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Traversing Pasifika education research in a post-truth era

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Abstract

Utilising a post-critical autoethnographic approach, this article presents various tensions of a Pasifika doctoral student and researcher navigating Pasifika research in a post-truth era. Pacific researchers have documented the sacredness and ontological positioning of how Pacific wisdom and knowledge are understood. This article challenges the teleological nature of the value-based practice fostered within Pasifika methodologies through evoking the ontological question of 'being'. Key questions are posed and are used as provocations to reconsider the influence of post-truth in philosophy itself and to use these initiatives to reconceptualise engagement 'in-and-with' Pasifika education research. These questions are: What is post-truth? How are the ethics of knowledge production influenced in a post-truth era? How can post-truth in Pasifika education research be contested through engagement with Pacific indigenous wisdom? Can evoking the concept of 'being' create opportunities to reconceptualise engagement in-and-with Indigenous knowledge and wisdom?

Keywords:

Post-truth, Pasifika education research, indigenous philosophy, being, wisdom

Introduction:

The post-truth era thrives as digital technology influences how people connect to and access information. While there are certain advantages in open access to information, the post-truth era has perforated prior-held notions of validity of knowledge. As many contemporary Pasifika¹ scholars have observed, viral trends are accepted and shared globally as a normative practice in ways of knowing. The nature of truth has been expressed in embodied, narrative and symbolic forms in traditional Pacific indigenous knowledge structures, where the history of humanity is entangled with cosmogony (Refiti, 2014). Pacific creation stories, myths and legends distinguish local connections to place and a direct lineage to God, the universe, the earth and its waters. In contrast, the nature of truth from a

¹ The concept of Pasifika was coined in the mid-1990s as a bureaucratic terminology grouping together Pacific Islands peoples living in New Zealand (either New Zealand born or migrant). In more recent years, the term Pasifika has been reconceptualised by Pasifika to represent a symbol of unity rather than a homogenous grouping of Pacific Islands peoples (Wendt-Samu, 2006). Pasifika ethnicities include Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, Cook Islands, Niue and Tuvalu (Leaupepe & Suani, 2014).



Western² philosophical standpoint presupposed ‘truth’ as something external to nature, objective and generalisable. This article explores how notions of truth presented in Pacific indigenous wisdom and in Western philosophy are neither value-free nor neutral. However, moves to post-truth also ‘disguises’ truth as a universal and value-free attribute, and as an idea that is appealing to the masses (Mika & Matapo, 2018). Public attention no longer questions how knowledge comes into being while post-truth politics pervades global ideology. This epistemic decay in ‘truth-value’ is seen in the tactics political leaders use to secure public opinion. The world of academia is not isolated from this phenomenon and as a Pasifika, Samoan academic and doctoral student I continue to navigate the tensions the era of post-truth creates in my thinking, theorising and being.

Methodological considerations: Why post-critical autoethnography?

The rationale for this post-critical autoethnographic inquiry is to intentionally open up opportunities to engage with multiplicity, so to draw attention to the macro and micro politics involved in varying conceptualisations and reconceptualisations of truth. Post-critical autoethnography as a methodology is constituted by postmodern and post structural epistemologies that challenge the limitations of critical theorising about the position of objective reality and how representation is determined (Nobilt, Flores & Murillo, 2004). Postcritical autoethnography exposes the restrictions of reflexivity in methods of traditional theoretical ethnography that privilege the rational over the emotional and the objective over the subjective (Foley, 2002). In the spirit of Pacific indigenous wisdom, the onto-epistemological position in which I engage in-and-with Pasifika research, I attempt to write with embodied, experiential capacities, so to capture and express affective and artistic ways of knowing. Included in this article, are personal cultural narratives, imagery and poetry. Expressed are specific Samoan cultural terminologies that argue for the point of post-truth within both Samoan cultural constructs as well as New Zealand contemporary life - these are made distinctive in italicised texts.

The problem of truth

The concept and status of the term ‘truth’ has changed over time. Truth still holds value in daily life and may seem as obvious as simply being correct, right or real (Rider & Peters, 2018). The origins of the word ‘truth’ can be found in the old English word ‘troth’, which means faithfulness and fidelity to the source. However as Fuller (2018) suggests, faithfulness to what exactly? – is the question on which presumptions of truthfulness are now based. In the period of modernity, philosophy sought to distinguish conceptions of evidence (fact-based) from that of personal testimony or revelation. What is shrouded/concealed when the measure of truth becomes a fact-checking exercise? The notion of truth as Devine (2018) outlines must be disputed beyond the dichotomous and binary image of truth. It must push past the mere argument of ‘truth’ versus ‘non-truth’. Within the postmodern, philosophy engages with complexities of the propositions of truth, rather than simply distinguishing what is true or false. As Fuller (2018) suggests “...it is not simply that philosophers disagree on which propositions are ‘true’ or ‘false’, but more importantly they disagree on what it means to say that something is ‘true’ or ‘false’” (p 13).

What is post-truth?

The term ‘post-truth’ was first coined by Ralph Keyes in 2004. Crucial to Keyes’ argument regarding the genesis of post-truth is the refutation of the idea of ‘a literal truth’ present in modernist thinking and theorising (Keyes, 2004). The idea of the post-truth era has been influenced by postmodern, constructivist, and postcolonial theorising which emphasises locality and subject position rather than

² Western philosophy refers to the philosophical thinking of Western culture, dating back to early Greek philosophy (Pre Socratic). The development of Western philosophy has shifted through time, from ancient, medieval, modern, through to contemporary approaches (Tubbs, 2009).

objective truths (Horsthemke, 2017; McIntyre, 2018). The term post-truth in a temporal sense suggests a movement away from truth as if the era of truth that once was, is no longer. The paradox here is that objectivity resists the idea of 'truth' as subjective, therefore marginalising other-than foundational ideal, which in turn pervades the taken-for-granted logic of the rational human subject. In terms of Pacific indigenous knowledge theories, particularly the genealogy of the human subject in cosmogony, factual evidence (positivist measure) is sceptical of indigenous creation stories, rendering them as an invalid or as a false interpretation of 'the real' - unlike the history of the Darwinian human evolution. Postmodernity and poststructuralism offer a theorising of the idea of truth in its full interplay with the world, from semiotics, genealogy, ethics, concept-creation to embodied knowing. Although Keyes (2004) classifies post-truth as a by-product of postmodernism, there are limits to objective truths that are not open to multiplicity and difference, as Mika and Matapo (2018) explain below:

It seems that most academics take issue with post-truth because it appeals to the masses through style, not substance. This demise of truth places research in danger, because verifiable and correspondence notions of truth are meant to be absolutely crucial for its objectivity and its continued survival. If post-truth really is so radical a departure, then, we would be on the brink of an utterly new – and possibly painful – set of discourses that threaten to force us to describe the world not as an intra-dependent entity with its own integrity (Mika & Matapo, 2018, p 187).

Shifting to the notion of truth as presented in post-truth discourses, the intent and representation of truth is to construct a blurring of boundaries between what is 'truth' and what is 'lies', what is fiction and what is non-fiction. Post-truth seeks to influence opinion based on feeling, stirring an emotive convincing of public opinion. According to Keyes, "post-truthfulness shapes a fragile edifice for society that erodes a foundation of trust that underlies a healthy civilization" (cited in Horsthemke, 2017, p. 285). Furthermore, Keyes acknowledges that post-truthfulness is entrenched in society. Lying is easy; it can enhance, embellish, or change 'truth' to be mere opinion.

From the perspective of a Pasifika/Samoan researcher, I am reminded here of the Samoan term *faitatala*, *fai* meaning to do or make, *tatala* to open or unpack, and *tala* to talk information. *Faitatala* as a verb essentially means the act of making talk, opening talk and/or gossip. The gossip becomes a fabrication of the truth, however, the term *faitatala* can be both negative or positive. *Faitatala* is commonly practised in informal situations, however, does not diminish the importance of influencing the opinion of others as those engaged in *faitatala* are usually trusted within that particular *vā* or spatiotemporal relational space. The dynamics of *faitatala* have changed, as the digital environment creates new ways to express *faitatala* which is not always considerate of the *vā* or relational foundation upon which people enter, such as anonymous comments on social media engaging in sharing, commenting and/or liking *faitatala*.

The influences of post-truth are evident in the history of politics, however, in more recent years, the media (including social media) have used post-truth tactics to shape public opinion on a broader scale. Post-truth shapes public opinion by appealing to emotion and personal biases rather than questioning how 'the truth' that is presented is conceived/come into being. It has been argued that in a post-truth era, it is easy to cherry-pick data, to come to whatever conclusion you desire (Mika & Matapo, 2018). An example of this is how research is funded to promote goods in the marketing of products, where the ethics of research may be misconstrued, so a profitable version of the truth can be presented.

In addition, digital technology has intensified post-truth(isms) as media outlets open access to local and global information with just one click. What is problematic about this is the way information can be manipulated to present false views. All major search engines, including all social media platforms operate on algorithms, which track online activity and predetermine newsfeeds. So, depending on personal preferences there are limitations to what 'information' you may be accessing. The following excerpt describes the repercussions of post-truth:

One major consideration about the shift to post-truth is the 'truth carrying capacity' of new social media and its propensity to disseminate fake news through Facebook,

Google and Twitter, and thereby to create a “bubble world” where algorithmically selected news sources simply reinforce existing prejudices thus compromising the capacity for moral thinking. (Peters, 2017, p 564).

In the dichotomy of ‘truth’ versus ‘non-truth’ and the fact-based measure of evidence, indigenous academics have to consider whether the issue is so clear-cut for them. As Mika and Matapo further suggest “in an ontological sense, ‘truthful’ research is that which works within the full interplay of the world” (2018, p 188). So, with the limitations of post-truth articulated, I do not suggest here a return to only objective, positivist notions of truth – not a full erasure³ of subjectivity or emotion in the engagement of research, rather it is about understanding that the idea of ‘truth’ is not so clear-cut.

In both Pasifika and Samoan thinking, the nature of truth and the relationship to knowledge is not value free and universal, yet ethics processes and procedures of social and educational research in and by Pasifika seem to infer a certain universality in regards to what way researchers must engage with Pasifika people(s). Universalising protocols, practices and methods, while celebrating difference identity, religion, and culture, simply reiterate grand narratives (Braidotti, 2013). Engagement with ethics procedures (predetermined and scripted) is in itself is an example of ‘the (essentialized) truth’ carrying capacity of post-truth(isms) (Mika & Matapo, 2018). Thus, we move to the next challenge of reconceptualising ethics of knowledge production in Pasifika education research.

Why reconceptualise the ethics of knowledge production in Pasifika education research?

All research is determined by modes of knowledge production, both traditional and the new and emerging (Houkes, 2016). From a Pacific perspective, there is an encroaching erosion of traditional knowledge due to various factors, the demise of elders, change in community ventures such as traditional art practices and differences in daily life events (Arts Council of New Zealand *Toi Aotearoa*, 2009; Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009). Engagement in Pacific research, predominantly bioethical research has proven problematic when Western ethical frameworks are applied to local Pacific communities, as Pacific knowledge production is situated not only in human relations but is conceptualised in, and with, the world (Du Plessis & Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2009). There is a connectedness to all things that rupture linear notions of spatiotemporality and *life*, which evokes a re-imagining of human ethics that has an affinity with both the animate and inanimate. Shifting towards Pasifika education research, research engagement presents similar conflicts as historically research with Pacific peoples have been framed within Western philosophy and discourses. In a response to such tensions, Pasifika scholars have developed the Pasifika education research guidelines. The Pasifika research guidelines indicate the universalising effects of dominant economic and educational structures that continue to marginalise Pacific modes of knowledge production, hence the significance of reclaiming research processes that are conducive to Pasifika ways of being and knowing.

In contesting, Westernised universal notions of values, beliefs and moral thinking that may be present in Pasifika research, as a Pasifika researcher I would also hope that Pacific values and beliefs systems are approached with such rigour and analysis, from within a Pacific onto-epistemological critique. I am reminded of the words of Associate Professor Kabini Sanga in his talking story at the recent New Zealand Association Research in Education Pasifika symposium (2017) where he highlighted concerns regarding cultural practices and the impact upon dignity. His open and honest critique from within a cultural worldview reminds us as researchers, that cultural constructs and knowledge production have limitations and should not always be taken as incontestable ‘truths’.

³ Derrida’s philosophical work engages in a post-structural critique of language and language signifier(s), particularly the inadequacies of signifier creating definitive meaning in language. When a concept or word is under erasure, it attempts to change it or rub it out while retaining it’s original concept or meaning (Anderson, 2012).

Presently the Pasifika Education Plan (PEP) is under review. The discourse associated with the PEP continues to impose a deficit view of Pasifika participation in education, particularly in contrasting ‘success’ in the English language, rather than Pasifika languages. The New Zealand Ministry of Education has sanctioned four iterations of the PEP spanning over seventeen years (2001-2005, 2006-2010, 2009-2012 *revised*, 2013-2017). Pasifika academics, advocates and leaders are resisting Western notions of success by articulating a Pasifika holistic understanding of success in the current review of the PEP to be launched later in 2018. The discourse that frames much of the measures of Pasifika in education is deeply entrenched in Western ideology, from participation and retention, assessment and completion. Why is this consideration of the historical genesis of PEP important to bring into this discussion of post-truth?

The PEP includes a set of generic Pacific values in an attempt to foster culturally responsive practice in the application of PEP strategies in all education sectors. These values are also evident in the Pasifika Education Research Guidelines published in 2001 (Anae, Coxon, Finau, Mara, Wendt-Samu, & Finau, 2001). These Pasifika values underpin moral thinking and ways of being ‘in-and-with’ Pasifika peoples in education and research, however the very nature of what these values represent remain uncontested. It seems as though the application of values has taken precedence in pedagogy, research and engagement in Pasifika education as a method of being ‘responsive’ to Pasifika ways of knowing and being. The Pasifika education research guidelines state:

The role of Pacific research is primarily not only to identify and promote a Pacific world view, which should begin by identifying Pacific values...but complementary to these is the need to also interrogate the assumptions that underpin western structures and institutions that we as Pacific peoples have adopted without much questioning. But in replacing these with Pacific systems, structures and institutions which are appropriate to Pacific contexts, the values which should underpin these uniquely Pacific structures should be clearly identified and understood (Anae et al, 2001, p 7).

As Pasifika researchers, engagement with Pacific methodologies also requires critique, which includes calling into question the ethics of cultural knowledge constructs and Pacific histories that have cut across transversal lines of both traditional and colonial ways of thinking (Matapo, 2016). As presented in the PEP and Pasifika education research guidelines there is a blending of Christianity with cultural values, demonstrating that notions of moral subjectivity and of ‘truth’ are not so clear-cut. Indigenous research experts, Spivak (1999) and Smith (2012) are sceptical of the post-colonial, as indigenous and Western histories subsist as irreducible entities. Clifford (2013) reiterates this point stating:

We work among irreconcilable antinomies, entering the paradoxes and tensions of our historical moment with agendas that are positioned and relational, pushing against, while drawing on, partial perspectives. The result is a more realistic, multiscaled, dialogical and unfinished, understanding of contemporary sociocultural worlds (Clifford, 2013, p 45).

Reconceptualising ‘values’ in values-based Pasifika education research

If researchers in Pasifika education are encouraged to embody notions of moral agency centered upon transcendental ideals (that of Christianity) then the outcomes of research may risk closing off opportunities for difference and becoming. Values are essentially teleological, in that they determine socially acceptable behaviour – i.e. how one might act in the research process. The centering of humanist values in research brings its own limitations when juxtaposed with Pacific indigenous knowledge (Matapo, 2016). As researchers in Pasifika education, we have to ask, how have we arrived at such values presented in Pasifika methodologies and where do these values take us? The world is not particularly acknowledged as a valid contributor to the research process or its outcome. Thus, the task for Pasifika researchers is to begin the task of reconceptualising research ‘with-the-world’

(animate and inanimate) as a fully present and privileged self in a post-truth era (Mika & Matapo, 2018).

Like the entangling⁴ of roots... a story within a story emerges

Figure 1. Twisted entangled roots – sidewalk New Caledonia



As a 2017 attendee of the Oceania Comparative and International Education Society (OCIES) Conference in New Caledonia, I had the opportunity to talanoa regarding my research in Pasifika education. Walking along the sidewalk with a fellow Samoan scholar I was taken by the entangled roots growing by the sidewalk. With my phone in hand, I snapped this image, sensing the intricacies and tenacity this plant endures along the harsh conditions of the coastline. Later, during the conference I had the honour of learning from a Kanak knowledge custodian at the Jean-Marie Tjibaou cultural centre, who explained the very significance of this root system in Kanak culture. The entangled roots are the ancestors reaching up, sprouting various connections, living and breathing in soil generating and sustaining new life. From this experience, I have come

to ask... How do notions of truth, when situated in specific cultural knowledge paradigms reconstitute the human subject with other-than-human? Here, this example expresses a direct intra-action⁵ of the human-subject with the world.

Evoking indigenous wisdom: Confronting post-truth

My hope for my doctoral study is to approach research engagement and ethics grounded in the idea of ‘truth’ as ontologically situated with/in various forms of indigenous wisdom rather than ideals of universality too often accepted in this post-truth era. His Highness Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi Efi (Samoan knowledge custodian and the former head of state of Samoa) explains the concept of *tofa sa’ili* which is an ongoing human pursuit for knowledge (Tui Atua, 2009). The concept of *Tofa sa’ili* when applied to research raises questions of harmony between human and non-human life, ethics for humanity and the capacity to think beyond human comprehension (human spirit). This example of wisdom presents an unfolding (past, present, future) as all life (human and non-human) are genealogically connected. Coming to know self in relation to others, past and present, the cosmos, the land, seas and skies, is something done within a collective that understands itself as part of a greater whole (Meyer 2014). In calling upon wisdom from a Samoan-Pasifika worldview and contesting post-truths by way of present-past thinking collective, I express this poem.

⁴ Deleuze and Guattari’s (1987) philosophical concept of rhizome generate new and emerging formations that are heterogenous and interrelated thus entangled (in contrast to arborescent formations that privilege formulaic structures of logic). For Barad (2007) entanglement engages in the philosophy of a new materialist ontology, that being in existence is not an individual affair, rather “...individuals emerge through and as part of their entangled inter-relating” (p ix).

⁵ Intra-action is new materialist concept developed by Barad (2007). The concept of intra-action is associated with entanglement in that it raises ontological questions of being and existence. Intra-action challenges individualist metaphysics as individuals do not pre-exist interactions. As Barad (2007) suggests “time and space...matter and meaning, come into existence” as intra-acting agencies (p ix).

My place

I was born in a place where the long white cloud,
 Clouds the division between heaven and earth.
 Where the earth meets the shores of the Pacific
 And as the earth's artilleries, the Pacific Ocean pumps life forces and flows
 The flows of the cosmos entangled in the tides of life's rhythm
 Life, from placenta to land, my feet stand grounded
 Grounded in spirit, attempting to embody present-past, as those before me,
 Past fixedness to one horizon, creating new relations to places,
 Relations to migration stories and traces
 Of journeying, navigating, star gazing, collective endeavours
 Endeavours of learning, resilience, change making
 Collective knowing with body, mind and spirit
 Knowing that belongs to earth, seas and skies
 My place, my being, collectively becoming...

(Matapo, J.).

Conclusion

Contesting post-truth(isms) in Pasifika education research requires a re-imagining of ethics and research processes, so as to engage Indigenous wisdom in being in, and with, the world. With this said, there is also significance in applying the same rigour to traditional cultural knowledge systems and broader cultural constructs from within a cultural onto-epistemological position. The separation of Pacific indigenous knowledge from the influences of colonialisation is not so clear-cut and offers new and emerging formations of being and subjectivity (Matapo, 2016). In evaluating claims of truth, Pasifika researchers must go further than dichotomous thinking, as we consider more deeply the harmony between human and non-human. In closing and as a Pasifika Samoan researcher, I draw upon this provocation given by Devine (2018) and reiterate this question, what is the point of critiquing truth-claims to right human wrongs when the world we live in is dying?

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