Talanoa – Pasifika and beyond

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Abstract

In this paper I discuss how the values, beliefs, and processes of talanoa contribute to wholesome research. I used to think that my PhD journey should not have been this difficult. There were times when I had difficulties in supporting my intuitive thoughts. I concluded that this was my lack of academic skills, but now I recognize that those intuitive thoughts are aligned to indigenous worldviews. I realized that I was not the only one who faced this problem when I mentored Pasifika DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) students. In my perception, the lack of access to indigenous methodologies knowledge and a collaboration space made it difficult for students to engage their culture and tradition within their research proposal. I then understood the tension that I had felt when my own values conflicted with the mainstream methodologies I was expected to use in my research. As deadlines approached, it was safer for me to go with the prevalent acceptable research standards as there was neither time, nor an appropriate collaboration space, to think through such conflicts. In subsequently studying indigenous methodologies as an alternative approach to mainstream thinking, I found that talanoa with its underlying values and beliefs bridged the conflicts that I had felt. Talanoa reflected my reciprocal conversations during my interviews with the research participants, but I realised that the discussions lacked co-constructing research outcomes. I feel that just contemplating underlying talanoa values such as respect, reciprocity, collective responsibility, humility, love/charity, service, and spirituality form a basis for valuable conversations. In contrast, I find research interviews to be more process oriented with little contemplation to values attached.

Introduction

I am a Malaysian of Indian ethnicity with education based on the British system, and work experience in local and international businesses. Somewhere in this mix I had developed values that kept getting in the way of my PhD research journey as I tried to become an academic. I mentored Pasifika DBA (Doctor of Business Administration) students, who as part of their coursework did modules on theory and methodology leading on to their research proposal. In my perception, the lack of access to knowledge of indigenous methodologies and to a collaboration space, made it difficult for them to engage their culture and tradition. I was then reminded of the tension that I had felt when my own values conflicted with the mainstream methodologies I was expected to use in my research. As deadlines approached, it was safer to go with the prevalent acceptable research standards as there was neither time, nor an appropriate collaboration space, to think through such conflicts. This involvement with students who had an interest in indigenous methodologies triggered my interest in indigenous methodologies as an alternative approach.

In this paper, I discuss (a) background, features, and the use of talanoa in the Pacific Island nations, (b) my reflection on talanoa, (c) differences between research interviews and talanoa, (d) intricacies of facilitating a talanoa, and (e) challenges faced in engaging talanoa before I conclude with why talanoa is useful beyond Pasifika.

Engaging talanoa

Smith's (2021) work on decolonizing methodologies recognized the importance of the research agenda of indigenous peoples and explains how story telling is one way of passing values and beliefs of indigenous cultures to future generations. Unlike other forms of dialogue, talanoa does not have an agenda which actually restricts conversations, avoiding issues that do not fall within the boundaries of the agenda (Halapua, 2007). Halapua (2013) highlights the open process and integrity of talanoa that shapes the agenda that the participants can identify with and have a sense of ownership.

Talanoa is made up of two words, tala (talk) with noa (without a fixed agenda) to draw out experiences, knowledge and emotions of both researchers and participants (Hindley et al., 2020). Noa requires storytellers and the audience to listen without pre-determined ideas and opinions, and to develop a sense of belonging within the group; and it teaches that stories are told without concealing anything, eventually leading to a common agenda (Halapua, 2013). The aim then is to first understand and then reach an agreement to ensure that collected information is authentic (Vaioleti, 2006). The strength of talanoa is drawn from its grounding in indigenous philosophy and adaptation of local cultural practice (Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014). Customs, rituals, social status, language, and the professionalism of the researcher and participants are factors that affect the talanoa (Otunuku, 2011; Vaioleti, 2006). Attention to respect and reciprocity within interactions among Pasifika people is central to relationships when conducting talanoa (Tecun et al., 2018). Relationships between people within "the sacred, spiritual, and social spaces" is central in the Pasifika concept (Anae, 2019, 1). In talanoa, researchers and members of the participating community work collectively through reciprocal conversations by building upon inherent value-based connections (Vaioleti, 2006).

Talanoa is more than just having a conversation, as it encompasses cultural aspects of whom we talk with, and how, why, and where (Vaka, Brannelly, and Huntington, 2016). Embedded indigenous aspects such as song, story, spiritual, and dreams introduce elements that are not part of western methodology (Vaioleti, 2013). A good talanoa produces mālie, "the energizing and uplifting of spirits to a positive state of connectedness and enlightenment", and māfana, or "inwardly warm feelings" (Fa'avae, Jones, and Manu'atu, 2016, 140-141) allowing co-construction based on rich contextual information (Vaioleti 2006). Such connections found through relationships among researchers and communities are often missing in western research (Chilisa, 2012).

Talanoa is known in many Pacific Island nations including Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Solomon Islands, Niue, Hawai'i, and the Cook Islands (Prescott, 2008). While talanoa is applied in their own unique way in each of the Pacific Island nations, it is a shared tradition with similar protocols, and brings together the indigenous worldview beliefs of family, ancestral bonds, connections to land, and spirituality (Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014). This is shown for example in Fiji, where talanoa is engaged within a Vanua frame guided by context, culture, and values (Nabobo-Baba, 2008); and in Tonga, talanoa is used for data collection within the Kakala framework (Fua Johansson, 2014).

The practice of talanoa ranges from the informal, to formal, with variations depending on context, and it is a skill associated with the values and related behaviour, depending on the context (Fua Johansson, 2014). Applications vary from social get-togethers all the way to important decision-making meetings that affect individuals, community, environment, and the world at large.

Talanoa was used in Tonga in settling the civil servants' strike in 2005, and the national crisis in the Solomon Islands in 2005, when the lives of the people, and government institutions were affected (Halapua, 2013). In 2017, Fiji presided over sessions of the climate change Conference of the Parties 23 (COP23) held in Bonn, and introduced talanoa for a non-confrontational approach focusing on solutions (Winkler and Depledge, 2018). In the health space, talanoa has been shown to be effective in fostering an appreciation of Tongan interpretations of mental illness, by incorporating understandings of how participants defined and experienced mental health and illness, including cultural and language differences, as compared to the prevailing western definitions of illness and health (Vaka, Brannelly, and Huntington, 2016). In education, talanoa has been core for Pacific Early Career Academics (PECA) to connect within their networks in engaging Pacific pedagogical concepts and adapting to changes required of the Covid19 pandemic using online delivery methods (Thomsen et al., 2021).

My reflection on talanoa

As I started learning more about indigenous methods and methodologies, I found talanoa to be a flexible data collection method. Talanoa describes the natural flow of how people get comfortable first with others before they provide relevant information. Absence of this comfort may lead interviewees to provide information that they think the researcher wants to hear.

In my interviews, although I had a list of questions, I started with describing the context of my research and requested the participants to share their experience. Many of the questions I had listed were answered as they shared their experience. I raised unanswered questions at the end of the interview,

at which stage participants had warmed up enough to comfortably elaborate further. More useful, were the answers they provided to questions that were not in my list. When I raised such new points in a subsequent interview, the participant was pleasantly surprised saying that interviewers normally did not raise such questions paying attention to more popular questions.

What I found profound were the underlying values of respect, reciprocity, collective responsibility, humility, love/charity, service, and spirituality (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014), hence acknowledging and respecting the personal journeys of the participants. Whether it was one-to-one or one-to-many conversations, these values provide the underlying spirit on how to conduct oneself and speak from the heart (Halapua, 2007) which specific guidance has difficulty capturing. Although I am an outsider, I feel like an insider in relating to the values of talanoa. Researchers like me are from the third space which applies to people whose identity is a hybrid of different cultures they have been part of; their identity is not one or the other (Bhabha, 2008). I find talanoa to be a method that is useful beyond Pasifika for people from the third space.

Differences between talanoa and research interviews

The unique features of talanoa differentiate it from research interviews (Hindley, November, Sturm, & Wolfgramm-Foliaki, 2020) which typically focus more on eliciting information and knowledge from participants than on cultivating relationships in reaching understanding among participants and researchers (Prescott, 2008). Historically, research interviews started with the influence of the dominant positivist approach, focusing on developing rapport and capturing the interviewee experience and perspective, ensuring neutrality of the interviewer and avoiding bias. In traditional research interviews, dialogue is mainly one way and asymmetric (Kvale, 2006). The interviewer asks questions and probes for further information listening attentively, and capturing the depth and nuance of the interviewee's experience (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). While probing, care is taken not to disagree with the interviewee to avoid interviewer bias.

In contrast, with talanoa the researchers become co-participants sharing their own experiences and stories with respect, openness and sharing, rather than taking a neutral position (Prescott, 2008). A good talanoa finishes with participants and researcher feeling a positive connectedness (*mālie*), with a warm feeling inside (*māfana*). In comparison, interviews are considered complete when they reach saturation, and with no new information surfacing.

Interviews based on the western approach could be viewed as insufficient when working with indigenous communities as approaches like talanoa reflect equality among participants and researcher and work towards developing relationships among people and the environment (Chilisa, 2012). Because of the inherent values of talanoa, it is a method that in and of itself takes into consideration aspects of working with participants whose needs are not well considered for in the western approach. However, in qualitative research, co-construction does happen when the researcher's feelings are conveyed to the participants at an unconscious level when collecting data (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). Researchers use reflexivity to critique and evaluate how their subjectivity influences the research.

Facilitating talanoa

The facilitator of the talanoa plays a crucial role in including all participants in developing consensus and deep discussions (Vaka, Brannelly, & Huntington, 2016) and to achieve the breadth of possibilities that lie within talanoa. The onus is upon the facilitator to incorporate values through the facilitation, rather than as a set of values expected from the participants (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014).

At the start of the talanoa, participants introduce themselves, sharing their background and experience, and creating awareness among other participants so that they can take such information into consideration during the conversation. Keeping in mind the underlying values of talanoa, the facilitator actively participates ((Vaioleti, 2006)) while gathering information, analyzing and constructing the meaning during the conversations, not only during data analysis (Crotty, 1998; Lee & Greene, 1999). Saturation indicates that no more new information is forthcoming during interviews (Saunders et al., 2018) compared to achieving *mālie* and *māfana* as indicators of a successful talanoa.

In facilitating a talanoa, the researcher must be able to listen, and to form a sense of belonging that encourages the participants to share their stories through which to co-construct meanings and understandings. Stories are told and understood before the participants reattach, as ideas flow connecting them to the past, present, and the future. Such intra-action is internal to the relationship, while interaction is between two people (Barad, 2018).

Challenges when engaging talanoa

Researchers face three major challenges: (a) conducting the talanoa, (b) meeting validity and reliability standards, and (c) complying with ethics guidelines. When conducting talanoa, there are three aspects to be considered (Hindley et al., 2020). First is the careful balance in letting the talanoa run its natural course, while being considerate of the time constraints of participants. Second is the attention to the relationships between the participants and researchers as well as relationships within the group of researchers and participants. Third is ensuring that indigenous values and beliefs form the basis for meaningful intercultural conversations.

Talanoa will probably not meet the validity and reliability standards of conventional interpretations (Vaioleti, 2006). However, trustworthiness rather than validity and reliability is more applicable in a naturalistic study which assumes that there are multiple realities (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) when using a method such as talanoa. The research approach is also different. Compared to the need for the researcher to be neutral and unbiased, by letting the participant provide the answers, talanoa encourages a two-way conversation which allows analysis to happen during the conversation rather than the researcher independently analysing later.

In using talanoa, ethics considerations need to go beyond that of the usual ethics application. A typical ethics application guides us to have a pre-determined agenda which to some extent can be contrary to talanoa, where an initial period of free flow of conversation takes place before the participant is able to warm up to the topic (Fa'avae, Jones, & Manu'atu, 2016). Fa'avae et al. (2016) further state that it is important to share these difficulties in the methodology write-up rather than ignoring these difficulties.

Pasifika and beyond

Talanoa is a suitable method for researchers like me who are from the third space. During my PhD research, I adhered to the guidance in preparing for my interviews, but during the interviews I followed my intuition in conducting the interview, while ensuring I collected the necessary data. I managed to present my findings in the manner expected of the western approach which I had thought is the academic approach.

There are branches of research interviewing that are more aligned to the features of talanoa. These approaches are enabling a shift in focus from a neutral encounter, to engaging in conversation and deliberation (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020). Conversations have foregone neutrality of the interviewer and focus on the relationship of the parties as a basis on co-constructing knowledge (Gubrium, Holstein, Marvasti, & McKinney, 2012; Talmy, 2010). This new wave also considers time and space (Gubrium et al., 2012) as in indigenous methodology.

Such interviews allow interviewer and interviewee to explore in-depth the underlying assumptions of the conversation, bringing in other perspectives, and elevating the conversation at a higher level (Tanggaard, 2007). Using Socrates' technique, interviews focus on understanding and reasoning of the situation rather than only on the personal experience of the interviewee, leading to a conclusion that discards definitions and even establishes new definitions (Brinkmann, 2007). Furthermore, fields that involve ethical and moral issues require participation of both interviewer and interviewee through deliberation and co-construction to gain insights (Curato, 2012).

However, there is still an important difference between talanoa and research interviews. Talanoa is based on values and beliefs upon which talanoa processes are developed. In the case of interviews, features are being discovered over time, but underlying beliefs and values are not obvious and are left to the researcher to elaborate. Furthermore, with many academic disciplines still maintaining the early mode of interviewing (Berner-Rodoreda et al., 2020) doctoral students are not being exposed to the new approaches in interviewing. Although textbooks on interviewing methods have developed beyond discussing approaches based on neutral unbiased interviews, towards understanding notions of co-construction by interviewer and interviewee, there is still a lack of empirical studies of these new standards (Brinkmann, 2013). The lack of empirical studies indicates that practitioners are not able to, or are reluctant to incorporate the new knowledge in these textbooks. As a result, research-based journal articles as an alternative avenue for learning diminishes.

Unlike some forms of research interviewing, beliefs and values are integral to talanoa. Interviews seem to be more process oriented. But this is not to say that interviewing, which has served well for so long, is not a useful method. We need to justify its use through its usefulness rather than the long presence in research from which indigenous knowledge and thought was excluded (Sanga & Reynolds, 2020).

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Author's biography

Dr Regina Maniam has a PhD (management) for which she used the dominant modern worldview. Her subsequent projects led to an interest in the indigenous worldview. However, after finding that there is limited access to indigenous knowledge in many universities, she is now pursuing doctoral research at the University of Otago. Her aim is to develop a model for access to indigenous knowledge and conversation spaces, taking into consideration the diverse indigenous worldviews and limited faculty members with exposure to indigenous knowledge.