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‘Talanoa as Empathic Research’

Trisia Farrelly¹, Unaisi Nabobo-Baba²

*Paper for presentation at the International Development Conference 2012
Auckland, New Zealand, 3-5 December, 2012*

Abstract

Talanoa has recently been taken up by development practitioners and others as an appropriate research method in Pacific contexts. However, there is a danger that *talanoa* is simply replacing ‘informal open-ended interviews’ whilst glossing over its emotional and cultural complexity. Empathy is an intersubjective and embodied experience which is vital to ethnographic research in development contexts. In this presentation, I will explore *talanoa* as a culturally appropriate ethnographic Indigenous method in the Pacific. *Talanoa* has been defined as talking about nothing in particular, chat, or gossip and it is within the cultural milieu of *talanoa* that knowledge and emotions are shared. Those who write about *talanoa* as a Pacific research methodology describe *talanoa* as a holistic and embodied amalgamation of the emotions, knowledge, interests, and experiences between researcher and participant/s. For indigenous Fijians, values such as empathy, respect, love and humility are essential to the *vanua* as indigenous worldview. *Talanoa* is an embodied expression of the *vanua* concept. Highlighting the connection between *talanoa* and empathy is vital in ensuring development practitioners and other Pacific researchers are implicitly aware of the political dimensions, cultural appropriacy, and socio-ecological impact of their research methods. This connection is also critical in illuminating how the appropriate application of *talanoa* as method may decolonise research in the Pacific and contribute to empowering development policy and practice.

Key words: talanoa, empathy, decolonising methods, Pacific

¹ Dr Trisia Farrelly, Lecturer Anthropology Programme, School of People, Environment, and Planning, Private Bag 11222, Massey University, New Zealand 4442. Farrelly@massey.ac.nz

² Associate Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Room 210E, School of Education Building, University of Guam, Guam 96923. nabobo_u@uguam.uog.edu

Much of what has been written today on Indigenous methodologies in the Pacific has been captured in education literature - not development studies or social sciences more broadly. A number of scholars have written about culture-specific epistemologies, ontologies, and pedagogies in the Pacific. However, these have not been explicitly applied to methodologies. Of the small number of localised methodologies presented in Pasifika academic literature, perhaps only three *Kaupapa Maori*, the *Kakala Framework*, and Unaisi's *Vanua Research Framework* have been specifically focussed and developed as comprehensive Indigenous research methods specific to a cultural context within the Pacific region.

Since his presentation in Honolulu where he presented *talanoa* as a potential mode for conflict resolution following the 2000 coup, Sitiveni Halapua has led a growing number of Pasifika researchers to re-imagine *talanoa* as a culturally-appropriate Pasifika research methodology. *Talanoa* research is now arguably the most prominent research methodology applied across the Pacific. Here, we will present some of our concerns with the way *talanoa* research has been presented in the literature to date. We will argue for the merits of empathic apprenticeship as an intentional, embodied, emotional, and intersubjective *process* between the researcher and the participant. We will also argue that empathic apprenticeship as the potential to enhance shared understandings between all human beings and that it provides a meaningful contribution to decolonising research methodologies.

Rooted in oratory tradition, *talanoa* is a concept recognised in many island nations across the Pacific including Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Niue, Hawai'i, the Cook Islands, and Tonga (Prescott, 2008). For Halapua (2008), *talanoa* may be understood as 'engaging in dialogue with, or telling stories to each other absent [of] concealment of the inner feelings and experiences that resonate in our hearts and minds' (p. 1). Tongan academic, Timote Vaoleti (2006), relates the two different, though related parts of the whole word, to interpret *tala* as 'inform, relate, or tell' and *noa* as meaning 'nothing in particular'. So for Vaoleti, *talanoa* literally means 'talking about nothing in particular' without any particular framework for that discussion (p. 23) or '[a] personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and their aspirations' (Vaoleti, 2006, p. 21). According to Nabobo-Baba (2007), it can also mean 'to offload'. For Halapua (2003, p. 18) *talanoa* is also a philosophy involving 'an open dialogue where people can speak from their hearts and where there are no preconceptions'. As we will be advocating the centrality of empathy to *talanoa* as research methodology, the way Halapua defines *talanoa* here signals the beginning of the path through which we hope to lead you in this presentation.

Talanoa as a research methodology does not simply entail applying the principles employed in the common ethnographic method of informal interviews. Nor is it synonymous with chatting or informal discussions outside of Indigenous Fijian cultural contexts. This is due to complex cultural differences. To emphasise this point, *talanoa* is not all about ‘what you say’ or even just about ‘how one says it’. Nabobo-Baba (2006, p. 94) and others remind us that in Fiji, even silence is far from empty: it is a way of knowing: ‘there is eloquence in silence...a pedagogy of deep engagement between participants’ (Nabobo-Baba, 2006, p. 94). What we wish to emphasise here is that valid *talanoa* research is undertaken with the understanding that it is a culturally and emotionally embedded reciprocal exchange between researcher and participants. It requires a deep, interpersonal relationship and emotional sharing between all parties involved (Morrison, Vaioleti, & Vermeulen, 2002 cited in Otsuka 2006, p. 3).

Most writers refer to *talanoa* almost exclusively as it is applied in a formal public forum (e.g. Halapua, 2003, Nabobo-Baba, 2006; Robinson & Robinson, 2005). There are different forms of *talanoa* including that which is formal and instrumental (*veivosaki*) and more informal and even serendipitous forms of *talanoa*. There are also a vast variety of protocols and expectations required for each form. This depends, for example, on whether you *talanoa* with *tabu* kin, the sick, and chiefs for example. However, for the purpose of this presentation, we wish to focus specifically on *talanoa* as private informal ‘chat’. This is because these forms of *talanoa* provide opportunities to (at least in my participants’ words) ‘talk straight’ not otherwise afforded in formal *talanoa*. ‘Talking straight from the heart’ opens up space for greater empathic understanding – this is the *emic* perspective sought by all good ethnographic researchers. I have previously written about informal *talanoa* as opportunities in which more intimate sharing may take place under the right conditions. In this process, ‘conscientizing’ or advancing critical consciousness (Freire, 1968), creativity, passive resistance (Scott, 1985; Cohen, 2004), and negotiation of new skills, knowledge and values can be played out without the restrictions of avoidance or *tabu* relationships, and free from fear of retribution (Farrelly, 2009, 2010, 2011). This paper progresses this work to discuss how the empathy required in *talanoa* between participant and researcher may be practiced.

As indicated earlier, we have a number of concerns about the ways in which *talanoa* has been presented as a research method. Few writers have clearly articulated *how talanoa* research could be conducted as a culturally-specific method and methodology. We share Sailau’s

(Suaalii-Sauni's) (2012) concerns that *talanoa* research has been veiled in metaphors and rhetoric rendering it politically and academically powerful, albeit somewhat mystical. Often, *talanoa* research is presented as synonymous with open-ended, informal interviews or focus groups conducted within a broad set of Pasifika cultural protocols. This only goes some way to decolonising research in the Pacific because it can perpetuate the representation of all Pasifika cultures as homogeneous. Instead, *talanoa* research needs to deal with the deeper epistemological and ontological underpinnings of the lived realities of our individual participants within their specific cultural contexts. Some examples of differences between Pasifika cultures and within Pasifika nations can be found in the notions of relatedness, expectations, assumptions, values, and protocols associated with the ways in which we communicate with one another. All these are embodied and imagined in different ways by different individuals. *Talanoa* should be conducted with intentional 'openness' to these diverse lifeworlds.

Another concern is that few describe *talanoa* research as a culturally complex research 'process'. Oftentimes, the definition of *talanoa* research is reduced to sitting down around a bowl of *kava* and talking informally with our participants about a topic within a set of cultural protocols. But we hope that by the end of this paper, you will come to know, or be reminded, that *talanoa* is much more than this. Contra to the assumption that it is a relatively static affair, *talanoa* takes place everywhere much of the time and to function as it should, *talanoa* research requires movement. If we want to understand our participants' hopes and struggles, we need to holistically contextualise the words they share with us as we move with them through the course of their daily lives. But this movement is not only physical. When our participants talk, they carry us on a cognitive journey, imaginatively moving us from past to present to future so that we can better understand how they live and feel their world. *Talanoa* research starts with the first contact made for the *sevusevu* (requesting entree) and considering the mutual transformation that occurs in the intersubjective spaces between the researcher and the researched, it never really ends. We hold our participants in our hearts and within our bodies for a long time after our fieldwork: we bear emotional and physical scars and share physically and emotionally in our participants' hopes, dreams, and moments of joy. For this reason, we have chosen to avoid the common phrase *talanoa* 'session' in *talanoa* research because it refers to an artificial spatial and temporal containment of a much more complex and ongoing process. *Talanoa* research also needs to be carried out with the understanding that locally-specific knowledge systems are in a constant state of flux and are

perpetually negotiated alongside new knowledge and ways of knowing. Knowledge and culture stand still for no one. All that we have discussed refers to what it means to do ‘empathic apprenticeship’ and we will talk more specifically in a minute but first we would like to discuss why empathy is vital in decolonising research in the Pacific.

Another concern is a more personal but valid one, I think. How do *I* as a non-indigenous researcher apply *talanoa* in such a way as to contribute to the decolonisation of research in the Pacific? The method and level of accuracy claimed in any attempt to empathise with our participants, particularly cross-culturally, is highly controversial. We know that. But we are not alone (e.g. Stueber 2006, pp. 195-218) in arguing that despite the challenges associated with empathising, a first-person perspective-taking must be prioritised as a form of social knowing and awareness. And this is particularly pertinent in a cross-cultural (or an insider-outsider) context. While no one can claim to fully understand the inner thoughts of another person, when we collaborate with our participants and co-researchers, we are obligated in our work to do everything we can to further our understanding of others perspectives, at least as one human being to another who shares and similarly embodies emotions such as pain, love, fear, hope, and despair. For us, empathic apprenticeship is a step in the right direction.

I often hear students and researchers saying that they want to apply the *talanoa* method in their research. But we feel that only with prolonged periods of participant-observation can the trust and mutual respect required of valid *talanoa* research be developed. Further, the long period of residence is necessary for our participants’ multiple “truths” to be exhumed. Is the mere effort to apply this approach enough or do short stints in the field have the potential to produce potentially invalid or even harmful research data? Litea has made it clear to us today that the academy’s ethics processes require a cultural and critical re-evaluation (Meo-Sewabu, 2012). This currently somewhat abstract thing called ‘*talanoa* research’ is likely to be endorsed by university ethics committees as ‘culturally appropriate’ despite time constraints.

Considering we work within the social sciences, we are surprised that emotion and empathy – those very things that distinguish us from other species (at least at high levels and according to non-Indigenous scientific ontologies) – are virtually absent from our research methodologies. What we are left with is research that is sterile, impersonal, disconnected, reductionist, objective, instrumental, and structural. Consequently, our research results reflect something far from our participants’ lived realities. Research methodologies which

bring us closer to understanding others' emotions, feelings, and attitudes provide us with a more complex and intimate understanding of cultural and social forms. For Lutz and White (1986), attending to emotions in our work is important because 'emotions mediate social action: they arise in social situations and carry implications for future thought and action' (p. 419). In addition, empathy '...can reanimate the sometimes robotic image of humans which social science has purveyed...Incorporating emotion into ethnography [they say] will entail presenting a fuller view of *what is at stake* for people in everyday life' (p. 431).

Emotions involve cultural meaning and bodily feeling. These feelings are socially and symbolically produced, expressed and felt. As Rosaldo argues, '[e]motions are not things opposed to thought' as is often assumed in Western science, rather emotions are '*embodied* thoughts, thoughts seeped with the apprehension that "I am involved"' (my emphasis, 1984, p. 143). However, although *talanoa* is widely understood as involving shared emotion, the embodiment of knowledge and emotion and the way that we might access that emotion in others is nowhere explained. As a result, *talanoa* research is in some ways in danger of reinforcing the mind/body, nature/culture dichotomies inherent where they do not meaningfully apply. Emotions, body, society, and environment, should not be so easily disconnected just because it best fits with non-Indigenous scientific rigour.

We have drawn on Gieser's (2008) 'apprenticeship of attention' to what we will refer to here as an 'empathic apprenticeship'. An empathic apprenticeship assumes that emotion is integral to perception and therefore to knowledge. Embodiment, emotion and empathy come together to fine-tune our perceptions and actions toward 'an education [apprenticeship] of attention' (p. 300) to the lived and felt realities of our participants. This is a conscious and intentional process whereby one adopts the stance of a learner but also of a co-producer of knowledge. The researcher must acknowledge power in the process (and the socio-political context in which the apprenticeship takes place) and how this impacts on emotion and knowledge-sharing.

Lutz's and White's (1986) *Anthropology of Emotions* concludes that perspectives that prioritise inner bodily experiences have been so persistent because this perspective is aligned with Western epistemologies and ontologies that reflect our individualised notion of personhood. If we want to come even close to empathising with our participants, we first need to develop a comprehensive understanding of our participants' 'personhood' and how this personhood is understood in relation to their broader social realm. Indigenous Fijian

‘selves’ are commonly understood as more socio-centric than egocentric due to the epistemological and ontological connectivities inherent in the *vanua* concept as a framework for knowing and living. While it is far too complex to go into any detail here, understanding the *vanua* as a framework for living and knowing is essential if we are to learn anything about our Indigenous Fijian participants and co-researchers. Acknowledging that the *vanua* concept must be understood within its locally-specific context in Fiji, the following gives us a basic understanding of how it might be conceptualised: Ravuvu (1983, 1987) and Ratuva (2002) describe the *vanua* as incorporating three inter-relationships: the territorial sphere including soil or land (*qeleva*); social kinship (*veivewani*); and its cosmological dimensions (*yavutu* and *vū*). The following is an example of Fijian personhood as it is felt within the *vanua* concept: During my 2004 doctoral research, my participants understood the intentionalities of ancestors to be disclosed through the health or affliction of person’s body or ecological elements such as a healthy or poor crop. These intentions were often symbolic of whether or not the whole community was following the straight path³ (Katz, 1999) (*na sala dodonu*) i.e. life lived *vakavanua* (the *vanua* way). So our point here is that what is shared in *talanoa* is done in consideration of the wider cultural milieu of participants’ social existence. This includes the kinship, ethics, and customs that constitute an individual’s world.

Because empathy is *imaginative* and *emotional* (Halpern, 2001), empathic methodology involves sharing a person’s emotion while imagining what things must be like for them. It also involves on-going affective *attunement*. *Attunement* is perceptual ability and the primary way in which humans communicate. 60% of all human communication is non-verbal. Attunement is one way of tapping into both the spoken and the unspoken word and empathy is one of the key elements of the process of attunement. Because attunement is experienced and does not rely on a shared language, it is ideal for enhancing empathic understanding in cross-cultural communication. It also enhances empathic understanding across insider-insider, and insider-outsider positionalities.

Attunement is an intentional skill that takes time to develop. The researcher interacts with their participants in a variety of situations over a long period of time. The researcher’s powers of imagination are used to their fullest whilst moving in and out of the subjective and intersubjective spaces between researchers and participants. The researcher must open their

minds and heighten their awareness to tune into their participant's bodily perception through their own embodied reactions. For example, a researcher observing a woman closing her body in on itself when discussing a violent incident may also observe that her own body is reacting similarly to the story shared with them as they imagine what it might be like for their participant to experience this. The researcher also observes how the participant reacts to their questions, comments, actions, silences and other non-verbal communication. How is my behaviour and words influencing my participant and the research process? What emerges from this intersubjective space is a level of shared humanity and a recognition of some part of ourselves in others. In Fijian, Unaisi and her colleagues (2012) have referred to this as *kauwai*. *Kauwai* is deep empathy in which the two parties involved are engaging in deep spiritual attunement. This emanates from kin based or other relationships that connect life experiences, histories, and especially shared or disconnected values. This facilitates empathic learning for both researcher and participant over time and the co-production of knowledge. Attunement also helps us to recognise when to remain silent and how others give meaning to silence (Halpern, 2001)⁴.

So a purely verbal exchange on the mat is not enough to achieve valid research data from *talanoa*. But Hollan (2008) argues that even the most admirable efforts at attunement are not enough for empathic understanding. What is needed, he argues is 'on-going dialogue as ...[an]... *active* investigation into the ways people in different times and places 'promote or discourage understanding of themselves' (my emphasis, p. 475). This on-going dialogue as inter-subjective process distinguishes empathy from mere projection (that is, the attribution of one's emotional reactions and perspectives to another) (Margulies, 1989 cited in Hollan (2008, p. 476). It is this on-going inter-subjective process of participant-observation that helps us to confirm or deny our initial assumptions about our participants' feelings and perspectives. We need to check that our bodily reactions and imaginings of how someone perceives their world are as accurate as possible: For example, we could say to our participant: "When we were working in your *teitei*, I noticed that you grew very quiet for a time. It was when you were talking about your new role in the project. Are you worried about the new responsibilities this will bring?"

⁴ This is something I plan to discuss in more depth in Unaisi's planned edited book on silence in the Pacific.

The notion that this is a continual and sometimes time-intensive process also assumes that the process of empathy is ever entirely error-free. How people feel about things change over time and our attempt to empathise may even affect the way people had initially felt about something. We cannot deny that our presence in the field does not influence those with whom we work. Perhaps we should be quicker to accept the mutually constituted nature of the research process.

While much of the literature does not clearly explain how to include emotions and embodiment in *talanoa* research, it is clear that these are essential elements. For example, Otsuka (2006) states, ‘In *talanoa* research, researchers and participants share not only each other’s time, interest, and information, but also emotions...’ (p. 4). This is also eloquently expressed by Vaioleti (2006) who describes *talanoa* research as ‘holistically intermingle[ing the] researchers’ and participants’ emotions, knowledge, experiences, and spirits’ (p. 24). Similarly, Unaisi (2007) has expressed the embracing of spiritualities among people, especially related peoples. So Fijians may refer to a certain *talanoa* as *vakamosi yalo* (painful to the spirit-soul) or *vakamarautaka na yalo* (causing happiness to one’s spirit-soul). Otsuka (2006) also alludes to the need for attunement when he says that both verbal and non-verbal cues are essential for meaningful *talanoa* research.

Our job is to understand people’s needs - from their perspective. Unless we provide the conditions in which our participants feel they can ‘talk from the heart’, we are letting them down – we can do better. In the specific context in which we conduct research, it is our responsibility to be led by our participants in the best way to conduct our research. In other words, our research methodology must reflect the knowledge-making and knowledge-sharing of our participants’ – not the other way around. The process and content of *talanoa* research are intersubjectively constituted by past experiences, imagination, the environment, emotions that occur through remembering, and each person’s bodily and verbal responses to one another, and to that remembering. The product of *talanoa* research, therefore, is found at the nexus of shared knowledge-sensation-emotion. We argue that an embodied, holistic, and critically reflexive process whereby researchers endeavour to enhance their empathic understanding of their participants (and, as a consequence of this process, themselves as researchers) will contribute to the decolonisation of research and therefore policy and practice in the Pacific.

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