
Melanesian Research Ethics

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Abstract

Research ethics underpins a successful research method and ethics is the corner stone of useful and meaningful research. Within the Melanesian context, research ethics has a foundational role in meeting the challenges faced when researching in Melanesia. Collaboration action and community involvement, personal compassion and courage are advocated as the means that researchers can apply to achieve improved research outcomes. The role of these attributes is explained in terms of research in Melanesian communities.

Keywords: research ethics, PNG, Melanesia, research methodology, validity

Introduction

An earlier article explored the criteria to be satisfied in order to describe a Melanesian research methodology (Vallance, 2007). This present article takes a wider perspective than a Melanesian methodology to address the concern of the ethical conduct of research within methodologies in Melanesian cultures, with particular reference to research conducted in PNG.

This article explores the domain of research ethics within the qualitative paradigm and within social research. While this paper does not directly address medical ethical concerns, the broad frame of reference is pertinent to medical research as well as positivist research models. This paper presumes that ethical research does not 'just happen' but is the result of careful and creative planning, human and technical insight, and respect for the research and the social contexts.

A starting point for this article is that research ethics is more than just informed consent. Research ethics pertains to more than data collection, although at times discussions of research ethics seem restricted to data collection issues. Research ethics pertains to the whole research process and is a guarantee of validity, the usefulness of the research outcomes.

The term 'Melanesia' is used through out this article. While the author's principal exposure has been within Papua New Guinea, there are clear cultural and sociological similarities between the peoples of PNG and the greater Melanesia (Franklin, 2007, p.26). PNG itself has an enormous cultural diversity evidenced in languages, customs and societal organisation (CIA FactFiles, 2006; Kelep-Malpo, 2007). The prominent PNG thinker Bernard Narakobi has developed a well respected philosophy of 'the Melanesian Way' (Narakobi, 1980). Lastly, many of the social issues that concern today's

researchers, including land rights, the conflict between traditional and so-called 'western' ways, the divide between customary practices and modern practices, transcend the national boundaries of the many island states of Melanesia. The term 'Melanesia' best accounts for the similarities and shared cultural identities of the peoples of PNG and their near neighbours in the south Pacific region.

Melanesian research ethics

This paper does not argue that research in Melanesia is more or less ethically challenged than in other locales or cultures. It does argue that there are challenges in accomplishing research in Melanesian societies, and that these challenges are fully worthy of the efforts required. This paper does argue that respecting the Melanesian context of the society is the only way to do ethical research in Melanesia. Furthermore, this paper argues that respectful, ethical research is the only form of social research that should be done and is worth doing in Melanesia.

The scope of research ethics

This paper is premised on the assertion that the ethical status of the research is fundamental to any discussion of the value of the research. While in methodological terms validity is often championed as the 'gold standard' of research, ethics is overwhelmingly the *sine qua non* of research (Vallance, 2005). Ethics, in the context of research, includes all aspects of the research and publication cycle rather than the more narrow perspective of ethical data collection. Ethical research demands that ethical research questions, research processes, analytic processes and data management and result dissemination all be accorded rightful priorities (Vallance, 2005).

Melanesian context of research ethics

Within the Melanesian cultures, a number of factors impinge upon the validity and trustworthiness of the research process. Two aspects of the research process: data collection and data analysis are examined in some detail with regard to safeguards to be employed to ensure high quality research outcomes. It is not claimed that these factors are unique to PNG or to Melanesia, however these factors are frequently encountered in research in Melanesian cultures.

Factors pertaining to data collection

There are a number of factors that pertain to the processes of data collection of particular relevance to Melanesian research contexts. The division of factors into those pertaining to data collection and those concerning data analysis is a dichotomy created for the convenience of explanation rather than a theoretical or practical difference. It is understood that overlap between these factors occurs. However, for the sake of organisation, the different groups are useful as an aid for discussion.

Language

The linguistic diversity of PNG is often stated. Not only are there some 800 or more languages today current in PNG itself (CIA FactFiles, 2007) but these languages derive from two different language groups, Austronesian and Non-Austronesian so that there can be little similarity between neighbouring language groups (Foley, 2000; Whiteman, 1984). Some of these languages have only several hundred mother tongue speakers (Kulick & Stroud, 1990). While *tok pisin* is usually described as the *lingua franca*, the peoples in the south of PNG often speak Police Motu¹ rather than *tok pisin* as a common language, although English is common in most towns across PNG.

Literacy is often little esteemed in PNG villages. While literacy rates and skills affect PNG development (Booth, 1995), the lack of literacy is a social issue of significance. Akinnaso (1981) asserts that literacy has cultural, social development and cognitive consequences. Literacy affects not only how one conceptualises but also what one can conceptualise (Meacham, 2001). One of the realities of research in village situations is the difficulty explaining what one is researching and why it is worthy of research. Many local PNG languages, and *tok pisin* itself (I have no experience of Motu), lack a vocabulary that is rich in abstract concepts, time delimitations and individualised effects. In some languages the vocabulary is so limited that even in verbal dialogue the context is crucial to resolve the intended meaning for words which have multiple, distinct meanings². It is difficult, even for a fluent speaker, to translate the ideas of research into a local language. Furthermore, many PNG people speak *tok pisin* but cannot read or write in *tok pisin*, so translated Consent Forms are inscrutable in either language. When these difficulties impede clear communication, it is of concern that the researcher cannot readily gain informed consent because the information cannot be readily communicated.

Cultural perspective of compensation

The visitor to PNG soon encounters the word 'compensation'. Yet compensation is not limited to the Western understanding of 'making right'³. It is argued that there are three different senses of the term compensation in PNG today. The first sense of compensation that operates in PNG today is the Western-legal understanding or redressing a particular wrong. Compensation is

¹ Motu is the specific language spoken by an ethnic group in the south of PNG. Police Motu is the name of the *lingua franca*, which has some considerable differences from ethnic Motu. However, in common conversation, Police Motu, as the *lingua franca*, is frequently referred to as Motu.

² In the Roro language the word 'wapuka'a' can mean 'bartering system' or 'midnight', depending on the context and the sentence structure in which it is used. Roro is spoken in Central Province by the coastal peoples between Hisu north of Port Moresby to the northern coastal extent of Central Province to Kikori on the province border with Gulf Province.

³ Macquarie Dictionary defines compensation as 'something given or received as an equivalent for services, debt, loss, suffering, etc.; indemnity' ('Macquarie Dictionary', 2005).

due to the person wronged and is to be paid by the person who has done wrong (Kepore, 1975; N. O'Neill, 1975). Compensation is also applied to a range of other social interactions like bride price and marriage payments (Jessep & Luluaki, 1994, p.8). Compensation also applied to activities to restore the social order (Kepore, 1975, p.178; MacDonald, 1984) and is most effective in re-aligning existing relationships (Stralhern, 1975, pp.185-186).

Trompf argues that 'Melanesian social life is a constant give and take' (Trompf, 1991, p.64) and that compensation has different faces and processes when employed between hostile groups and within tribes or clans not normally mutually hostile. So compensation can be understood as either retribution for wrongs admitted (Trompf, 1994, p.107), or 'indemnification of one's allies for their services, risks, and serious losses' (Trompf, 1994, p.107). 'Compensation' also includes the exchanges or gifts, some token in nature but others substantial, that are used to create, formalise and acknowledge relationships (Mantovani, 1984, p.204). The reciprocity of exchanges can be seen as building relationships. It is this sense of ritualising relationship which is now discussed in terms of research ethics and data collection.

The researcher and the research participants enter into a relationship. This relationship usually has some clearly defined boundaries in Western thinking, but in the Melanesian mindset relationships can be more pervasive and certainly more valued. It is possible that a research participant can understand that contributing to the research enterprise is, in fact, one part of a ritualised relationship exchange and that person can expect reciprocity or compensation for the information given. This cultural perspective has several consequences. Firstly, if unanticipated or unrecognised, this expectation of reciprocity may result in offence and even anger if the expected reciprocal exchange does not occur. Secondly, if information given is offered in order to create or cement a relationship, that which is offered might be constructed in ways to maximise the perceived relationship benefit: in other words the discussion, may become more a telling of what is thought to be valued, rather than the person's own understanding.

It is not uncommon for some participants to have unrealistic expectations of personal benefits of research. While the *Belmont Report* specifically enjoins researchers to have regard for the beneficence of participants (National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research, 1979; National Health and Medical Research Council, 1997, 1999; Sieber, 1992), the *Belmont Report* does not advocate reciprocal relationships within the research context. It is not claimed that the cultural understanding of compensation will invalidate data collection. It is argued that careful planning of the approach and establishment of the research relationship in the Melanesian cultural context is important to ensure that appropriate and trustworthy data are collected for the research.

Communal consent

Melanesians frequently report a communal model of ownership. This communal ownership usually extends to land and other resources (Trebilcock, 1984). Customary land tenure is never separate in Melanesia from social, political and economic factors (Giddings, 1984, p.150). Allied with this communal sense of ownership is a decrease, relative to Western perceptions, of individual efficacy. It is the practice in many communities that decisions are made by community leaders, or big-men, for the community. The big-man is not usually a hereditary leader in Melanesian cultures but one who maintains his leadership through political and economic prowess (Chao, 1984, p.133, pp.137-138). While decision-making is often in consultation with community members, community leaders can make such decisions.

The power of the local community leaders is pervasive and persuasive. If a researcher gains research access through the approval of the local leader/s, it may be difficult to determine whether individuals offer real assent to being involved in the research, or more importantly can realistically choose to not consent if the community has consented. If the community assents to the research, even if solely through the decision of the local leader, it will be rare that community members can freely not participate in the research. This nexus has implications for the collection of research data. If a participant is not fully consenting, or does not know how to express lack of consent, then the quality of the data offered to the researcher is compromised. Clearly, community consent cannot be presumed to mean that all community members are willing participants. If all participants are not fully willing, the researcher needs to be mindful that the data she/he is collecting is of mixed quality and may need to employ further on-to-one discussions to determine the extend of consent.

In some traditional communities the concept of consent is subsumed under broader issues of trust or relationship. The exchange of token gifts can signify the building of such a relationship, be that betel nut in Melanesia or tobacco as might be used in indigenous Australian communities (Davison, Brown, & Moffitt, 2006; Ellis & Earley, 2006). This aspect of exchange can mitigate the quality of informed consent that may be desired in well planned research.

Epistemology

It has been argued elsewhere that differences in epistemology can produce different research methodologies (Vallance, 2007). However, if the potential research participants have an epistemology that is very different from that of the researcher, the threat of miscommunication in data collection is high.

Indigenous peoples have a distinctive way of looking at the world, thinking about it, relating to it, and experiencing it, with the result that indigenous peoples' epistemologies can no longer stand behind or outside mainstream methodologies, but in front or beside as the situation demands (Fleras, 2004, p.118).

It is not unknown that some cultures resist research (Gibbs, 2001, p.675; Hudson & Bruckman, 2004). Whether due to bad experiences with researchers or a world view that does not validate or honour research into people's lives, some cultures are resistant to research (Beresford, Partington, & Gower, 2003; Gibbs, 2001; Ryen, 2004).

A number of factors impinge upon data collection that is ethically and methodologically sound. These factors include, in the Melanesian context, the languages of the people and researcher, the local community's understanding of compensation and communal versus personal consent. Wherever differences in world view exist, and the differences track between researcher and research participants, there are grounds for caution that the messages being given and received in the same sense that they are transmitted.

Factors pertaining to data analysis

The previous section of this paper has explored some issues that pertain to the collection of valid or trustworthy data. This section addresses a number of issues that pertain more to the transparent and meaningful analysis of research data. While the distinction between data collection and data analysis is not always an unequivocal one, especially within the qualitative methodologies, it is employed here as a means of order and priority for conceptual clarity.

Giving the answers that might be valued

As earlier noted, compensation can be an exchange to develop or cement relationships. This culturally approved practice develops a social habit of agreement, and in Melanesian cultures agreement with superiors or those of higher status is often the currency of reinforcing these relationships. Within normal discourse this cultural norm makes for politeness, social harmony and effective bonds within the community.

When a researcher enters the Melanesian context, social compliance with the views of another can be problematic. It is tempting to suggest in the previous sentence; 'when a Western researcher enters the Melanesian context', but this construction would be misleading and unnecessarily biased. Melanesian peoples encompass an extremely heterogeneous group of languages, cultures and even races such that PNG people, for instance, can often feel culturally out of tune in their own country by simply moving some few kilometres from where they grew up or live. So just being a citizen of PNG, or being an indigenous born person in PNG, does not mean that one is culturally in tune with the research field. In fact, it is likely with over 800 languages, that only *tok pisin* or English are shared languages and mother and father tongues [*tok ples*] are diverse. Just being Melanesian does not guarantee cultural sensitivity, and indeed as the history of anthropology suggests, being aware of one's cultural differences might heighten one's sensitivities to those very differences and make them visible to observation.

The researcher usually arrives with expectations. The community also has expectations, and in many communities there is some deference to the outsider even if it is just as a visitor. This deference and a concern to be hospitable and welcoming can sometimes incline participants to 'give the answers that make the researcher happy'. Social discourse that seeks to establish or confirm relationships, if not appreciated and understood, can impede the search of personally held opinions and socially constructed attitudes than could be thought to persist beyond the space of the research, and social, encounter.

Working in such a cultural matrix, the researcher needs to take care accepting those first offered thoughts. The researcher needs to self monitor what clues are being sought by participants and what clues are being offered by the researcher. Sometimes researchers offer non verbal clues that reinforce certain messages, at least as perceived by participants: noting some words in a book, or writing notes at one point of the talk can be seen to be approving or validating such a communication and may encourage a participant to offers further such ideas, 'since the researcher likes these, because they are being written down'. Conversely, to stop note taking at a certain point might be perceived as research disinterest in the participant's views. Similarly, non verbal expressions of approval, smiles and sub verbal messages, can subtly influence and guide the participant along lines that are perceived to be approved by the researcher.

Temporary nature of answers

The temporary nature of expressed attitudes is something often remarked upon by initial researchers in PNG. While no social scientist expects attitudes to be unchanging and completely permanent, there is an assumption of consistency over time within the Western thinking of attitudes and opinions. The Melanesian mind, immersed in concerns for social harmony has less trouble adjusting expressed opinions to match community mores (Gesch, 2007). This flexibility can be noted when the context changes, possibly from working-day or modern occupation mindset to a traditional perspective.

The social researcher in Melanesia needs to take special care to shift and sort evidence of attitudes reported. In this situation, the researcher needs to reflexively consider contextual and complementary evidence that might substantiate the consistency or firmness over time of expressed opinions.

Embedded cultural perspectives such as sorcery

Traditional Melanesian societies are alive to the spiritual world. The notions of *tambu*, sorcery and witchcraft are still current. Indeed in traditional societies today sorcery and witchcraft are the objects of conflict and the resource of the ill (Gesch, 2007, pp.19-20).

Different tribes have different totem objects or animals, *tambu*, and special sensitivities surround these cultural imperatives. Similarly, cultures have sensitivities about particular issues, bodily functions, means of interpersonal address or association. Some societies are very sensitive to the relationships

between opposite genders, and even social gestures can change meaning when gender becomes a factor: the ubiquitous hand shake on meeting new people is strongly discouraged between men and unmarried women in some places.

Any research, especially amongst people living traditionally, has cultural perspectives. Social research that does not include the deliberate and thoughtful awareness and sensitivity to cultural mores in the local place will always be threatened by the possibilities of conflict, and even more importantly, of not clearly hearing the messages spoken by participants. Hearing the spoken messages requires awareness of the cultural context in which the messages are spoken.

Literacy and culture

The adult population in PNG has a declining rate of literacy. Recent estimates of the net school enrolment at primary levels of schooling has shown that less than 35% of school age primary level students attend on a regular basis (Kombra & Webster, 2006). Hence, the literacy of adults, especially in the English language can be expected to be in decline. Even literacy in *tok pisin*, which may be the language of rural primary level schools (Department of Education, 2003) cannot be expected to be high. Hence written communications and written instructions to participants are increasingly problematic in PNG today. Researchers will need to be aware that even simple written directions may be beyond the reading skills of many people in either *tok pisin* or English.

Much of Melanesia remains a culture of oral stories. The rules and interpretative protocols of oral stories are different to those of the written form: both in flexibility of expression and adaptability of meaning. As researchers approach projects from a perspective of written literacy rather than oral stories, the interpretative potentials change from the oral form to the written forms. It is possible that researchers might think that they are being told 'literal truths' whereas the participants might be communicating 'moral or social truths' in the oral tradition that sound lie the reporting of actual accounts.

Guidelines for ethical research in Melanesian cultures

Ellis and Earley propose a fourfold approach to respectful research with indigenous communities. Modifying their American focussed schema a little, it is suggested that these four approaches of community, collaboration, compassion, and courage create the hallmarks of ethical research in Melanesian cultures (Ellis & Earley, 2006, p.8). These qualities are human qualities. The human interactions of qualitative research do not limit its effectiveness nor its usefulness.

Neutrality in qualitative research, or in any situation where there is direct human contact, is a fallacy.

(Ellis & Earley, 2006, p.7)

These four guidelines presume a human interaction that does not assume neutrality (Tom & Herbert, 2002). Melanesian research cannot be neutral since it is informed by and involved in Melanesian values and world-views.

Community

First and foremost, ethical Melanesian research requires a community approach. Ethical research projects will inform the community, seek permission from the community and include community perspectives in data collection and analysis.

So much of traditional Melanesian life revolves around the village. Village leadership is frequently a matter of extensive consultation with member, and researchers must build such extended consultation into their research plans and timetables. Even those Melanesians who live in urban environments frequently have a strong sense of identification with village which in turn creates bonds with family, kin and tribe. So, researchers need to inform the whole village community about the aims and processes of the research, as well as inform all community members of potential outcomes and possible consequences of the proposed research.

Permission for the research must be gained from and of the community. This task is twofold: the community needs to have a voice to assent to the research, and the researcher for his/her own ethical responsibilities must ensure that each individual participant also fully assents to the research process. The acquiring of informed individual assent will usually require signed Consent Forms, of such forms attested by a personal mark where the participant is not literate enough to make a signature. Both community consent and individual consent are required because the individual researcher has her/his own ethical standards to maintain which are not to be lowered or ameliorated in communal research situations.

The research must include a community perspective. To be true to the Melanesian world-view of community, to respect the Melanesian epistemology, research must be respectful of community and must foster community. This statement is stronger than 'should not harm community' since community is a positive force in Melanesian epistemologies.

Collaboration

Ethical Melanesian research will be collaborative. Collaborative research has a number of levels. The first level of collaboration is to involve the participants as more than sources of data. Researchers will find collaborative question-making useful to enable participants to reveal their realities. Collaborative question-making involves people in what questions need to be asked and how to ask those questions so that people can respond informatively.

Collaborative research can include collaborative meaning-making. While the researcher has her/his own perspective on the meaning told by participants, the

community members themselves can add an extra dimension if they can contribute to the reflection on their realities. Surely, appropriate safeguards for confidentiality or anonymity will be to be employed, and there are numerous means of suitable safeguards.

Collaboration can also include shared dissemination of research outcomes, clear acknowledgment of the contributions of the community and acknowledgement that the community has some ownership of the research outcomes.

Compassion

Some authors have positioned compassion as a quality intrinsic to feminist methodologies (Thompson, 1992). This paper argues that active compassion is an essential orientation for the social researcher who is seeking to understand the 'other'. Other-ness is never easy to encounter, and researchers might avoid the challenges of other-ness (Witz, 2007). Without compassion, ethnography becomes less than the emotional and human account to which it aspires to be (O'Neill et al., 2002). Without compassion, the ethnographer risks becoming some type of voyeur who is distanced from the research scene and by that very distance is dislocated from much of its meaning. In a real way the immersion and prolonged fieldwork of the classical anthropologist was an extended protocol to allow compassion to develop and interpret the research field through eyes that felt with the research participants. Ashworth and Lucas (2000, p.299) claim that empathy is a fundamental attribute in order to perceive the meaning that the other communicates.

When the research context includes cross cultural parameters, the need to empathy and compassion becomes even stronger. There are two different calls for empathy and compassion. The first and possibly more obvious call is for compassion with the people in the research context; their experiences and feelings should evoke compassion. The second call is an internal one; that the researcher deals compassionately and patiently with his own difficulties of enculturated understanding.

Courage

Ellis and Earley propose that the researcher needs courage to 'have strength to be who one is and to seek one's vision' (2006, p.8). The researcher does need courage (Dickson-Swift, James, Kippen, & Liamputtong, 2007) to be an individual, although in concert with the requirement of compassion, individualistic courage is not enough. Courage is also required to acknowledge and abide with differences, discontinuities and even contradictions between the research and the research context (Hubbard, Backett-Milburn, & Kemmer, 2001). Values, assumptions and even fundamental perceptions of the value of life may call for courage to be encountered rather than these discomforts be overlooked or diminished in their power (Wolgemuth & Donohue, 2006). This courage enables the researcher to stand on the edge of uncertainty and to

acknowledge that one does not have all the answers and sometimes cannot understand the answers of the other.

Courage is required in reporting cultural research. It is an easy matter to report only that which is well understood and under analytic control. It is risky to report gaps or places where understanding is incomplete.

Conclusion

This article has attempted to explore some of the challenges of social research embedded in cultural settings. While research in cross cultural contexts is neither easier nor more difficult than other research, cross cultural research has distinct challenges. These challenges involve the full research process, and this article has used the lens of research ethics to better focus the requirements of valid and useful research.

The article has explored some challenges of collecting valid and useful data, and other challenges under the heading of analytic challenges. While these are not intrinsic differences, there are differences of degree and also differences in terms of when in the research cycle the challenges may be confronted.

Lastly, the paper has attempted to offer some guidance to those undertaking cross cultural research. The guidance is not in the form of a series of steps or procedures, but rather a group of attitudes and personal orientations that may permit the researcher to encounter the culture in a way to better appreciate its integrity and values. While cultural sensitivity is often recommended, it is less frequent to find suggested means to work towards cultural sensitivity. It is argued that cultural sensitivity can be attained by the application of the attitudes of collaborative action, community involvement, compassion and courage.

It may be that researchers in diverse domains will find the advice towards collaborative action and community development useful to better understand the meanings that participants are requested to communicate. The research's qualities of compassion and courage are recommended for all social researchers, especially those who are encountering the challenges of the differences in others and their understandings of the world. It is suggested that courage and compassion can usefully characterise much social research.

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