

Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research

Cross-cultural research is rife with ethical and methodological challenges but, despite the increased demand for such research, discussions on ‘culturally sensitive methodologies’ are still largely neglected. Consequently, researchers often find themselves faced with difficulties but lack information on how to deal with them. This text provides an in-depth discussion on how to perform qualitative research in cross-cultural contexts with an emphasis on a more ethical, sensible and responsible approach. Pranee Liamputtong suggests culturally sensitive and appropriate research methods that would work well with cultural groups. She offers thought-provoking perspectives and diverse cultural examples that will be of value to both novice and experienced cross-cultural researchers. Throughout the volume there are references to the excellent work of many cross-cultural researchers who have paved the way in different social and cultural settings.

Pranee Liamputtong is a professor in the School of Public Health at La Trobe University.

Cambridge University Press
978-0-521-72731-0 - Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge, New York, Melbourne, Madrid, Cape Town, Singapore,
São Paulo, Delhi, Dubai, Tokyo

Cambridge University Press
The Edinburgh Building, Cambridge CB2 8RU, UK

Published in the United States of America by Cambridge University Press, New York

www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9780521727310

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First published 2010

Printed in the United Kingdom at the University Press, Cambridge

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data

Liamputtong, Pranee, 1955–

Performing qualitative cross-cultural research / Pranee Liamputtong.

p. cm.

ISBN 978-0-521-89868-3 (hardback) – ISBN 978-0-521-72731-0 (pbk.)

1. Cross-cultural studies – Research. 2. Qualitative research. I. Title.

GN345.7.L53 2010

301.072–dc22 2009053755

ISBN 978-0-521-89868-3 Hardback

ISBN 978-0-521-72731-0 Paperback

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To my parents
Saeng and Yindee Liamputtong
and
To my children
Zoe Sanipreeya and Emma Inturatana Rice

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Preface

The reasons I wrote this book are many. For one, I am the product of cross-cultural identity. My grandparents, apart from my paternal grandmother, were migrants who escaped poverty from the south of China and settled in the south of Thailand, where I was born and raised. Throughout my childhood, I was constantly made aware of my ‘alien’ status within the local Thai community. It was not only my ‘ethnicity’ but also my ‘poverty’ that continued to plague my childhood. We were misunderstood about so many things, and often people would look down on us – the alien and the poor family. I survived all of this and I have always vowed to myself that I would write something about cross-cultural issues when I had the chance, and that chance has arrived. This is the reason for the birth of this book.

Second, because of my own cultural identity, I have great interest in the lives of ‘cultural Others’ who are also marginalised in society. In particular, I have been touched by writers who come from non-Western societies or those who have been marginalised due to their race and ethnicity. The story that I found most touching was when the tennis star Arthur Ashe announced that he had AIDS, a *People* magazine reporter asked him: ‘Mr Ashe, I guess this must be the heaviest burden you have ever had to bear, isn’t it?’ Ashe said: ‘It is a burden, all right. But AIDS isn’t the heaviest burden I have had to bear ... Being black is the greatest burden I’ve had to bear’ (in Ashe & Rampersad 1993: 139). Because of my interest, I wanted to learn how cross-cultural researchers perform their research. Once I started, I couldn’t stop. I found more and more interesting aspects of cross-cultural research and this prompted me to write this book.

Third, I have been doing research with ethnic minority groups in Australia. Often, I come across issues that I think researchers who wish to carry out their work in different cultures ought to know, not only for their projects to become a success, but also for the well-being of the research participants. Cross-cultural researchers must do their research sensibly and responsibly. What they do should not further marginalise people or harm them in any

way. This book deserved to be born, since there is no other book which dedicates the entire discussion to how to do research in cross-cultural settings.

This book is written so that more justice will result in many research projects and hence we will no longer see the exploitation of our research participants in this world. To be more ambitious, my wish is that this book will help to address what Martin Luther King wrote in his *Letter From the Birmingham Jail* (1994: 2–3): ‘Injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere.’ Perhaps, ‘justice anywhere is a path for justice everywhere’ will be what we see in the future!

I realise that what I write in this book may not please everyone because there is no way that I can cover every angle of performing cross-cultural research. However, there is a need for me to speak about what I believe is important in this volume. As Audre Lorde (1984: 40) says: ‘I have come to believe over and over again that what is most important to me must be spoken, made verbal and shared, even at the risks of having it bruised or misunderstood.’ This is because if we do not speak out or share with others, as Trinh T. Minh-Ha (2006) warns, people will speak for us and our work will be criticised and misinterpreted. This is not a self-indulgence, I can assure you. Rather, it is the way for me to bring forth troubling issues that have always stayed in my heart. I believe that it is also important for other social scientists to appreciate these issues.

I would like to express my gratitude to several people who have helped to make this book possible. First, I thank John Haslam, acquisitions editor at Cambridge University Press, who believes in the virtue of this book and contracted me to write it. I thank him wholeheartedly. I wish to thank Rosemary Oakes, my dearest friend, who would diligently read through, comment and edit my chapters before I sent them to John. She sacrificed much of her time to assist me with the final touches of this book. Rosemary’s help is greatly appreciated. I also want to express my thanks to Carrie Cheek, assistant editor at Cambridge University Press, who worked with me on the book cover and the production of the book. Last, I thank my two daughters, Zoe Sanipreeya Rice and Emma Inturatana Rice, who put up with my busy writing tasks. Bringing both of you up cross-culturally has also been an inspiration for me to write this book.

Pranee Liamputtong
Melbourne, March 2009

About the author

Pranee Liamputtong is a Personal Chair in Public Health at the School of Public Health, La Trobe University, Melbourne, Australia. Pranee has previously taught in the School of Sociology and Anthropology and worked as a public health research fellow at the Centre for the Study of Mothers' and Children's Health, La Trobe University. Pranee's particular interests include issues related to cultural and social influences on childbearing, childrearing and women's reproductive and sexual health.

Pranee has published several books and a large number of papers in these areas. These include: *Maternity and Reproductive Health in Asian Societies* (edited with Lenore Manderson, 1996); *Asian Mothers, Western Birth* (1999); *Living in a New Country: Understanding Migrants' Health* (1999); *Hmong Women and Reproduction* (2000); *Coming of Age in South and Southeast Asia: Youth, Courtship and Sexuality* (edited with Lenore Manderson, 2002); *Health, Social Change and Communities* (edited with Heather Gardner, 2003). Her more recent books include: *Reproduction, Childbearing and Motherhood: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (2007); *Childrearing and Infant Care Issues: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (2007); *The Journey of Becoming a Mother amongst Thai Women in Northern Thailand* (2007); *Population, Community, and Health Promotion* (edited with Sansnee Jirojwong, 2008); and *Infant Feeding Practices: A Cross-Cultural Perspective* (to be published in 2010).

Pranee has published several research methodology books. Her first was titled *Qualitative Research Methods: A Health Focus* (with Douglas Ezzy, 1999; reprinted in 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004); the second edition of this book is titled *Qualitative Research Methods* (2005, reprinted in 2006, 2007, 2008); and the third edition, *Qualitative Research Methods*, is authored solely by herself (2009). Pranee has also published a book on doing qualitative research online: *Health Research in Cyberspace: Methodological, Practical and Personal Issues* (2006). Her new books include: *Researching the Vulnerable: A Guide to Sensitive Research Methods* (2007); *Undertaking Sensitive Research: Managing Boundaries, Emotions and Risk* (with Virginia

Dickson-Swift and Erica James, 2008); *Knowing Differently: Arts-Based and Collaborative Research Methods* (edited with Jean Rumbold, 2008); and *Doing Cross-Cultural Research: Ethical and Methodological Issues* (2008). Two further methodology texts include *Research Methods in Health: Foundations for Evidence-Based Practice* and *Focus Group Methodology: Principles and Practices* will be published in 2010.

About the book

This book comprises nine chapters. In the first chapter, I discuss the necessity of performing qualitative cross-cultural research. As in any good methodology textbook, I provide some theoretical standpoints that I believe sit neatly within the framework of cross-cultural research. Chapter 2 introduces crucial issues regarding ethical and moral perspectives in performing cross-cultural research. Some general discussions on ethical and moral issues which have been debated in the literature, historical examples of research which have exploited many individuals and communities, and issues relating to ethical principles and informed consent are presented. This chapter also includes discussions on the risk and harm which may befall cross-cultural researchers themselves.

In Chapter 3, issues relevant to accessing potential research participants are raised. I point to some strategies which will assist researchers to gain access and to maintain relationships with their participants so that their research projects may run successfully. Chapter 4 discusses cultural sensitivity in cross-cultural research. I argue that cultural sensitivity is an important issue in conducting research with people from different cultures. This chapter provides some suggestions about how to become a responsible researcher when working with cultural groups.

I introduce the issue of the insider and outsider status of cross-cultural researchers in Chapter 5. I suggest that the insider and outsider dichotomy based on cultural attributes ‘remains contested’, as there are other issues at hand and these include gender, social class, age and other social characteristics. These issues are covered in this chapter. In Chapter 6, I point to the importance of language and communication in cross-cultural research. Often, researchers and their participants are from different linguistic backgrounds. This can have a great impact on the research process and its success. In this chapter, I discuss issues pertaining to language and relevant to bicultural researchers, and working with interpreters and/or translators. I also introduce forward- and back-translation issues in this chapter. Last,

discussions on the transcription in its original language and a translation method which cross-cultural researchers may adopt in their qualitative research are provided.

Chapter 7 begins the discussion of qualitative research methods which represent personal and collective testimonies: oral/life history and focus group methods. The essence of oral/life history and focus group methods and some examples of cross-cultural research which make use of these methods are detailed. Chapter 8 continues people's testimonies in cross-cultural research, but it emphasises personal and collective testimonies within a collaborative effort. This chapter is dedicated to the methodology of community based participatory research (CBPR), and includes discussions on CBPR, participatory action research (PAR) and the photovoice method.

In the last chapter, I discuss the way we write to represent the voices of our research participants in cross-cultural research. There are several salient issues that I believe deserve great attention. For example, how do we write our research findings in a way that what we write will not further marginalise our participants, in what language should we write our findings, and who owns the research findings? Ways in which we can write up the findings sensitively and make use of innovative writing strategies are suggested. The last section is on the dissemination of research findings. How do we do this in cross-cultural research so that the findings can be fed back to our participants and reach a wider audience?