

## Lalanga: Weaving the Kakala with Constructionist Grounded Theory

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### Abstract

*Lalanga* – Tongan for weaving – blends two methodologies: the traditional Tongan *Kakala* framework and contemporary Constructionist Grounded Theory. *Lalanga* guided a research project that investigated the perspectives on family planning and fertility of 12 Tongan women, aged 16 to 45 years old, residing in South Auckland, New Zealand. Weaving the two methodologies strengthened the cultural cohesiveness of the research for the Tongan women, beyond what each methodology could achieve alone. This article illustrates use of this culturally safe approach to mixed-method qualitative research involving Pacific people.

**Keywords:** Kakala framework, toli, tui, luva, constructionist grounded theory, fertility, Tongan women, family planning services.

### Introduction

The Tongan concept of *lalanga* translates literally 'to weave' or the action of weaving. This article describes how our weaving of two research methodologies – the traditional Tongan framework of *Kakala* and Constructionist Grounded Theory (CGT) informed a study exploring poorly understood reproductive health perspectives of Tongan women living in South Auckland. The *Kakala* framework and CGT were incorporated in the *lalanga* framework to complement each other and benefit the research process and those involved in it. In Tonga, *lalanga* is a traditional form of art practised for many generations. It respects the skills of the weaver and the availability of resources to this person. The weaver is analogous to a researcher whose resources include research methodologies. The pandanus plant is the main source used to *lalanga a fala* (mat). Through critical reflection and dialogue a dialectical approach can bring research methodologies together as conversational partners even when their premises differ greatly. As with the use of different methodologies, each pandanus plant produces a different type of fala that varies in colour, fineness in texture and value (Herda, 1999; 'Ilaiu Talei & Memmott, 2014).

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The quality of mixed methods research likewise varies, akin in the Tongan culture to the ranking between each type of *fala* (Herda, 1999). *Lalanga* is also gender-specific. Although men sometimes harvest the Pandanus plant, women do the majority of *lalanga* mat weaving (Van der Grijp, 1993; Mataele, 2012). Women contribute to the economy and communities by producing a *kakala* to be worn by and benefit women. By extension, weaving the research methodologies of *Kakala* and CGT fits with a care ethic as a philosophy that has feminist roots grounded inductively and contextually in voice and relationships. It seemed appropriate therefore for us to weave *Kakala* and CGT in order to try to understand the perspectives of Tongan women towards family planning and reproductive health in South Auckland. The findings of the research underlined the right of women as carriers and mothers to decide when and if to become pregnant and access family planning services (Malungahu, 2015). Before *lalanga* commences the Pandanus leaves must be prepared in advance, using various techniques for each type of pandanus plant. However generally, preparation involves cutting the leaves close to the trunk and removing the spiky teeth before boiling and drying the leaves, stripping them into strands (*tohi*) and optionally bleaching or colouring the leaves (Van der Grijp, 1993; 'Ilaiu Talei & Memmott, 2014). Similarly, researchers attend faithfully to preparing and executing their planned individual methodologies, before weaving them together. We will briefly describe *Kakala* and CGT separately and then discuss how these methodologies were *lalanga* in our study. The strengths and limitations of the approach are discussed as are recommendations for future research.

### **Kakala Framework**

The *Kakala* framework is an indigenous framework of knowledge and wisdom unique to the Tongan process of producing a beautiful *kakala* or garland (Thaman, 1988; 2007). There are three main processes in forming a *kakala*, namely *toli*, *tui* and *luva*. The first is *toli*, picking of the flowers, which maps to the sampling and recruitment phase of research. *Toli* emphasises the importance of selecting and choosing the most beautiful flowers, in this case selecting eligible participants for in-depth interviews. Secondly, *tui*, threading together the flowers, symbolizes the collation and analysis of data. *Tui* underlines the importance of ensuring that each flower is positioned in a beautiful yet organised way. Thus this process represents the categories and themes identified during the analysis phase of qualitative research. Thirdly, *luva*, the gifting and giving away of the garland, emphasises the importance of presenting findings in a meaningful way, mindful of the audience. The *Kakala* framework also highlights the importance of the Tongan worldview, highlighting the Tongan values of *ofa*, love and reciprocity, and *faka'apa'apa*, respect (Thaman, 2007). Just as the *kakala* was predominantly woven by Tongan women, the principal researcher, Malungahu (2015), weaved the methodological approach, and the participants in the research were all Tongan females.

### **Constructionist Grounded Theory (CGT)**

Constructionist Grounded Theory is a highly inductive approach to conducting qualitative research. As described by Charmaz (2006), it evolved from the classic grounded theory introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967) and objectivist grounded theory proposed by Straus and Corbin (1994). Ontologically relativist and epistemologically subjectivist, the approach of CGT seeks to construct (rather than test) a tightly framed theory (or explanation) about something. This theory reflects the meanings of issues emerging through the interaction of the researcher and participants. Thus the resulting theory is rooted or 'grounded' in the data collected, and is relevant to the area of study. The term 'grounded' is the hall mark of all grounded theory approaches. Elements of CGT deemed relevant to this study were theoretical sampling, initial coding, focused coding and theoretical saturation.

### **The weaver (researcher)**

Central to *Kakala* and CGT are the skill and the status of the weaver-researcher, since both attributes contribute to the value of the *fala*. Herda (1999) argues that the value of the *fala* is founded in the 'accumulated experience and the illustrious individuals who have come into contact with the fine mat that add greatness and value' (p.161). Production of a *fala* also holds emotional and sentimental value tied to how the traditional gifting of the *fala* symbolises the generosity of the *anga fakatonga* (Tongan way). Thus the interwoven methodology serves as a gift to be used and understood by Tongan and non-Tongan researchers alike especially for research projects involving Tongans. Weaving was also evident because of the Tongan lineage, gender and age range shared by the study participants and lead researcher. Spaces were evident in the mat weaved; for example a subculture, such as child birth experience, might be absent for some participants.

However, the researcher reflected on her own thoughts and opinions about the research process throughout the study. This constant reflexivity was practised to protect the fidelity of the analysis and interpretation of the collected data. The University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (Reference 013358) approved the study.

### Study context

The study aimed to identify the attitudes of New Zealand-born and Tongan-born women towards family planning and fertility; explore their perspectives on family planning services available in New Zealand; explore barriers to accessing these services; and identify strategies to reduce such barriers and improve service access. To meet these aims we conducted qualitative research that used the *fala* (interwoven approach) to weave the *Kakala* framework and CGT. The research output was a symbolic mat of culturally patterned themes elicited from the perspectives of Tongan women, aged 16 to 45 years residing in South Auckland.

### How the methodologies were *lalanga*

The *tolip* phase (selecting the flowers) included theoretical sampling and recruitment for in-depth interviews. The *tui* phase entailed initial, focused and theoretical coding. In the *luva* phase, exemplified by this article, the writing style was evocative of participant experiences. Memo writing (unique to CGT) occurred during all the *Kakala* phases. Emphasised were the voices of participants in an ethical and culturally appropriate manner. We shall elaborate in turn on each stage.

### *Toli*

In the *Kakala* framework, *to li* describes the first step of producing a beautiful garland through the 'choosing and the picking' of beautiful flowers (Thaman, 2007). *Toli* requires knowledge of the materials with which to fashion the *kakala*, but also the skill to obtain the materials without damaging them so they do not lose their fragrance and freshness (Thaman, 1992). This care supports the ethical and cultural appropriateness of the data collection. *Toli* was interwoven with research practices consistent with CGT, namely theoretical sampling, snowball sampling and face-to-face semi-structured in-depth interviews. Theoretical sampling ensured the sample comprised participants relevant to addressing the research question and generating a framework from emergent themes (Charmaz, 2006). Because the research was a sensitive topic, *tolil* recruited participants in a culturally safe manner by providing the information sheet and consent form in the Tongan language. Adherence to principles for Pacific health research, such as relationships, respect and protection was integral to researcher-participant interactions before, during and after the interview. To help put the women at ease, establish common ground and develop rapport, the interviewer asked questions (for example about lineage and place of worship) to get to know the participants. To access a diverse group of women, details of the research were disseminated to numerous Tongan community groups. Most of the groups belonged to a Christian denomination. Potential participants were given information about the research. *Toli* validated selecting participants that could benefit from the research findings. Saturation is a key element of CGT (Charmaz, 2006) in which no new themes emerge from the data during *toli*. Once saturation was reached recruitment ceased. Saturation was identified with a sample of 12 women. Half were born in Tonga and the remaining half were born in New Zealand. Most of the women lived in high deprivation areas typical of the Pacific demographic in New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand & Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs, 2010).

### *Tui*

*Tui* required the researcher to thread each flower together in a culturally appropriate manner. It brings a holistic quality to the data analysis whereby cultural significance is valued according to tradition and mythology associated with the *kakala* (Gavett, 2011; Riggs & Sandlin, 2007). Our *tui* entailed analytic processes of CGT: initial coding, focused coding and theoretical coding (Charmaz, 2006). Our initial coding was open to exploring whatever theory possibilities emerge from the data (Charmaz, 2006). Four main questions, adapted from those suggested by Charmaz (2006) were asked throughout the initial coding process: What do these data permit a study of? What do the data suggest? From whose point of view? What theoretical category do these data indicate? To add to this *tui* also required us to evaluate the data according to their cultural significance, by asking questions such as, how is this issue culturally significant for Pacific people? From whose point of view is this understanding expressed? Thus *tui* required understanding and drawing on Pacific values to produce an in-depth, culturally inclusive analysis of the data collected.

The time taken to create a *kakala* depends on the complexity of the desired garland (Riggs & Sandlin, 2007). *Tui* afforded the flexibility to choose the level of complexity of the data analysis that was required to address the study aim. The lead researcher chose to undertake line-by-line coding to separate data into ideas and identify processes. Focused coding was used to categorise initial codes incisively and completely. Here *tui* required assessing the cultural meaning and significance of the initial codes. This understanding was used to categorise related codes and arrange themes hierarchically, for example by identifying relationships of cultural importance to participants. Even when codes arose infrequently, they could carry cultural significance and rank highly in generating categories. Lastly, theoretical coding connected the categories to tell a comprehensive story about the attitudes of New Zealand- and Tongan-born women toward family planning and fertility.

### ***Luva***

*Luva* in the *Kakala* framework is the giving away of the *Kakala*. The data were written and presented in a culturally appropriate manner respectful of the participants and us. Cultural appropriateness here means adopting Pacific (Tongan) ways of thinking and doing during the dissemination process (and entire research process). Information was delivered in Tongan and respectful of Tongan values (*ofa* and *faka'apa'apa*). An example of how this was done in written form was reference to underlying structural, economic and political factors that contribute to health and reproductive health inequities among Tongan (and Pacific) peoples and non-Pacific peoples. Consistent with CGT evocative writing was used to verbalise strong images, memories and experiences shared by the women during the interviews (Malungahu, 2015).

## **Discussion**

### **Strengths of the *fala*: the interwoven approach**

Lalanga in this study occurred through weaving the complementary research methodologies of *Kakala* (*toli*, *tui* and *luva*) and CGT. From our perspective, *Kakala* added a new strand to the beauty of CGT. It added cultural safety and sensitivity, which suited this Pacific research enquiry and strengthened its responsiveness to ethical and cultural considerations. The theoretical stance of the *Kakala* was culturally appropriate for Pacific women because cultural inclusivity and Pacific ownership of the robust CGT process helped to legitimise their voice and lived realities. *Faka'apa'apa* (respect) was evident since the *fala* was grounded in the data and, under the leadership of a Tongan female researcher was produced by Pacific women, to be worn by Pacific women, and benefit Pacific women. Responding explicitly to these cultural variables, *lalanga* resembles how a heuristic approach enables researchers to reflect and draw openly on their own experiences and lives as a resource for their research and its development (Moustakas, 1990).

### **Limitations of *lalanga***

*Lalanga* may not suit all research. The current research weaved together two qualitative methodologies. Yet to be determined is the appropriateness of weaving additional methodologies for example, *Talanoa* (Vaioloti, 2006) and CGT. Ultimately the study aim which underpins how the study is conducted is critical in deciding whether or not *Lalangac*an benefit the overall research process. On balance the overall benefit of this interwoven approach must outweigh the costs.

### **Recommendation**

We recommend *lalanga* to Tongan and non-Tongan researchers interested in using *Kakala* and CGT in qualitative research that involves Tongan peoples on matters of importance to Tongans. *Lalangac*an contribute to such research so long as the resulting *fala* benefits the overall research. This outcome appears most likely in qualitative research that is feminist in nature and concerns sensitive topics such as sexual health and reproduction. The interwoven approach could be adapted to suit other qualitative research, especially involving other Pacific Island and ethnic minority groups that share similar values, such as *'ofa* and *faka'apa'apa*. Additional research is required to explore using *lalanga* with more or different methodologies.

## Conclusion

This article has described *lalanga* as a way of weaving together two complementary methodologies: the *Kakala* framework and CGT. Owing to its cultural appropriateness, the interwoven approach methodologically strengthened our study of the perspectives of Tongan women towards fertility and family planning. *Lalanga* benefited the research by explicitly emphasizing the cultural position of the participants and researchers. It brought their identity to the fore in a culturally appropriate manner that underlined Pacific ways of thinking and doing. The addition of the *Kakala* contributed a nuanced complexity to CGT and provided a research framework rooted in Tongan philosophy, mythology and history, which is culturally sensitive and safe. Tongan and non-Tongan researchers may benefit from adopting this approach in qualitative research involving Pacific people.

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