

Relational Accountability in Indigenizing Visual Research for Participatory Communication

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Abstract

This article argues that an indigenous approach to communication research allows us to re-think academic approaches of engaging in and evaluating participatory communication research. It takes as its case study the *Komuniti Tok Piksa* project undertaken in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea. The project explores ways in which visual methods when paired with a community action approach embedded within an indigenous framework can be used to facilitate social change through meaningful participation. It involves communities to narrate their experiences in regard to HIV and AIDS and assists them in designing and recording their own messages. Local researchers are trained in using visual tools to facilitate this engagement with the communities.

Keywords

indigenous research, visual methods, participatory communication, Papua New Guinea, HIV/AIDS

Introduction

This article attempts to re-focus the discussion about participatory communication by examining elements of an indigenous approach to research and practice. It is based on a larger research project undertaken in Papua New Guinea (PNG), *Komuniti Tok Piksa* (KTP), which sought to explore the use of visual and creative methodologies in HIV prevention. The research was guided by an indigenous (Melanesian) approach and developed HIV prevention material by exploring and capturing local narratives. This article focuses on one key part of the project responding to the question on how local narratives and indigenous knowledge can be incorporated most significantly in researching and designing strategies for social issues in a specific socio-cultural context.

KTP put emphasis on building relationships and entering reciprocal spaces of exchange between researchers and research participants. Approaches and frameworks were negotiated, developed, and re-configured by the various groups and communities involved. This moves the focus of discussion to the relational accountability of the researcher and his or her ability to negotiate a space where various levels of participation emerge. Relational accountability becomes thus an indicator for ethical research practice.

The results of the KTP project, some of which are the creative products of the groups such as films, were diverse and polymorphous. As these products continue to be presented to audiences, they open up and continue a dialogue among

community members and researchers and among communities themselves. The KTP project has been considered a successful project by funders, communities, and wider audiences due to the high identification level and community ownership that was maintained throughout the creative production process from conceptualization to production, postproduction, and distribution (Thomas et al., 2012).

The case study discussed in this article demonstrates the use of an indigenous approach to visual research in developing communication for social change research strategies. Although the study can be situated within the wider field of health communication and approaches such as community-based participatory research (CBPR; Blumenthal, 2011; Rhodes et al., 2012), the focus of this article is on exploring the way participatory action research (PAR) and visual research interact within an indigenous research approach. The active engagement of community members in becoming active researchers on the project is assessed within the facilitation of media technologies that are being used as tools for self-reflection and self-representation. Here the potential of

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participatory research for community action emerges. Within and through these media, the relationship between facilitator and researcher and the various levels of “research data” that emerge are captured allowing us to consider how local narratives and indigenous knowledge can be incorporated in researching and designing strategies for HIV prevention in a specific socio-cultural context. By involving indigenous ways of “seeing” and “doing” throughout the research process, this article presents an innovative framework for undertaking participatory communication research.

To contextualize the approach within the issues under examination, the article first provides a brief background to HIV and AIDS communication and presents the challenges specific to PNG. The authors then illustrate the methodological foundation for the study exploring aspects of visual research and PAR before discussing the relevant components of an indigenous research approach focusing on the concept of relational accountability. The article argues that closer attention must be paid to the relational space that is formed between researchers and researched to create impactful programs and for researchers and project implementers to be accountable for their actions while undertaking participatory communication projects.

HIV and AIDS Communication

HIV and AIDS remains a complex social issue in which a variety of communication concepts have been explored over recent years. Success stories in slowing down the spread of HIV and AIDS demonstrate that locally and regionally specific communication approaches are required. Participatory communication becomes important as it is recognized that communication must move beyond awareness. As argued by Rico Lie (2008), “awareness does not automatically lead to change” (p. 293). This is supported more generally by Gumucio-Dagron (2003):

Information alone does not generate changes, whereas communication—which implies participation, sharing of knowledge in a horizontal way, and respect for diversity and culture—is key to social change. (p. 3)

HIV and AIDS is a very personal and emotional issue. Attitudes and behaviors are embedded in social and cultural norms and are based on the situation of individuals. Behavioral patterns do not necessarily follow rational decision-making processes and are therefore hard to guide and impact (Airhihenbuwa & Obregon, 2000). These understandings are addressed in a recognized shift in HIV and AIDS communication, which foregrounds the use of local community media away from mass media campaigns, sees HIV and AIDS as more than just a health issue, and moves away from aiming at individual behavioral change to the idea of social change (Lie, 2008).

In a country, such as PNG, this shift has begun to be addressed; however, specialized and highly contextual

approaches are required. Earlier programs which focused on mass media campaigns might have been counter-productive, reinforcing fear about HIV and hence increasing discrimination and stigma against those living with HIV (see King & Lupiwa, 2009). Programs need not only deal with informing people but also with reversing some of the misconception that might have previously been created through more distant media approach.

The Challenges in PNG

According to the PNG National HIV and AIDS Strategy 2011-2015, the total number of people living with HIV was estimated at 34,100 in 2009 (NACS, 2010). The trends of the epidemic across regions of the country are not the same. In 2009, the majority of 90% of all new case reports of HIV infections were from the capital Port Moresby and all the Highland provinces (NAC, 2010) where this project has been taking place. Despite an improvement in the knowledge of patterns of the pandemic, NAC (2010) notes that there is still a lack of epidemiological and behavioral data to steer the national response, specifically in planning for prevention initiatives.

The dynamics of HIV transmission in PNG are influenced by a great diversity of sexual cultures, with different values, norms, beliefs, and practices. The potential for sexual transmission of HIV is heightened by early sexual partnerships, including polygamy, extra marital sexual partnerships and inter-generational sex; the exchange of sex for cash, goods and services; low and inconsistent condom use; high levels of sexual violence and rape; mobility; and the use of penile inserts and modifications. (NAC, 2010, p. 19)

Awareness campaigns in the country have faced enormous challenges due to these reasons: diversity in cultural and traditional beliefs and modernization being chief among them. A medium that has shown some success comes through the arts in theater and television drama. People are appreciating edutainment (informative and entertaining), because it is reaching a largely illiterate population who might not have regular access to mass media (Corrigan, 2006). Furthermore, if the focus is on socio-cultural change, the intervention has to “focus on what is circulating within the social domain, what is shared within the community . . . which will not change any individual behaviour directly, but it will address the climate [and] set a frame for discussion” (Lie, 2008, p. 293).

Moving away from mass media campaigns, a couple of initiatives sought to use the arts as a means of both awareness and research, an innovating response to HIV. *VSO Tokaut AIDS Awareness Community Theatre Project* is an action research project that trialed community led theater in rural communities (Corrigan, 2006; Levy, 2008). The visual quality of theater defied language barriers as messages were played out to reflect to communities, their realities.

Similarly, the approach of *Community Conversations* has been adapted by the national AIDS Council. Dialogues are facilitated within communities to identify the driving forces of the epidemic, specific to local settings (Reid, 2010).

The success of these recent research and awareness initiatives has been in its localized approach, appropriation of technology, and valuing of community experiences and beliefs as a way of both facilitating the message creation and creation of knowledge among participants. Such approaches are reinforced in a literature review (King & Lupiwa, 2009) which showed that cultural diversities, sensitivities, and fear are delaying the success of the national response to HIV and AIDS.

KTP: Developing New Approaches of Working With Communities

KTP springs from the fundamental idea that sustainable approaches to slowing the spread of HIV and AIDS need to be developed by communities themselves to be successful. This builds on strategies employed in CBPR and community health advocacy work acknowledging the need for ethical research and practice that prioritizes community ownership and community empowerment (Blumenthal, 2011; Rasmus, 2014; Rhodes et al., 2012). Key to this approach for KTP was the establishment of relationships between communities, facilitators, and educators to develop sustainable communication channels where an ongoing dialogue is facilitated that responds to the specific challenges a community faces. To facilitate this process, KTP developed a creative research approach that seeks to involve participants actively in the creation of prevention messages that can be used to educate others in PNG.

The KTP baseline study, conducted at the beginning of the project in about 10 Highland communities, revealed a number of initial results (Thomas et al., 2012). “Standard” prevention messages are often rejected, in particular those explicit about sex or condoms. As a result of earlier mass media interventions programs that were based on scaring the population, people’s perceptions with the disease are that of death and as a disease with no cure. HIV is associated with prostitution and unfaithful sexual behavior. These factors have resulted in high stigmatization of those who are HIV positive. In addition, a large number of people in the Highlands have a lack of practical knowledge about the disease, how to prevent themselves from it, and how to look after those who are HIV positive.

In regard to awareness, people commented on the lack of involvement of those undertaking awareness in the local communities, pointing at infrequent visits, and lack or limited engagement and length of stay resulting in forgetting the message. In this, they demonstrated the missed opportunity to build on trust with local community members.

Given this feedback, it is relevant to consider the indigenous social and cultural value systems as experienced day-to-day in communities. PNG culture can be viewed within the larger region of Melanesia as a region that shares cultural commonalities, political alliances and, despite a large linguistic diversity, a common language, *Melanesian Tok Pisin*. Prominent in previous studies is that Melanesian culture is strongly based on personal relationships, and these relationships are key to any social change processes in the communities. The focal point of Melanesian societies is the community or the clan/*wantok*. *Wantok* in *Tok Pisin* (Melanesian Pidgin) means literally “One Talk,” the ones who speak the same language and, thus, share their same clan, tribe, and culture. Loyalty to one’s community often takes priority over individual preferences. Through various relationships, the community provides a “safety net.” People are taken care of, and in turn, they have a series of obligations to the community (Montovani, 1991).

KTP used the Melanesian understandings of relationships in its research and community approach. Incorporating these means grounding the approach in a Melanesian worldview and Melanesian community experience (sharing a lived experience). Research processes should focus on these experiences, representing them in data collection and analysis. Above all, research outcomes must be directed toward community benefit (Vallance, 2007). By putting a Melanesian framework as central to our inquiry, we have to put at its centre the community and relationships that emerge through engaging in the research process. Careful attention needs to be given to the way relationships are formed and the process of exchange the researcher enters. Collaboration between researcher, potentially co-researchers, and research participants becomes a necessary element. KTP researchers are themselves local or have links to these communities through their formal and informal networks (*wantok* system), enabling, thus, their entry to the communities and facilitating communication based on common background.

Knowledge must be understood in the context of relationships formed to develop a holistic understanding—relationships with people, ancestors, and the environment. Knowledge of a community could be regarded as collective memory (Thomas, 2011), common experiences that have shaped the community in the past. Being aware of this collective memory and incorporating it in research might help build bridges between the community and researchers.

To facilitate the entry into communities by the KTP team, it was important to enter with no direct agenda in mind and being open to community (Bishop, 2005). The focus was thus tuned into fulfilling a relational accountability to the team and the community (Wilson, 2008) and giving the community a right to be understood (Husband, 1996). In Melanesia, this means engaging in reciprocal relationships, a give and take, between the community and the KTP team. There must be an understanding and a will from the commu-

nity that a project such as KTP can be beneficial to the community in some way (see Vallance, 2007).

Forming such a basis for the formation of meaningful relationships is essential for HIV and AIDS communication and has often been neglected. In most cases, outsiders decide what information is displayed and what communication channels are used. In PNG, however, there is a need to understand what communication channels are most appropriate for HIV and AIDS communication. Given the strong focus on relationships and community well-being in PNG culture, KTP sought to first create a space where these communication channels could be explored and opened up.

Visual Methods: Creating Spaces for Reflection

The use of visual and creative methods with KTP can be categorized within “arts-based research” (Prosser & Loxley, 2008). Arts-based research methods emphasize the fact that

. . . people make sense of their lives through the interplay of sensory relations not accessible through discourse; words and numbers are mere proxies for their direct experiences. Textbased approaches are limited because they fail to move beyond inherent psychophysical characteristics to reveal taken-for-granted, embodied, sensorial lives. (Prosser & Loxley, 2008, p. 35)

Given the linguistic diversity in PNG and a previous focus on pamphlets and billboards as HIV and AIDS prevention strategies, arts-based methods address emotional and embodied elements of decision-making processes. Visual methodologies and arts-based inquiry, hence, focus on creating dialogical engagement. Arts-based methods aim at creating relationship and providing an “arena of exchange” for participants (Bourriaud, 2002, p. 18). Visual experiences, in particular, form a key component in our daily lives. As MacDougall (2006) argues, “visual knowledge provides one of our primary means of comprehending the experience of other people” (p. 5). Visual information stays in our memory stronger than textual information does and images connect strongly with our emotional experiences.

KTP uses a process that strengthens the idea of identification and involves the screening back of material within the community. The process of viewing one-self has been described as empowering and raising self-confidence among participants. “The act of seeing ourselves can join the links of self-observation, establishing a clear identity that may have been non-existent. Identity and self-definition are necessary prerequisites for personal empowerment” (White, 2003, p. 66). In the process of seeing ourselves, we have the opportunity to create a distant position to ourselves, reflecting on our actions. For communities, the collective watching of video material means the negotiation of shared meanings and understandings. It creates an opportunity to discuss perceptions within a group. This process becomes particularly

important within the context of HIV and AIDS which is surrounded by taboos and stigmatization. Knowledge is put out in the open, and through collective viewing, everyone is brought on the same level for discussion.

The innovative research approach within the Highlands context has provided researchers an opportunity to apply local concepts and act them out through community participation. Using creative methods, as Knowles and Cole (2008) have argued, is

part of a broader commitment to shift the dominant paradigmatic view that keeps the academy and community separated: to acknowledge the multiple dimensions that constitute and form the human condition—physical, emotional, spiritual, social, cultural—and the myriad ways of engaging in the world—oral, literal, visual, embodied. (p. 60)

Arts-based research methods are closely linked to cultural approaches to transformation and social change. Highland’s cultures are known for their capacity to express themselves creatively. The setting thus provided a unique location to explore engagement in creative research methods with communities.

Incorporating the visual approach with an understanding of Melanesian values confirms Bourriaud’s (2002) concept of relational aesthetics that conceptualizes art practice away from the “self-referentiality of modernist art,” turning instead to the way art-making builds relationships with others and with the world. Bourriaud believes that collaborative art and media making provide a space to explore these relations and our identity as it evolves through them. Here, relations, not media objects, are primary. A collective aesthetic means “our values are embedded in our physical and affective relationship with the world” (Leuthold, 1998, p. 16).

By facilitating a collaborative creative process, values and decisions can be reflected on and collectively shared by participants. This process as we indicate in this article provides an opportunity to tackle some of the driving forces of the HIV epidemic and to ignite solutions developed by the participants themselves specific to their local setting and situation.

The KTP Process: Using PAR for Social Change

The ethos behind participatory action research, involving consultation and participation processes, is not for researchers to adopt the responsibility of improving each individual’s and family’s life. Instead, if individuals, families, communities and institutions including governments are interested in improving, or could be convinced to improve, then researchers and practitioners can use participatory action research to facilitate, support and assist the parties’ own actions. (Kelman, Lewis, Gaillard, & Mercer, 2011, p. 65)

The epistemological foundations of PAR, such as being context-bound, focusing on real-life problems, seeking for

Table 1. The *Komuniti Tok Piksa* Process as Undertaken in the Ruti Community.

No	Stage	Description
1	Consent and community introduction	The local researchers first identified the community to conduct their research in. In this case, the selection was influenced by an existing relationship of the leading local researcher with this community through relatives which facilitated the entry into the group. A community introductory meeting was then held with the community and consent was gained from the community.
2	Baseline study	Observation and interviews were conducted to assess the general level of HIV and AIDS education and knowledge in the community, the way in which information is disseminated, and the particular interests of the community.
3	Community profile and communicative ecology	As part of creating a comprehensive profile of the community and its members, the research teams created a profile of the community and facilitated the drawing of their communicative ecology map which along with the baseline formed the basis of knowledge and information dissemination patterns.
4	Review research topics and debrief	Having iteratively revised the research topics to be inclusive of community perspectives and needs, the researchers revised and planned the next stage. They incorporated relevant community members, as the specifics of the research were finalized.
5	Recording or creation	The research team, supervised by the principal researcher, recorded community narratives or facilitated, where appropriate, creative workshops. For example, some communities produced a film based on a dramatized story, and others created a song.
6	Downloading and editing	The filmed data were then digitized and edited on-site, involving participants.
7	Screening or performing	Once the product was prepared, the community was invited for a collective viewing. The researchers together with the immediate participants then presented their artistic creations to the community.
8	Reflection, collective viewing, and discussion	Following the screening, the researchers facilitated community discussion focusing on the issues raised by the visual outcome. Open discussion about HIV and AIDS relevant to the community was stimulated.

diversity and trans-disciplinarily (Bodorkos & Pataki, 2009), resonated with the nature and aims of this project. And as PAR's approach highlights, research subjects in this project have been full participatory partners in the work of trying to address the HIV/AIDS issue; the action to address this issue arose from this collaborative work; and research was produced throughout this process (Wisner, Stea, & Kruks, 1991).

Action research starts "from an orientation of change *with* others" rather than the change *of* others (Reason & Bradbury, 2008, p. 1). Participants, researchers, and community members in this case engaged in processes of cyclic action from observing, reflecting, planning, and action. The situational characteristic of action research allows for the evaluation of individual and community transformations, revealing how knowledge is processed and constantly (re)formulated within the discourse of culture (see Gegeo & Gegeo-Watson, 2002). In this case, visual analysis and ethnographic techniques have been used to engage community members in interpreting interviews and behaviors. Community interpretations were workshopped with local researchers and participants through reflexive visual analysis. Video ethnography is increasingly recognized as an effective and accessible methodology, particularly in its ability to create dialogical approaches to change (Iedema, Long, Forsyth, & Lee, 2006).

The PAR cycle (observe-reflect-plan-act) was activated in consultation with the participant community and other

members. Following initial observation, a baseline study, and community reflection and discussion, a specific set of actions was designed. This set of actions was then realized, being iteratively reflected on and revised as the research progresses and as the community was given opportunities to comment and respond. The main steps in the research process included the eight stages mentioned in Table 1.

The engagement in visual and filmmaking processes expanded the action research framework. Due to the large amount of visual data collected, the research facilitators underwent a selection process of the material that was then incorporated in feedback sessions with the communities. Reflection of the recorded material provided an additional level of validation of the analysis of the data and served as a trigger for dialogue among participants (Figure 1).

By using visual tools and looking back at them, researchers as well as community members entered a process of participation, observation, filming, selection, reflection, and positive change (see Iedema & Merrick, 2008). Through its explorative nature, the project stayed open to adopting the most effective and culturally appropriate processes. In a country with strong oral traditions, linguistic diversity, and high illiteracy rate, visual methods were tested and proved to be appropriate in engaging communities in research and community action practices. Through their potentially higher level of engagement, research results are more likely to benefit these communities.



Figure 1. Ruti youth reviewing and discussing the visual material.

An Indigenous Approach to Visual Research and Practice

In the first phase of KTP, researcher teams traveled to 10 Highlands communities to establish projects. The open approach meant that in each community, the creative processes varied. The level of participation was determined by the communities, whether they contribute to the visual products by being interviewed or telling their own stories or actively participating in taking pictures.

Prioritizing and Valuing Relationships

In trying to contribute to a growing body of understanding of indigenous research approaches in PNG, the project sought to open up a space where Papua New Guinean researchers could examine their own understanding of what it meant to do “indigenous research.” This meant to reflect not only on the community’s practices and actions but also on their own understandings and learning.

As I went through this research processes, I came to realise that an indigenous approach was everyday in action, most times unconsciously activated. The different approaches were helpful in shaping my view of the KTP approach, making me link the concepts to things I recognized in my life. Reading other people’s work however did not give me a sense of how I could do my own research using an indigenous research approach. (Eggs, reflections from her MA thesis on the project, 2011)

The indigenous research paradigm, especially from a Melanesian research approach, accepts relationships as fundamental to the experience (Mel, 2002). The indigenous researcher is also a stakeholder in the relationship web and thus obliged to maintain it, taking the role of the researcher to another level, this of a “critical, reflexive, stakeholder researcher.” The researcher’s relationship to the community needs to be clear and significant enough to make you a

stakeholder to the relationship, and it must be openly acknowledged by members of the community:

Joys came here through a connection; you young people sitting here know this. She came and slept in my house and worked with the youths and you showed your film in other communities. I am very happy about this. (Gigau, Closing comments, January 28, 2011, Ruti village)

Local researchers experienced several challenges in the process of conceptualizing the project, their participation during the process of entering the communities, establishing relationships in regard to this project, and defining their role as facilitators, co-researchers, and members of the community. In this process, they had to leave aside prior knowledge of research methodologies that were not applicable within the context of this research project.

The need for reflection on their personal experiences and knowledge prior to this project and how they relate to their role in the project was an important process for the local researchers. An indigenous research approach is an encirclement of ontology, epistemology, axiology, and methodology, where individual cultural groups process and create knowledge in everyday interactions (Gegeo & Gegeo-Watson, 2001; Vallance, 2007; Wilson, 2008). Each cultural group has values that underpin its worldview, and the local researchers needed to develop an awareness of their worldview and the impact it had on creating knowledge with the communities during the project process. Eggs developed her own model in an effort to make sense what indigenous means in the research process with communities (Figure 2).

In the above diagram, the outer circles represent everyday community encounters, issues, events Eggs experienced. These are all related, not compartmentalized, flowing one into another in day-to-day activities. The inner circles represent community values, forming a foundation for ethical conducts. The outer and inner circles are not exhaustive and dependant on the community’s activities and engagements. At the centre is the community, and its well-being is achieved through experiences, transitions, resolutions, and awareness of things both natural and supernatural (spiritual). Negotiation was an important component of the research experience, and knowledge of the community’s values and expectations was imperative. With the tensions, for instance, around project benefits, it was important that the researcher continued to negotiate through dialogue, reasserting the value of monetary benefit as a sub-value compared with *gutpela sindaun* (*Tok Pisin* for well-being) and its importance of maintaining community relationships. Part of this ongoing negotiation was her engagement in reciprocity, that is, sharing of food or kill of a pig to say thank you.

Relational Accountability as Process and Ethics

Working with communities requires an ongoing negotiation process of relationships including acquiring consent. Ignoring



Figure 2. Community themes relevant to an indigenous research approach (Eggs, 2011).

relational conflicts or harmonies that exist in a community would certainly have a direct impact on the researcher's relationship with the community. Relationships and accountability to these relationships became an important part of the negotiation process where transparency and openness were key elements. Wilson (2008) affirms relational accountability as a principle of researching indigenous communities. It was paramount that the researcher maintained a good relationship with the community, for their family's, the participants', and the project's sake. Jones, Crengle, and McCreanor (2006) note the importance of relationships in the Maori research process.

A critical aspect of the research process has been *whakawhanaungatanga*: allowing time and space to establish relationships. The dynamics of *whanaungatanga* are critical in determining participation in research and negotiating access to communities. (Edwards et al., 2005, as cited in Jones et al., 2006, p. 9)

This extends to what the authors say is an embodiment of the new relationship (between researchers and researched) beginning with "rituals of encounter, informed consent and ability to opt out of the project and appropriate exit procedures" (Jones et al., 2006, pp. 9-10). Some of the advocates of indigenous research such as Bishop (1998) and Smith (1999) write that research in indigenous communities using Western epistemologies fail if its purpose is to improve conditions of indigenous communities, instead of enabling the communities to seek their own answers. Respecting relationships and negotiating them around benefits that outweigh monetary rewards encourages understanding and acceptance of the project and its contribution to the community's well being. A Melanesian epistemology is embedded in the relationships that are formed and from which knowledge of the world is acquired.

In these communities, there was an intricate network of social and family relationships that helped to ensure survival of the

group through interdependence and cooperation. People did not define themselves in terms of their individuality, but in terms of group affiliation. Basic to their thinking and knowing was mutuality, not separateness. (Mel, 2002, p. 3)

Relationships are hard to measure and quantify, but everyday expressions and ceremonial/symbolic gestures embodies the relationships we have with one another. Negotiating these relationships for the project included ongoing interactions between participants and the researcher and communication with them, about them as individuals and community members and about the project. This enabled the researcher to talk to participants about their uncertainties (i.e., money) and plan for the future. The ongoing dialogue, including simple acts of communication, such as wishing goodnight over the phone, added value to the relationship. The youth participants of the Ruti village refer to Eggins as “sister” even after the project’s ending.

Negotiation with the wider community was through a combination of occurrences. In Eggins’s case, following the initial screening in Ruti village, people began to understand what the project was about. This became the focus of negotiating the value of community’s participation and the project’s continuity. As we dialogued after the screening, viewers appreciated the visual, talking about its use as a tool for preserving community images and traditional cultures.

On behalf of the community, I’d like to say thank you for doing this. You came and got the youths involved in this drama film and after watching it, we in this small community like it and we are happy with you. (Viewer 6, Ruti screening, October 2010)

Wilson (2008) writes that an indigenous research paradigm is when “the axiology and methodology are based upon maintaining accountability to these relationships” (p. 71). Mantovani (1984) describes it in a different way: referring to relationships (in general) making a community connected to each other in a web of interrelatedness, whether it be as friends (positive relationships) or as enemies who pose a threat to the literal sense of an end to life. Eggins’s role as a researcher/student/facilitator was clear to the participant youths and community. But it was her connection to a family (her aunt in this case) in Ruti that strengthened her position. The community’s knowledge of her family ties has made her status a bit more than just researcher/student/facilitator. It is a pre-set foundation that allows her to be a firm stakeholder in that relationship.

The relationships built on and forged are vital to the project as well as the research process, where a space is created for negotiation. The continued dialogue that she maintained as a researcher kept the relationship going and the doors open for collaborative work. It is this relationship that makes Eggins a stakeholder in the experiences that unfold, thus holding her accountable. The relationship thus transcends its

transactional character and enters a reciprocal long-lasting phase where all parties are equally accountable.

The value of “community” is surface-value because community has always been the way Melanesian have experienced a core value—being *life* translating to *gutpela sindaun* in Melanesian Pidgin for lack of terminology translation (Mantovani, 1984).

. . . the function of community is biological survival, emotional survival, meaning, all the facets that are embodied in the word “life.” Life is not only biological existence; it is health, wealth, well-being, good relationships, security, prestige, strength, etc. The community has been experienced as the “only way to such” “life,” and so it comes to share in the “absoluteness” of “life.” (Mantovani, 1984, p. 201)

Mantovani (1984) offers that relationships, with ancestors, within community, to other communities, to the total environment, and exchange as pivotal to the interpretations of *life* within community. In research endeavors, this might be described as an embodiment of the new relationship (between researchers and researched) beginning with “rituals of encounter, informed consent and ability to opt out of the project and appropriate exit procedures” (Jones et al., 2006, pp. 9-10).

Engaging with the community in a meaningful way is very important as all interactions have underlining meanings that intricately connect everyone and everything in the microcosm of these Highland’s communities. In linking such a research approach to issues like HIV and AIDS, and finding ways of potentially making awareness effective, both researcher and community must be collaborative agents of change, understanding how a community in transition values *gutpela sindaun* and especially how they interpret it. The technology and all it entails can become a tool for opening a space for communication for social change and participatory communication.

When HIV/AIDS awareness groups come to the village they just come and talk and go away and people do not get their message. When KTP came into the community we thought that they were here to do their research so we took them as another awareness group. But now we see what they were here for and we were part of the film that they made and it’s very good for the community to know more about HIV/AIDS . . . This film that we have made is very good and it is powerful. The children can learn from it when they grow up so I am very happy. (Older man, Mu Community in the Simbu Province quoted in Thomas et al., 2012)

Refocusing the researcher’s actions on his or her relational accountability introduces a new perspective into the research process. This approach also opens up a space for creative collaboration. Once trust has been built in the community and consent has been obtained for the participants to take part in the research, a creative process begins. The building of the

relationships provides a space for creative collaboration. Hence, certain groups within the participating communities came forward with their ideas in regard to films, photography, and music.

Creative collaborations bring in other aspects of this approach such as relational aesthetics and how reflection, feedback, and dialogue result in reciprocity that need to be explored in their own merit. In regard to research in indigenous communities, there is a need to understand relational accountability as foundational for any intervention undertaken to ensure active participation of communities throughout the process.

Conclusion

Previous HIV and AIDS prevention campaigns in PNG have lacked an understanding of local narratives and processes. The KTP project was designed to strengthen the level of community ownership and identification in HIV prevention materials to create a higher level of effectiveness of awareness campaigns. To achieve this, KTP carefully reviewed and managed researchers' relationships with community members. The project employed concepts of an indigenous research approach focusing on relational accountability and reciprocity to ensure that the participation by communities was maintained. This article has presented key points in that process by reviewing the researchers' and community experiences. It has argued that relational accountability should be carefully examined as a key component in any community intervention.

Using visual approaches to research and community practice, in particular video, has presented itself as an appropriate tool to exchange and communicate ideas and knowledge about HIV and AIDS in PNG communities. Following indigenous principles can provide a more holistic approach to communication, incorporating embedded cultural practices, norms, and everyday negotiations into the identified issues in regard to HIV and AIDS. The involvement of the community members in the creation of such material was crucial in making it relevant to their specific situation and in creating a space for dialogue among others in the community.

Visual communication as a research tool can build on existing community communication structures and serve as a catalyst for sharing indigenous understandings. Communities feel valued when their ideas are recorded. The open approach to let the participants guide the creative process allowed the researchers to better understand community perceptions including scenarios of risky behavior. The viewing of the Ruti film drama stimulated important community discussion among audiences. The product therefore serves as a stimulator within the local context.

Involving and training local researchers was a key component of KTP's approach. Existing community relationships were utilized and expanded throughout the project. This was not without challenges, and ongoing negotiations

evolved around managing expectations from the communities, researchers, and funding bodies. Five years after the project started, the audio-visual materials continue to be distributed in PNG and the wider Pacific, and the research team continues to negotiate relationships with community members who are involved in the distribution of the material.

The article has argued that for HIV/AIDS communication to be successful, appropriate communication channels need to be opened up. This begins with the way connections to members of the community are established and how building trusting-relationships with participants can provide access to local narratives. This can be achieved by following indigenous approaches to research and media practices prioritizing relational accountability of researchers and participants. Here, the goal has been to mobilize the community to participate and debate their views and for them to take ownership of HIV messages and solutions to the HIV epidemic. Understanding participatory communication from a relational perspective can assist researchers to frame understandings of participation and engages them in an ethical process reviewing their own involvement with the community.

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