

Pacific Talanoa and Participatory Action Research: Providing a space for Auckland youth leaders to contest inequalities

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Introduction

This research arose from our experiences, past and present, of working with youth in marginalised communities, using empowerment-based methods to address inequalities (Conn 2012; Antonczak 2013). In 2015 we embarked on a pilot project, which experimented further with empowerment-based research in the context of Auckland, New Zealand. Based on current notions that youth can play a key role in a change agenda (Lundy 2007) we asked: How can an empowering space be provided for Auckland youth leaders' perspectives and actions? This working paper discusses the process of providing such a space for Auckland youth leaders who are from disadvantaged communities. Through the use of empowerment methodology (namely Participatory Action Research (PAR) combined with Pacific Talanoa) the research aimed to foster youth leadership and advocate for extending this in an environment of inequalities.

Auckland health inequalities

In 2002 the New Zealand Ministry of Health (NZMoH) defined health inequality as 'differences in health that are unnecessary, avoidable and unjust' (2002:27) stating that ethnicity was the key influence in shaping inequalities in health between different population groups. The health, wellbeing and socio-economic participation of youth from Auckland communities experiencing inequalities, including Maori, Pacific and refugee communities, is a particular concern in New Zealand. Youth experiences are impacted by family poverty and lack of employment opportunities, and these factors are reflected in poor health and well-being for them and their communities (NZMoH 2013).

NZMoH have called for approaches which address ethnic, gendered, socio-economic and geographic inequalities (NZMoH 2002; 2013). Yet if addressing inequality is indeed a core value of health policy, and there is considerable evidence to back this up, why does the New Zealand Government and society continue to tolerate so much inequality, inequity and social injustice? Explanations of the status quo include the lack of real political will and social consensus to make the required structural changes, which are dependent primarily on the redistribution of wealth and opportunity (Rashbrooke 2013; *Inside New Zealand: Mind the Gap* 2013). Notably, NZMoH aspirations seem at odds with an environment, locally and globally, which is increasingly weak at regulating payment of tax by wealthier populations and institutions as a vital means to resource the necessary changes. There are examples of countries or regions that have been successful in achieving more equitable societies, mainly by increasing opportunities for education and employment, and we can learn from them, but they too face considerable challenges in sustaining gains (Conn and Diesfeld 2014).

There are those who argue for a need to change the language of inequality and social determinants, moving away from the political polarisation of left and right thinking to achieve the societal buy-in required to address this issue (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation 2010). Others suggest we need new and ambitious local and global financial mechanisms (Picketty 2013). Twenty-first century strategies advocate for radical shifts away from 'business as usual' and the need for structural change seems stronger than ever. Given this large scale and ambitious backdrop we wondered what our role as academics might be, and that of the Auckland youth we work with in both the university setting and the wider society, in this endeavour?

Youth leadership and addressing inequalities

Clearly, the need for action in the New Zealand context is urgent, but also of significance in the long term. We believe that the role of Auckland youth is vital in this agenda. First, research argues for the place of youth as catalysts in promoting solutions to social problems (Lundy 2007). Tackling inequalities, such as those relating to health requires changes to policy, systems and programs (WHO 2013). It also requires an informed and confident population who can advocate for such change within the broad societal context (Campbell et al. 2010). Arguably youth should be in the forefront of such a proactive population given their place in the future. This is even more of an imperative given the youthful nature of Auckland's future population and the high proportion of youth from disadvantaged communities (Redstone and Conn 2011).

Studies describe youth leaders as having the ability to guide others on a course of action, influence their opinion and behaviour, and show the way by going ahead. Also, leaders have the ability to analyse their own strengths and weaknesses, set personal goals, and have the confidence to carry them out. In this research, leadership is not seen to be emanating from a single person, rather leadership is defined as a dynamic process emerging from the actions of groups of people to achieve common goals in group and inter-group relationships (Gosling 2012).

There are many positive examples of youth leadership in New Zealand. Finlay (2010) describes the development of a youth council in Auckland and the important role it plays in city decision making. Maori and Pacific youths' high participation and success in sports, church, other community and cultural and group based activities, is well noted (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014). These reflect the incorporation of traditional and cultural approaches and new and alternative discourses constructing youth as active agents in society, rather than as disadvantaged, passive, or problematic (Lundy 2007). However, what is less clear is whether participation by youth in Auckland civic life can help

reduce inequalities, and what enhanced youth participation and leadership could mean for such an agenda in future. Therefore, we started with the recruitment of a small number of youth leaders already working with Auckland communities. We invited them to explore how leadership can be enhanced across the youth population for community based solutions, but also in influencing policy makers.

Methods

PAR and mobile technologies

PAR was our initial choice of methodology given its established record in providing a safe space for youth and as a change-oriented approach embedded in the suite of collaborative methods termed Participatory Research (Kemmis and MacTaggart 2014). PAR seeks to bring researchers and community members together to identify problems, investigate and analyse problems together, and then collectively generate solutions (Ledwith and Springett 2010). Going further, PAR requires reflecting and learning from the implementation of solutions and developing further cycles of action. Empowering methodologies seek to promote social transformation by addressing powerful relationships initially between the researcher and the researched, but ultimately in relation to the wider society. Within an empowerment project, researchers aim to equalise the inherent power imbalance evident in their relationship with research participants by: paying specific attention to issues of voice and interpretation; seeking to understand participants own meanings and interpretations and using these interpretations of reality rather than the researchers' own (Wong et al. 2010). This translates practically to participants being 'co-researchers' or partners with maximum involvement in the design of the research, data collection and analysis, and application of findings.

Mobile technologies and social media were envisaged to be the main mechanism for data collection, analysis and dissemination given that many of today's youth are avid digital users and natives (Prensky 2001). The project offered opportunities for the research team to build their capacity by providing mobile equipment and training in use of mobiles and social media. It was envisaged that through film, audio or other mobile means of communication youth leaders could reflect on their role, develop their critical conscience and judgment, use relevant information, draw on an awareness of their social reality, and plan a strategy to convey messages that benefits their preferred cause. Research shows that beyond the role of mobile technologies as a useful mechanism in empowerment methodology, it can extend the opportunities offered to young people to engage in civic life (Youniss et al. 2002; Beetham and White 2014). It offers opportunities to foster engagement on a scale which has never been possible before now. Yet there is a lack of research on what this might mean for youth leadership.

Recruitment of youth co-researchers and the research process

The study followed a flexible definition of youth based on the cultural context rather than institutional definitions.

Whilst the United Nations defines youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 24 years, many communities consider the transition to adulthood (with its related role in decision making) to be somewhat later than 24 years. For example, within the Samoan community youth are defined as those aged between 13–50 years (Tuagalu 2011).

Early in 2014 a group of six youth leaders, aged between 20 and 30 years, were recruited to join with a group of academics from Auckland University of Technology (AUT) in what was perceived to be a growing and fluid research team. Recruitment started purposively with the academics identifying three youth leaders who they had collaborated with for the purposes of research. The three leaders then invited three peers to join the group. Leadership activities in their respective communities included: sport and food projects with Pacific youth; female genital mutilation (FGM) prevention and physical activity projects with refugee communities; and research with high school students about public health in the 21st century (Auckland District Health Board 2014; Said 2014). Most of the group had undertaken postgraduate study and had strong links with the university, and all are women. It is envisaged that through further action cycles this group will continue to grow to form a loose network or community of practice around fostering youth leadership in Auckland. A feature of the study was an openness to recruiting leaders from different marginalised communities in Auckland, reflecting and celebrating the diversity of the society. Hence youth leaders are collaborating together not only from their own but from different communities, reflecting the reality of their experiences of belonging to both in a multi-cultural city. The six youth leaders in the study identify with Maori, Pacific and refugee communities.

The process of working together involved a series of meetings to get to know each other and design the project, starting with discussing the research concept. The group also received training in PAR and use of mobile technologies. The meetings took place in coffee shops and small meeting rooms on the university campus. Part way through the process, one youth member suggested that Talanoa method would be suited to the study because it embodies a narrative and informal style, comfortable for the group to use and reflecting the identity of Auckland society. The team member who suggested the change did a presentation of Talanoa method and how it might work well alongside PAR for the benefit of the rest of the group. The group considered the proposal and particularly liked the idea of a method that provided opportunities to tell personal stories; Talanoa being such that it provides a culturally secure space where 'I can be me' (Fairbairn-Dunlop 2014; 2015:). Thus, Pacific Talanoa method combined with PAR provided an approach which was owned and contextualised by the group.

An important feature of the study is the emphasis on building creative spaces which offer great opportunities for documenting experiences and views visually, orally and using narrative. Two training workshops for the research team involved film makers using live action and animation with mobile technology. Youth leaders chose to present their individual digital stories in different ways, such as

using moving image, voice over, and photos. Data collection and analysis was conducted by the youth leader team without the presence of the academics in the group. It involved each leader telling their personal story, then sharing these stories with each other. Finally, the youth leaders conducted a focus group, coordinated by one of the members, where they analysed their stories. The stories and the focus group discussion were recorded on smart phones or ipads.

Storytelling or narrative is a longstanding way for people from all cultures to express themselves and to talk about their experiences and therefore Talanoa has a universal quality making it attractive not only to Pacific peoples. From the storytelling stage of the data collection, the group seemed confident and comfortable enough with each other to move to the focus group for the purpose of discussing (analysing) the stories.

Smartphones were provided by the project, although a number of co-researchers had personal smartphones, and the group appeared to enjoy learning about the versatility and range of creative possibilities of the mobile (<https://vimeo.com/155584348>). The final stories included images of the sea and other symbols of the Pacific, animation of key words like 'family' and 'culture', and live to camera speaking. The preliminary findings for this action cycle are about the importance of family, culture, and self/identity in 'becoming' and 'being' a youth leader. It appears that this initial reflective process is key to the formation of the co-researchers as a team and as leaders for the next stage of the research.

This process of design, learning together, sharing, and analysing will culminate in the development of a compilation short film and a *pecha kucha* presentation to share with others, such as youth groups, schools and decision makers. In this way, as is the nature of action research, the project has now passed through the first cycle. The next action involves disseminating ideas about youth leadership, promoting a paradigm of youth as leaders, and inviting other youth to participate.

Methodological discussion: Talanoa with PAR

A welcome innovation emerging from the youth-owned design process was combining Talanoa method with PAR. PAR is a well-established global research method, whereas Talanoa is specific to the Pacific region. This reflects an important agenda in a critical research: that is, adapting global methods for local use; building a locally appropriate research culture; and reflecting the preferred identities of researchers within their world. Here we explore combining PAR and Talanoa and consider the synergies between them.

Epistemology and methodology

The epistemological basis of Talanoa forefronts the knowledge construction processes of Pacific peoples drawing on Pacific world view: 'Talanoa's philosophical base is collective, oriented towards defining and acknowledging Pacific aspirations while developing and implementing Pacific theoretical and methodological preferences in research' (Vaiolletti 2006:25). In longstanding use, Talanoa are the common decision-making fora in Pacific

communities and they usually follow a process of community (families) meeting together to discuss an issue of concern. Information and knowledge is shared to create community based solutions. The process of Talanoa can take place at any level or between any group of people.

Drawing from Talanoa as an important Pacific tradition, Talanoa as a method and PAR are grounded in a critical scholarship which aims to address the inequalities arising from the colonial experiences of communities in South America and the Pacific region. Whilst the origins of each are different in location and history they have a similar purpose in a critical research agenda which aims at destabilising the status quo, and benefiting the disadvantaged (Fairbairn-Dunlop and Coxon 2014).

Talanoa method also has synergies with PAR as both are primarily collaborative as well as critical, providing a space for the knowledge of those who are voiceless to lead in developing strategies. PAR is used in a variety of settings globally, often as part of a community development agenda, or in relation to intervention-based programs. However, there has been significant criticism of the co-opting of PAR by organisations which use it as a tool for program delivery, with limited regard for empowerment or destabilising norms (Cooke and Kothari 2002).

Methods

Talanoa is a type of narrative inquiry, with a common culture of storytelling providing convenient and comfortable space for research to take place. Talanoa method is collaborative in that the stories are shared and discussed, building on the relationships between the storyteller(s) and others listening, with an aim of finding solutions to community problems. PAR similarly may involve narratives. It draws on a range of methods with the element of choice given to co-researchers. Visual and expressive methods are popular with Talanoa and PAR as they allow for greater freedom and enjoyment for the co-researcher.

Co-researchers' reflections

The process of providing an empowering space for Auckland youth leaders is essential in this research. Here we discuss some of the main observations of the co-researchers on that process.

Increasing ownership by youth leaders during the process

Initially the academics in the study chose the research design and organised and led the meetings and training workshops. Over time the youth leaders took over the process of organising and recording the digital stories and focus group. This reflected a shift in the process to one that was more youth-owned. Another illustration of this is that, whilst PAR was well received by youth leaders at the start of the research, they felt confident to propose and adopt change to the design, in this case that of Talanoa method. This demonstrated that there was a space to change the initial plans. The increased level of ownership by the youth leaders is also reflected in the lead they are taking on the production of dissemination outputs, such as a short film

based on the findings of the first cycle. The ability within an empowerment agenda for the co-researchers to make changes to and manage the different stages of the research is key to the success of the paradigm, and this has been demonstrated in the first project cycle. It may also be that this particular group of leaders are pre-disposed to shape and influence matters and therefore they feel comfortable with taking ownership of the research process.

Preferences for using mobile technologies vary among youth leaders

Whilst considered 'digital natives', some of the youth team preferred exploring the possibilities offered by the mobile technologies in the research, whereas others expressed preference for discussion and reflection with or without technology. This may indicate that it is still early days to describe even the young population as digital natives. It might indicate natural differences in preferences for technology over face-to-face experiences.

Youth leaders are busy people

A limitation for the project was that of delays and gaps between research activities. One reason for this is that youth leaders are busy people. They are often working, studying, have considerable family responsibilities and they are also involved in various projects. Their time and skills are often spread thinly across their families and communities. PAR is time-consuming and by requiring greater ownership by co-researchers, it makes additional time and energy demands on them. There is a need to accept this as a feature of an empowerment agenda, and to plan how best to meet this challenge.

Overall reflections and further work

This paper started with a consideration of inequality in New Zealand and of the ethnic bias of this in Auckland society. We discussed the possible role of youth leaders in addressing this problem, given that they have a key role in working with disadvantaged communities and we can learn from them.

The first stage of the project demonstrated the potential for youth to take ownership of such a project. An example was given of the inclusion of Pacific Talanoa method, combined with PAR, to demonstrate ownership and contextualisation by the group. Another feature of the study was openness to recruiting leaders from different marginalised communities in Auckland, reflecting and celebrating the diversity of the society. We consider that there is a need for more of this type of cross-cultural research given the increasing diversity of society and the need for young people to be able to work and live together. Yet, currently there is a tendency for research to be conducted on a single ethnicity basis, partly because of funding bias.

A major limitation in the study was that youth leaders are invariably busy people and given the time intensive nature of empowerment research this is a considerable problem for future action cycles of dissemination and growing the network. One approach which we would like to explore is that of embedding further cycles in the projects that youth leaders are already working on. Another might

be to develop with them, practical tools or frameworks to try out in a variety of settings such as schools and NGO community based projects.

These are important first steps in a long-term initiative. Talanoa and PAR were well received by the group, and mobile technologies at this stage mainly served to capture stories and a critical discussion. We believe that in the next stages mobiles will prove to be particularly crucial given their potential to reach a larger audience relatively easily. This process of design, learning together, sharing, and analysing will culminate in the development of a compilation short film and a *pecha kucha* presentation to share with others such as youth groups, schools and decision makers. In this way, as is the nature of action research, the project has now passed through the first cycle. The next action involves disseminating ideas about youth leadership, promoting a paradigm of youth as leaders and inviting other youth to participate. The focus on dissemination, through face-to-face means and using social media to develop the community of practice of youth leaders and extend their influence in New Zealand society will, we believe, be crucial to addressing an ambitious agenda designed to reduce inequalities.

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