To know more of what it is and what it is not: Pacific research on the move

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Abstract

To name something is to stake a claim, an action which, while having a moment of origin, requires dynamic attention to context and development. This article discusses the naming of Pacific research. It offers a brief but timely reminder of the genealogy of the field before approaching a number of issues of contemporary concern. These include the need for placing new work within existing patterns and models of research; the importance of balancing enthusiasm with careful locative work; the value of respectful critique and ongoing re-framing; insightful discernment as a counter to the hegemonic tendencies of colonialism and assimilation; and the creative tension of connection and separation within a Pacific paradigm. Ultimately, research and researchers must pay heed to those who follow, avoiding clutter and preparing a useful space for future generations.

Keywords: Pacific research, naming, genealogy, Moana theory, legacy

Introduction

Just over a decade ago Sanga (2004) challenged the naming of Pacific research. His concern was not the term Pacific, although this has been, and continues to be, challenged (Ferris-Leary, 2013). Instead, Sanga signalled dissatisfaction with the direction of naming; the origins of the justification of Pacific research as a field worth naming at all. He observed that at that time even outstanding and influential researchers felt the need to be justified by reference to the West, being named 'through' the voices of others. Perhaps this spoke of the educational experiences of those involved, a desire to be taken seriously by institutional players in other places, the unconscious effects of the belittlement decried by Hau'ofa (1994), a combination of these factors or of others. Whatever the case, Sanga's response was to offer a philosophical ground, a way of clearing space in which indigenous Pacific research could be delineated. This stance assumes that Pacific understandings of reality, knowledge generation and values stand on their own as the bases of a research paradigm to serve local Pacific interests without justificatory reference to the West. His description of the field as a paradigm recognised the creative tension between unity and uniqueness across the region.

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Genealogical origins

The naming and consequent framing of any field is an important concern. Naming is not a passive or inconsequential activity. It focusses identity. One's name has genealogical origins: it carries *mana* and defines who one is, simultaneously underscoring uniqueness and conveying the connection of relationships (Jeshion, 2009). That said, names need not be static and can change over time. They can be added to and bestowed on others as each generation claims their space of belonging. *Whakapapa* is ever-extending. The intergenerational nature of research means that it is appropriate from time to time to reflect on the current naming of any field. Sanga's (2004) challenge to the direction of the naming of Pacific research was intended to begin a conversation to which it is now timely to contribute further. Legacy is at stake, perhaps best advanced by first taking stock.

A background to the development of space for Pacific research can be found in the series of disturbances which have shaken the academy from within. Helu-Thaman (2003) found cracks in the academic monolith through the challenge of post-modernism. Vaioleti (2013) portrayed the way *Kaupapa* Maori and feminist theories locally and globally pushed boundaries around the power relations of what counts as knowledge and legitimate methods for its development. These challenges created openings in the academy for the recognition of Pacific theorisation.

However, it would be wrong to see Pacific research simply as a logical aftershock of global challenges. Post-modernism's permissive thrust did not propose the inherent value of Pacific knowledge in the region (Helu-Thaman, 2003). Feminism required contextual positional framing to be locally relevant such as through standpoint theory (e.g. Moreton-Robinson, 2013), and decolonisation, developed in diverse contexts in reaction to colonisation (Brayboy, Gough, Leonard, Roehl, and Solyom, 2012; Smith, 1999), and relies on local theorisation to displace hegemonic structures. Despite global steps towards the goal of a 'more democratic and inclusive framing of research' (Nabobo-Baba, 2008:142), much work has been required to develop Pacific research as a field.

A debt exists to those who developed Pacific research spaces despite the restrictions which made this a struggle. In her poem 'Our Way', Helu-Thaman speaks of the pain of negotiating personal understandings with those of the academy. She also recalls, "I had to hang my cultural orientation and identification on the trees at Albert Park and forget who I was for a while" to be "modern and successful" (2003: 11) as a Tongan university student in Aotearoa New Zealand. At times, being "too different, too personal and too Tongan" (2003: 10) hindered publication. Despite this, Helu-Thaman (1992) introduced *Kakala* as a research framework based on Tongan reference. *Kakala* has the potential to unsettle the dominance of the researcher over community and to challenge the modernity of research by valuing Tongan relationality, time honoured practices and values. The model creates a space which does not require the severing Helu-Thaman experienced in Albert Park. Such early moves paved the way for others.

Subsequent genealogical development of the field has occurred. This can be exemplified by further reference to *Kakala*. This has not remained a static structure. For instance, Helu-Thaman (1992) outlined a three-stage framework: *toli*, *tui* and *luva*. Additional stages intended to enlarge applicability have been proposed. Tongan academics Johansson-Fua and 'Ana Taufe'ulungaki (Johansson-Fua, 2014) expanded the *Kakala* framework by including *teu*, *malie* and *māfana* phases; the last two being derived from Manu'atu (2001).

However, it is not just depth and complexity which has developed, but also width. The *Kakala* framework now sits in a field of differing Pacific structures related in their decolonial intent,

utilising, like *Kakala*, metaphorical references to Pacific life as ways of understanding research. Many models have developed in their own metaphorical niche. Examples include the Cook Islands *Tivaevae* by Maua-Hodges (2000), the Fijian *Vanua* research framework by Nobobo-Baba (2008), and the Samoan *Fa'afaletui* developed by Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave and Bush (2005). This list continues to expand with more recent offerings such as the Samoan *Ula* framework (Sauni, 2011), the Fijian *'Iluvatu* framework (Naisilisili, 2012), the Tuvaluan *Ola Lei* (Tufoua, 2014) among others. While contexts define each model, theorisation as an activity is seldom an isolated pursuit and genealogy need not develop within only one model appropriate for one locale, but also between models serving diverse communities.

Contemporary concerns

As a field develops, enthusiasm should not replace rootedness. Clarity in a field is supported by the explicit acknowledgement of genealogical relationships. This can be seen in Pacific theorisation. For instance, Nabobo-Baba says the *Vanua* framework was "inspired" (2008: 143) by *Kakala*. She also acknowledges borrowing from critical theory and *Kaupapa* Maori theory. In turn, *Vanua* has inspired other researchers. For instance, Meo-Sewabu describes "cultural discernment" (2014: 345) as a process whereby the ethics of *Vanua*-framed research can be developed in consultation with community to ensure a valid cultural fit. This offers navigation and support where the relationship between research context and research institution results in a potential clash of ethical priorities. *Vanua*-based cultural discernment is an example of Pacific theoretical structures talking back, naming themselves to the academy. This naming is rooted in growing confidence, itself derived from the relational web of Pacific research.

Decolonisation remains a background to Pacific research. An early example of its intersection with Pacific theorisation is narrated by Vaioleti (2013). He recalls his experience of the inadequacies of methodologies inherited from the academy when used in research with Pacific people. These were unsuitable because their theoretical underpinnings did not align with Pacific-origin thinking, languages or cultures. This situation spurred his development of an alternative Pacific-specific approach which he named *Talanoa* Research Methodology (TRM) (Vaioleti, 2011). TRM offers theoretical structures which, like *Kakala*, seek to harness values, behaviours and understandings which originate in the region. Methodologies with this kind of root are capable of creating ethical, methodological and operational space(s) in a Pacific research paradigm, challenging colonisation as a consequence.

However, colonisation is a creeping, ongoing force not confined to landgrabs or subject to simple displacement, especially in the academy. As the field develops, there is need to be vigilant about what can and should be called Pacific research. Careful and respectful critique of the past is essential. The developments to the *Kakala* model can be read as critique, the results of explorations which have tested the model and strengthened it through refinement. Like *Kakala*, *Talanoa* as utilised in Pacific research has been subject to genealogical development since it was used by Halapua (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014) and developed by Vaioleti (2011). For example, 'Otunuku (2011) proposes ten guiding principles for using *Talanoa* in research with Tongans, while Fa'avae, Jones, and Manu'atu (2016) discuss *Talanoa* of various kinds in a range of contexts. However, Tunufa'i points back to its roots, its original naming as an area for attention, critiquing the naming of *Talanoa* methodology as involving a "misunderstanding" (2016: 231) of Halapua's (2000) purpose and audience. Thus, hand-in-hand with development, archaeological debate can contribute to clarity by asking questions of a starting point. Whatever one may think of the arguments, in the face of the power of colonisation in the present, we benefit from walking forward by looking back carefully.

Clarity is also well-served by discipline in the present. A lack of discipline may open the door to creeping colonial assimilation through the naming of non-Pacific things as Pacific. Such dilution is significant if it diminishes the relevance of research to Pacific peoples: a failure to do one's work thoroughly can obscure the path for others. For instance, clarity is at stake where Pacific names are used to claim uniqueness for structures which are essentially representations of established Western practice (Tunufa'i, 2016). Researchers confident in their field should be able to use whatever is at hand to achieve Pacific purposes without the need for re-naming; offering a Pacific name does not necessarily ensure alignment with Pacific thought or practice. Thus, discipline in the present to ensure the future is as important as navigating by careful attention to the past. In both, critique is its own form of development, a conversation which, when respectfully conducted, offers opportunities to honour origins and protect legacy. Through its agency the Pacific qualities of the field can be ensured. Over the passage of time, identity continues to be negotiated in a journey which requires clarity, transparency and reflexivity. These are key if Pacific research is to "know more of what it is and what it is not" (Sanga, 2004: 50).

We might also consider the further development of connections between theory from proximal and overlapping spaces, such as between *Kaupapa* Maori and Pacific theory, already investigated by several researchers (Mila-Schaaf & Hudson, 2009; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Suaalii, 2017). Addressing such relationships through honest and careful critique can provide a clear sense of what is and is not being claimed, thus avoiding the obscurity of confusion and the colonialism of imposed aggregation.

Another issue of significance to the identity of Pacific research is clutter. Efi (2005) discusses clutter as involving ideas which can become attached to histories and knowledges, and which provide a potential distraction from their value. Instead, energy should be directed to ensuring the survival, deep understanding and appreciation of that which gives indigenous peoples "meaning and belonging". Clutter can have a "paralysing effect" which works against this goal. What matters can be "right under our noses' (2005: 68), embedded in the substance and context of knowledge itself. By contrast, clutter is an accretion.

Concerns have been expressed regarding clutter in the "increasing web-like array of methods, methodologies, approaches, models and paradigms" (Tunufa'i, 2016: 228) in the field of Pacific theorisation. While not questioning the value of theoretical models in themselves, a concern for clutter asks questions of model-making as a self-justifying activity, the adoption or creation of new names. Where a multitude of structures populate a landscape, the shape of the land can be obscured.

New theoretical structures will undoubtedly develop in the field, continuing the contextualisation of research practices and understandings in this vast, related but heterogeneous region. However, model creation should not be undertaken lightly or seen as a requirement of useful research. To (re)create without a clear prior survey of the field fails to take respectful account of the contributions of others, substituting creativity for scholarship and valuing individuality over the relational development of that which has come before. The risk is a cluttering of the paths of those who follow.

Sanga's (2004) concern for a paradigmatic approach to Pacific research values the kind of relationality which might reduce the urge to clutter. The commonality and mutual support valued by Hau'ofa (1994) and Crocombe (1976) remains relevant if value is placed not only on local particularities but also on regional commonalities. A denial of this forgets linguistic and mythical footprints of connection (Ka'ili, 2005) and supports European cartography instead of oceanic voyaging (Whimp, 2008). A paradigm which insists on cultural purity and the separation it

evokes also flies in the faces of the Pacific ethnogenesis which has been claimed for migrant communities (Spoonley, 1988) and of all the *tok pisins* of Melanesia. It also places a barrier between island-based and migrant populations, which does not reflect ongoing circular movements (Ka'ili, 2005; Macpherson, 2002). That is not to deny the Tongan-ness of *Kakala* or the Fijian-ness of *Vanua* and so on, but to situate these under the shelter of an umbrella of supportive kin, able to care for the various *va* involved through both relatedness and separation.

What counts is what research can do to celebrate, develop and support the lives of Pacific peoples as both unique and connected wherever they are. Context defines appropriateness, relevance, the balance between distinctiveness and shared features. Taking stock of context respects the past while acknowledging a fluid world. Any piece of Pacific research can belong in the paradigm as well as to the more local community it serves; naming involves individuality and relationality. Imagining an appreciative space where we in the region can learn from each other is a strength. Neither total exclusivity nor the unadulterated universalism of so-called objectivity is reflective of much Pacific life.

As a final look to the future, we might consider the depth of challenge offered to the academy by recent work, such as that by Ferris-Leary. In an exploration of *Moana* theory, Ferris-Leary claims not only the configuration of research practice as space of local resonance. 'In the case of *Moana* research…the type of outcome is appropriate to a socialized circular-evolving type of logic…' (2013: 13) developed through a discursive and iterative structure, and claiming flexible, socially mediated and holistic results. This thinking addresses form and function in a poetic holism. It also replaces Pacific as a name with a linguistic reference to the ocean which joins us all, a navigation of possibilities.

Conclusion

Despite the longevity of the philosophies and ontologies which are embodied in research endeavours, Pacific research and the self-conscious theorising which underpins it has a relatively short history. This article has argued for intentional naming, describing, defining, relating and separating theoretical constructs as acts of development. Respect for the past expressed as precision and critique are the ground on which the creativity of the future should sit. To claim a research paradigm is a collective act, and, like all families, we should expect joys and tensions on our journeys. The issue of legacy is central to the enterprise of all families, one which demands that we look to ourselves and to each other. Rather than being named in the shadows of other traditions, a Pacific research paradigm is equal to all others or nothing at all.

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