

Title: Pacific Talanoa and Participatory Action Research: providing a space for Auckland youth leaders to contest inequalities

Authors and affiliation: Conn C; A Said; L Sa'uLilo; P Fairbairn-Dunlop; L Antonczak; S Andajani; G Ofa Blake

Auckland University of Technology (AUT), New Zealand

Contact: cath.conn@aut.ac.nz

Introduction

This research arose from our experiences, past and present, of working with youth in marginalized communities, using empowerment-based methods to address inequalities (Conn, 2012; Antonczak, 2013;). In 2015 we embarked on a pilot project, which experimented further with empowerment-based research in the context of Auckland, New Zealand. Based on current notions that youth can play a key role in a change agenda (Lundy, 2007) we asked: How can an empowering space be provided for Auckland youth leaders' perspectives and actions? This working paper discusses the process of providing such a space for Auckland youth leaders who are from marginalised communities; working collaboratively with a group of academics. The research aimed to foster youth leadership and advocate for extending this in an environment of inequalities. This working paper focuses on the role of empowerment-based methodology in the project, incorporating Pacific Talanoa and mobile technologies.

Auckland health inequalities

In 2002 the New Zealand Ministry of Health [NZMoH] defined health inequality as “differences in health that are unnecessary, avoidable and unjust” (2002, p. 27). NZMoH (2002) stated that ethnicity was the key influence shaping inequalities in health between different population groups. The health, wellbeing and socio-economic participation of youth from Auckland communities experiencing inequity, including Maori, Pacific and refugee communities, is a concern in New Zealand. Youth experiences are impacted by factors such as family poverty and lack of employment opportunities, and these factors are reflected in poor health and wellbeing outcomes for them and their communities (NZMoH, 2013).

NZMoH, publically recognizing the existence and bases of inequality, have called for approaches which addressed ethnic, gender, socioeconomic and geographic inequalities (NZMoH, 2002; 2013). Yet if addressing inequity is indeed a core value of health policy, and there is considerable evidence to back it up, why does the New Zealand government and society continue to tolerate so much inequity and social injustice? Explanations of the status quo include the lack of real political will and social consensus to make the required structural changes, which are dependent primarily on the redistribution of wealth and opportunity (Rashbrooke, 2013; 'Inside New Zealand: Mind the Gap', 2013). Notably, NZMoH aspirations seem at odds with an environment, locally and globally, which is increasingly weak at regulating payment of tax by wealthier populations and institutions as a vital means to resource the necessary changes. There are examples of countries or regions that have been successful in achieving more equitable societies, mainly by increasing opportunities for education and employment, and we can learn from them; but they too face considerable challenge in sustaining equity gains (Conn & Diesfeld, 2014).

There are those who argue for a need to change the inequalities and social determinants language, moving away from the political polarization of left and right thinking to achieve the societal buy-in required to address this issue (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2010). Others suggest we need new and ambitious local and global financial mechanisms (Picketty, 2013). Twenty-first century strategies advocate for radical shifts away from 'business as usual'. The need for structural change seems stronger than ever. Given, this large scale and ambitious backdrop, we wondered what our role as academics might be, and that of the Auckland youth we work with in the setting of the university and the wider society, in this endeavour?

Youth leadership and addressing inequalities

Clearly, the need for action in the New Zealand context is urgent, but also of significance in the long term. We believe that the role of Auckland youth is vital in this agenda. First, research argues for the place of youth as catalysts in promoting solutions to social problems (Lundy, 2007). Tackling inequalities, such as those relating to health a particular focus of our research, requires changes to policy, systems and programmes (WHO, 2013). It also requires an informed and confident population who can advocate for such change within the broad societal context (Campbell et al, 2010). Arguably youth should be in the forefront of such a proactive population given their place in the future. This is even more of an imperative given the youthful nature of Auckland's future

population; and the high proportion of youth from marginalised communities (Redstone and Conn, 2011).

Studies describe youth leaders as having the ability to guide others on a course of action, influence their opinion and behaviour, and show the way by going ahead. Also, leaders have the ability to analyze their own strengths and weaknesses, set personal goals, and have the confidence to carry them out. For this research leadership is not seen to be emanating from a single person, rather leadership is defined as a dynamic process emerging from the actions of groups of people to achieve common goals in group and inter-group relationships (Gosling, 2012).

In fact, there are many positive examples of youth leadership in the New Zealand context. Finlay (2010) describes the development of a youth council in Auckland and the important role it plays in city decision-making. Maori and Pacific youths' high participation and success in sports, church and other community and cultural and group based activities is well noted (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014). These reflect the incorporation of traditional and cultural approaches and new and alternative discourses constructing youth as active agents in society, rather than as vulnerable, passive, or problematic (Lundy, 2007). However, what is less clear is whether participation by youth in Auckland civic life has had any effect in reducing inequalities, and what enhanced youth participation and leadership could mean for such an agenda in future. Therefore, we started from the basis of wanting to recruit existing Auckland youth leaders involved in working with communities, and invite them to explore how leadership can be enhanced across the youth population for community based solutions, but also in influencing structural change.

Methods

Participatory Action Research and mobile technologies

Participatory action research (PAR) was our initial choice of methodology for this study given its established record in providing a safe space for youth; and as a change-oriented approach embedded in the suite of collaborative methods termed Participatory Research (Kemmis & MacTaggart, 2014). PAR seeks to bring researchers and community members together to identify problems, investigate and analyze problems together, and then collectively generate solutions (Ledwith & Springett, 2010). Going further PAR requires reflecting and learning from the implementation of solutions, and developing further cycles of action. Empowering methodologies

seek to promote social transformation by addressing powerful relationships initially between the researcher and the researched, but ultimately in relation to the wider society. Within an empowerment project, researchers aim to equalize the inherent power imbalance evident in their relationship with research participants by: paying specific attention to issues of voice and interpretation; seeking to understand participants own meanings and interpretations and using these interpretations of reality rather than the researchers' own (Wong et al 2010). This translates practically to participants being 'co-researchers' with maximum involvement in the design of the research, data collection and analysis, and application of findings.

Mobile technologies, and social media, were envisaged to be the main mechanism for data collection, analysis and dissemination given that many of today's youth are avid digital users and natives (Prensky, 2001). The project offered opportunities for the research team to build their capacity by providing mobile equipment and training in use of mobiles and social media. It was envisaged that through film, audio or other mobile means of communication youth leaders could reflect on their role; develop their critical conscience and judgment; use relevant information; draw on an awareness of their social reality; and plan a strategy to convey messages that benefits their preferred cause. Research shows that beyond the role of mobile technologies as a useful mechanism in empowerment methodology, it can extend the opportunities offered to young people to engage in civic life (Youniss et al, 2002; Beetham & White, 2014); offering opportunities to foster engagement on a scale which has never been possible before now. Yet there is a lack of research on what this might mean for the inequalities agenda.

Recruitment of youth co-researchers and the design process

The study followed a flexible definition of youth based on the cultural context rather than institutional definitions. Whilst the United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years many communities, consider the transition to adulthood (with its related role in decision-making) to be somewhat later than 24 years. For example, within the Samoan community youth are defined as those aged between 13-50 years (Tuagalu, 2011).

Early in 2014 a group of six youth leaders, aged between 20 and 30 years, were recruited to join with a group of academics from Auckland University of Technology (AUT) in what was perceived to be a growing and fluid research team. Recruitment started purposively with the academics identifying three youth leaders who they had collaborated with for the purposes of research. The three leaders

then invited three peers to join the group. Leadership activities in their respective communities included: sport and food projects with Pacific youth; in Female Genital Mutilation (FGM) prevention and physical activity projects with refugee communities; and in research with high school students about public health in the 21st century (Auckland district health board, 2014; Said, 2014). Most of the group had undertaken postgraduate study and had strong links with the university, and all are women. It is envisaged that through further action cycles this group will continue to grow to form a loose network or community of practice around fostering youth leadership in Auckland. A feature of the study was an openness to recruiting leaders from different marginalized communities in Auckland; reflecting and celebrating the diversity of the society. Hence youth leaders are collaborating together not only from their own but from different communities, reflecting the reality of their experiences of belonging to both in a multi-cultural city. The six youth leaders in the study identify with Maori, Pacific, and refugee communities.

The process of working together involved a series of meetings to get to know each other and design the project, starting with discussing the research concept. The group also received training in PAR and use of mobile technologies. The meetings took place in coffee shops and small meeting rooms on the university campus. Part way through the process, one youth member suggested that Talanoa method would be suited to the study because it embodies a narrative and informal style, comfortable for the group to use and reflecting the identity of Auckland society. The team member who suggested the change did a presentation of Talanoa method and how it might work well alongside PAR for the benefit of the rest of the group. The group considered the proposal and particularly liked the idea of a method that provided opportunities to tell personal stories, Talanoa being such that it provides a “culturally secure space where ‘I can be me’ ” (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014; 2015). Thus, Pacific Talanoa method combined with PAR, provided an approach which was owned and contextualized by the group.

An important feature of the study is the emphasis on creative spaces which offer great opportunities for documenting experiences and views visually, orally and using narrative. Two training workshops for the research team involved film-makers using live action and animation with mobile technology. Youth leaders chose to present their individual digital stories in different ways; such as using moving image, voice-over, and photos. Data collection and analysis was conducted by the youth leader team, without the presence of the academics in the group. It involved each leader telling their personal story, then sharing these stories with each other. Finally, the youth leaders conducted a

focus group, coordinated by one of the members, where they analysed their stories. The stories and the focus group discussion were recorded on smart phones or ipads.

This process of design, learning together, sharing, and analyzing will culminate in the development of a compilation short film and a *pecha kucha* presentation to share with others, such as, youth groups, schools, and decision-makers. In this way, as is the nature of action research, the project has now passed through the first cycle. The next action involves disseminating ideas about youth leadership; promoting a paradigm of youth as leaders; and inviting other youth to participate.

Methodological discussion: Talanoa and Participatory Action Research

Epistemology and Methodology A welcome innovation emerging from the design process was the combining of Talanoa method with PAR. The epistemological basis of Talanoa forefronts the knowledge construction processes of Pacific peoples drawing on Pacific world view: 'Talanoa's philosophical base is collective, oriented towards defining and acknowledging Pacific aspirations while developing and implementing Pacific theoretical and methodological preferences in research' (Vaiioletti, 2006:25). Talanoa are the common decision-making forum in Pacific communities and they usually follow a process of community (families) meeting together to discuss an issue of concern using the information and knowledge shared to create agreed to and community based solutions. The process of Talanoa can take place at any level or between any group of people.

Talanoa method and PAR are in a critical tradition grounded in scholarship which aimed to address the inequalities arising from the colonial experiences of communities in South America and the Pacific region. Whilst the origins of each are different in location and history they have a similar purpose in a critical research agenda which aims at destabilising the status quo, and benefiting the marginalised.

Talanoa as a method has synergies with PAR which is primarily collaborative providing a space for the knowledge of those who are voiceless or marginalised to lead in developing strategies. PAR is used in a variety of settings globally, often as part of a community development agenda, or in relation to intervention-based programmes. However, notably there has been criticism of the co-opting of PAR by organisations who use it as a tool for programme delivery, with limited regard for empowerment or destabilising norms (Cooke & Kothari, 2002).

In this project Talanoa was well received and adopted by the group of Auckland youth. The Pacific youth member who proposed Talanoa described the benefits in her presentation to the group: Talanoa method has an 'Empowering nature where participants share their experiences with peers including family and church'.

Researcher Position In the case of Talanoa, researchers collaborate with community leaders and create Pacific appropriate space for participant's to present their stories. In the project participants are constructed as co-researchers, in line with empowerment method, and they take part in the research design, research process, and dissemination, as well as having the opportunity if they wish for a long-term relationship with the research.

Methods Talanoa is a type of narrative inquiry, with a common culture of storytelling convenient and comfortable space for research to take place. Talanoa method is collaborative in that the stories are shared and discussed, building on the relationships between the storyteller(s) and others listening, with an aim of finding solutions to community problems. PAR similarly may involve narratives, although it draws on a range of methods with the element of choice given to co-researchers. Visual and expressive methods are popular with Talanoa and PAR as they allow for greater freedom and enjoyment for the co-researcher.

Over a period of time the youth leaders recorded and then shared their stories. Gloria in her story expresses her reason for becoming a leader:

...you know in New Zealand westernised cultures are very different, very individual way of thinking compared to a communal Pacific background. So yes that's my story I'm hoping to make a difference within the Pacific community and as such to a greater society overall.

Storytelling or narrative is a longstanding way for people from all cultures to express themselves and to talk about their experiences and therefore Talanoa has a universal quality making it attractive not only to Pacific peoples. From the storytelling stage of the data collection, the group seemed confident and comfortable enough with each other to move to the focus group for the purpose of discussing (analysing) the stories. Nasra's comment in the focus group gives a sense of the exchange about becoming a leader:

..like knowing your parents gave you an opportunity like you're really there to make your family proud and you're there to make your community proud so in order for that to start taking place someone has to be a leader in order for that transition to take place.

In the project smartphones were provided by the project, although a number of co-researchers had personal smartphones, and the group appeared to enjoy learning about the versatility and range of creative possibilities of the mobile (<https://vimeo.com/155584348>). The final stories included images of the sea and other symbols of the Pacific, animation of key words like 'family' and 'culture', and live to camera speaking; and these will be incorporated into a short film for dissemination. Whilst considered as 'digital natives' according to their age group, the youth team were generally more interested in the content creation process than the technology. This may indicate that it is still early days to describe even the young population as digital natives; it might indicate natural differences in preferences for technology; and it is likely to reflect the interests of the group in health and society rather than in technology.

Data collection and analysis In a collaborative action research there is no separation between data collection and analysis in the same way as other methodologies. One issue for the project was that of delays and gaps between activities. This is an issue noted in other collaborative studies where ownership is with a range of actors who often have busy lives and other demands on their time. There is a need to accept this as a feature of an empowerment agenda.

Outcomes and dissemination This paper is the first in a process of reporting which will include creating digital outputs for dissemination and furthering the goals of the action research. These will be presented in various fora such as youth clubs, Auckland Council and district health board venues. In discussing these possibilities in the focus group Losi notes the scope of social media for the project: 'Especially through social media like facebook - nowadays its so easy just to send something and make it public for the whole world to see'.

Conclusion and lessons learned for evidence and practice in an age of inequality

We started writing this paper about inequality in New Zealand, and the ethnic bias of this in our society; and we considered its intransigent nature as a significant social problem for Auckland society. We discussed the possible role of youth leaders in addressing this problem. We note that

there are youth leaders currently working with communities and we can learn from them; but that there is a lack of evidence, or indeed effort, looking what this might have in reducing inequalities.

Here we discussed a project which aimed to foster this, with the wider goal of contributing to addressing inequalities. The project used empowerment methodology of Talanoa and PAR to capture the views and experiences of a group of youth leaders, and build their skills as action researchers with the confidence and potential to contribute to a growing network. The first stage of the project demonstrated the potential for youth to take ownership of such a project. These are important first steps in a long-term initiative. The methods Talanoa and PAR were well received by the group, and mobile technologies at this stage mainly served to capture stories and a critical discussion. We believe that in the next stages mobiles will prove to be particularly crucial given their potential to reach a larger audience relatively easily. The focus on dissemination, through face to face means and using social media to develop the community of practice of youth leaders and extend their influence in New Zealand society will, we believe, be crucial to addressing an ambitious agenda designed to reduce inequalities.

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