

Teu Le Va: Samoan relational ethics

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Abstract:

Development of Pacific research guidelines can become unnecessarily cluttered, with competing, unclear designs, and gaps in the transference of customary knowledge across space and time. Standard ethics discourse goes some way in coming to know the bones of the person in a general context, but in relational ethics we are called to put a'ano (flesh) on the bones of personhood, recognising our commitments to each other in the humanity of relationships. This article discusses the concrete but subjective relationship between people at all stages of Pacific research. Relational spaces in a Pacific experience clarify research praxis. The philosophy of 'teu le va' focuses on secular and sacred commitments, guiding reciprocal 'acting in' and respect for relational spaces. Primarily concerned with the theoretical and philosophical nature of teu le va, this article traces the genealogy of its incorporation in government research guidelines to show how indigenous Pacific ethics have potential to shape educational research in New Zealand.

Keywords: relational ethics; teu le va; Samoan indigenous philosophy; emancipatory paradigm

Full Text:

Regarding the development of supposedly Pacific indigenous research guidelines, models and competencies, we must be wary about how development of cultural competencies, guidelines, etc can become befuddled and unnecessarily cluttered by competing unclear designs, as well as by gaps in the transference of customary knowledge across space and time (Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Taisi Efi, 2005). Much of the development of Pacific paradigms, concepts, metaphors, models of 'well-being', research methodologies and cultural competencies has occurred in the health and education sectors (Anae, 2010). As Efi implies in the above paper, much of this development appears to be ad hoc and fragmented. The nature of the development highlights the necessity for more coordination and focus, especially to potentially 'unclutter' or elucidate Pacific approaches to research. I contend that an indigenous relational ethic can assist with that clarity. Normative ethical principles, virtue ethics, feminist ethics, and ethics of care (Bakhtin, Holquist, & Liapunov, 1990; Bell, 2014; Bergum & Dossetor, 2005; Hoskins, 2012; Levinas, 1988; Nealon, 1997) are all useful to the Pacific researcher, but a fuller exploration is called for into the specific

relationships within which the ethical moment is enacted. Standard ethics discourse goes some way in coming to know and attend to the bones of the person, in a general, objective context. In relational ethics, however, we are called to put a'ano (flesh) on the bones of personhood in a way that recognises and demands respect, attentiveness and responsiveness to our commitments to each other in the humanity of relationships.

Pacific relational ethics, building on and highlighting certain aspects of those more conventional approaches, highlights a Pacific research ethical concern and clarifies the context-derived nature of research. In this article I discuss the concrete but subjective relationship that exists between people at all stages of Pacific research. Relational spaces, regarded as 'ambiguous' by much Western discourse (Bergum and Dossetor, 2005), in a Pacific experience become clarifiers of research praxis. I invoke the philosophy of 'teu le va' (to value, nurture, and 'tidy up' social and sacred relational spaces, Anae 2010), which focuses on the secular and sacred commitment by reciprocally 'acting in' and respecting these relational spaces (Airini, Anae, & Mila-Schaaf, 2010; Salmond, 2011; Verbos & Humphries, 2014). This focus on the sacred/spiritual dimension sets indigenous relational ethics apart from western relational ethics, and in the context of research praxis, can develop an indigenous relational ethic amongst researchers and their participants, communities, research team, institutions, funders, policy makers and tangata whenua. The relationships thus enacted will lead to positive outcomes needed for transformative change for disadvantaged ethnic minorities.

Primarily concerned with the theoretical and philosophical nature of teu le va, this article traces the genealogy of its incorporation in the government research guideline document, *Teu le va: Relationships across Research and Policy: a collective approach to knowledge generation and policy development for action towards Pacific education success* (2010) to illustrate how indigenous relational ethics have the potential to shape educational research in New Zealand. It also offers the potential of teu le va to illuminate the place of the spiritual/sacred and tapu (implicit in indigenous cultural rituals) in relational ethics discourse, ethical debates and research praxis. In this article, *Teu le va* (italicised) refers to the Ministry of Education published document, while *teu le va* (unitalicised) refers to the Samoan indigenous concept. Also, in this article, 'Pacific' signifies research related directly to the educational experiences of all Pacific peoples residing in New Zealand, rather than the contested term 'Pasifika', used by the Ministry of Education (Anae, Coxon, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001).

Pacific Education Research Guidelines (Anae et al., 2001)

These guidelines were commissioned by the Ministry of Education to provide a clear understanding of the cultural and socio-historical complexities involved in doing Pacific research in educational settings, and practical protocols for carrying out research. These original guidelines were seminal in outlining Pacific research contexts, and some

of the specific and sensitive issues around how research should be carried out between researchers, their teams and Pacific peoples and communities. The document develops a Pacific methodology which insists on Pacific ontological and epistemological considerations being incorporated at all stages of the research process--from defining the research 'problem' to research design, implementation, analysis and dissemination of findings. These considerations are defined as the need to acknowledge contemporary Pacific contexts: inter-and intra-ethnic dynamics (Anae, 1998; Tiatia & Deverell, 1998; Tupuola, 1993); collective ownership (Fana'afi Le Tagaloa, 1996), shame; authoritarian structures (Mavoa & Sua'ali'i, 2001); and implicit gender, status and gerontocratic principles (Anae et al., 2001, p.28). In retrospect, these guidelines could have clarified further the need to examine and expose the complex nature of ethics in Pacific research in clarifying further questions such as: Who am I? Who are you? What is our connection? What happens when the ethical moment is enacted?

Despite having been part of the team that developed the Pacific Education Research Guidelines, it was not until 2007 when I was asked by the Ministry of Education to write a conceptual paper (Anae, 2007) for the *Is Your Research Making a Difference to Pacific Education?* symposium, held in Wellington to inform a second iteration of the guidelines, that I had an epiphany of sorts, which did not really mature until that paper was published (Anae, 2010). Firstly, I wanted to create a paradigm shift and a change in mind-set about the need to do Pacific research 'properly' yielding more robust and more meaningful evidence that could translate into policy--an emancipatory paradigm which shifted research as a means to an end, to the saliency of people and the importance of relationships between people in the research process. My own research trajectory had revealed tragic flaws in traditional research culture in New Zealand pertaining to Pacific peoples and communities. Much Pacific research in New Zealand, for example, has glossed over cross-cultural contexts, ignoring the cultural complexities not only of the multi-ethnic nature of Pacific communities, but also the intraethnic nuances of the diverse groupings and identities of Pacific peoples in New Zealand. I knew that until this was addressed, Pacific research in New Zealand would be ineffective and lack ability for transformative change for a component of New Zealand's Pacific population which remains marginalised, powerless and in a situation of crisis, according to all demographic indices.

Secondly, I realised that the proliferation of indigenous research methodologies/methods/models being developed in New Zealand were in response to the centrality of relationships between the researchers/researched and the importance of indigenous references in the way Pacific researchers were engaging in their moral and ethical praxis. Thirdly, and more importantly, at the core of these considerations and developments was the need for an overarching philosophical paradigm, which could umbrella these diverse but closely-related methods/methodologies/models. I realised that by reframing relational ethics using the indigenous concept of *teu le va*, a paradigm shift could occur. This paradigm is important as it will later flow back into Pacific theses, research, and communities. Moreover its philosophical and theoretical

import is in the form of human capital as well as research outcomes (Burnett, 2012).

Concomitantly, my own personal experience as a Samoan woman born in New Zealand, my faasamoa upbringing and my valuing of Samoan cultural references in acknowledging the centrality of aiga (extended family), va tapuia (sacred relational spaces) and va fealoa'i (spaces between relational arrangements), tautua (to serve), faaloalo (to respect), feagaiga (special covenant between brother and sister and their respective lineages), gafa (genealogy), lotu (church), and faamatai (chiefly system) provided inspiration for the kind of transformative change I was seeking. The seed of the teu le va philosophical approach had been planted in the fertile soil of relational ethics.

The Place of the Sacred/Spiritual, Tapu, and teu le va in Relational Ethics

The concept of the Samoan self as a 'relational self' is explicit in the literature on Samoan wellbeing in New Zealand (Lui, 2003; Tamasese, Peteru, Waldegrave, & Bush, 2005). The Samoan self is described as reliant on relationships that are occurring in the va, or space between. Samoan discourses on the va, va feoloa'i, va tapuia, and teu le va (to value, nurture and act on the sacred and secular spaces of relationships) are covered comprehensively in the literature (Lilomaiava-Doktor, 2006; Shore, 1982) where understandings of va/teu le va are defined as "the fatu (essence) of faasamoa" and the "tapu-ness" of the va (Anae, 2010).

Efi states that "tapu (the sacred) and tofa saili (the search for wisdom) are considered and situated in contemporary Samoan experiences and understandings of the ethical ... and provide the basis for ethical research in a Samoan indigenous context" (Tui Atua Tamasese Taisi Efi, 2009, p. 115). I support his call for the "re-appreciation" of the rightful place of the spiritual, sacred and tapu in ethical debates, since there is no recognition, value, or appreciation of the sacred in western relational ethics frameworks. Teu le va provides a framework for interactions within which the sacred can be enacted. In Samoan contexts it can be experienced as a spiritual awakening and the recognition of the 'sacred essence' beyond human reckoning, which comes from the knowledge that Samoan people are connected in a web to the Gods of our understanding. Some understand these Gods as Tagaloa and all of creation; others as the Christian God. Tagaloaalagi (the long version of Tagaloa) is believed by Samoans to be the progenitor creator God. Ancient Samoan beliefs about Tagaloa are compromised by the influence of Christianity, colonialism and capitalism (Maliko, 2012).

These indigenous perspectives suggest that if one views all reciprocal relationships with others as sacred, then the relationship will be more valued and more closely nurtured. The teu le va indigenous reference uses Efi's notion of va tapuia and genealogy and focuses on the centrality of reciprocal relationships in the development of optimal

relationships. But how does one *teu le va*? And how, within the *va*, does interaction by involved parties occur? To *teu le va* requires that one regards these (inter)actions as sacred in order to value, nurture, and if necessary tidy up the *va*--the social and sacred space that separates and yet unites in the context of *va tapuia*, experienced in research relationships. This is not to say that to *teu le va* in all one's relationships is simple, nor an easy process, especially if there is disagreement with the other party in a relationship, and one takes a more subservient role/position to the other. More often than not it is complex, multi-layered and fraught with difficulties. For example, *teu le va* is used in the wedding ceremony to imply that when problems occur in the marriage, one or other partner must relent/submit to the other, thereby cementing the institution of marriage. But if all parties have the will, the spirit and the heart for what is at stake, then it is a win-win situation and optimal outcomes will be achieved.

Teu le va is significant because not only does it infer protocols, cultural etiquette, both physical and sacred, and *tapu*, it implies both proscribed and prescribed behaviour and the concomitant moral and ethical underpinnings of behaviour. It insists that direct action must follow to correct the relationship and/or the relational arrangement if a breach of the *tapu* in the *va* has occurred. Thus not only during formal rituals, but also small family or village meetings, when one is told to *teu le va* the matter is taken very seriously and immediate action taken to address the incorrect relational arrangement (Airini et al., 2010, p. 12). Thus in this point of reference, in all human relationships, the action/behaviour and consequences consists of the duality of reciprocal practical action being sanctioned by spiritual, moral and sacred support.

In our research relationships, Pacific researchers can *teu le va* in general by exposing, understanding and reconciling our *va* with each other in reciprocal relationships in the research process and for engaging in dialogue with all research participants at all levels. A person, as an independent being is both separate from others (independent) and connected to others (dependent) at the same time. A relational personhood, an interdependent personhood fosters rather than assumes autonomy. Thus the role of the Pacific researcher is to facilitate continued dialogue between research participants, colleagues in the research team, funders, policy-makers, and communities to ensure debate and continued dialogue over time. Where there is tension or disagreement, to *teu le va* means to soothe, mute and/or attenuate these, in order to correct or realign priorities to ensure the dialogue is kept intact and moving forward.

Although people and groups with whom we meet and have relational arrangements all have specific biographies (a whole plethora of ethnicities, genders, classes, ages and agendas), whether they are family members, colleagues, leaders, participants, or funders, to *teu le va* means to be committed to take all these into account in the context in which these relationships are occurring in the enactment of ethical moments. It is this as well as through face-to-face interaction, words spoken, body language and behaviour, with purposeful and positive outcomes of the relationship in mind, that the

relationship progresses and moves forward. Not to do this will incur the wrath of the gods, the keepers of tapu, and positive successful outcomes will not eventuate; progress will be impeded, parties to the relationship will be put at risk, and appeasement and reconciliation will need to be sought.

Teu le va: Relationships across Research and Policy (Airini et al., 2010)

This second Pacific education research guideline document makes explicit the underlying nuances of the philosophical and methodological issues contained in the original Pacific Education Research Guidelines 2001 and expands on already introduced issues, themes, reference points and praxis contained therein. However, while the first set espoused the importance of relationships between researchers and Pacific participants/communities, this second set of guidelines, published some ten years later, built on that platform by then focussing on the last epitome of transformative change in the New Zealand policy context--translating robust Pacific research into policy and service delivery for Pacific learners in New Zealand.

In this second guidelines document, the Samoan indigenous philosophical teu le va paradigm is presented as a conceptual reference, methodology and philosophy for future Pacific educational research in New Zealand. Teu le va is about bringing researchers, communities, funders, institutions and policy makers into context, process and dialogue to help provide optimal education outcomes for and with Pacific learners. It is clear that conventional approaches and thinking have not always been up to the task of dealing with Pacific education issues. After discussion with Pacific education researchers, policy-makers, and other change leaders in education, Teu le va has been developed to provide the case for developing new and different kinds of relationships for the exposure and translation of knowledge into policy aimed at Pacific success in education.

Teu le va takes a strategic, evidence-based, outcomes-focused, Pacific success approach, outlining three interactive principles focused on optimal relationships that will lead to directive action. Firstly, optimal relationships through teu le va between researchers and policy makers are necessary for a collective and collaborative approach to research and policy making and must be valued and acted on. Secondly, collective knowledge generation is pivotal in developing optimal relationships so that new knowledge and understandings are generated. Thirdly, research and policy efforts must be clearly focussed on achieving optimal Pacific education and development outcomes.

Teu le va emphasises the importance of relationships, and the significance of the context behind the necessity of understanding the domains of social relationships and influence of all research relational communities (participants, researchers, institutions,

funderson, policy-makers, Pacific communities) involved in Pacific educational research. In this way, types of research, research problems, findings, and linkages to policy formation can be more explicitly conceptualised, strategically formulated, approached, valued and acted on in terms of the aspects of the va in relationships (in)formed by the research process. These principles are depicted in Figure 1.

The six practices outlined in the Teu le va (Ministry of Education, 2010) document outline collaborative ways in which research relational va can be acted on: to engage with research communities in Pacific education research; to collaborate in setting the research framework; to create a coordinated and collaborative approach to Pacific education research and policy making; to grow knowledge through a cumulative approach to research; to understand the kinds of knowledge used in Pacific education research and policy making; and to engage with other knowledge brokers (Airini et al., 2010, pp. 19-28).

Essentially, Teu le va involves identifying and understanding the va or 'spaces' between different research relational communities in Pacific education research and development. Developing, cultivating and maintaining relationships consistent with the principles and understandings that underpin the widely shared Pacific concept of va and to teu le va is advocated. This will strengthen opportunities for knowledge transfer across these spaces. Ultimately, it is posited that knowledge is fundamentally empowering. For generators and developers of knowledge to pay scant attention to knowledge transferability and applicability does a huge disservice to the endeavour. It is hoped that these guidelines may provide a useful starting point for further thinking about knowledge generation and translation for Pacific education.

Teu le va in Action: Ensuring Research Informs Policy

Research underpinned by Teu le va is more likely to become evidencedbased policy when: it fits within the political and institutional limits and pressures of policy-makers (Crewe & Young, 2002); it has a compelling logic to underpin it, a Minister to drive it, an educational sector that owns it, research to support it, and connections to grow it; researchers and policymakers share particular kinds of networks and develop chains of legitimacy for particular policy areas (Crewe & Young, 2002); and outputs are based on local involvement and credible evidence, and are communicated via the most appropriate peoples, channels, style, format and timing (Airini, et al., 2010, p-31).

Two examples that showcase teu le va principles and practices illustrate ways in which research and policy works for improved Pacific education outcomes. In the first case, Samoan bilingual education is identified as a policy need in Pacific literacy and languages and illustrates how collaborative knowledge generation in optimal and respectful relationships can generate new knowledge and understandings

(Amituanai-Tolosa, 2007). The second case describes elements of a literacy research initiative undertaken in collaboration with teachers, and informed by policy needs, and illustrates how research and policy efforts can be clearly focused on achieving optimal outcomes for Pacific learners (McNaughton & Lai, 2009). A caveat however, is that where the intention is unified (to improve outcomes) each particular context will need a degree of flexibility, dynamism and responsiveness in order to operate in ways that best fit the needs, and va, of each particular situation.

The teu le va paradigm and the document Teu le va have provided crucial advocacy and indigenous Pacific epistemologies for Pacific university students' theoretical choices in New Zealand:

This political response is often expressed through advocacy for culturally sensitive approaches to research, such as teu le va--preservation of a respectful social space between researcher and researched. (Burnett, 2012, p. 483)

Conclusion

My work on developing both Ministry of Education documents (2001, 2010) has enabled me to realise that the teu le va approach adds to the discourse and inroads created by the fertile soil of relational ethics. The teu le va approach gives language to the action that Pacific research practitioners can enact in their daily work for all research relational communities, not only for the Pacific people(s) and communities who need their services and support, but also for those who work alongside them (Pacific colleagues/research teams) and above them (policy makers, research institutions and funders).

I and other Pacific authors of these cross-disciplinary Pacific research guidelines and cultural competencies are calling for the valuing of relationships as the central location for ethical action, given that human flourishing is enhanced by healthy and ethical relationships (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). All professionals involved in research processes should be committed to relationship--with the people they serve, both individually and collectively, and with each other. Today, needing to engage in New Zealand's knowledge economy, this commitment to relationship can be obscured by an emphasis on advanced technology, consumerism, legal liability, bureaucracy, objective rationalism, and individual autonomy. This paper calls for a refocusing of ethics in research concerning Pacific peoples and communities on the nature and significance of relationship, by offering the Samoan indigenous reference of teu le va.

By delineating a comprehensive and philosophically grounded relational ethics for Pacific research in the diverse fields of education, health, justice, social needs and so on, teu le va evokes the need to attend to the art of ethics. The focus of relational ethics

is on whole people as interdependent moral agents and the quality of the commitments between them. The space between people is defined by the relational discourse as the ethical space or the relational space, a space that must be nurtured and respected if ethical practice is to be enacted. Teu le va means that each person has power that is fundamental to human development. In dialogue, all sides can be heard and one's autonomy is fostered through gaining voice and perspective, and through the experience of engagement with others. "Ethical behaviour is not the display of one's moral rectitude in times of crisis...it is the day to day expression of one's commitment to other persons and the ways in which human beings relate to one another in their daily interactions (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005, p. 96). For me this symbolises that teu le va provides the connection between the researcher and all the other research relational communities. It is a connection built on compassion and the cultivation of physical, mental, ethical and spiritual energy. What is of paramount importance is the relationship of fa'aaloalo--of trust and respect--between the researcher and researched (Verbos & Humphries, 2014).

Both Ministry of Education Teu le va documents provide insight as to how teu le va can be applied. Given that relational ethics will always be contested terrain on which battles have raged about concepts, values, practices, and about how ethics should be taught and applied, teu le va provides a tangible way forward. These guidelines are not only about encouraging exemplary moral action, but also acquiring a deeper knowledge of ethics, in the hope that improved moral behaviour is promoted by knowing what is the right and good thing to do--and seeing how decisions are made and implemented in practice. The worth of community and of relationships in research praxis needs to be valued. Teu le va enables us to understand what relationships are about, how they are created, what they mean and how they are sustained. Human flourishing is enhanced by healthy and ethical relationships, and morality is rooted in the collective life (Bergum & Dossetor, 2005).

Relationships are the essence of humanity. The Samoan indigenous reference of teu le va in Pacific research context allows us to define a moral and ethical relational space for discovering knowledge about others through dialogue and sensitive interaction for positive outcomes in all our relationships with research communities. Teu le va is a spiritual experience. It is about relational bodies literally affecting one another in the va and generating intensities between and across human va, discursive va, thoughtful va, respectful va, and spiritual va. Soifua.

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Figure 1 Applying Teu Le Va

Relational context

Concept/principle

Teu le va

Funders-Ministries-

Policy-makers

<p>Untangling Pacific statements population cohorts/ /the va between island-born/NZ-born</p>	<p>Acknowledging/ untangling of inter/ intra dimensions of ethnicity and identity. Recognising the salience of context</p>	<p>Specific to be included in requests for research (ie when RFPs are sent to tenderers) as to either Pan-Pacific or ethnic-specific and also whether inter-and-or</p>
<p>intra-</p>		<p>ethnic considerations are to be addressed</p>
<p>Nurturing the va between research and based participants regarding /ethnic methodologies and methods CM/</p>	<p>Avoiding the 'clutter ' / maximising research for optimal educational outcomes for Pacific students through careful consideration of research methods/ method-ologies to be used (with different groups in different contexts).</p>	<p>RFPs should insist on methodology on triangulation between EMI interface model (Samu 2001), the /cube model (Sasao Sue 1993) and teu va reference The proposal align with funder/ ministry requirements, and also the three reference points above. [Note: information about the EMI, variation of the CM and teu va could be</p>
<p>& le points. should</p>		
<p>le</p>		

appended

to RFPs to help tenderers align their proposal to these reference points.]

Best practice to reference points / processes/ the va between funders/researcher; researcher and team; Educational researcher and Guidelines participants; researcher and proposers/tenderers communities

Implementing sound research processes and principles e.g.the six stages of research as outlined in the Pasifika Educational Research Guidelines (Anae et al 2001:28)

RFPs should refer research principles such as those in the Pasifika Research and request that show how they will address these in their research design and implementation processes.

The va between funders/policy--makers/ministries and researcher(s)/ research teams

Through Teu le va research processes a commitment to transformative change for Pacific students, families and communities to reduce educational underachievement in Aotearoa-New Zealand that is not only fiscal but also philosophical and moral.

Negotiating with successful tenderer(s) regarding ethical, timing and funding issues. Ensuring a commitment to researchers that findings will be translated into policy development to preserve the va between funder and researcher and researcher and communities via participants

Relational context

Teu le va

Researchers

Untangling Pacific population cohorts/
/the va between island-born/NZ-born

The research proposal put forward should show a clear unravelling and identifying of intraethnic complexities (e.g. age-gender-status), as well as 'hidden' status considerations (eg.gang-clique). There should also be a clear focus on pan-Pacific and-or inter-ethnic considerations with diverse sub-groups as necessary

Nurturing the va between research and participants regarding methodologies and methods

Successful tenderer must show clear knowledge and experience of various palagi and Pacific methodologies and methods and is able to negotiate through triangulation of ethnic interface/
cube/teu le va reference points in order to justify relationship between proposed methods: (quantitative/ qualitative or both), types of questions

(descriptive, explanatory, prevention, evaluative), and cultural complexity (sub-cultural/ ethno-cultural/ a-cultural as in Cube Model.

Best practice reference points / the va between funders/researcher; researcher and team; researcher and participants; researcher and communities

Reciprocal relationships to be nurtured are: with tangata whenua, research institution, strategic priorities, the funders, research colleagues in team, emerging researchers, research participants, communities. How these relationships would be nurtured should be clearly delineated in the research proposal (eg. Acknowledging research participants for their time, through koha, feed/back, transcripts, research reports/ summaries of findings; mentoring of emerging researchers and so on.

The va between funders/policy--

Within negotiated funding and timing

makers/ministries
and researcher(s)/
research teams

parameters, take
into account
precedents-
considerations
relating to best
practice for
selecting
appropriate, robust
research approaches-
method-ologies and
methods. Also, as an
ongoing process,
widely disseminate
well-researched and
articulated findings
to research
participants,
communities and
policy-makers.

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