

Is there a Melanesian Research Methodology?

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Abstract

The possibility of a Melanesian research methodology within social research is discussed. Necessary conditions for a Melanesian research methodology are derived through a comparison with feminist discourse. The necessary conditions for a defensible Melanesian methodology are outlined, and these conditions require more than simply being Melanesian. Any research methodology must be argued to be transparent and rational with, in this case, the qualitative paradigms of social research. While it is argued that a Melanesian research methodology may be useful in a number of social research domains, no claims are made that this methodology will be useful for all research questions, nor should Melanesian researchers feel compelled to employ this methodology.

Key words: Melanesian, research methodology, indigenous research, culture sensitive research.

Introduction

This article critically examines the argument that a Melanesian research methodology exists and is a useful and valid research approach. This is not an easy argument to make since rejection of a distinctively Melanesian research methodology risks criticism of master narrative hegemony (Stanley, 2007, p.34) as well as cultural insensitivity. However, claims of particular research methodologies should be open to examination. This article makes the presumption that a Melanesian research methodology will be within the broader qualitative paradigm of research, and hence it is not argued that this methodology might be universal across paradigms. Indeed, all methodologies are constrained by their antecedent ontologies and epistemologies.

This article is written by a male expatriate academic working in PNG. It arises out of his professional engagement in postgraduate education, the teaching and mentoring of research students in PNG; after significant experiences in Australia, and to a lesser extent USA and UK, working with doctoral research students. Reading, reflection, research methods classes, and ongoing conversations with researchers who are finding their own voice in the discourse of research have formed the impetus to develop this article.

The term 'Melanesian' is used throughout this article. There are several reasons for using the term Melanesian, despite the author's principle exposure to Papuan New Guinea cultures and research students. The first reason is that there are multiple similarities between the cultures and sociological perspectives of the peoples of PNG and the greater Melanesia. There are clear

anthropological and cultural ties between the Melanesian peoples (Franklin, 2007, p.26). The second reason is that PNG is itself enormously culturally diverse. Over 800 language groups alone create a diversity of cultures within New Guinea to the north and Papua to the south of the PNG nation (CIA FactFiles, 2006). Some PNG cultures are patrilineal in organisation and others are traditionally matrilineal (Kelep-Malpo, 2007). The third reason is that some PNG thinkers are themselves identifying a unifying philosophy that Narokobi (1980) has called 'the Melanesian Way'. Lastly, there are many social issues that concern today's researchers: land rights; the divide between customary ways and modern ways; the conflict of traditional versus so-called 'Western' ways; amongst others, that transcend the national boundaries of Melanesian countries. It is argued that the term Melanesian better accounts for the shared cultural perspectives of the PNG peoples and their near neighbours in the South Pacific region.

Nature of methodology

When social researchers use the term 'methodology' what is signified? Methodology means the validated integration between the research design and the means of data collection and analysis. The integration requires a 'match' or connection between ontology and epistemology constructed by the researcher. While many researchers might not reflect on this integration, methodology is the atmosphere or ether, the encompassing medium within which the research is undertaken and includes the world view of the researcher and the researcher's understanding of what are useful research questions and how these questions can be pursued.

Definition of terms

It will help to clarify the meaning of terms to be discussed in this article. While it is seldom possible to find unanimous agreement on definitions in social science, the definitions offered here are recognisably mainstream. It is not intended to develop philosophical depth in these following definitions, but to simply determine common ground to permit the discussion to progress. It is not the intention to re-fight the old 'paradigm wars' (Gage, 1989) so no comparison of these terms is intended other than to clarify their meanings.

Ontology

The ontological question relates to the nature of reality. Simply: What can be known? When answered, the ontological question leads to the epistemological question which asks, How can we know or find out (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108)? Ontology asks questions and describes responses to the nature of being and reality and so sets limits to the types of questions which are open to research. Is there such a thing as 'cultural reality' and is this 'reality' singular or multiple, variable or unchanging?

Epistemology

The epistemological question is: What is the relationship between the one who seeks to know and the content to be known? (Guba & Lincoln, 1994, p.108) If there is a singular reality, how can we apprehend or learn about this reality? In what position does the researcher stand with respect to such a reality?

Epistemology is concerned with who can be a knower, what can be known, what constitutes knowledge, sources of evidence for constructing knowledge, what constitutes truth, how truth is to be verified, how evidence becomes truth, how valid inferences are to be drawn, the role of belief in evidence, and related issues.

(Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001, p.57)

Methodology

Methodology is a term describing the understanding or perspectives within which the research is conducted. Methodology depends on both ontology and epistemology; methodology describes not the products of the research but the processes of research (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.39). Methodology subsumes methods since methodology validates particular methods as appropriate for research and does not validate other methods as appropriate. Methodology is a means and a self-conscious approach to systematic knowledge production or the conduct of an enquiry including data analysis. Frequently, research design is used to 'capture' this sense of the term methodology. The connections between ontology, epistemology and methodology describe the particular research paradigm or design. (Fawcett & Hearn, 2004; Kirkham & Anderson, 2002; Packer & Goicoechea, 2000). Three broad families of methodologies are usually described: quantitative and qualitative methodologies and Critical Theory (Neuman, 2003, pp.64-83). However, diverse and varied methodologies are more recently described: feminist, Marxist, constructivist, and even Queer Theory (Mayo, 2007).

Method

The term method applies to the styles of means of making data. A method is a particular approach to collecting data and the 'method' applies to both the means of collecting the data and the type of data collected. So, common methods include surveys, interviews, various types of observation, and more structured experimental designs (Cohen & Manion, 1994, p.38).

Methods, and the types of data they develop, are validated by methodological principles. If one is working out of a positivist paradigm the value of methods which can produce data in numeric form will be emphasised, and conversely data of a textual nature will be difficult to fit within the paradigm, in other words will not be validated.

It can be noted here that some authors use the term method to include methodology. When the phrase research method is used, the term often

includes methodological components. The context needs to be examined to determine precisely whether methods as defined herein or methodology is being discussed.

Comparison with feminism

This article is instructed by the program of research that is loosely labelled 'feminist research'. While feminist research might elude a precise description, feminist research might generally be circumscribed as 'research on the experiences of women from the perspective of women and in advocacy of women'. Some feminist researchers might argue that it is not necessary to include 'on the experiences of women' so that situations of male interactions can be interrogated from the feminist perspective (Harding, 1987b, pp.6-10). However, it is fair to suggest that there is some agreement about the nature of feminist research. So, might argue feminist researchers, a feminist research methodology is a different way of applying the general structure of scientific theory to research on women and gender which is grounded in its own epistemology (Harding, 1987b, p.9). Harding would further argue that a feminist epistemology grounds a feminist empiricism. A feminist empiricism is critical of the 'prejudices (that) enter research particularly at the stage when scientific problems are being identified and defined, but they also can appear in the design of the research and in the collection and the interpretation of data' (Harding, 1987a, p.182). Furthermore feminist empiricists argue that such biases can be eliminated by careful, reflexive design.

Feminist research uses the data collection methods that other research methodologies employ: '... (F)eminists have used all existing (research) methods and have invented some new ones as well' (Reinharz, 1992, p.4). The use of surveys, interviews or observations, to name just a few, does not make a research project as feminist research or not feminist research. In concluding a review of feminist research methods, one author outlines ten main themes regarding feminist research methodologies.

These themes are:

1. Feminism itself is a perspective, not a research method.
2. Feminists use multiple research methods.
3. Feminist research involves ongoing criticism of non feminist scholarship.
4. Feminist research is guided by feminist theory.
5. Feminist research may be transdisciplinary.
6. Feminist research aims to create social change.
7. Feminist research tries to represent human diversity.
8. Feminist researcher often includes the researcher as a person.
9. Feminist research frequently attempts to develop a special relationship with participants.
10. Feminist research frequently defines a special relationship with the reader.

(Reinharz, 1992, p.240)

A Melanesian research methodology

This section of the paper attempts to use the lens of feminist research methodology to investigate whether a Melanesian research methodology is possible. Further, if a Melanesian methodology is possible, does it already exist in a manner that can be defensibly described?

Indigenous research methodologies

There is a growing literature in indigenous research methodologies. It must be stated that this author finds a claim for any indigenous methodology that essentially states 'as an indigenous person researching indigenous issues I am employing indigenous methodology' as unsatisfactory. The rationality of research requires that research processes and methodologies, as well as methods, be open to inspection and critique.

This section of the paper will attempt in part to deconstruct the claims of indigenous methodology wherein the deconstruction develops a firm ground for describing any indigenous methodology. This brief section is not intended as a review of the growing literature on indigenous methodologies. Rather, this section attempts to establish some connections between the more established discourses of indigenous methodologies and the critique of any potential Melanesian methodology.

Pacific researchers have claimed a distinctiveness for their research that at times has been unrecognised (Huffer & Qalo, 2004). Yet Huffer and Qalo argue that all Pacific peoples share a distinctive research methodology, a claim that appears as large as the surface area of the globe it covers (approximately 20% of the Earth's surface). Some authors seem to construct an epistemology in opposition to a colonial past (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001, pp.55-57; Meyer, 2001, p.126; L. T. Smith, 1999).

If indigenous research methodology can make rightful claims, these claims need to be articulated in terms of methodological arguments. Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo in a later article argue that indigenous epistemology positions the researcher, and indeed all participants, in a different manner than other methodologies. The social, and therefore cultural, constructions of research are powerful determinants of discourse.

By indigenous epistemology we mean a cultural group's ways of thinking and of creating, formulating, and theorizing about knowledge via traditional discourses and media of communication, anchoring the truth of the discourse in culture ... Conceptually, indigenous epistemology is concerned with the process through which knowledge is constructed and validated, and the role of that process in shaping thinking and behavior. All epistemological systems are socially constructed and formed through sociopolitical, economic, and historical context and processes. (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2002, pp.381-382)

North American scholars have confronted a past that has been socially and culturally oppressive for the original peoples and seen a new relationship of narrative within the discourse that is research (Barton, 2004).

Indigenous research methodologies are concerned not only with new methodologies, but also with the re-positioning of indigenous peoples within research practices (Henry *et al.*, 2002, pp.11-15). Yet, indigenous research needs to ensure that a new privileged group is not created simply on the grounds of race or insider status.

Indigenous methodologies do articulate that indigenous scholars cannot be privileged just because of their indigenous background, because there are a great variety of 'insider' views. Insider research has to take seriously the notion of accountability, which is an obligation or willingness to accept responsibility, as well as the notion of respect and – most of all – the notion of a thorough knowledge of indigenous traditions and languages.

(Porsanger, 2004, p.109)

Posanger argues that Maori research methodology is based on an 'epistemology of whanaungatanga' which forms the basis of relationships between the researcher as part of the community (Porsanger, 2004, p.111). Similarly, Aboriginal research can be described as a communal act (Dunbar *et al.*, 2002; Dunne, 2000; unknown, 2003). It is commonly asserted that indigenous peoples have an intrinsic relationship with the land and that community values are highly prized.

So, what might constitute a particularly Melanesian research methodology. To explore this question, the related areas of Melanesian epistemology and Melanesian ontology are investigated.

Melanesian Ontology

If there is to be such a thing as a Melanesian ontology, then one must be able to describe a Melanesian perspective or view of reality. Is there a Melanesian reality, distinct from the Western reality of more traditional research?

The Melanesian world view is holistic (Lea, 1997, p.3; Namunu, 1996; Zocco, 1998). All is in relationship between the natural world, living creatures and persons; and illness is always seen as a disruption of the harmony of these relationships (Mantovani, 1995, p.18).

Culture is not just a bundle of customs but a system of ideas, and ordered whole inherited from and shared with a group, through which people are taught how to answer their physical, social and spiritual needs.

(Mantovani, 1998, p.3)

This Melanesian world view has affinities with indigenous world views from many parts of the world. A Melanesian ontology must demonstrate, beyond the mere claim, that the research is grounded in a particular ontological perspective. This ontological claim must be represented in both data collection and data analysis. A Melanesian ontology will be grounded in relationships. These relationships will be primarily communal and be active among the research participants and between participants and the researchers. A Melanesian ontology will encourage research questions which are holistic and integrative, questions which respect the cultural dimensions of participants and stakeholders. A Melanesian ontology will respect the wider questions around the community and be sceptical of 'single factor' explanations.

Melanesian Epistemology

A particular world view embodies a range of values. These values underpin and support the world view, values that embody and make current the cultural perspective. Franklin lists ten values which he claims underlie the Melanesian world view. These ten values are:

1. The value of land (*graun or wara*)
2. The value of the clan (*lain or wantok*)
3. The value of reciprocity (*bekim, bekim bek*)
4. The value of food (*kaikai, mumu*)
5. The value of ancestors (*tumbuna, tambaran*)
6. The value of ritual (*taboo, singsing, lotu*)
7. The value of leadership (*hetman*)
8. The value of education (*skul*)
9. The value of compensation (*peibeck, bekim, birua*)
10. The value of work (*wok*).

(Franklin, 2007, pp.28-37)

These values are not necessarily coincident with a Western understanding of the same terms (Burt, 2002). In consequence, Franklin argues that these values determine a distinctively Melanesian world view. Gegeo and Gegeo-Watson (2002, pp.381-382) further argue that the truth value of the discourse is embedded within the culture and cannot be comprehensively rationalised outside the culture.

Culture ensures that traditional discourses are continued, and cultural values underlie and are the medium of this discourse. Thus, cultural truth is anchored in the experiences of daily living which are themselves interpreted through the experience of culture. If a culture has distinctively different underlying values and the discourse is ongoing within that culture, it can be argued that this discourse forms a functionally distinct world view. Accepting that the

Melanesian world view differs from the typical Western view, one can argue that this Melanesia world view characterises a different relationship with the world, a different sense of connection between the knower and the known. Differences are in the holistic epistemology of the Melanesian: single causes are unlikely and effects are caused by the conjunction of harmony or disharmony between natural elements, people and between people and the natural world (Togolo, 2002, p.214).

A Melanesian epistemology will foreground the cultural values of the participants. Melanesian epistemology will reinforce and build shared values and develop insights in harmony with the community. While Franklin's ten values are not exhaustive, Melanesian epistemology will develop questions and means of responding to those questions in shared cultural values. Melanesian epistemology will focus on the life of the community since Melanesian values are focused on life, particularly community life (Mantovani, 1998, p.9; Namunu, 1996, p.80). More specifically, Melanesian epistemology will be grounded in the program to develop, reinforce and grow community life relationships, and research is not constructed in ways that might threaten community life and relationships.

Melanesian data collection methods

There are two distinctly different approaches to a discussion of data collection methods. The first approach might assert that the methods of research differ not at all. This echoes Reinharz's comment quoted earlier (1992, p.4). The methods of data collection that are used in Melanesian research are not what makes the research Melanesian. This approach would assert that Melanesian researchers must acquire the technical competence to master the methods of data collection and analysis to the same extent as any other researcher.

The second approach to this question of Melanesian research methods would agree with the first approach and also want to go further. The second approach would point out that data collection is itself a complex of collecting data within the complex of ethical systems, of permissions, confidentiality and mutual respect (Vallance & Tchacos, 2001). These have been formally defined in the Belmont Report (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979) as well as numerous ethical guideline statements of professional bodies (American Educational Research Association, 2000; American Psychological Association, 2002; Antle & Regehr, 2003; National Health and Medical Research Council, 2001; M. B. Smith, 2000). Cultural perspectives of power and authority, the balance between individual and communal rights and ownership all are relevant. This second and more holistic perspective will be addressed in a later article by this author on Melanesian research ethics.

Whence a Melanesian research methodology?

Firstly, is it possible that someone who is not Melanesian, like the author, present and even utilise Melanesian methodologies. This question is, at its

essence, the question whether we research the 'other' (Kanuha, 2000)? Certainly it is unsafe to assume that cultural otherness is not active in research approaches (Hwang, 2005). This paper contends that Melanesian methodology does not rely upon 'Melanesian ethnicity, but Melanesian values and world view. The comparison between disability research in the quote below and Melanesian Research as we are discussing it, is apt and fully applicable.

Research carried out into disability by a disabled researcher cannot on the basis of experience alone be seen to be more legitimate than research carried out into disability by a non-disabled researcher. It is how the research project is conducted, how the participants are involved, how attention is paid to ethical issues and the extent of critical reflexivity, that have to be regarded as key factors. These aspects in turn need to be subject to ongoing critical appraisal at each stage of the research.

(Fawcett & Hearn, 2004, p.216)

While speaking about postcolonial research in general, Kirkham and Anderson frame the necessary conditions for good Melanesian research. [If the reader could replace the word 'postcolonial' with 'Melanesian' as she reads, the power of this extract becomes clear].

The hallmark of postcolonial scholarship is a strong research-theory dialectic that brings a particular interpretive lens to the research that recognizes that each life is shaped by history. This lens frames how questions are formulated, who is included in the study, how data are interpreted, the meanings derived from the data, and how research findings are communicated and applied. While we are not limited in the kinds of questions we ask, our questions are framed from a particular epistemological perspective. That is, the postcolonial lens always takes into account the context in which each life is situated, and analyzes how gender, race, class, and historical positioning intersect at any given moment to organize experience in the here and now.

(Kirkham & Anderson, 2002, p.15)

It might be added that nationality and culture are two further aspects that the Melanesian lens must include in its account. The issues of authenticity and trustworthiness, initially discussed by Lincoln and Guba (1989) remain pertinent for Melanesian research today. These issues include initial contact, ownership of knowledge, prolonged engagement, persistent observation, member checks, language and interview process (Kanuha, 2000; Waldrip & Taylor, 1999). It should be noted that a Melanesian methodology is not merely theoretical, it is situated in its own community, which has regional flavours and differences, is subject to changes over time and within communities and overlaps discussions of ethnicity, race and culture (Quanchi, 2004, p.8). The communities of the Melanesian Diaspora also have active roles in this methodological discourse.

This article has argued that a Melanesian research methodology is possible. Furthermore, a Melanesian methodology is a valid and defensible means to approach some research domains. It is unlikely that a scientific-medico program on the evolution of the malarial parasites would adopt a Melanesian methodology. Melanesian methodology may be attractive to certain groups in social research, especially in the domains of education, community development and cultural studies.

What a Melanesian research methodology offers

What might a Melanesian research methodology have to offer? What potentials exist within a Melanesian research methodology? A proper application of Melanesian values offers exciting potentials for Melanesian researchers and the social research community. The first benefit is that Melanesian perspectives may be given a more clear and authentic voice. The clarity and authenticity will arise from the embedded Melanesian values and the congruence between these values and Melanesian communities' lived experiences. A Melanesian methodology may empower more Melanesians to enter the discourse of research. Increased Melanesian discourse will help overcome the lack of Melanesian research, especially related to PNG and social research.

As more Melanesian research is published, greater awareness of the distinctiveness of Melanesian cultures and contributions to world views may develop. It is important that Melanesians communicate research outcomes to their communities, and it is hoped that a Melanesian methodology may facilitate and encourage this communication. Melanesian researchers will be more frequently read and Melanesia's place, comprising so much of the world's surface area and sensitive tropical oceans, may become better understood and more respected.

A Melanesian methodology must give precedence to the interpretation of acculturated persons regarding cultural interpretation. Put simply, those within the culture have at least an equal voice in explaining meanings, significance and values, with respect to those who study the culture from outside. While Melanesians are 'insiders' of their own *tok ples*¹ and culture, their research discourse must strive for increased transparency and rationality as the final standard of good research. Finally, as Melanesians across their diverse cultures raise their social and educational levels, an acceptance of Melanesian research approaches is a necessary step to validating their cultural integrity.

Criteria of Melanesian research methodology

Just claiming that Melanesian methodology has a special respect for the land, for relationships and is more holistic in its approach fails the test of rationality required of accountable and transparent methodologies. So what is required to

¹ *Tok ples* is literally talk of my place. It is the language and culture of the village, the most local shared expression of culture.

support the claim of Melanesian methodology? It is suggested that the following six requirements must be satisfied in order to defensibly claim the employment of a Melanesian methodology of research:

1. The research must be grounded in a Melanesian world view that respects Melanesian ontology and epistemology;
2. The research program: questions; processes; and outcomes, must respect and focus upon the Melanesian experience;
3. The research must share Melanesian values in a manner that is exemplified in data collection and analysis;
4. The research must be grounded in the Melanesian community experience and consolidate that life-force integration between all participants, including the natural and spiritual worlds;
5. While not requiring that all researchers be ethnically Melanesian, the lived experience of Melanesian culture is a requisite of all participants, including the researchers;
6. That the research outcomes be developed, publicised and moved toward action and policy in ways that fosters the life of the Melanesian community.

It is argued that these six requirements fulfil Reinharz's ten criteria (1992) listed above for feminist methodologies. These criteria also respect the ten Melanesian values outlined by Franklin (2007, pp.28-37). It is felt that these six criteria are less prescriptive and more culturally sensitive in the Melanesian context, yet contain the radical demands of a methodology which is critical, empowering and liberating. It is also argued that these six criteria are useful for researchers when investigating and choosing between methodologies, and informative of the requirements of a Melanesian research methodology. These requirements may not be fully inclusive, and other researchers may add to them over time.

Melanesian communities, and especially PNG communities, are changing rapidly. Under pressure from modern, technological, Western-oriented, consumerist and market oriented forces, the fabric of Melanesian communities is stressed. Melanesians find themselves at some odds with a pace of development that, while promising many material benefits, might endanger spiritual and holistic values of village life (Whiteman, 1984). Hence, many Melanesians experience themselves to be slightly out of step, even in their own culture. And, it is worth repeating, Melanesian cultures are many, varied and differentiated from each other across a wide spectrum of beliefs, values and practices.

It should not be said that a person, whether a researcher be a Melanesian or not, 'should' employ a Melanesian research methodology. Just as a range of methodologies exists and a methodology can be selected that best suits the

researcher's purpose, so too a Melanesian methodology is not 'one size fits all' nor a methodology for all seasons. It is not suggested that all research conducted in Melanesia needs to be conducted in a Melanesian methodology. Nor should Melanesian researchers feel bound to employ a Melanesian methodology unless that methodology meets their research purposes and commitments. The number of disciplines in which a Melanesian methodology could be acceptable may initially be small, but initial resistance to a new paradigm is not unusual.

The important matter is that a Melanesian methodology be employed when appropriate and, when employed, be utilised in a manner that is defensible, transparent and trustworthy.

Conclusion

This paper has argued that the concept of a Melanesian research methodology is a valid concept and is practicable in some research programs. Not all research conducted in PNG will need to use a Melanesian research methodology, and those research projects that do employ a Melanesian research methodology must rationalise that choice in the same way that other choices must be defended in a transparent and articulated manner.

A Melanesian research methodology will be grounded on Melanesian values and be focused on community life-force outcomes. These values must be evident in research planing, data collection and data analysis and the subsequent publication of research outcomes. The research will respect the Melanesian holistic, relationship-centred, integrated world view that establishes connections between physical, emotional, spiritual and relational realities in a communal consensus. Melanesian research methodology will be grounded in Melanesian beliefs and values of land, clan, reciprocity, food, ancestors, ritual, leadership, education, compensation and work.

Melanesian research methodology is not the prerogative of those who are ethnically Melanesian, nor does ethnicity itself enable this research methodology to be successfully employed. The issue is whether the research can participate in the values nexus in which Melanesian methodology is validated.

This paper is offered as a way forward that Melanesian researchers might be encouraged and empowered to find their researcher 'voice'. That Melanesian research is little represented in the literature is beyond argument, and this small effort might contribute to the confidence of Melanesians, by birth or adoption, to better represent their communities' realities in the professional discourse of research. The author wishes to thank those colleagues and early researchers who have contributed to the formation of these ideas, while hoping that this paper does their contributions justice.

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