



# The *Talatalaga* Research Methodology: A Qualitative Research Approach

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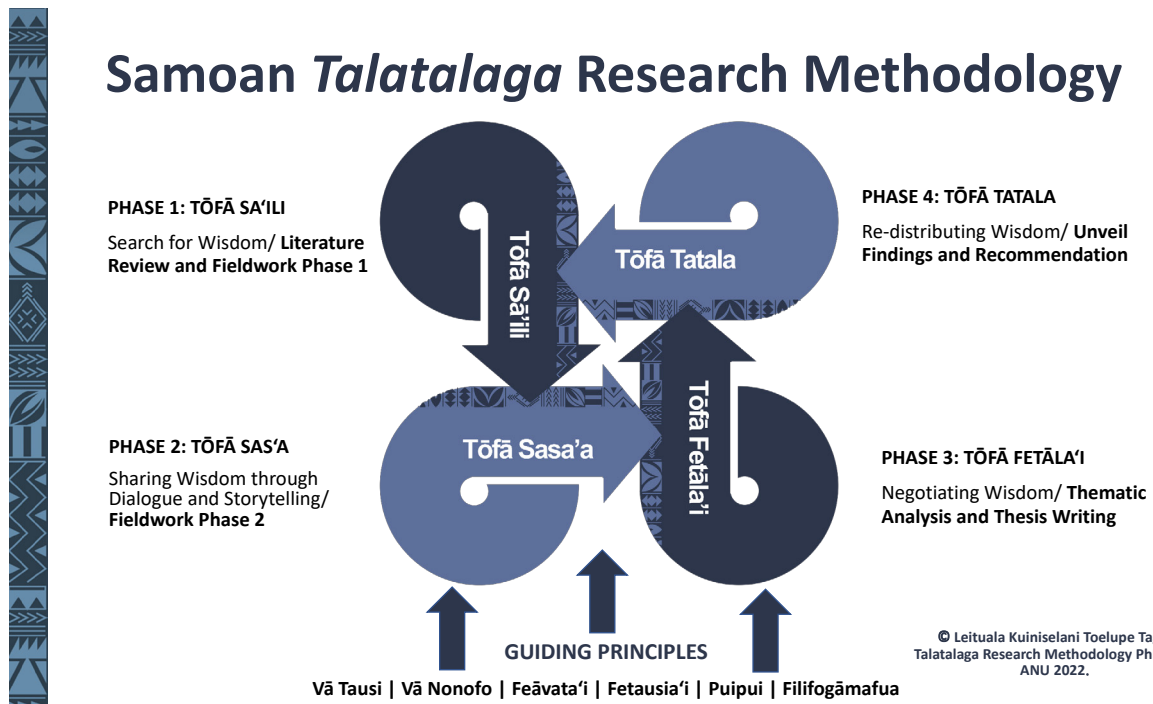
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In preparation for my doctoral research on rethinking the Boe Declaration and security in the Pacific, I developed the *Talatalaga* research methodology (Figure 1), an Indigenous qualitative research approach for my fieldwork. Through use of an Indigenous methodology, I am rethinking — and decolonising — security in the Pacific. The methodology will be used alongside the *Malu* conceptual framework (outlined in an accompanying In Brief) which ensures a gendered approach to the research. The philosophy behind the *Talatalaga* methodology encourages a disciplined attitude, builds confidence and academic credibility for Pacific researchers. The future of Indigenous Pacific research lies within developing a philosophical reorientation toward Pacific perspectives, knowledge and wisdom that have been devalued or suppressed (Helu Thaman 2003).

The development of the Samoan *Talatalaga* research methodology was inspired by my late grandfather, Tōfā Toelupe Vaitoa Si'u Toelupe, who used *talatalaga* to describe any gathering of the *aiga potopoto* (extended family) at his village of Malie in Samoa to engage in deeper analysis of issues and what lies beneath the surface. The root word for *talatalaga* is *tala*, and *tala* means story. The word *talatala* (which is the verb) means to unravel, to disentangle, and for my research it reflects the need to take a deeper dive towards understanding what lies underneath the issues at hand.

The use of the *Talatalaga* research methodology will contribute to Indigenous advocacy that emphasises the importance of cultural context. Similar to the Kaupapa Māori methodology (Smith 1999), it places Pacific people, their values and knowledge systems at the centre, recognising the importance of representing Pacific people's perspectives in ways that are culturally appropriate.

Figure 1: Plan of *Talatalaga* methodology



Source: Author.

## The four key elements of the *Talatalaga* methodology

The *Talatalaga* methodology is informed by a Pacific ontology which emphasises the collective and building consensus around solutions (Vallance 2008). The sequence of the methodology can be used in diverse contexts. It must be noted that, as can be seen in Figure 1, it is an ongoing process, and the methodology can be used for any research, including academic research:

1. *Tōfā sa'ili* (search for wisdom) is translated by Tui Atua (2009) as the search for wisdom. *Tōfā sa'ili* is a figurative expression symbolising a purposeful attempt by Samoan traditional leaders, *matai*, and the elderly to deliberate on a matter to achieve a sound and reasonable decision on an issue at hand. It also denotes 'reaching out for wisdom, [alluding] to the idea that one is forever searching for knowledge' (Tui Atua 2009:183). *Tōfā sa'ili* reflects the typical initial step taken for a PhD, a literature review – searching for wisdom through existing literature.
2. *Tōfā sasa'a* (sharing wisdom through storytelling and dialogue) is a Samoan concept that refers to the practice of sharing one's wisdom and knowledge in a *talatalaga* or in any context where wisdom is sought or shared. It is applied to the process of engaging research participants in conversations and the sharing of wisdom during the data collection. It signifies the value placed on knowledge and wisdom shared and it places the emphasis on research participants' knowledge and their willingness to engage in the research. The medium of sharing applied can be both face to face and virtual.
3. *Tōfā fetala'i* (negotiating wisdom) is the skill of navigating the different perspectives, exploring options as one seeks for answers, and this is also applied in the process of a *talatalaga*. It is applied in this part of the research as one engages in data analysis and assessment and begins the writing process, towards producing a draft thesis.
4. *Tōfā tatala* (redistributing wisdom) is the final phase of the research methodology where we unveil findings and recommendations for application. *Tōfā tatala* depicts the revelation of knowledge and wisdom that was once protected and guarded, to find solutions in a *talatalaga*. It encapsulates the principles of accountability and reciprocity and the responsibility of the researcher to redistribute the wisdom that was once entrusted with them through the *tōfā sasa'a* phase, but are now gifted back to our people through the process of *tōfā tatala*.

## The five guiding principles

The guiding principles adopted for this methodology address the ethical considerations to be made throughout the research. These principles align with existing Pacific Research Guidelines and Protocols.

1. *Vā Tausi, vā nonofo* refers to the sacred, unspoken but known and revered governing rule of engagement in

a *talatalaga*, including respect for the *vā* or sacred spaces we share with others.

2. *Feavata'i* describes our responsibility to respect and uphold the dignity of our research participants; the same respect will be extended to us as researchers. It speaks to our sense of humility as we are privileged to hear our people's stories.
3. *Fetausia'i* refers to compassion and reciprocity and our duty to treat the information received with care and caution and to share the information back to our people for their benefit.
4. *Puipui* refers to our accountability for each other as a collective. We are responsible for the protection of our people, and as researchers we will be held accountable for our actions.
5. *Filifogāmafua* refers to our due diligence, our duty to assess, review, and evaluate with caution and wisdom the information collected from our people.

## Conclusion

The Samoan *Talatalaga* research methodology can be replicated in any Pacific Island country, or in any context for that matter, because the key thing here is the framing. While the concepts originated in Samoa, I argue that the conceptual framing of the methodology is relevant across the Pacific, just as Samoan *talanoa* (conversation) (Fa'avae et al. 2016) is now widely used in research and in regional and global policy dialogue. The application of the concept determines its relevance and resonance, and the *Talatalaga* methodology provides the robustness and agility ensuring its replicability across countries and cultures.

## Author notes

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## Endnote

1. This is a brief overview of the methodology which will be expanded on when it is launched before or as part of the thesis completion process.

## References

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