*Broussonetia papyrifera*) used in weddings, and other Fijian ceremonies.
- 5 Literally means to visit – in Fijian custom one cannot go empty handed to visit someone.
- 6 A polished tooth of a sperm whale, the most valuable item of Fijian property and used in exchange and ceremony (Nabobo-Baba, 2006: p. 155).
- 7 Plant of and drink made from *Piper methysticum*.
- 8 Acknowledging entrance onto the land.

- 9 Literally means to be in shock, when someone dies. My mother had been away for 40 years and myself 20 years.
- 10 Taking care of me displayed their respect for me as their 'vasu' defined as the village connection through the mother or the maternal links to a village.

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