

Decolonising Pacific research, building Pacific research communities and developing Pacific research tools: The case of the talanoa and the faafaletui in Samoa

*Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni** and *Saunimaa Ma Fulu-Aiolupotea†*

*Va'aomanu Pasifika Unit, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, 6 Kelburn Parade, Kelburn Campus, Wellington, PO Box 600, Wellington 6140, New Zealand.

Email: sailau.suaalii-sauni@vuw.ac.nz

†School of Nursing, Faculty of Applied Sciences, National University of Samoa, Papaigalagala Campus, Toomatagi, PO Box 1622, Apia, Samoa.

Email: m.aiolupotea@nus.edu.ws

Abstract: *In building Samoan academic researcher capacity in Samoa, we argue that there is a need to first establish the kind of researcher community advocated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith, and to do so through developing research tools, such as the talanoa and faafaletui, in partnership with researcher capacity-building initiatives such as the applied postgraduate social and health research methods course (coded PUBX731-HSA505) run by the Centre for International Health, University of Otago, in partnership with the National University of Samoa. This paper offers a commentary on the talanoa and faafaletui as Pacific research methodologies, and asks what its value might be for researchers in Samoa. It reflects on the learning experiences of staff and students of the applied social and health research methods course in relation to the talanoa and faafaletui as Pacific research methodologies or methods. It concludes that developing Pacific research and researcher capacity in Pacific Island countries, such as Samoa, must include opening up spaces within these communities to critically engage what is Pacific or Samoan or indigenous about these research tools, methods or methodologies, and how they might differ in form or substance from other methods or methodologies.*

Keywords: *Pacific research, Samoa, indigenous methodology, decolonising methodologies, talanoa, faafaletui*

O le 'oto'otoga: *I le atina'e o le su'esu'eina o le poto salalau i Samoa, matou te manatu e ao ona faatuina ni faalapotopotoga e pei ona fai mai Linda Tuhiwai Smith e ala lea i ni mafutaga faafaletui e galulue faatasi ma le PUBX731-HSA505 lea e faafoeina e le lunivesite o Otago ma le lunivesite o Samoa (NUS). O le pepa leni e faamatala ai le metotia o le faafaletui i lona mau faavae ma lona aoga i le su'esu'ega a tagata Samoa i le poto salalau. O loo faailoa mai ai le iloa ma le poto masani o faia'oga ma le fanau a'oga i le faatinoga ma le aoga o le metotia o le faafaletui. Ma ua maua ai se manatu faapea: E ao i le su'esu'eina o le poto salalau i Samoa ma isi atunuu i le Pasefika ona sa'ili, po o a tonu lava metotia e afua mai i le laufanua o le Pasefika ma pe faapefea ona iloa 'ese'esega mai isi metotia?*

Dr Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni is currently a Senior Lecturer in the Pacific Studies and the Samoan Studies Programmes of the Vaaomanu Pasifika Unit, School of Social and Cultural Studies, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington (VUW). Prior to taking up this position, she was Senior Research Fellow with the Centre for International Health, Department of Preventive and Social Medicine, Dunedin School of Medicine, University of Otago. She was based in Samoa from December 2008 to July 2011, working with NUS's Centre for Samoan Studies, Faculty of Business and Entrepreneurship, and the then Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences in research capacity building projects.

Saunimaa Ma Fulu-Aiolupotea is currently a Nurse Lecturer in the School of Nursing, Faculty of Applied Sciences (the School of Nursing was formerly with the Faculty of Nursing and Health Sciences which was disestablished in 2012). She worked as a registered nurse midwife in Samoa for over 20 years before joining NUS. She teaches in the areas of midwifery, anatomy, physiology, pharmacology for nurses, pathophysiology and applied nursing clinical practices.

Introduction

'Talanoa' and 'Faafaletui' are terms used by academic and social researchers in the Pacific or Oceanic¹ region to describe two research methodologies that claim meaning and significance from a common indigenous Pacific, particularly Polynesian, world view.² As formal research methodologies, they assert conceptual origins that can be traced back to Tongan, Samoan or Fijian roots. While there are many other Pacific research methodologies developed by Pacific researchers (such as the *kakala* by Konai Helu Thaman (1997, 2002), the *tivaevae* by Maua-Hodges, (2000), and the *vaka* as cited in Agnew *et al.* (2004) and Nakhid *et al.* (2007), for example), we examine only the *talanoa* and *faafaletui* for the purposes of this article/conversation. We do so for two reasons. First, because the published literature relevant for an in-depth analysis of Pacific research methodologies and methods is currently most available for these two; and second, because in our reflections on the theoretical and practical significance of Pacific research methodologies to Samoa, our main experience has been with these two.

The aim of our paper is twofold: specifically we seek to offer a commentary on the *talanoa* and *faafaletui* research methodologies and methods. And, more generally, we seek to contribute to the broader conversation regarding decolonising research in the Pacific. In Samoa, as in other Pacific countries, the university is today considered a place of status. It is a key site for higher learning. It is also a significant source for providing the 'baseline research' that is now sought after by Pacific Island governments to assist them in making prudent decisions on behalf of their nation. Academic research, particularly in medical health and the social sciences, is carried out by Pacific staff in Pacific universities largely according to Western models of research. Because Pacific research is only beginning to find its footing in the world of academic research, engaging in and developing pan-Pacific research models or frameworks, such as the *talanoa* or *faafaletui*, is, though exciting, also daunting and fraught with complications. In focusing specifically on the *faafaletui* and *talanoa*, we seek to illustrate some of the complexities surrounding

indigenous Pacific research and the development of its tools.

In terms of decolonising research and developing useful cross-cultural research tools for Samoa, capacity-building initiatives, such as those advocated by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2004), are critical. In advocating for a Pacific research community, she finds that a lot depends, as is often said, on having the right people in the right place at the right time. And this, she implies, does not and should not have to happen by chance:

Building a research community is an important part of building research capacity and research culture. The purpose of a research community is that researchers need to communicate and contest ideas, they need to operate in a system where some basic values about knowledge and research are understood and shared, they need an informed audience, they need leadership and mentorship, they need rewards and acknowledgements, they need to be assured that their pursuit of knowledge is understood by at least one community other than their own families and that they need to nurture students or emerging research into a social system and finally they need to know their basic literature or body of knowledge. In other words, they need to breathe, talk, drink and eat knowledge and research and scholarship. It can be conceptualised as simply a group with whom a Pacific researcher can share conversations about their ideas and research activities (pp. 8–9).

Research and teaching partnerships between senior and junior Pacific academic researchers who work with Pacific peoples benefit most, in our experience, when there is deliberate and mutual sharing and probing of Pacific and Western epistemologies inherent in contemporary Pacific research. This was something we as Samoan researchers sought to do in our partnership as research academics working in health research in contemporary Samoa. In this article/conversation, we are privileged to share, alongside our esteemed colleagues Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Trisia Farrelly and Litea Meo-Sewabu, some of our own experiences and thoughts as Samoan Pacific researchers on the *talanoa* and *faafaletui* as Pacific research tools for this special issue.

To help illustrate the claims we make here about Pacific research and about the talanoa and faafaletui, we reflect on our joint experiences of working with the talanoa and faafaletui as research concepts, methods and methodologies in Samoa. Our research partnership began as part of a specific inter-university collaboration between the University of Otago (UO) and the National University of Samoa (NUS).³ We discuss below a postgraduate course we were both involved in, in which we explored the talanoa and faafaletui methodologies/methods. We also make brief reference to a project on Samoan traditional birth attendants where the talanoa was also used. In our concluding comments, we reflect on the significance of our partnership as Samoan/Pacific health researchers as a model for how Samoan/Pacific research and researcher capacity can progress.

We begin with an explanation of what the talanoa and faafaletui as research methodologies are said to consist of.

Talanoa and faafaletui

Most Pacific researchers and researchers working on studies involving Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand will be familiar with the names 'talanoa' and 'faafaletui' as research methodologies or methods. They were introduced, respectively, to the academic world by Pacific researchers Sitiveni Halapua (see Halapua and Halapua, n.d.; Halapua, 2007; Halapua, 2008), Timote Vaoleti (see Vaoleti, 2006; see also Vaoleti and Vaoleti, 2003), and Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese (along with her Pacific research team at the Wellington Family Centre).⁴ Timote Vaoleti is a Tongan academic education researcher based in New Zealand and working for the University of Waikato. He is mostly cited as the original articulator of the talanoa research methodology. Sitiveni Halapua, also a Tongan academic and working for the United States East-West Centre at the time as Director of its Pacific Islands Development Program, is recorded in the literature as also using the talanoa concept, but as a Pacific method for negotiating dialogue between national bodies towards conflict resolution. And, he is recorded as doing so prior to Vaoleti's joint 2003 publication. The faafaletui research methodology, on the other hand, was

introduced as already mentioned to academic researchers by the Pacific research team of the Wellington Family Centre in New Zealand, led by Samoan family therapist and researcher Taimalieutu Kiwi Tamasese (Tamasese *et al.*, 1997, 2005).

The genealogy of the talanoa as a formal Pacific methodology (for eliciting dialogue at least) can be traced back to the two Tongan authors, Vaoleti and Halapua. Obviously, the concept of talanoa (see below) has been around well before their work was published. But by adding to it a technical research-related meaning, Vaoleti, in particular, has in some ways transformed talanoa to be not just about the 'talk' of participants but also about the way that 'talk' is set up and analysed for academic research purposes – such as with interview data. Similarly, while the concept faafaletui has been around in Samoan discourse for some time, it was not until Taimalieutu and her team developed it into a formal research methodology and published it in various places (most notably in the *Australian New Zealand Journal of Psychiatry*) that it took on a meaning that went beyond its usual or traditional confines (see below). As other researchers (as well as ourselves) find value in these frameworks and utilise them in our own research work, the strengths and limitations of such tools begin to emerge and we have an opportunity to refine them. In other words, through the publication and wide dissemination of critical Pacific researcher experiences with these tools, their usefulness and legitimacy as research tools, and as *Pacific* research tools at that, we (in a collective sense, as a community of Pacific researchers) can help towards making more nuanced sense of what they carry conceptually and involve methodologically.

Linguistically, the term talanoa as a Polynesian term is in Tongan said to be made up of two conceptual parts: 'tala' meaning 'to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply' (Vaoleti, 2006: 23); and 'noa' meaning 'of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary or void' (Vaoleti, 2006: 23). The word faafaletui, on the other hand, is said to break down into three component parts: 'faa' – a causative prefix; 'fale' meaning a house or groups or houses; and 'tui' meaning weaving (Tamasese *et al.*, 2005).

Vaiotele (2006) describes talanoa as belonging 'along with qualitative research, grounded theory, naturalistic inquiry and ethnography . . . to the phenomenological research family' (p. 25). This is supported by Prescott (2008), who includes within this list interpretive constructivism. According to Vaiotele (2006), talanoa as research methodology is 'ecological, oral and interactive', it is 'a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations' (p. 21). He says that talanoa 'allows more *mo'oni* (pure, real, authentic) information to be available for Pacific research than data derived from other research methods' (Vaiotele, 2006). Leaving aside the mention of other research methods for the moment, Vaiotele concludes that talanoa is 'a cultural synthesis of the information, stories, emotions and theorising' and that this cultural synthesis is 'made available [to] produce relevant knowledge and possibilities for addressing Pacific issues' (Vaiotele, 2006). The cultural synthesising suggested here implies the bringing together, as in the act of weaving together as suggested by Tamasese *et al.* in their faafaletui, the various strands of 'talk' that emerge from the talanoa session, and making sense of these through a cultural reading. The emphasis on ethno-cultural referencing as a key reference point for making sense of the information gathered and of the emotions and behaviours associated with collecting and reporting that information is what is suggested to be unique to the methodological design of both the talanoa and the faafaletui.

Faafaletui is described by Tamasese *et al.* (2005) as 'a method which facilitates the gathering and validation of important knowledge within the culture' (p. 302). They note that it is a Samoan concept that was brought to their notice by Samoan participants in their research 'to explain the process in which they viewed themselves to be a part' (Tamasese *et al.*, 2005). They elaborate that the faafaletui is 'a methodology of weaving together knowledge from within the houses of relational arrangements', that is, 'weaving (tui) together all the different levels of knowledge frames from within the "houses" of collective representation' for the purpose of substantially enhancing and adding to 'the Samoan world view' (n.p.). In both the talanoa and faafaletui, the process of 'bringing

together' (in terms of collecting and analysing) the 'talk'/'knowledge' of participants is culturally nuanced and manifest in words, gestures, silences, in all those things used to communicate culturally specific meaning. While there are some differences between the talanoa and faafaletui in terms of their conceptual focus, both are metaphors used to describe a process of storying and gathering of narratives.

As ethnic terms, the talanoa and faafaletui stem from different, although related, linguistic roots. In Samoan, the faafaletui, by its semantic origins, tends to involve closed group discussions of a serious nature. The term talanoa, on the other hand, whether shorthand for talanoa faasamasamanoa or talanoaga is more open, encouraging any kind of talk to happen between any persons or groups of persons, either or both in group and/or one-on-one settings. In discussing this difference with Samoan elders, it was suggested that the terms talanoa and faafaletui, as specific research terms, can be brought into the Samoan vocabulary if, in developing them, their new or technical usages are adequately explained and able to address the idiosyncrasies of Samoans and their use of language.⁵ In other words, after some debate it was decided that there was no reason why we, as Samoan or Pacific researchers, could not extend the meanings of words such as faafaletui or talanoa to meet specific or new research purposes, provided of course that we are careful not to inscribe in them new meanings without first making clear what their original or usual meanings were or are.

Given this, researchers who seek to engage in open dialogue with a Samoan participant or groups of Samoan participants may use the talanoa as a method if they seek to gather information, whether serious and not, in any kind of manner (casual or formal). Where they wish to gather information they consider (and believe their Samoan participants will consider) to be of a serious nature, they might utilise instead (as discussed further below) the faafaletui method. And the way in which they would set up and carry out their talanoa or faafaletui discussions, including their rapport-building exercises, will depend on existing assumptions about the role of the researcher and the researched, their cultural relationships or affiliations with each other, any existing power dynamics, the seriousness of

the issue at hand and so on, all of which need to be thought of before, during and after the talanoa and/or faafaletui research exercise. For researchers applying the faafaletui as a research method, it makes most sense in the Samoan context, culturally speaking, to do so when a more formal discussion is favoured. Where the subject matter is not so serious or where more open and unstructured conversations are encouraged, they could adopt the talanoa. The formal character or seriousness associated with the faafaletui concept may be traced to an old Samoan story associated with the term.

The story is linked to the famous saying: '*ua nofo fale le aiga Sa Tui ia Maa*', literally 'the family of Tui are meeting to discuss the disappearance of Maa'.⁶ Maa in this saying is the name of a daughter in the family of Tui (i.e. *aiga Sa Tui*) who was left out at sea to perish by her brothers who were jealous of their parents' love for her (she was an only daughter). In this rendering of the origins of the term faafaletui, the family of Tui is said to have come together to deliberate (*ua nofo fale*) over what to do about her disappearance (Suaalii-Sauni, 2006⁷). The seriousness of this issue, like the seriousness of Halapua's (2013) national conflict resolution settings, gives nuance to the idea of faafaletui involving group discussions where participants are carefully selected and proceedings are geared towards seriously trying to find some resolve of a serious issue. Here, the idea of the weaving (tui) together of the serious thoughts and recommendations that come out of these faafaletui deliberations, out of the different fale or houses, is still applicable.

The cultural and metaphorical significance of the 'fale' or house/s suggested by Tamasese *et al.*, is elaborated on by Lealiiee Tofilau T. Taleni (2011) in his description of the new Pasifika Talanoa centre at the Christchurch College of Education. In Samoan, he describes this new centre as a 'fale faafaletui o aoaoga', which he translates as 'a house or place for weaving, collaborating and nurturing the thinking about teaching and learning' (p. 5). Lealiiee explains that this 'fale faafaletui o aoaoga' has four key domains: the faavae or foundation; the fola or floor; the pou or pillars; and the tauluga or roof. He explains that the foundation represents cultural values and principles relevant to learning, teaching and communicating. The fola

is a mat that goes on the floor and represents gestures of 'inclusivity and openness to collaboration and the weaving of knowledge', which occurs 'through [both] the processes of faafaletui and talanoa'. The pillars represent 'ideas, programmes, initiatives and implementation processes' which 'support and transform teaching and learning'. And last, the roof represents 'protection and security for all learners', including teachers. This fale resonates with Fuimaono Karl Pulotu-Endemann's fonofale model (Ministry of Health, 2008, see appendix, pp. 30–31) used widely by the Aotearoa New Zealand Pacific health sector as a health belief model (Suaalii-Sauni *et al.*, 2009b).

By unpacking the idea of fale faafaletui in this way and using it alongside the term aoaoga or learning, Lealiiee illustrates and indeed brings together the aims of faafaletui and talanoa, and suggests that they share in the end a common purpose. As explained by Vaiioleti, Halapua and Tamasese *et al.* (and all those who have since extended on them, such as Fletcher, n.d.; Otsuka, 2006; Prescott, 2008; McCarthy *et al.*, 2010; Havea, 2010; Marsh, 2010; Otunuku, 2011; Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012), the talanoa and faafaletui as methodologies and methods seem to privilege a process of storying that wherever possible is open and face to face. Such storying, whether deep, serious or casual, is carried out using a process that is focused on building culturally appropriate and respectful relationships, not only between researcher and participant, but also between researchers themselves. As methods, the distinction between an interview or focus group and a talanoa or faafaletui session, although not yet sharp, is becoming clearer as more researchers use them, and talk and write explicitly about their experiences doing so – about what worked and what did not (Prescott, 2008; McCarthy *et al.*, 2010). At present, there is a necessity for Pacific researchers to describe their use of talanoa or faafaletui in ways that suggest them to be synonymous with European-termed social research methods, such as the focus group or interview. In Tamasese *et al.*'s case, they refer to their faafaletui sessions as 'faafaletui focus groups'.⁸ For Teevale *et al.* (2012), they talk about 'open-ended talanoa styled interviews'.

Confusion can arise when talking about the talanoa and faafaletui as research methodolo-

gies and as methods. In terms of developing Pacific research, we are more uneasy with the suggested practice of locating talanoa or faafaletui as research methodologies within phenomenology or interpretive constructivism, than with the coupling of talanoa and faafaletui as research methods with other social research methods. Our uneasiness lies in the difference between 'existing alongside' and 'existing within'. To 'exist within' presents the obvious difficulties of ensuring visibility amidst more dominant competing world views. But the problem is not just with voice; it is also with scope. To suggest that talanoa and faafaletui as research methodologies are merely part of the family of phenomenological research is, in our view, to risk making our Indigenous world views (including our forms of communication) subservient to the different world views that dominate phenomenology.⁹ Moreover, it is to unfairly limit Pacific research methodologies such as talanoa and faafaletui to the more qualitative fields of inquiry. Pacific research must have research methodologies that determine for itself its visibility and scope. It is here that the aims of Pacific research overlap with other indigenous research such as Kaupapa Maori (Smith, 2004) and the Philippine pakapa-kapa approach (Pe-Pua, 2006).¹⁰ In all three cases, there is the deliberate pursuit of an enabling two-way conversation between researchers and between researchers and participants, a conversation that privileges a research process that always keeps at the forefront a respect for cultural context and meaning, no matter what the research.

In the political manoeuvrings that come as a matter of course with any attempts to decolonise academic research, Pacific indigenous language terms such as talanoa and faafaletui must be appropriately empowered to have presence and legitimacy in both the academic and Pacific worlds (Gegeo, 1998; Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Pe-Pua, 2006). In using our own Indigenous terms to represent research methodologies that carry our Pacific values, we stand a better chance of transporting these values across not only multicultural and multiethnic domains, but also across the generations. If such terms, and the frameworks and methods they describe are well understood, owned and disseminated, through rigorous

debate and critique, they can make a serious contribution towards decolonising our research theories and practices. We offer next a brief discussion of what some of all this actually meant for us in our current research, teaching and learning practices in Samoa.

Bringing talanoa and faafaletui to university in Samoa

In January 2010, the talanoa and faafaletui as research methodologies were offered to Samoan students (most of whom were public servants and NUS academics) of the joint UO/NUS postgraduate applied social and health research methods course (coded PUBX731-HSA505), jointly administered by UO and NUS staff (Suaalii-Sauni *et al.*, 2011). The course ran for three consecutive years (2010, 2011, 2012) and was part of the initiatives carried out under the UO/NUS MOU noted earlier. Saunimaa Ma Fulu-Aiolupotea was part of the first cohort of students in 2010. Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni was the main course coordinator. For our discussion here, Tamasailau describes first the objectives for having these methodologies form part of the course, and then she reports on the 2012 student cohort responses to being introduced to the talanoa and faafaletui. This is followed by Saunimaa's reflections on her own experience of learning about faafaletui and talanoa as part of the 2010 cohort and its subsequent impact on her own teaching and learning at NUS.

Tamasailau's reflections

The primary reason for including the readings on talanoa and faafaletui into the course and the module on Pacific research was to try to actively involve students in Samoa and from New Zealand in a conversation about Pacific research methodologies, what they necessarily involved and why. I chose the talanoa and faafaletui because they, as Indigenous Pacific concepts, speak directly to the phenomenon of talking, storying or narrativising. But I was also interested in creating a space where Samoa-based researchers could co-create with their New Zealand counterparts a conversation that hopefully would be ongoing about what Pacific research involves, how we could go about

doing Pacific research, and how we could ensure that it is not only culturally sensitive to Pacific contexts, but also methodologically rigorous and ultimately useful (i.e. meets the purpose it sets out to achieve). To achieve this 'space', students were to read the writings of Vaioleti (2006), Prescott (2008), Tamasese *et al.* (2005) and Robinson and Robinson (2005), and to read these alongside literature on qualitative interviewing (Adler and Clark, 2003), qualitative analysis (McMurray *et al.*, 2004), life story research (Etherington, 2009) and life histories (Crapazano, 1984). Practical assignments involved them deciding whether to carry out a life story or life history interview, a focus group, talanoa session or faafaletui session, or if they wanted a mixed combination of these. Students were encouraged to feed back to the class their experiences of applying these methods with their peers.

In carrying out these methods, the students were asked to audiotape their discussions/dialogue/ interview/ focus group/ talanoa or faafaletui sessions, transcribe them, and provide a summary of themes arising. This was intended to expose students to the practical requirements of collecting, collating and analysing narrative text. This text was expected as a key output from their talanoa and faafaletui session, and so students were strongly encouraged to pay careful attention to learning how the content for these texts were to be collected, organised and analysed, and reflect on what their readings said about this process. Their actual engagement in the practice exercises and in reflecting on the readings were intended to impress on them Michael Patton's (1990: 372) point that when dealing with narrative text, 'there are no formulas for determining significance . . . no straightforward tests for reliability and validity . . . , there are no absolute rules', but 'to do the very best with your full intellect to fairly represent' the information gathered.¹¹ This wisdom applies equally across life stories, life histories, interviews, talanoa and faafaletui sessions. The common denominator in terms of practical methodological output for their talanoa or faafaletui sessions and qualitative research interviews or focus groups was a narrative text.

Because the qualitative paradigm when applied generically is sometimes rendered as if devoid of cultural specificity, students and

teachers alike were able to see how having the talanoa and faafaletui available forced us to compare and think more carefully about what was common across these research methodologies and methods, and what was more specific to some than others. Many of us, as expected, were unsure of how best to apply the talanoa and faafaletui as methods, and saw little difference in practice between them and an interview or focus group in terms of the general mechanics of actually carrying them out. For us, the main difference lies in how we (students and teachers) thought about what we were doing during our talanoa or faafaletui sessions (although most of the students chose to do talanoa sessions).¹² That is, in actually saying to ourselves that they were 'talanoa' or 'faafaletui' sessions, we seemed to be able to better keep on top of our minds the Pacific values explained by Vaioleti (2006) and Tamasese *et al.* (2005) to be central to them; we thought of our Polynesian/Samoan codes of respect, the need for turn sharing when speaking, the need for symbolic gestures of reciprocity and gratitude, and so on. At this stage of teaching these methods, I was not overly concerned about the conceptual ambiguities produced by the obvious overlaps between the talanoa, faafaletui, focus group and interview as methods. For me, it was enough that we had the opportunity to experience just trying out the talanoa and faafaletui as discussed by Vaioleti (2006) and Prescott (2008), and to do so alongside the interview and focus group.

Students also had to grapple with questions about what to do with their talanoa or faafaletui narrative text, how they were to make sense of it, what tools they needed in order to organise and analyse it, what claims they could draw from it and so on. They fast learnt that these practical questions were common to all research paradigms. The issues of use of language (especially the movement between the Samoan and English languages), of how to contextualise the narratives (individually and as a collection) and how to make transparent researcher interpretations, were all key points for lively discussion and re-emphasised for us the importance of Michael Patton's wisdom mentioned earlier. Moreover, in getting students to actually summarise the key themes arising from their transcripts and walking them through

the analysis of those themes and then the narrating of the summary, they were given a hands-on opportunity to appreciate the cautionary note that if their faafaletui and talanoa texts were not deliberately brought together as representative texts of a population or community group, then they must avoid in summary talking about their talanoa and faafaletui findings as if they were. In other words, students were advised to be very careful how they worded their findings so as not to suggest that their participants' views were representative of all those like them. Sharing these distinctions was useful not only for the students but also for me in terms of refining my own understanding of how analysing talanoa and faafaletui texts might work vis-à-vis the interview or focus group. Basically from what we could discern so far, there is little difference. The general rules of analysis are largely the same: do the very best you can with your full intellect to fairly represent the information gathered. Given the constraints of trying to do all this in a 12-day/three hours a day block, the main objective was to sow the seed of reflexive learning and praxis.

I also reflected in class that although using the talanoa or faafaletui as a methodological framework for quantitative research had not yet been done, it is theoretically possible. In reflecting on this, it seemed to me that because of the way in which we conducted our basic epidemiology and questionnaire work with the Samoan villages (Lotuanuu, Fusi-Saoluafata and Vaiala) over the three-year period, it could be said that what we did fell quite comfortably within either the scope of a talanoa or faafaletui research methodology. What we did was engage the principles of building a culturally appropriate relationship with village representatives before entering the village, and we respected these relational protocols throughout the data collection process up until the final stage of disseminating our findings back to them face to face. The relevance of Pacific research methodologies such as talanoa and faafaletui to medical research, such as epidemiology, is an interesting area for indigenous health or development researchers to follow up on. Through this course and the faotosaga (traditional birth attendant) research project that Saunimaa and I are involved with (Suaalii-Sauni *et al.*, forthcoming), I have been able to further develop my

understanding and appreciation of these two research tools and of Pacific research generally.

In terms of student responses to being taught the talanoa and faafaletui as research methods, we offer comments from the 2012 cohort. For most of these students, gaining exposure to the talanoa and faafaletui was quite new and educational, and at the same time both identity affirming and challenging. Their responses signal the potential of Pacific research tools such as the talanoa and faafaletui for places like Samoa. The written responses below were drawn directly from the anonymous 2012 student cohort course evaluations. Each quote is by a different student. There were 20 in this class.

The greatest thing about this [Pacific research module] is the use of both languages [English and Samoan] in our class. [It] catered for the way we learn, think and the way we do things in Samoa (our way).

It was an extremely interesting and thought provoking module. Putting a name (an indigenous one at that!) to a method was interesting in that you could finally say to your organisation/client etc . . . that this was the 'method' used. I really enjoyed the way the module was delivered. The ability to discuss with groups the application etc., and then putting it back into the plenary session.

Talanoa is relatively new to myself; with the word faafaletui. But it seems that I have learned a great deal about it as research methods.

The knowledge that there are Pacific research methodologies has made me very curious about this course. Or should I say, added incentive for me. It has always been the same research methods but to learn about the existence of Talanoa and Faafaletui has really boosted my interest.

It would be a great achievement to Pacific researchers if these methods are established as Pacific research methods and is used by non-indigenous researchers.

I am proud that we have our own methods to do our research.

It is quite an eye opener and opens up the mind to think outside my comfort zone or think critically. It also questions my own identity of being a Samoan. What makes me a Samoan? I now have a greater understanding of methods

that we should use in our country to collect and collate information.

It will be interesting to see what other unique Pacific methods can/will be developed in the future.

I hope to see/read more about the Talanoa/Faafaletui method as it improves.

Saunimaa, who was a member of the 2010 cohort, now reflects on her own experience of the talanoa and faafaletui in her work as a nurse lecturer and researcher.

Saunimaa's reflections

The first time this talanoa concept came to my knowledge was when I attended the postgraduate summer school course on applied social and health research methods by the OU-NUS as mentioned above. The concept was introduced mainly as a research method for data collection which was later used in the practical part of the course. It was here that I found the method very powerful for uncovering people's stories especially when used as an informal way to allow for open discussions and the spontaneous exchange of ideas. The method, when used in our course, was mostly carried out in quiet places. This was important I felt when unpacking personal stories, ideas and opinions. The way the talanoa approach was used in class and the way the learning environment was arranged were conducive to creating rapport and genuine closeness between us as participants in our talanoa group.

Another interesting thing I found while using the talanoa method in our class was that when stories were shared, it was like listening to fagogo being told.¹³ And, as pointed out by Kolone-Collins (2010), when they are told, listeners are encouraged to listen carefully and reflect. I believe this method of 'talanoa' has an element of the fagogo.

Reflecting on these methods in this way has been valuable for my teaching and research for it encourages me to listen carefully and to reflect when engaging in discussions with my students and research peers. These methods seem valuable to both my teaching and learning as a student and as a teacher. They have forced me to recognise the value of personal experiences to learning and teaching.

I was motivated to learn more about talanoa as a research and teaching tool when I joined the CAT (Certificate of Adult Teaching) programme offered by NUS in 2012. In preparing for an essay for that programme, I came across the work of Jione Havea (2010) who wrote that talanoa 'is a point of intersection, like a passage in a reef, through which currents and waves whirl with the rising and receding tides' (p. 11). I found his metaphor quite interesting in its suggestion of possibilities and opportunities for lively interactions, of different 'talk' coming together. If one uses talanoa (or even faafaletui) in the Samoan classroom or in the research field, there could be opportunity for the co-creation of new knowledge. In reflecting on the anticipated liveliness of this kind of interaction and the learning that may stem from it, I was very motivated to search further for how taking a Pacific-specific approach to learning, teaching and researching could help me develop my professional teaching capacity at NUS.

In searching for the meaning of talanoa, I found that in Pratt's Samoan dictionary of language and grammar, he, like the Tongan linguists, divides the term into 'tala' which is defined as 'to chat, converse together' (Pratt, 1960: 314), and 'noa' as meaning 'of no account, without object, without cause and without fastening' (Pratt, 1960: 234). 'Talanoa', he says, can also mean 'to talk nonsense' (Pratt, 1893: 297). I know that in Samoa there sometimes is 'talanoa' or talk in this latter sense, described as 'faitala' or 'gossiping' – it is still 'talanoa' or talk, although not necessarily very nice talk. In the Tongan dictionary by Churchward, cited by Vaioleti (2006), talanoa seems to have the same meaning.

Talanoa as storying and/or dialogue, to my knowledge, existed in Samoa long before my time. And I am 63 years old. It was used in homes by parents and children, matai and families, villages and churches, by women at weaving sessions and so on, for centuries. Whenever there is an issue in my family, my parents would want to discuss ways to address and/or solve it. Although we would more accurately call this a talanoaga or faafaletui, the object of the exercise seems the same as that described as talanoa by the talanoa researchers. There is a process, implied or explicit, for

coming together to talk or share views about something, usually something important.

When I came to engage in a research project involving Samoan traditional birth attendants or faotosaga with Tamasailau (Suaalii-Sauni *et al.*, forthcoming), we decided to use the talanoa research methodology alongside qualitative life stories to frame our research approach. Again, as in our classroom, both these methods encouraged me to reflect more deeply on our respect protocols and how I as a Samoan built rapport with participants, how I listened to what they had to say (or not), and how I engaged with them in my talanoa or faafaletui or interview. Having the patience to listen carefully and to let them speak for however long they wanted was something I found difficult because I was always conscious of time and of wanting to get as much information as possible before the sessions ended. Nevertheless, I have found trying to use Pacific research tools like the talanoa in my research both challenging and interesting. Thinking through the talanoa and the faafaletui has contributed a lot to my professional development as a nurse lecturer by opening my eyes to different ways of seeing and doing research in Samoa.

We now draw our reflections here to a close by saying that both the talanoa and the faafaletui present exciting possibilities for developing a new dimension to the experience of doing research and of being researched in Samoa. Pacific research terms such as the talanoa and faafaletui, when used to describe a research methodology, necessitates closer attention to the world views they carry.

Drawing conclusions

The talanoa and faafaletui are terms that encapsulate, carry and signal a world view, a way of knowing and doing that define and guide encounters and relationships between researchers and participants and between researchers themselves. While ethical and cultural principles such as those developed by social scientists (Davidson and Tolich, 2003) and Pacific research groups (MOE, 2001; HRC, 2005) offer useful guidelines on how to do ethical research with Pacific peoples, they are not set up to help the researcher work out what the difference between an interview and a talanoa session

might be, or that between the talanoa and the faafaletui. This comes best with understanding the nuances of Pacific research, gained both by applying the proposed tools and by critically analysing their internal logic. This article has attempted to spell out the cultural nuances and logic associated with the talanoa and faafaletui, especially when understood within the Samoan context.

The work suggested by Trisia Farrelly and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba in this special issue on talanoa as empathic apprenticeships is exciting for it probes the logic of the talanoa further by questioning how it can force us to recognise the need for 'deep empathic understanding' when carrying out cross-cultural research. So, too, is that offered by Litea Meo-Sewabu who writes of the importance of 'cultural discernment' in the process of doing research as an Indigenous Fijian researcher. As Samoan Indigenous researchers, we seek to participate in the building of a researcher community in Samoa that can draw on these exciting developments in Pacific research.

This paper has sought to offer a commentary on the talanoa and faafaletui as Pacific research methodologies and methods. It reflected on our learning experiences as Samoan health researchers using the talanoa in a health research project and as a staff member and student of the applied postgraduate social and health research methods course offered by the University of Otago, in partnership with the National University of Samoa where the talanoa and faafaletui were offered as part of its Pacific research module. It also has highlighted not only an account of the co-learning experiences of teachers and students of the talanoa and faafaletui in Samoa, but also of ourselves in our own relationship as co-authors.

As co-authors, our partnership has grown since we first met as potential co-researchers in 2009. Being Samoan and committed to building Samoan researcher capacity in Samoa, we are drawn to research methodologies that speak to our Samoan context and world views. As two Samoan women – one raised outside of Samoa with limited Samoan language abilities, and the other fluent and raised within – our journey as Samoan co-researchers has required patience and a willingness to learn on both sides. Our relationship is best described as that of

co-mentors/mentees; we learn and teach each other new things all the time. We see our partnership and friendship as a metaphor for the kind of capacity-building partnerships we desire for Samoa and Samoan researchers. The decision by UO's Centre for International Health to have their researcher based in Samoa for two and a half years, while counter-intuitive to conventional New Zealand inter-university collaborations, provided for our partnership the much needed time to build the kind of trust relationship we now have.

Like any other institutional arrangement, the partnership between OU and NUS is made real through and by people. It is people who negotiate on behalf of their institutions and countries the whats, hows, whens and whys of research, teaching, funding and so on. It is people that interpret what Kabini Sanga (2004) describes as value-free and value-bound research. It is people, with all their cultural and personality traits, idiosyncrasies, knowledges and skills, that bring to life these partnerships. And, it is when people come together in these deep empathic ways that the process of decolonisation in research happens best.

Notes

- 1 The terms 'Pacific' or 'Oceanic/Oceania' are used in New Zealand and the Pacific region to describe those island countries or states that fall within the general anthropologic categories of Polynesia, Melanesia and Micronesia, including Australia, New Zealand and Hawai'i.
- 2 When reading discussions on 'the Pacific way' by Kamisese Mara (1997) and in the edited collection by Sione Tupouniua *et al.* (1975), or the Melanesian way by Bernard Narokobi (1983), or *tikanga* Maori by Hirini Moko Mead (2003) or on *faaSamoa* by Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi (see essays by Tui Atua in Suaalii-Sauni *et al.*, 2009a), beliefs about spirituality, ancestral bonds, connections to land and family have common threads of thought that run throughout. These common threads give rise to an argument for a common Indigenous Pacific world view.
- 3 The UO and NUS signed a five-year memorandum of understanding (MOU) in 2004 to carry out academic teaching and research projects of mutual interest. The MOU was very broadly couched and served as formal acknowledgement on the part of both universities to work towards building NUS's academic capacity. The main initiatives associated with the MOU are the NUS staff scholarship programme where NUS staff could apply for a limited number of postgraduate scholarships to study at Otago. Another initiative was the research and teaching work carried out by the Centre for International Health from 2009 to 2011, led by Dr Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni (see Suaalii-Sauni *et al.* (2011) for discussion on the teaching project and the Suaalii-Sauni (2011) address titled 'In search of chutzpah' given to NUS in 2011 for outline of other projects undertaken as part of her work with NUS). Although we note that other New Zealand universities, such as the Victoria University of Wellington (VUW), has since taken up similar MOUs with the NUS, and that there have been and are partnerships or collaborations between NUS and other universities within Australia, Canada, Norway and Japan, the UO/NUS collaboration is unique in some respects in that an indigenous Samoan researcher from UO was able to be located in Samoa for a significant amount of time (two and a half years) to provide specific on-the-ground academic research capacity building assistance across NUS faculties.
- 4 Timote Vaoleti, in his 2006 article, cites the work of fellow Tongan academic and education researcher Konai Helu Thaman as the main source for his development of the *talanoa* as research methodology. He cites two unpublished papers/addresses delivered by Konai in 2002, first to the Atenisi University in Nukualofa, Tonga in January, and the other delivered in August in Suva, Fiji.
- 5 It is important to note here that in the Samoan language, the words 'talanoa' and 'faafaletui' refer to two different kinds of talk or talking processes. *Talanoa* refers to loose, casual conversation where there is no view from the outset to come together to discuss anything of serious importance. *Faafaletui*, on the other hand, does indeed, as Tamasese *et al.* explain, imply the idea of coming together for the specific purpose of discussing a serious matter and finding, where possible or if necessary, a resolution. When applying these terms in the Samoan context, researchers must be careful not to collapse or equate the two names as if they are one and the same. In other words, they must, when using 'talanoa' as a research methodology in the Samoan setting, explain that it involves an extension on the usual Samoan interpretation of *talanoa* to include the idea of engaging people in serious conversations about matters of importance and that by so doing they are redefining its usage for more technical academic research purposes to help serve the pan-Pacific imperatives of Pacific research. We are grateful to Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi for raising this issue and also to Seiuli Vaifou Aloalii Temese for the lively and very informative debate we held over it.
- 6 As with many Samoan stories of origin, there are many different versions of the origins of the *faafaletui*. It has also been brought to our attention that the reference to Sa Tui, or the family of Tui, is further interpreted to be in relation to the main kingly Tui dynasties of ancient Samoa and other parts of the Pacific, that is, the Tui Manu'a, Tui Atua, Tui Aana, Tui Uea. We are grateful to Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta'isi Efi and Sadat Muaiava for their feedback on this point.
- 7 Suaalii-Sauni (2006, see fn. 53).

- 8 In a guest lecture to our Samoa-based postgraduate Otago/NUS applied research methods course discussed below, Taimalieutu Kivi Tamasese shared that in order to explain to the NZ Health Research Council what the faafaletui entailed, they had to describe their faafaletui sessions as focus groups. After a few years of having their 'O le taeao afua: Samoan qualitative mental health' research project funding proposal rejected by the NZ HRC, it was suggested that if they replaced the word faafaletui with focus groups, the committee might better understand their proposed methodology. She stated that the year they did this their application was approved.
- 9 While it is true that phenomenological methodologies contain similar and complementary values and aims, including striving for an 'understanding [of the] distinctly existential, emotive, enactive, embodied, situational and nontheoretic', aspects of different human phenomena, and that it recognises Vaoileti's desire for specific address of the tension between 'what is unique and what is shared' (see van Manen, 1997, p. 345, cited in Finlay, 1999: 299), the actual doing and thinking exercises associated with these research processes, however, require a clear understanding of the underlying philosophical and cultural traditions associated with them. In terms of phenomenology, these traditions include that described as 'Husserlian' or 'Heideggerian' phenomenological approaches. Both are steeped in and begin with a particular cultural (German Christian) reference and use German terms (such as Dasein and Lebenswelt) to help illustrate the conceptual foundations of their respective approaches. In doing so, they deploy modes of explaining and doing that privilege a particular cultural lens. Moreover, we are mindful that phenomenology, like other social science methodologies, begin with a concern for universal knowledge. Pacific indigenous research, to which the talanoa and faafaletui belong, begins by contrast with a concern for ethnic specific knowledge and the protection of an ethnic, pan-ethnic or Indigenous heritage. Their different starting points make it difficult, therefore, for Pacific research to sit comfortably within phenomenology.
- 10 Both these examples could technically be included in 'Pacific research', especially if geography and Indigeneity were key criteria for inclusion. However, in growing largely out of Aotearoa New Zealand, Pacific or Pasifika research as an academic concept and practice is currently more commonly understood by the Pacific research community in Aotearoa New Zealand, to be separate to Kaupapa Maori and to those such as pakapa-kapa from Asian Pacific rim countries.
- 11 Obviously, these are guidelines that have developed over time and with various research experiences that suggest the need for general rules about how to select participants, how to make sense of their narratives or words and actions, how to write about these faithfully, etc.; however, these guidelines are just that, they are guidelines. Each narrative research situation will in the end require the researcher to employ his or her full intellect (which includes seeking advice from experi-

enced researchers) to know how best to assess and report the meanings associated with it.

- 12 The teachers were also involved in the practical exercises and participated in these student talanoa sessions.
- 13 Fagogo are, in the Samoan language, bedtime stories usually told to children (Kolone-Collins, 2010). See also Tui Atua (2011) and Moyle (2009) for further discussion on fagogo.

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