

# THE SCOPE OF TALANOA RESEARCH METHODOLOGY: THE PLACE OF RESEARCH METHODS THAT ARE NOT ROOTED IN PASIFIKA TRADITIONS

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the scope of Talanoa research methodology, a pan-Pacific approach to research. We ask about the implications of Talanoa research projects incorporating methods of data collection that have not been formulated from within Pasifika traditions. In the process, this paper examines distinctions as well as overlaps between the research categories of 'methodology' and 'method.' We argue that applying a Pasifika lens to this topic renders insights that are not available from Eurocentric perspectives. Ultimately, based on an analysis of existing Pasifika literature on the topic, we suggest that a range of research methods that are not uniquely Pasifika can be compatible with a Talanoa approach. In addition, we suggest that as a decolonising Indigenous methodology, Talanoa research – when examined alongside or in concert with Eurocentric research approaches – raises critical questions around contextualising research as cultural activity.

## KEYWORDS

Talanoa, Pacific research, Talanoa research methodology, research methods, Indigenous research

## INTRODUCTION

“E fafaga fanau a manu l fugala’au, ae fafaga fanau o tagata l upu ma tala” – little birds are fed with leaves and flowers while little children are fed with words and stories. This old Sāmoan proverb speaks to the importance of verbal communication in the growth of a child. Sāmoa and the Pacific in general are steeped in oral tradition and history. This oral tradition is the foundation of learning and knowledge dispersal, and this practice is continued today not only in the form of 'everyday' talanoa (conversation, talk, exchange of ideas/thinking), but also via Talanoa research methodology, which is used widely in contemporary Pasifika research.

This paper explores the scope of Talanoa research methodology. Specifically, we ask: For research projects that employ this methodology, what are the possibilities for, and the implications and risks of, utilising methods of data collection that are not themselves Pasifika? After reviewing the core components of Talanoa research, and based on an analysis of existing Pasifika literature in relation to this topic, we argue that research methods that are not uniquely Pasifika can be compatible with a Talanoa methodological approach. We focus on Westernised interviews and focus groups when exploring this topic, as these methods (particularly the former) are the most widely cited in discussions about methods within Talanoa approaches to research. Ultimately, we suggest that while 'Western' and 'Pacific' research approaches can be dichotomised, they need not be, necessarily. As far as we are aware, to date – with the exception of Prescott (2008), and Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) – our conclusion about the compatibility of (certain) Westernised methods with Talanoa methodology has not been articulated explicitly elsewhere in the literature. We build on these authors' work, and we show how an examination of 'methodology' and 'method' through a Pasifika lens renders insights about research activity that are unavailable from Eurocentric perspectives. In addition, we suggest that an examination of these issues raises critical questions around what it means to contextualise research culturally, including questions around how best to ensure that Talanoa research maintains its decolonising intentions and effects. We note that while this latter topic is not the main focus of our paper, we cite a few key considerations in relation to it.

A brief comment on terminology is in order. In this paper we use the term 'talanoa' (with a lowercase 't') to signify everyday cultural practices of conversation/talk. We use the term 'Talanoa' (with an uppercase 'T') when referring to Talanoa research methodology or methods. We note, however, that these conventions do not always apply to quotes from authors we cite.

Our motivation for exploring the scope of Talanoa research methodology stems from our roles within the Master of Applied Practice – Social Practice (MAP-SP) programme at Unitec New Zealand, Te Whare Wānanga o Wairaka, in Auckland. The MAP-SP is a qualification focusing on applied and community/industry-engaged research, designed primarily for social workers, community developers, counsellors, and those working in allied fields. The programme places emphasis on Indigenous methodologies; notably, approximately 60% of its students are Māori and/or Pasifika. At the time of this writing, more than 30% of MAP-SP students are Pasifika. Accordingly, Talanoa research methodology features strongly within numerous student projects. Each of this article's authors is involved in the MAP-SP. Associate Professor Helen Gremillion is the MAP-SP Discipline Leader and is also a course lecturer and supervisor in the programme. Jason Hallie is a lecturer and the Pacific Champion within Social Practice programmes at Unitec. He provides pastoral care to Pasifika students, and he also teaches a bachelor's course dedicated to talanoa. Dr Falaniko Tominioko is Director of Pacific Success at Unitec, and he serves as a MAP-SP supervisor. He has used Talanoa research methodology in his academic pursuits.

Talanoa and Kaupapa Māori research methodologies are two key Indigenous approaches to research that are covered in the MAP-SP. In accordance with Unitec's commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Kaupapa Māori methodology is given primacy; indeed, it is cited specifically within learning outcomes of required courses. While Talanoa and Kaupapa Māori methodologies are distinctly different (and it is beyond the scope of this paper to explore these differences fully), Pasifika scholar Timote Vaoleti (2011) notes an important similarity: the former encompasses a decolonising Pasifika world view, and the latter a decolonising Māori world view. In addition, both approaches reflect ways of seeing, being and acting in the world that extend well beyond research practices. However, unlike a Kaupapa Māori research approach – which does not detail particular research procedures or methods, and is often utilised in concert with methods of data collection that are not Kaupapa Māori per se<sup>1</sup> – a Talanoa research approach describes not only overall methodology but also specific methods. As the MAP-SP grows and enhances its coverage of Indigenous approaches to research, and considering the fact that both Māori and Pasifika scholars have noted strong compatibilities between Indigenous research approaches and certain non-Indigenous ones (Prescott, 2008; Stevenson, 2018; Vaoleti, 2011, 2013; Walker et al., 2006), in this paper we ask: Can Talanoa methodology, like Kaupapa Māori methodology, co-exist with a variety of research methods? Can Pasifika research possibilities be enhanced thereby, without risking compromising the spirit and aims of a Talanoa approach?

## METHODOLOGY AND METHOD: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

As background for this article's core topics, we offer an overview of the terms 'methodology' and 'method.' For more comprehensive discussion of the points covered in this section of our paper, see Mills and Birks (2014) and Clough and Nutbrown (2012).

Research methodology refers to overall research design, inclusive of research philosophy and/or world view. It encompasses not only methods of data collection and analysis, but also the principles that sit behind and justify methods. Examples of research methodologies include, for example: Talanoa approaches, Kaupapa Māori research, phenomenological approaches, experimental research, and participatory action research. Methods, on the other

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<sup>1</sup> Stevenson (2018) writes that beyond key cultural and ethical values articulated in the literature applicable to Kaupapa Māori research, Kaupapa Māori "does not inform how to carry out the research project" (p. 55). Similarly, Walker et al. (2006) state that one of "the idiosyncrasies of Kaupapa Maori research is that writers do not tell you how to do kaupapa Maori research; instead, they tend to focus on what it does and the effects that it has" (p. 335). Walker et al. further clarify that "methods of data collection in Kaupapa Maori research are not particular to Maori ... [and] may well draw upon Westernised research designs" (p. 336).

hand, are specific tools of data collection and/or data analysis. Examples of methods of data collection include interviews, focus groups, surveys, randomised control trials, standardised tests and journaling. Methods of data analysis include, for example, statistical analysis and thematic analysis. In this paper, when we discuss methods, we refer to methods of data collection only.

Methodologies, along with research questions, often determine methods. For example, the methodological principle that findings are to be based on verifiable observation (the principle of empiricism) leads to research methods involving measurement techniques that reduce data to numbers. In contrast, the methodological principle that meaning making is subjective (a phenomenological principle) leads to research methods that, for example, draw out people's narratives or stories.

Although it is possible to draw upon more than one research methodology for a given research project, typically only one is chosen. Note that 'mixed-methods' research methodology entails the collection and synthesis of both quantitative and qualitative data. In most cases, methods of data collection are not unique to particular methodologies; for instance, interviews and focus groups are used across a wide range of qualitative and mixed-methods methodological approaches.

Talanoa research methodology is typically utilised for qualitative research amongst Pasifika people. The question of what constitutes appropriate Talanoa research methods (of data collection) is the core topic of this article.

## TALANOA AS METHODOLOGY AND METHOD – AND MUCH MORE

In most scholarly writing about Talanoa approaches to research, the concepts of methodology and method are elided. Often, the terms are used interchangeably and/or both are referenced. Fa'avae et al. (2016) explain that Talanoa research "encompasses a practical method and the theoretical concepts used to enact that method [i.e., a methodology]" (p. 140).<sup>2</sup>

Timote Vaoleti, a Tongan academic and education researcher who is widely acknowledged as the originator of Talanoa research methodology,<sup>3</sup> sheds further light on the all-encompassing nature of a Talanoa approach to research. While Talanoa can be defined simply as a Pasifika "personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations" (Vaoleti, 2006, p. 21), it is much richer than such a definition could imply. Because this methodology builds upon an age-old Pasifika practice of engaging and communicating – "adding to it a technical research-related meaning" (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014, p. 333) – it taps into and encompasses an expansive Pasifika world view and ways of being. Vaoleti writes:

While it may be useful to simply list a number of characteristics integral to a talanoa encounter, this seems a rather prescriptive and linear way of articulating an holistic way of being and relating. Its complexity is part of its attraction. Talanoa should not be separated from ethics, spirituality, nature of being, existence, time and space, causality, ceremony, and social order. Talanoa is an encounter, individually or in a group, made possible only by a desire by all involved to engage verbally, intellectually, spiritually even emotionally about issues at hand. ... In agreeing to take part in talanoa kau nga fa'u [participants] place their mana and reputation on the line. It is the obligation of the researcher to kau nga fa'u, their relatives, their ancestors, their village, to process or advance talanoa authentically and develop the results respectfully and for the purpose for which knowledge is being co-created and given. (2011, pp. 128–129)

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<sup>2</sup> Fa'avae et al. (2016) go on to explain that Talanoa research also encompasses "the analysis of the information collected" (p. 140). This topic is beyond the scope of the present article.

<sup>3</sup> Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014, p. 333) note that Sitiveni Halapua, also a Tongan academic, "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." They also note that Halapua's contribution occurred prior to Vaoleti's formalising of Talanoa as a research methodology/method.

The quote above signals certain characteristics of a Talanoa research approach, such as face-to-face encounters and reciprocity, which are outlined below. The larger point it highlights is that the purposes and reach of Talanoa research extend well beyond that which is captured by the terms 'methodology' and 'method.' We suggest that as a decolonising Indigenous methodology, Talanoa research raises critical questions about the meaning and goals of research, including its fundamental component parts and procedural elements. This bigger picture has a bearing on our key question for this article: whether or not research employing Talanoa methodology can incorporate non-Pasifika data collection methods and still maintain its integrity as a Talanoa approach.

Before we address these critical questions around methodology and methods, it is necessary to explore the cultural meanings of talanoa more fully.

## DEFINING EVERYDAY TALANOA, AND IMPLICATIONS FOR TALANOA RESEARCH

### The concept of talanoa

As noted above, Talanoa research builds upon talanoa as a long-standing, Pasifika cultural practice. 'Talanoa' is a Tongan word which, however, signifies a concept considered to be pan-Pacific.<sup>4</sup> Citing Prescott (2008), Fa'avae et al. (2016, p. 140) note that as "an oratory tradition, talanoa is a concept recognised in Samoa, Fiji, Tonga, Cook Islands, Niue, Hawai'i and the Solomon Islands." The concept does carry a "diversity of meanings" (Tagicakiverata & Nilan, 2018, p. 3) across these different Pasifika contexts. This diversity reflects cross-cultural differences in understandings of talanoa as an everyday cultural practice or way of being. However, across these various contexts, talanoa is a traditional form of knowledge sharing that is often firmly rooted in the community, and takes place orally and in person (Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014).

Vaiotele writes that, in the Tongan context:

Talanoa can be referred to as a conversation, a talk, an exchange of ideas or thinking, whether formal or informal. ... *Tala* means to inform, tell, relate and command, as well as to ask or apply. *Noa* means of any kind, ordinary, nothing in particular, purely imaginary or void. ... Talanoa, then, literally means talking about nothing in particular, and interacting without a rigid framework. (2006, p. 23)

Similarly, Meo-Sewabu writes that, from a Fijian perspective, one can define 'tala' as:

... 'to offload'. *Noa* is often used with a prefix '*na noa*' meaning yesterday, so *talanoa* means literally offloading stories of recent events. ... early Fijians expressed oral tradition through several means. One of these was *talanoa*, when stories were relayed by the old to young people. (2014, p. 347)

However, Vaiotele (2011, 2006) clarifies that the literal meaning of talanoa does not adequately capture its breadth and – especially for research purposes – its rigour. Referring to its implementation in research, he notes that there are "many complex components of Talanoa" (2011, p. 116), allowing for a range of modes and procedures for both data collection and data analysis. Further, although some have interpreted Talanoa processes to be most appropriate for light-hearted or less serious research topics and questions (Tagicakiverata & Nilan, 2018; see also Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014), Vaiotele details multiple possibilities for Talanoa methods (outlined below) which do not preclude serious and/or probing research. More generally, he argues that Talanoa's lack of a rigid framework should not be taken to mean that Talanoa research is devoid of purpose or direction. In fact, Vaiotele (2011) is unequivocal that the aims of a given Talanoa research session must be clear to all those involved, and that the researcher takes an active role shaping the data-collection process in light of these aims.

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<sup>4</sup> Note that there is a range of Pasifika research methodologies distinct from Talanoa methodology, including: faafaletui (Sāmoa) (Tamasese et al., 2005); kakala (Tonga) (Thaman, 1997); tivaevae (Cook Islands) (Maua-Hodges, 1999); te vaka (Tokelau) (Kalavite, 2014); vanua (Fiji) (Kalavite, 2014); and talaloto (Tonga) (Naufahu, 2018).

The idea that talanoa talk is about ‘nothing in particular’ does not capture the meaning of ‘noa’ in Pasifika research practice. Vaioleti (2006, p. 24) writes that “*noa* creates the space and conditions” of a Talanoa encounter. For instance, when seeking participants’ consent to proceed with a Talanoa session, after the researcher states the purpose of the Talanoa s/he pauses, and during “the pause (*noa*, space), the researcher’s head should be slightly bowed and looking towards the ground to communicate s/he is finished and now waiting for a decision” (2011, p. 127). Halapua (2003) suggests that, more broadly, the concept of space within talanoa is linked to the concept of *vā*. *Vā* is generally described as the ‘space in between,’ and socially represents the relationship between two or more people (Anae, 1998; Lilomaiva-Doktor, 2009; Mila-Schaaf, 2006). *Vā* is:

... the existence of relationships between individuals and groups or communities. Maintaining these relationships pre-empts the conduct of participants during a talanoa. Respect for elders, family members, society and tradition encourages participants to consider the wider context of their existence and not just their individual point of view. (Prescott, 2008, p. 135)

The role of *vā* in Talanoa research points strongly to Pasifika world views infusing Talanoa processes and protocols. These world views can be articulated as values and principles.

## Talanoa research values and principles

While Pasifika values and principles shaping Talanoa research vary across a range of Pasifika contexts, some core elements that are pan-Pacific can be identified, in keeping with a general understanding of Talanoa research as a pan-Pacific approach.

Values include:

- *Mo’oni*: pure, real, authentic. Halapua (2007) cites the importance of speaking from the heart within talanoa encounters.
- *Mālie* (as developed by Manu’atu, 2000): a state of energised and uplifted spirits, linked to an experience of connectedness and enlightenment. This state occurs during what Vaioleti terms a “good Talanoa encounter” (2006, p. 24).
- *Māfana*: warmth. *Māfana* can be described as “warm feelings” associated with *mālie* (Fa’ave et al., 2016, p. 141; see also Manu’atu, 2000).<sup>5</sup>
- *Faka’apa’apa*: respectful, humble, considerate (Vaioleti, 2006).
- *Anga Lelei*: kindness, tolerance, helpfulness, calmness, dignity (Vaioleti, 2006).

Pasifika scholars stress that, as Fa’avae et al. (2016, p. 142) put it, Pasifika values – as well as Pasifika principles (some of which are detailed below) – “are not merely superficial cultural rituals; they are key to research quality. The richness and type of research knowledge made available to the researcher depends on the depth of the respectful relationship between the researcher and participants.” As noted above, Talanoa research is conducted within and predicated upon a rich tapestry of relationships that is inseparable from Pasifika social – as well as spiritual and ontological – understandings.<sup>6</sup>

Vaioleti (2011) reviews some key principles of talanoa/Talanoa research. He emphasises that while “the practise of talanoa may seem on the surface to be very flexible, open, and casual, when used formally as a means of communication, talanoa are structured by tapu, cultural expectations, and accountability” (p. 115), including

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5 When *mālie* and *māfana* are no longer present in a Talanoa process, the session naturally comes to an end.

6 These conditions of Talanoa research raise the important question of how best to ensure that appropriate Pasifika cultural expertise is incorporated into Talanoa research teams. An exploration of this topic is beyond the scope of this paper.

understandings of appropriate behaviour according to gender, class, age and cultural rank (see also Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014, and Vaioleti, 2013). At the same time, Talanoa research:

... can mean a conversation or discussion where the participants and the researcher/s have considerable power in deciding the desired process and protocol that is likely to lead to certain outcomes of the discussions. They can participate in this process, decide on its form and length, create its ambience, structure, and choose whenever to disengage if desired. (Vaioleti, 2011, p. 122)

In these ways, Talanoa research takes place from within Pasifika cultural and interpersonal frameworks that are understood as living and evolving, and as ever-negotiated – within certain constraints, limits, or sociocultural ‘givens.’ Fundamentally, Talanoa research co-constructs findings through culturally contextualised encounters.

There are important implications here for identifying a few additional Talanoa research principles. Vaioleti (2013, p. 206) writes that “cultural interplays during talanoa such as moods, emotions, silence, deep and reflective thoughts, eye and body movements are all parts of the talanoa. Behaviors are integrated and inseparable parts of the phenomenon the participants experience.” Coupled with the fact that Talanoa research is rooted in oral tradition, these features of Talanoa mean that it is almost always conducted face to face.<sup>7</sup> In addition, a focus on emergent findings and on co-constructed processes and outcomes means that a positioning of the researcher as a powerful ‘expert’ – common within many (but not all) Eurocentric research approaches – does not apply. Power sharing between researchers and participants is a key element of Talanoa. Finally, and in keeping with the latter point, Talanoa research entails reciprocity, mutual accountability, and a commitment to pursue research outcomes that will benefit involved Pasifika communities. As Vaioleti (2011) puts it, Talanoa research “firmly places the power to define what the Pacific issues are at the centre of the encounter between the researchers and *kau nga fa’u* [participants]” (p. 128). Vaioleti continues, emphasising the constitutive role of relationships for Talanoa research: “This is where real and meaningful relationships are vital and have relevance for the research outcome” (p. 128).

In addition, Talanoa research is decolonising. The combination of Pasifika values underpinning Talanoa research, the ethical imperative that the research will benefit Pasifika people and the empowerment of the *kau nga fa’u* speak to Talanoa’s decolonising effects. For the Talanoa to be successful there needs to be a high value placed on Indigenous cultural ethics, values and practices. Vaioleti (2006, p. 24) notes that Talanoa research is, therefore, “resistant to rigid, institutional, hegemonic control.” Taken together, this set of perspectives challenges the views of some Eurocentric researchers that Talanoa is an unscientific mode of storytelling lacking in rigour and focused on romanticising Pasifika history (see Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014).

## TALANOA AS A DISTINCTIVE RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Because Talanoa research takes place within Pasifika ways of knowing and being, existing Eurocentric categories of research methodology do not neatly apply to it. In addition, as noted above, writings about Talanoa research often elide the concepts of methodology and method. As an Indigenous cultural practice that has been developed into a form of academic research, Talanoa occupies a space that challenges and confounds mainstream research activity and categorisation.

That said, Vaioleti (2006, 2011, 2013) has helpfully identified a range of Eurocentric methodological approaches with which a Talanoa approach is aligned. He cites similarities with grounded theory, naturalistic inquiry, ethnography, narrative inquiry and phenomenology; and he holds that phenomenology is the most closely aligned approach. A benefit of examining such similarities is that it allows researchers who are unfamiliar with Talanoa an avenue for

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<sup>7</sup> Face-to-face encounters can include virtual ones. Fairbairn-Dunlop (2014) chronicles the successful use of a virtual space where a talanoa was held to promote Pasifika postgraduate research in Aotearoa. This mechanism was subsequently evaluated and found to be culturally appropriate and supportive for the researchers.

understanding it, while also sharpening Talanoa's distinctiveness (see also Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2014). In this section of our paper we explicate some points in this regard in relation to phenomenology.

Vaioleti points out that phenomenological approaches to research are similar to Talanoa approaches in that they both focus on participants' meaning making of lived experience. Further, lived experience is a very rich construct in both traditions. Citing Moustakas (1994), who writes about phenomenology, Vaioleti (2013) explains that both traditions focus on "the wholeness of experience and a search for the essence of experiences" (p. 206). This understanding of experience is inclusive of moods, emotions and embodied phenomena such as eye and body movements (see also Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014). In addition, Talanoa follows what Vaioleti identifies as a Heideggerian phenomenological approach. First, Heidegger "insisted that the observer [e.g., a researcher] ... couldn't separate herself from the world being studied" (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 206. See also Heidegger, 1962). Second, the wholeness of experience is a "being-in-the-world," or the meaning of "being," that is realised and accessed via "contextual entrenchment" (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 206). Following the first point here about a Heideggerian approach, this contextual entrenchment applies to both the researcher and participants.

However, although Vaioleti locates Talanoa within the phenomenological research family, he also argues that Talanoa "does not fit totally with a phenomenological perspective" (2011, p. 133). This lack of a complete fit is due to the fact that, within a Talanoa approach, cultural considerations may suffuse the explication or exploration of world views. In other words, Pasifika-specific protocols and cultural processes constitutively shape Talanoa research. Writing about this issue in relation to Tongan phenomena, Vaioleti (2013, p. 194) states that a given Talanoa research project must be aligned "with the anga fakafonua (culture or rites of Tongan people) which include knowledge ('ilo fakafonua [Tongan knowledge]), values (mahu'inga fakafonua [Tongan values]), language (lea fakafonua [Tongan language]) and ways (founga fakafonua [Tongan ways])." Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea summarise the situation as follows:

... phenomenology, like other social science methodologies, begin[s] with a concern for universal knowledge. Pacific indigenous research ... 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. (2014, p. 342)

## TALANOA METHODS

Vaioleti (2013) identifies at least eight possible Talanoa research methods, which Fa'avae et al. summarise as follows:

... talanoa vave (quick and surface verbal exchange between two or more people);<sup>8</sup> talanoa faikava (focused talanoa by males who share similar interests while drinking kava [traditional alcoholic beverage from crushed kava root]); talanoa usu (deep and more intimate talanoa which is mālie and māfana and involves humour);<sup>9</sup> talanoa tevolo (spiritual talanoa which involves sharing about supernatural visitations, dreams or visions of people who have passed); talanoa faka'eke'eke (closest to a modern interview and involves verbal searching and more probing questions); pō talanoa (talking in everyday matters such as politics, church matters, children, television); talanoa'i (talking which involves high-level analysis, synthesis and evaluation); and tālanga (similar to a debate or constructive argument about issues that require attention).<sup>10</sup> (2016, p. 141)

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8 Vaioleti (2013, p. 200) states that talanoa vave is used in research to secure "commitments for a deeper and more formal talanoa at a later stage," or to "remind, maintain connection or ensure shared understanding."

9 Vaioleti (2013, p. 201) clarifies that this form of talanoa can be "for pleasure and perhaps just filling time before another engagement. For researchers, it is an ideal way to build trust for more objectified talanoa such as faka'eke'eke, talanga and talanoa'i."

10 Tālanga is "used by outsiders or less powerful individual[s] or groups to invite themselves into a talanoa" (Vaioleti, 2013, p. 203). It can also be used to challenge perceived assumptions embedded in the research process, allowing participants to raise issues around "perceived abuse of power or injustice during a talanoa research process. Tālanga then can contribute greatly to the validity and reliability of [Talanoa research] approaches" (p. 204).

The selection of method/s for a given Talanoa research project will depend on the researcher's intention and on the direction of a particular Talanoa. Kalavite (2014, p. 169) notes that Talanoa methods range from a more formal approach, which she likens to – but does not equate with – semi-structured interviewing (allowing for guiding questions and relatively set timeframes), to an informal approach (likened to, but again not equated with, an unstructured interview).

Vaioleti (2013) writes that one method may dominate a given research process “although others [can] be employed fluidly, interchangeably to set and maintain a good atmosphere, pass or obtain information holistically, prod or triangulate while observing all technical and cultural protocols during the data collection or data co-construction” (p. 199). The cultural skill of a Talanoa research process – what Fa’avae et al. (2016) call “the arts of Talanoa” (p. 145) – enables not only multiple methods but also the co-existence of seemingly contradictory pulls towards structure and flexibility within a given Talanoa. Although, in keeping with the value of mo’oni, Talanoa research processes prize speaking from the heart and often spontaneously, Vaioleti argues that, overall, a “highly structured approach is vital” in order for participants to be able to “co-construct meaning from the encounter because talanoa employs an open technique where the precise nature of any question asked has not been determined in advance, but will depend on the way in which the talanoa develops” (Vaioleti, 2011, p. 128).<sup>11</sup>

The above descriptors of Talanoa methods reveal what appear to be, from a Eurocentric perspective, a confounding of methodology and method. Specifically, the cultural features of Talanoa research render its methods inseparable from its methodology. In the next section of this paper, we turn to the inverse question: i.e., the question of whether Talanoa methodology is inseparable from Talanoa methods. To reiterate our key question: Does the use of Westernised methods as part of a Talanoa study make cultural sense, and/or threaten to compromise the cultural integrity of a Talanoa approach?

## **Integrating non-Pasifika-specific research methods within Talanoa research methodology**

There is general agreement amongst Pasifika scholars that Talanoa research involves “a process of storying and gathering of narratives” (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014, p. 334). As such, the main Westernised research methods that are sometimes used within a Talanoa approach, or to which Talanoa research methods are compared, are interviews and focus groups (see Fa’avae, 2016; Kalavite, 2014; ‘Otunuku, 2011; Prescott, 2008; Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Vaioleti, 2013). While other inductive, Westernised social science methods – such as ‘insider’ ethnographic methods and case studies – may also be a good fit, this discussion will be limited to the role of interviews and focus groups for Talanoa research, with a focus on the former (as it is the most widely cited).

Before discussing the issue of using interviews or focus groups within Talanoa research, it is important to acknowledge that – as Fa’avae et al. (2016), Prescott (2008), and Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) point out – in some research reports the term ‘talanoa’ is used interchangeably or in concert with ‘interviews’ without reference to any methodological implications. For instance, while Otsuka (2005) describes a Talanoa data collection process for an education study in Fiji, he also refers (without explanation) to interviews with study participants. Similarly, Teevale et al. (2012) write about implementing an “open-ended Talanoa interview style” (p. 283),<sup>12</sup> and Mo’ungatonga (2003) refers to her Talanoa sessions as interviews.

On one level, this situation may be simply a matter of translating Pasifika terms into English. For example, Fa’avae et al. (2016) write that, for a research project they describe, they “decided that maybe we could talanoa (pō talanoa)

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11 Note as well that in its focus on debate and argument, tālānga can offer what Vaioleti identifies as a contrasting perspective to the warmth and empathy associated with Talanoa research (see Footnote 10 for additional detail).

12 In Teevale et al.’s (2012) study, Talanoa research methodology was not adopted (among other descriptors, the authors cite appreciative inquiry and grounded theory). Discussing the implications of using Talanoa methods for studies that employ non-Pasifika methodologies is beyond the scope of this paper.

and do interviews (talanoa faka'eke'eke) at different times, or on different occasions. The talanoa seemed necessary to the interviews, and the interviews opened up topics for subsequent talanoa" (p. 146). Fa'avae et al.'s use of the term 'interview' here is clearly an English translation of faka'eke'eke (as noted above, faka'ek'eeke is, according to Vaioleti [2013], closest to a modern interview) – particularly considering that they write critically not only about a Westernised 'interview mode' but also about scholars interchangeably referencing 'talanoa' and 'interviews' in their research publications.

On the other hand, there are times when scholars distinguish between Talanoa and Westernised methods and yet still apply Westernised terms to Talanoa processes. Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) note that, although it is "not yet sharp," "the distinction between an interview or focus group and a talanoa ... session ... is becoming clearer as more researchers use" Pasifika methods (p. 335); at the same time, they write, there is currently "a necessity for Pacific researchers to describe their use of talanoa ... in ways that suggest [it] to be synonymous with European-termed social research methods, such as the focus group or interview" (p. 335). Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea clarify that institutional politics play a role in this latter situation, reporting on the circumstances of a Pasifika research team that received research funding for a project, after multiple unsuccessful attempts, only once they accepted advice to use the term 'focus groups' instead of a Pasifika term for their chosen research method.

In this light, Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) advocate for the use of Pasifika terms for Pasifika research. They argue that, in "the political manoeuvrings that come as a matter of course with any attempts to decolonise academic research," it is imperative for Indigenous research terms "to have presence and legitimacy in both the academic and Pacific worlds" (p. 336). This is a powerful point to make, and one that is echoed by Māori scholars emphasising the importance of te reo when promoting and growing Kaupapa Māori research (see Walker et al., 2006). As mentioned above, however, Kaupapa Māori researchers frequently employ a range of research methods, inclusive of Westernised ones (referred to in Westernised terms). Arguably there is power as well in co-opting Westernised methods within Indigenous methodologies, making use of them to suit overarching Indigenous research processes and outcomes.

In fact, Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) are clear that what is most important in relation to the above issues for decolonising Pasifika research is that Pasifika research *methodology* is identified as culturally specific and is autonomous. Writing about the Pasifika methodology of faafaletui as well as Talanoa methodology, they state that for the goal of developing Pasifika 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" (p. 336). They note that Vaioleti (2006, 2011) locates Talanoa within the phenomenological research family, and that Prescott (2008) states that Talanoa is linked to interpretive constructivism.<sup>13</sup> Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea are clarifying that they are uneasy with these methodologically blurred lines, and are relatively more comfortable with mixing and matching Pasifika and Westernised methods. They argue that methodological autonomy allows Indigenous researchers to privilege "a research process that always keeps at the forefront a respect for cultural context and meaning, no matter what the research" (p. 336) – i.e., inclusive of a range of research topics and data-gathering tools (not necessarily Indigenous tools).

We agree that Westernised research methods can be compatible with Talanoa methodology, and that the key to upholding the values, purposes and decolonising effects of Talanoa research is to preserve Talanoa's methodological autonomy. As long as Pasifika cultural contexts, values and meanings are at the forefront of research processes, a variety of methods (perhaps in modified form: see below) can be utilised without compromising Pasifika intellectual, spiritual and cultural connections between researchers and participants (see Kalavite, 2014). We suggest that in this way – i.e., with respect to mixing and matching research methods across cultural frameworks – Pasifika research can be similar to Kaupapa Māori research. We now turn to a discussion of this

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13 Interpretive constructivism is typically viewed as a research paradigm, which is a slightly larger umbrella than a research methodology (see Mertens, 2010).

topic from a slightly different angle: one that queries the idea that Westernised methods are uniformly Eurocentric. We also look again at the question of how important it might be to utilise Pasifika terms for research methods when one's methodological approach is Pasifika.

Not all Westernised interview methods are equally Eurocentric. While Pasifika scholars generally agree that Westernised interviews are not in themselves adequate for capturing the relational and cultural richness of Talanoa processes (Fa'avae, 2016; Prescott, 2008), Prescott (2008) explains that there are many types of 'Western' interview approaches (including group interviews), and that the content, meaning and purpose of an interview is shaped constitutively by the way it is theorised and put into practice. It is true that Eurocentric interviews can be relationally sterile, and structured to transmit knowledge one way, for the benefit of a seemingly neutral researcher. But in his discussion of the history and development of Westernised interview techniques, Prescott points out that interviews can also be used within, and their processes shaped by, research methodologies that acknowledge the sociocultural situatedness of participants and researchers, the co-construction of realities amongst research participants (including the researcher) and "the desire to understand rather than explain" (Fontana & Frey, 2005, p. 706). So, as Prescott (2008) puts it, while "the *talanoa* process should not be mistaken as simply a particular style of interview, there are a number of similarities between unstructured interviews and *talanoa*" (p. 132).

Prescott (2008) utilises *talanoa* "as a complementary addition" (p. 133) to the interview, and at times uses the terms interchangeably (with a clear methodological justification provided for doing so). Similarly, Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) see "little difference in practice" between Talanoa methods "and an interview or focus group in terms of the general mechanics of actually carrying them out" (p. 337). However, in both of these articles, an argument is made that if methods are referenced using Pasifika terms, Pasifika values and processes are more likely to stay top of mind. Prescott notes that popular perceptions of (more structured) interview processes, when referred to as 'interviews,' may hinder Pasifika peoples' participation. A long history of colonising research amongst Pasifika peoples informs such perception, which remains relevant currently. Prescott suggests that a researcher utilising Talanoa methodology "may go to extraordinary lengths to explain a form of interview that addresses the weaknesses generally associated with traditional [Westernised] interviews, when they may simply request that they would like to *talanoa* with the participant" (p. 130).

All things considered, it seems that the use of Pasifika vs. Westernised methods and terms can depend on context. Pasifika scholars are negotiating an academic space that has been shaped by Western epistemologies. Talanoa processes have been deliberately crafted as 'academic' and translated into existing research worlds. With these points in mind, and with appropriate contextual understanding, translation can work in multiple directions: e.g., Pasifika terms can be used for a research method to enlist Pasifika participants for a collaborative, decolonising project that is funded by a body to whom methods are described as interviews. In their discussion of capacity building around, and the teaching of, Pasifika methodologies, Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) state that "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" (p. 332) (*italics in the original*).

As stated above, Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) do support the use of non-Pasifika methods within research projects that employ Pasifika methodologies. Examples of such research include 'Otunuku's 2011 project with parents and caregivers of secondary school students in New Zealand, using focus groups and a Talanoa methodology. 'Otunuku explains that the focus group process was shaped by Talanoa (methodological) values and protocols, deviating from what would ordinarily be prescribed for a focus-group process. For instance, focus-group time frames were expanded, since "making connections between researchers and participants – either through family, relatives, school mates, place of birth, or shared acquaintances – took nearly half the time prescribed by the literature on focus groups" (p. 46).

Another example signals the potential of expanding Talanoa research beyond the qualitative research approaches with which it has been associated – a potentiality that, as Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) note, offers

a strong case for methodological autonomy (as opposed to a too-tight association with phenomenology or interpretive constructivism). It is worth quoting at length:

... although using the talanoa ... as a methodological framework for quantitative research has not yet been done, it is theoretically possible. In reflecting on this, ... because of the way in which we conducted our basic epidemiology and questionnaire work with the Samoan villages ..., it could be said that what we did fell quite comfortably within ... the scope of a talanoa ... 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 the village 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 ... to medical research, such as epidemiology, is an interesting area for indigenous health or development researchers to follow up on. (Suaalii-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014, p. 338)<sup>14</sup>

It is important to stress that colonising representations or appropriations of Talanoa research are an ever-present possibility. In this light it would seem risky to include non-Pasifika methods within Talanoa methodological approaches. However, restricting Pasifika researchers to Pasifika-only methods can be seen as a colonising practice in itself. We can turn this issue on its head: why should Eurocentric research concepts be enabled to claim all the non-Indigenous (and only non-Indigenous) research territory with which they have been associated? We reflect further on this question in the final section of this paper.

## CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

This paper argues that research methods that are not specific to Pasifika traditions can be compatible with Talanoa research methodology. We agree with Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) that the key to preserving the integrity and intentions of a Talanoa research approach – including its decolonising effects – is methodological autonomy, not specific research methods. To achieve this end, it is imperative that Pasifika research processes maintain respectful, collaborative and power-sharing relationships as well as core Pasifika values and principles throughout; any non-Pasifika methods employed may be modified accordingly.

In the process of reaching this conclusion, this paper critically queries the categories of ‘methodology’ and ‘method.’ When viewed through a Pasifika lens, new insights about these categories arise; for instance, the inseparability of Pasifika methods from Pasifika methodological considerations. Unpacking Talanoa as methodology and/or method reveals the (Western) cultural limitations of these terms, which are not always clearly distinguishable within Pasifika research traditions, and are in these contexts infused with quite specific cultural protocols and world views that are not typically associated with these constructs. Further, as part of examining the implications of utilising non-Pasifika methods within a Talanoa methodological approach, we have argued that not all Westernised research methods are equally Eurocentric. Some Westernised methods have been crafted to be porous to sociocultural contextualisation, and to allow for the co-construction of knowledge amongst research participants (including researchers). We conclude our paper with some reflections on this latter point.

Suaalii-Sauni and Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) write that one effect of exploring rigorously and simultaneously (in their teaching) both Pasifika and Westernised research approaches, and openly considering the suitability of any research method for a Talanoa project, is that this process raises questions about the common assumption that qualitative research, when it is thought about generically (i.e., from within Western paradigms), is devoid of any cultural specificity. They write that such an exercise in the classroom “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

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14 In relation to Kaupapa Māori research, Walker et al. (2006, p. 336) note that the “Westernised research designs” that can be used include surveys and experiments, even though “certain kinds of qualitative research, for example oral histories, narratives, and case studies, and methods like interviews and focus groups, fit more comfortably within a Maori way of doing.”

others” (p. 337). In this paper, we too have uncovered the possibility that Westernised methods can embed cultural content.

A question that is then also raised is: what Western cultural assumptions and protocols might be embedded in Eurocentric methodologies and methods, masquerading as universal principles (or as principles that can apply generically to all ‘non-Indigenous’ research contexts)? When Prescott (2008) identified contemporary forms of (Westernised) interviewing as a good fit with Talanoa research, he pointed out a blind spot within Eurocentric scholarship that addresses the development of interview methods allowing for this fit. He writes that in descriptions of how interviews have evolved as research tools to accommodate rich cultural contextualisation, “there does not appear to have been any regard given to the possibility that such forms of communication already exist” (p. 130) – i.e., within very long-standing practices of talanoa (and other oral, Indigenous traditions). We suggest that this situation reveals a set of Western protocols and assumptions embedded in Eurocentric approaches to research: namely, the unacknowledged (and likely non-conscious),<sup>15</sup> rhetorical erasure of collectivist, non-European precedents in relation to its own research constructs. Put differently, it is perhaps a uniquely Western (and quintessentially colonising) approach to stake apparently ‘new’ claims – claims about, for example, the development or evolution of an interactive tool (employed in research) allowing for rich cultural contextualisation – when in fact said claims are not new and are not, at root, Western. With this perspective in mind, it is reasonable to argue that the use of interviews – and, potentially, a whole range of research methods currently identified as Western – within a Talanoa project (modified accordingly as needed) is entirely appropriate and justified.

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15 Hence the blind spot.

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