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Research ethics and international and cross-cultural research: Fiji and Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

There are significant challenges associated with conducting research with a researcher from another institution, in another country or with another culture, and even more challenges when all three factors apply. This paper critically appraises the complexities of a cross-cultural, international, and collaborative research project, and identifies the challenges for the researchers and their organisations, and the ways in which these were managed. It evaluates the process of obtaining ethics approval from two organisations in Aotearoa New Zealand and Fiji. The paper presents the perspectives of both the researchers and the organisations providing ethics approval. There is often concern that research conducted by someone from a ‘global north’ country (here, Aotearoa New Zealand) in a ‘global south’ country (here, Fiji) will have power asymmetries, and that research will disadvantage the researched community, or not provide any benefit back to them; this project directly addressed these concerns. The research outputs, and research outcomes and impact, need to be considered at the research design stage to ensure they are appropriate for the community in which the research is being conducted. While organisations may be reluctant to approve research conducted in a different culture and country, the risks can be managed and mitigated.

Keywords: research ethics; ethical review; cross-cultural research; collaborative research; research ethics committees

7186 words excluding references

Introduction

This paper critically evaluates the process of conducting an international, cross-cultural, and co-designed research project and the ethics processes associated with the project.

The project involved researchers from two different countries and cultures (Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ) and Fiji), and from two different academic institutions and their research ethics committees.

Conducting research in different cultural contexts, and in ways that are ethical and appropriate for those contexts, can be challenging. There may be different practices and worldviews, differences in sociocultural norms, power asymmetries, and different understandings of research ethics and principles (Durham, 2014). On the other hand, international and cross-cultural partnerships can also provide more nuanced research and expand the understanding of everyone involved (researchers, participants, and ethics committees). When research includes human participants, it is important to ensure that projects minimise risk, ensure participants maintain autonomy, and benefit from the research. Respect and cultural integrity (the practice of respecting the traditions of other cultures) are key. This extends to project design, respecting the contributions of participants, and ensuring a meaningful outcome for local communities.

Rather than reporting the results of the research project, this paper explores the process of gaining ethics approval. It evaluates the considerations for both the co-researchers and the research ethics committees of approving an international, cross-cultural research project. It considers the power asymmetries that exist where one researcher is from a global north country (here, New Zealand) and the other from a global south country (here, Fiji) for researcher collaboration and co-design, and the knowledge needed by the ethics committees to evaluate cross-cultural research projects.

The paper draws conclusions about the effectiveness of the ethics process and how research ethics committees can best support complex and cross-cultural research projects.

The authors of the paper are the research manager of the NZ institution (who was a Research Committee member in 2022), and the NZ and Fijian co-researchers who conducted the research project (a lecturer and a librarian, respectively). The key question is: How effective were the ethics reviews for this project? Effective is defined

here as meeting the needs of the co-researchers, ensuring research integrity, minimise participant and researcher risk, and ensuring culturally appropriate research.

The research project is titled ‘The health and viability of special libraries in Fiji in the twenty-first century’. The research was conducted through interviews with Fijian special librarians done jointly and in person by the co-researchers.

The paper provides a brief background of the national environment and culture in Fiji and an overview of relevant literature. It explains the ethics processes in the NZ and Fijian institutions, and the challenges for the committees and the co-researchers. It considers the benefits of the research for the Fijian library community, presents the lessons learned about the process, and ends with some recommendations for improving ethics review in cross-cultural research.

Fijian cultural context

Pacific countries ... are not “small and fragile islands, ... but large oceanic countries and territories, custodians of nearly 20% of the earth’s surface”. Show some respect. (Pagani, quoting former Pacific Island Forum Secretary General Dame Meg Taylor, 2023)

Fiji is a diverse multicultural society, with a history of racial violence that predates independence. Indians first began coming to Fiji in the 1880s as indentured labourers. At first the numbers were insignificant (0.5% of the population in the 1881 Census), but by 1946 Indo-Fijians outnumbered the indigenous Fijians (iTaukei), with 46.4% Indo-Fijians compared with 45.5% iTaukei (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012). Concerns about this imbalance caused growing dissatisfaction among iTaukei and culminated in ethnic riots in 1960 (West, 1960).

The first coup in 1987, following an election that resulted in an Indo-Fijian dominated government, included rioting against Indo-Fijians and their businesses (Kristoff, 1987). Since then, it has been estimated that 70,000 Indo-Fijians emigrated between 1987 and 1990—making up 90% of all emigrants from Fiji (Gani, 2000). The 2012 Census shows that iTaukei now make up 62.8% of the population, while Indo-Fijians have dropped to 32.7%. The remaining 4.5% reflects the diverse nature of Fiji and is made up of many peoples, including Chinese, Europeans, Banabans, Rotumans, Solomon Islanders, Samoans, Tongans, Tuvaluans, and those from Papua New Guinea (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2012).

The December 2006 coup under military commander Voreqe Bainimarama was aimed at resetting previous ethnic divisions (Conciliation Resources, n.d.). However, the Fijian Government changed again in 2023, and the controversies continue. With this troubled history, care is required when talking of ethnicity, language, religion, and culture; there is no single 'Fijian culture'.

The delicacy of cultural interactions is also recognised by the Fijian institution that approved the research application. The institution's human ethics handbook makes it clear that researchers unfamiliar with Pacific cultures should seek advice and understand the impact of their own background beliefs and values.

Research participants in Fiji

While Pacific leaders treasure diversity in their culture and religious beliefs, locals are not always able to express their views on the workplace openly, due to a fear of breaching organisational policies and procedures, or through concern that this may lead to reputational risk for their organisation. Many organisations have a communications office or public relations personnel who are authorised to speak on behalf of the organisation but may not know much about a library's services and processes.

Additionally, three-year renewable contracts are the norm within the Fijian government and academic institutions, which makes employees intrinsically vulnerable. Staff are potentially at risk if they speak freely and speaking on topics such as budget limitations (an interest for this research project) is not appreciated by management.

There is also high staff turnover within special libraries in Fiji. This is partly due to differing salaries for library assistants in different corporate, government and academic institutions. Some institutions provide better professional development opportunities and financial support for academic study. Fiji also continues to have high levels of emigration, and staff may leave to pursue opportunities overseas. Newer staff may lack organisational knowledge and be unable to answer questions for this reason. All research participants sought approval from management to take part in the research. Copies of the information sheet and interview questions were provided in advance to facilitate this approval. Staff in one organisation expressed initial enthusiasm but withdrew following management refusal.

These issues required consideration in the development of the research, when approaching participants for an interview, and while the research was underway. It was therefore very important to give interview participants the right to delete any content they subsequently regretted sharing.

Literature review

Ethics in research is extensive, complicated, and warrant deep and thoughtful discussion. (De Wet, 2010, p. 303)

The literature discussing ethics and ethical review for research is vast. We briefly scope aspects relating to research ethics committees (aka institutional review boards) and ethical review. Most general texts on research include chapters about ethics (e.g.,

Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Hammond & Wellington, 2021; Marshall & Rossman, 2011; Pickard, 2013), while works such as Denzin, Lincoln, and Smith's (2008) *Handbook of Critical and Indigenous Methodologies* (2008) provide an extensive overview of a diverse range of methodologies.

The avoidance of research misconduct, the minimisation of harm, and the promotion of research integrity are key to ethics review, along with (in the social sciences in particular) supporting individual researchers and projects to develop and use appropriate methodologies and practices (Kennedy et al., 2023). While research into clinical research ethics predominates, unsurprisingly, since medical research is generally considered the origin of ethics review (Lees, Waters & Godbold, 2021), this is of less direct relevance to the current paper, which deals with social science qualitative research. Carniel et al. (2023) and Louw and Delpont (2006) consider the challenges of developing effective research ethics committees in the social sciences and humanities in the light of this strong medical background, and De Wet's (2010) research analyses the importance of ethical appraisal in the social sciences. There is debate about whether the ethical review process is effective or whether it puts unnecessary barriers in the way of researchers, with institutions focusing more on risk management than research ethics. Lees, Waters and Godbold (2021), in their discussion of ethical review and tertiary educational research, note that there is no agreement on the kind of metrics that could measure the work of ethics review, although different instruments are in use in different countries. Gray et al. (2017) ask whether research ethics guidelines are 'culturally competent' in their exploration of how well these work for Indigenous groups in New Zealand, Canada, and Australia.

Wefers et al. (2023) explore the ethics of their cross-cultural research project and the problem with power asymmetries, especially in a global north/global south

context, which characterise cross-cultural research and are ‘potentially unethical’ (p. 234). They point out that:

Another unique challenge is that researchers and the researched in cross-cultural studies typically differ in cultural socialization, namely in their cultural values and norms. Yet, a deep understanding of and respect for the culture is a prerequisite for ethical conduct because universal ethical guidelines need to be translated in a culture-sensitive way. (Wefers et al., 2023, p. 234)

Benatar (2002) identifies informed consent and universal standards as of most concern in research about research ethics in developing countries. Durham’s (2014) analysis of her (Australian) institution’s ethics process supports this, highlighting the fixed notions of the institution vs. the complex and non-traditional context of her research (unexploded ordinance in South-East Asia). She identifies tension between the constraints imposed by western notions of the research (e.g., confidentiality) vs. cultural notions of a more collectivist society where she was the guest. Gray et al. (2017) argue that ‘a trustworthy relationship between subject and researcher is central to ethical research, and that the absence of a trustworthy relationship increases the likelihood of harm to the subject’ (p. 25).

Kwame and Petrucka (2024) examine the ‘ethical dilemmas in cross-national qualitative research’ (Canada and Ghana), noting that this is not a straightforward process and even less so when there are two ethics committees involved. They emphasise that ‘it became apparent that consent and its documentation can have cultural implications in different settings’ (Abstract) and that ‘REBs [research ethics boards] must exercise reflexivity in their protocol review’ (‘Implications for cross-national qualitative research’ section). Broesch et al. (2020, p. 3) also make this point, noting, for example, that signing a standard consent form may make the research appear more

significant than it really is if participants usual experience of signing is in legal, medical, and political contexts. Likewise, Kwame and Petrucka (2024) note that in parts of Ghana (the site of Kwame's research), an oral consent carries more weight than signing; consequently, 'REB [research ethics board] members should be aware of these cultural variabilities' ('Implications for cross-national qualitative research' section).

Cross-cultural research in library and information studies (LIS) includes research conducted within a country of a particular group of people who are not the same culture as the researcher (e.g., Haines, 2021; Haines, Du, & Trevorrow, 2018) as well as within another country (e.g., Gaston, 2014; Gaston, Dorner & Johnstone, 2015), and including research conducted, like Kwame's (Kwame & Petrucka, 2024), from a global north university in the researcher's home country in the global south (e.g., Boamah, 2014; Pham, 2016). Lilley (2018) discusses the methodologies for conducting research in an Indigenous context from a LIS perspective and Villagran (2022) offers points about what LIS cross-cultural research entails (within a US context).

Disciplines such as marketing (e.g., Buil, et al., 2012), psychology (e.g., Wefers et al., 2023), and social sciences generally have diverse examples of cross-cultural research and how to conduct it, including the appropriateness (or otherwise) of using western-developed survey instruments in non-western contexts, global north assumptions about practices and processes, and the methodological rigour of cross-cultural research.

To address these and similar issues, Broesch et al. (2020) strongly recommend a community-centred approach for social science research. They suggest 'a productive baseline may be for researchers to consider community inclusion as part of their project design from the start. Ideally, the community is not only central to the planned research, but is leading it' (p. 3). They also emphasise the importance of returning the research to

the community in some form (p. 3–4). Likewise, Durham (2014) questions how we know that the research will benefit the participants, or that the benefits will be fair. This is an aspect should be considered carefully for all research, not just that in a different culture to our own. Research is generally seen as benefitting mankind, but this is as much a global north cultural construct as a reality. Examples of exploitation, of researchers taking knowledge and resources and providing nothing in return, and misrepresenting that knowledge or stealing the resources, are legion, especially when indigenous peoples are involved. See, for example, Linda Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*).

In the current research project, collaboration between the New Zealand and Fijian co-researchers was an important aspect, and one of the planned outcomes (a directory of special libraries) was part of what will be given back to the community.

Research design and the ethics approval process

The research was triggered by a story the NZ co-researcher heard while living in Fiji, but which had happened some years earlier. Details are vague, but apparently the collections of a disbanded special library were left in boxes on a Suva street, free for passers-by to take. Others mentioned similar stories to her. She wondered if this was evidence of a 'boom and bust' cycle in Fiji's special libraries, and the research project arose from that speculative thought.

In Fiji, most of the published content on libraries concerns academic libraries. Internationally, special libraries are under-researched, and those in the Pacific are even more so. Examples of research into Fijian special libraries include Mamtora and Walton (2014: collaboration between Australia and Pacific libraries); Murgatroyd (2011: information behaviour and models of service in scientific and technical libraries); Oates (1985, 1986: special libraries in Fiji); and Waibuca (2004: Fiji's medical libraries).

Special libraries were one of the earliest types of libraries in Fiji. Many began their support of private organisations and government agencies before most public, academic, and school libraries were set up. Government libraries are a key focus of this research, as historically many have struggled to obtain adequate support and funding. Mamtora (2001) reported that ‘Government departments are, in general, poorly resourced and underfunded; this leads to mediocre services to the wider population, and particularly those in the rural areas’ (p. 3). Consequently, special libraries in government departments were also underfunded, and the situation is not much different now.

The research project aim was therefore to determine whether Fijian special libraries are struggling or thriving, to evaluate the extent of collaboration and cooperation, and to see whether this is a sustainable approach for Fiji and the wider library community in the Pacific.

In the context of conducting ethical social sciences research, the important aspects, according to Broesch et al. (2020, p. 5) are:

- Site selection
- Community involvement
- Locally appropriate implementation of research design and methods.

This qualitative research project:

- Identified a gap in knowledge for Fijian special libraries based on the NZ co-researcher’s existing knowledge of Fijian special libraries (site selection)
- Involved collaboration with a Fijian co-researcher and the Fiji Library Association (community involvement), and
- Focused on co-design and *talanoa* as appropriate methods for the local context.

Ethics approval context

The NZ institution has an Ethics Committee which reviews the research and provides ethics approval for the design and methodology. It also has a Research Committee which, among other things, approves funding for a research project. A project must have ethics approval before funding is approved. Research Committee members may also provide advice and feedback which expands what the ethics committee has recommended. Overall, the intention is to ensure the research has integrity, is ethically sound, is well-designed and appropriate, considers the different communities and participants involved, and does not incur risks for either the researcher or the participants, as well as provide funding for research. There is one proposal form for both committees with an additional funding summary. Each committee has a Māori and a Pasifika representative; the Ethics Committee is chaired by an external academic; the Research Committee is chaired by the research manager. Both qualitative and quantitative research from the diverse disciplines taught by the institution is considered.

Similar to the NZ institution, the Fijian institution has a Research Ethics Committee and a Research Committee, as well as faculty research committees for each of the five schools. The Research Ethics Committee is chaired by the Pro Vice-Chancellor (Research and Innovation), with one representative from each faculty (school). Research projects involving human subjects require ethical approval, whether undertaken by full-time or affiliate staff. A screening questionnaire is used to determine whether the proposed project requires approval by the Research Ethics Committee, and individual faculty research committees decide if full human ethics approval is required.

Ethics review and approval process

The research proposal was submitted to the NZ Research Committee in August 2022,

applying for funding for the project (travel to and accommodation in Fiji and associated costs). The Committee asked for clarification around several major aspects and indicated the research needed ethics approval before they approved funding. The time frame for the September Ethics Committee agenda was too short for the co-researchers to make the necessary revisions; the revised proposal was therefore accepted for the November meeting (the Ethics Committee met bi-monthly). The proposal was approved in November with some additional minor changes, signed off by the Ethics Committee chair and one additional Ethics Committee member via email. The proposal was resubmitted to the Research Committee for the December meeting. Funding was approved in December (again, with minor changes required), but formal proof of this approval was not provided until January after the final revisions had been received by the Research Office.

Documentation from NZ was expected as part of the Fijian application, so this was not submitted until NZ approval had been granted. The research project was submitted to the university Faculty Research Committee for approval in early 2023. Initially, the screening questionnaire was completed and submitted along with the approved documentation from NZ. Subsequently, the full Application for Human Ethics Approval form was requested and provided.

The situation for this project was not the same as most applications submitted to the Fijian committees. The Fijian co-researcher was no longer working as an academic but had a role within the university library, which is not attached to a faculty or school. The Research Office initially coordinated the process for approval with the aim of passing the application to a nominated faculty committee. Initial approval for the research was therefore sought from the University Librarian (the Fijian researcher's manager), and formally confirmed. However, the application did not receive high

priority: there was a feeling that a staff member using personal time to undertake research with an external collaborator did not require institutional approval. It was eventually agreed by all concerned that research-active staff employed by the university required research approval.

Overall challenges

There were several issues with ethics review for this project. First, the speed with which the proposal was created necessitated substantial revisions. The double review took far more time than the co-researchers had anticipated. In addition to approval timeframes, the project had to avoid busy periods in both institutions. Travel and accommodation costs for the NZ co-researcher escalated as it was not possible to make any bookings until the proposal had been approved in Fiji, close to the time of travel.

Second, the NZ and Fijian committees had different approaches and requirements. For example, the Fijian committee required the information sheet to say participants could withdraw at any time, whereas the NZ committees thought this could leave the researchers in an awkward position if participants pulled out just before publication of an article (a significant issue with only four participants). A compromise was agreed where withdrawal was not possible after the interview transcripts were signed off. Similar tensions and negotiation are illustrated in the research literature (e.g., Kwame & Petrucka, 2024).

Third, questions were raised by both NZ committees about the validity of a non-Fijian undertaking research in Fiji. While the New Zealander is the primary co-researcher and is non-Fijian (*Kaivalagi/palagi*), she lived and worked in Fiji for five years in the 2010s. Her role as lecturer and coordinator of the Library/Information Studies programmes at the University of the South Pacific (USP) involved students

from 12 different Pacific nations, which has given her significant insight into the operations of all the different library types in the region. She also liaised closely with the Fijian library community as a committee member of the Fiji Library Association.

Fourth, identification of participants was a concern for the NZ committees, since Fiji is a small country and special librarians few. They recommended the approach was clarified in the proposal and the word ‘anonymity’ removed, and explanation provided of how cultural considerations would be managed during the interviews and the way the talanoa approach would be used. Talanoa is about connecting with others, sharing ideas through open and respectful interactions. Talanoa involves listening with interest and attention, accepting rather than judging and asking questions to clarify and confirm understanding (Le Va, n.d.).

Finally, the NZ committees wanted clarification of how the research would benefit the Fijian library sector.

Essentially, the NZ committees wanted to be sure the research was not being imposed from outside Fiji with a coloniser and global north understanding, i.e., that the research was not WEIRD (Western, educated, industrialised, rich, democratic) (Broesch et al., 2020; Wefers et al., 2023). Full contextual information was not provided in detail in the initial proposal, so the committees sought assurance that the NZ co-researcher had sufficient expertise to conduct the research in this context using talanoa and was working closely with the Fijian co-researcher to develop and conduct the research. However, the NZ co-researcher felt that these concerns were not clearly articulated in feedback and that this complicated the revision process and led to significant frustration for her as she sought clarification.

A local co-researcher is vital both to improve the likelihood that research will be approved, as well as to encourage participation and improve credibility of the results

(Broesch, et al., 2020). As there are few Pacific based publications or authors involved in library and information services research, collaboration with a Fijian co-researcher could help to change that. This may potentially encourage others to begin their own projects by boosting research awareness - and expertise - within the Fijian library community. A commitment to open access for published research outputs should make it easier for others to read the research and increase the impact of research findings on key stakeholders.

During this project, the Fijian co-researcher was active in (and elected president of) Fiji Library Association, and a key contact for association members. As a local, the Fijian co-researcher managed tasks such as scheduling interviews, and as a local colleague, reluctant potential interviewees could be more comfortable declining to participate.

The co-researchers noted that there were potential sensitivities around arranging interviews, as well as deciding on questions and topics that would be appropriate for general discussion. It was possible that those approached could feel uncomfortable discussing some issues. As an oral culture, an informal talanoa interview was the appropriate choice, and to be receptive to advice and recommendations based on local knowledge (for further discussion of talanoa, see Le Va, n.d.; Vaioleti, 2006). Vaioleti says:

Research methodologies that were designed to identify issues in a dominant culture and provide solutions are not necessarily suitable in searching for solutions for Pacific peoples, whose knowledge and ways of being have unique epistemologies, as well as lived realities here in Aotearoa. (p. 22)

Challenges for the New Zealand committees

The challenges for the NZ committees were varied and committee members were

concerned to 'get it right' in what was (for them) a unique research project. The initial proposal documentation was rushed and lacking detail because the opportunity for the research arose close to the committee agenda closing. The committees did not have particular knowledge of Fiji, or the complex cultural and social dynamic explained earlier in this paper. There are no institutional guidelines for research involving Pasifika peoples, communities, and nations (unlike, for example, Unitec (2016) which emphasises relationships, knowledge as something to be safeguarded, and the acceptability of oral versus written consent, or University of Otago (2011) which also acknowledges the variety of different Pacific values, ways of living and beliefs). As with any research proposal, their focus was to ensure the research was ethically sound and culturally appropriate. Consequently, the Research Committee offered feedback (August) for the NZ co-researcher that required a lot of thought and effort to address, which led to the proposal form being expanded to provide the needed points fully. The Ethics Committee feedback (November) was more straightforward (benefitting from the changes requested by the Research Committee) although they raised additional concerns about the cultural context and exactly how the conduct of the research would happen.

The challenges for the co-researchers are written in their own voices below.

Challenges for the New Zealand co-researcher

I had not witnessed the development of research and ethics committees in the four academic institutions where I have worked, so did not understand that the research project needed to be fully planned before submitting it for approval. Naively, I saw the proposal as a starting place; to be further developed after I had fully researched the literature, thought seriously about the research gap and what we would explore. The research proposal seemed to want almost a finished article before the research began, which felt very much like the cart before the horse. This meant that my original ideas in

the proposal were still unformed, and I also made assumptions about how much the Committees were aware of my background.

The proposal was only developed after the NZ institution reinstated international sabbaticals (which had been suspended from 2020 until mid-2022 due to COVID). The proposal was therefore developed in a very short time to meet committee deadlines. My initial target for the proposal was the Research Committee, which met monthly. Feedback from the Research Committee came just a few days before the deadline for the Ethics Committee agenda in September, and there was insufficient time for me to make the changes required. A revised proposal was sent to the Research Committee in October, but this was referred to the November Ethics Committee where it was accepted with provisos. The revised proposal was then considered at the December Research Committee meeting.

The development process was iterative, and ultimately the proposal process has helped my research planning in many ways. The blank proposal form was seven pages and 1590 words, but by the time my proposal was accepted (six months until the final formal letter), the form had grown to ten pages and 5340 words.

However, the process was time-consuming and detail-focused, and feedback did not clearly articulate what additional information changes were required. In August, the Research Committee indicated the need to consider cultural considerations for the research, but these issues were not explained further. In November, the Ethics Committee required a clearer statement that cultural considerations for interview participants would be enhanced by the indigenous status of the co-researcher. However, it was only in December that feedback from a separate funding application finally revealed the primary concern: the proposal needed to recognise the responsibilities and

implications of the power imbalance when undertaking research in Fiji (representing the global south) with a non-Fijian researcher from a dominant culture (global north).

Once I understood the concern that research undertaken by a researcher operating from a WEIRD perspective could easily misrepresent the culture under examination, while failing to benefit research participants or the wider community they represent (Wefers et al., 2023), it was clear that my assumptions needed to be more clearly articulated. Research outputs were always intended to benefit local communities which for this project included a directory of Fijian special libraries to improve networking and information sharing. Libraries identified from that directory would also be contacted to complete an online survey to establish issues of concern to the special library communities, areas of mutual interest, and opportunities for collaboration. This expectation also aligns with the Fijian institutional requirements that research outcomes benefit Pacific communities.

Iterations of the proposal were reviewed by the (then) research manager and clarification provided in addition to the formal feedback from the Research Committee. Each iteration took additional time to address, and the process was at times extremely frustrating. I compared this to 'embroidering the Bayeux tapestry blindfolded, with my hands tied behind my back.' I could not book flights or accommodation until the proposal was approved or begin research approval in Fiji, adding to anxiety and stress.

Challenges for the Fijian co-researcher

At the start of the process, I had a teaching role in the library and information diploma programme through Pacific TAFE, a subsidiary organisation within USP, where teaching staff are not necessarily research active. When the approved application was ready for the faculty committee, my role had changed to that of an academic librarian. This also changed my status to researcher-practitioner. Although each school in the

Fijian institution has its own faculty committee, USP library staff are not required to be research active and so do not have an associated committee.

Although research among university library staff is encouraged, for a researcher-practitioner this does not impact or add value to primary performance outputs, although collating information and revealing positive findings can add a value for decision makers. An organisation can be supportive, particularly when the research is within the same industry, but all work tasks must still be completed.

Research is therefore conducted after hours, or by making up time for any research activities conducted during core hours. Staff availability for research is also impacted by staffing shortages, teaching information literacy sessions, which may be outside core hours, and regular rostered evening and weekend work. However, evening and weekend work can also *create* opportunities for research due to the time in lieu in work hours. This was the case with this project: the interviews were conducted close to the end of the participants' working day.

Although the research was supported by my institution, the ethics application process raised questions about the clarification of the scope of the research questions and the measurement of the results.

Discussion

The research project was more closely scrutinised by the NZ committees than other research proposals they received because: a) it was in Fiji; b) the staff member conducting the research was not Pasifika; and c) because no other research has previously been conducted in a Pacific nation by researchers from this institution (although researchers had conducted research in other countries, usually their country of origin). Some of the literature (e.g., Durham, 2014) questions the extent to which (or even if) ethics review committees consider local participants in their local context, as

opposed to the committee's context. In this instance, consideration of the local context (Fiji) to ensure the research was not colonialist, led to what could be considered unnecessary complexity. This is set against the lack of detail in the initial version of the proposal and the Research Committee's need to fully understand the parameters of the project (design, co-researchers' expertise, benefits back to the local community). Both NZ committees were cautious: they wanted the research to have cultural integrity, research integrity, benefit to the co-researchers and the Fiji library community, and minimal risk. Despite the challenges, the response from both NZ committees was positive. An Ethics Committee member commented on the final version of the proposal:

I do look forward to seeing how this all goes. I can imagine there will be grateful Special Library staff who would welcome this. It could be a milestone for the industry.

It is worth considering the extent to which an ethics review committee can or should determine the final shape of a research project, even if the basis of their decision-making and feedback is to ensure that there is no risk or harm. That is, do those granting ethics approval have the right to say something is appropriate or inappropriate for another culture? The process for this project might have been smoother if the Fijian committee had considered the proposal first, since the NZ committees could then have had a better sense of what the local perspective was and provided feedback to the co-researchers with that knowledge.

Benefits of the research.

As noted, research needs to benefit the participants and their community. One of the aims of the research project was to contribute to the Fijian library community, and this explicit aim was recognised by the institutional committees. This section considers whether the benefits were achieved (or are likely to be achieved; the project is not yet

complete).

Benefits to the local community. This research project, from the start, sought to be fair to the Fijian library community, to advance their knowledge for them, and to provide concrete and tangible benefit to them. Special libraries contribute to economic growth and the supply of services. An increased understanding of their collective situation will help identify issues and gaps in service. It may also identify cost savings and create opportunities for innovative solutions. Successful strategies can be shared, and such collaboration could offer a lifeline to Fijian special libraries, particularly those poorly funded. The research project's outcomes may also assist with lobbying central government for improved support for government libraries, including the use of consortia to maximise scarce database funding.

The findings may also expose further opportunities for collaboration and apply digital solutions more widely to increase economic benefits to the organisation, Fiji, and the Pacific. Organisations previously working in isolation may be encouraged to share rather than compete for resources, therefore strengthening their viability and potentially expand services. Acquiring a shared integrated library management system would benefit organisations and the public, and save budgets. Information dissemination could be standardised, reducing duplication of services. While some special libraries serve their internal and affiliated stakeholders only, they are often a dominant force in their industry corporate knowledge and hold significance in society. For example, Central Bank libraries serve their internal, local financial institutions and external members. Both local and international financial institutions depend on the Central Bank library to collate local financial knowledge to disseminate as and when required.

Collaboration with interview participants ensures that the co-researchers speak on behalf of the Fijian special library community when presenting their results. This

collaborative approach will ensure that future actions are appropriate and will contribute to long-term change.

The co-researchers are unaware of any concerns over this research from participants or the wider Fijian library community, including regarding the involvement of a non-Fijian. Given the extremely limited local library research on special libraries involving Fiji, it could be argued that any research would have a positive impact, and even if the findings were disputed (which the co-researchers have no reason to think at this point), the research could still start a conversation. The NZ co-researcher notes that ‘The reality was that everyone I met seemed grateful that any research was happening in the Fiji LIS sector. There was no expressed resentment regarding my involvement. Two of those interviewed are ex-students, while the other two worked with me when I was active in the Fiji Library Association, and they valued our input.’ The Fijian co-researcher confirmed this separately, saying ‘All the special librarians were happy to assist me in this research’. These close connections are an unintended consequence of the comparatively small library community in Fiji.

The co-researchers hope that their findings will create opportunities for further research by stimulating new ideas and motivating researcher-practitioners and those teaching on the LIS programmes in Fiji, thus boosting research expertise within the Fijian library community.

One unanticipated benefit for the Fijian co-researcher was that she built knowledge of the sector and current issues, which further supported her as president of the Fiji Library Association. In addition, she gained experience of a research project and collaboration with another researcher, including interviewing, recording, transcribing, and analysing responses, and creating a survey (in progress at the time of writing). She is now planning a formal programme of research study in LIS.

Benefits of collaboration. This project would not have been achievable without a local researcher with an appropriate local cultural context as well as strong networking skills. Similarly, an entirely external project may not have resulted in the openness of participants and a willingness to share experiences. The NZ researcher's background in Fiji was therefore also important.

The research culture within the Fijian library community is currently limited, making it less likely that this research would have been initiated and completed solely by members of the Fijian library community. However, this has widened the research possibilities and opened a door which others may now choose to step through.

Lessons learned about cross-cultural research and ethics review

Overall, the lessons learned by the co-researchers and the institutions can be summarised as:

- Cross-cultural research and collaboration take much longer than researchers think, both to create a project and to get the necessary ethical review and approval. Both researchers and committees need to be aware of this.
- Ethical considerations are more challenging to get right, especially by global north ethics committees.
- Education needed for ethics committees around how to ensure cultural integrity in research projects. Every culture is unique; cultural competence does not transfer from one culture to another, necessarily.
- Support and guidelines are needed for researchers, so they better understand the ethics process and documentation that is required. This is especially important when the researcher is 'new and emerging'. Exemplars could be provided.

- Research partnerships and collaborative research have diverse benefits for all parties and enrich those involved.

Lessons for the co-researchers. The research findings so far have derailed some assumptions made by the NZ co-researcher. It is clear that the special librarians interviewed are innovative and make good use of the available resources.

Researchers new to the proposal process need guidance to understand more about what is wanted and *how* to articulate the requirements. Best practice could include a guide accompanying the proposal form, indicating what content is required for each section. A sample proposal which had been successful would have also been helpful as a model. Ideally, new and emerging researchers could be encouraged to attend meetings to learn more about expectations. Even if this was not possible, ideally researchers should have the opportunity to speak to their proposal, resolving many questions as they arise. Where the issue raised is more complex, researchers could be encouraged to liaise with the committee members raising the issue so it can be resolved and the proposal finalised for presentation and approval at the next meeting.

Lessons for the NZ institution. Going forward, the NZ institution is considering how to incorporate some of the lessons learned from this process.

More detail may be useful to fully inform a research or ethics committee when they are considering cross-cultural research. Each NZ committee brought an abundance of caution to the process, and was concerned to ensure that this research had cultural integrity; brought benefit to the participants; and was not imposed on the researched community. Greater detail would have helped their understanding and review. It is probable that, with better support and guidelines, more detail would benefit all projects,

since any research conducted in NZ is – by the nature of the country – likely to include individuals of diverse cultures.

The cultural diversity of Fiji is a significant factor, and any such diversity is likely to impact ethical norms, such as the ability of an individual to provide their opinion about their workplace freely (as discussed earlier), or the way interviews are undertaken and understood (e.g., Kwame & Petrucka, 2024). Understanding the cultural context for a particular research site is always challenging. Ethical requirements with a global north perspective or framework may not be able to be directly implemented in other contexts, which may also have diverse requirements. The context was well understood by the NZ co-researcher and risks in the research design were mitigated by inclusion of the Fijian co-researcher, but not as well-explained in the initial research proposal as they could have been. As noted, the Fijian library community was positive about the research and appreciative of any research being conducted, although this did not mitigate existing cultural constraints around their freedom of expression in an interview. The NZ co-researcher offered to speak in person to the committees; however, this is outside the committees' usual practice but perhaps could be considered going forward; it is done in some other institutions.

Kwame and Petrucka (2024) recommend a 'dialogic ethics review process ... where researchers and research ethics boards engage in on-going dialogue rather than the usual prescriptive format research ethics reviews often assume'. This is similar to the process that the NZ co-researcher assumed when they were developing the research proposal, but which was not part of the existing model in the institution. While such a process might indeed ensure better research outcomes in the long run, it would be a noticeable change to the work of research ethics committees, adding significantly to their workload. However, it is worth considering how support and feedback can be

provided for a researcher earlier in the process, and the best way to achieve this without unduly burdening committees. The NZ research manager (the first author) has developed a webinar series of 'research basics' for new and emerging researchers, which includes information about the ethics and funding processes, and research design (the series is being delivered in 2024). She is also considering changes to the research proposal form and providing exemplars to researchers.

Lessons for the Fijian institution. This application was outside the usual scope of research applications presented to the university, but despite initial hiccups, the process was successful. The Fijian committees had little experience of a researcher-practitioner research project. The university might wish to consider how to support non-academic staff to make the process smoother for future applications.

Conclusion

Organisations are, quite rightly, cautious about allowing their global north (WEIRD) researchers to conduct research in global south countries or Indigenous communities. Examples of poorly conducted, biased, discriminatory, and negative research are legion. Those in global south countries and Indigenous communities are also often hesitant to permit research, having suffered from being research subjects in the past. It is important to ensure that research projects have cultural integrity as well as research integrity, good design, and minimal risk, and researchers are culturally competent.

However, even with genuine effort to 'get it right', it is possible that ethics committees are still making judgements about the value, design, and conduct of the research from their own perspective, especially where they are unable (for practical reasons) to consult the researched community. This evaluation has shown that process

of cross-cultural research is complex, but do-able, especially when the documentation is sufficiently detailed.

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