Cultural Insiders and Research Fieldwork: Case Examples From Cross-Cultural Research With Thai People

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Abstract
The status of the insider and outsider is an important concept for cross-cultural research. Being a cultural insider is recognized as a strength that allows the researcher to take part in the everyday lives of local people and to get closer to the participants. We explore these issues using examples from our own research with Thai people in southern Thailand and in Melbourne, Australia. We suggest that insider status has an impact on whether the researchers can conduct successful fieldwork and obtain in-depth understanding of the phenomenon being investigated. Being an insider enables a researcher to conduct research more sensitively. It helps in gaining a deeper understanding of the sociocultural contexts of the research setting. However, there are also challenges associated with insider status. These include the need to reestablish our position in a community, our assumptions about what the participants tell us, and participants’ expectations about us. This article provides case examples for researchers who are interested in conducting research, particularly within the Thai context. It should contribute to a conceptual understanding of real life experiences in a cross-cultural context in general.

Keywords
cross-cultural research, insider/outsider perspective, gender, ethnicity, successful fieldwork, qualitative study

Introduction
The concept of insider versus outsider status of researchers has received much attention in recent years (Edmonds-Cady, 2012; Shariff, 2014). This status is a particularly important aspect of cross-cultural research (Banks, 1998; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010). These terms primarily refer to Western researchers who have traveled a long distance to “study” native people. But the terms can also refer to local researchers conducting research with individuals and groups within their own country or cultural groups (Liamputtong, 2010). Both of the writers of this article fall within the category of native researcher because we have been conducting research with people whom we share “social, cultural and linguistic backgrounds” (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 109). According to Banks (1998), being recognized as a cultural insider is the best approach for successful fieldwork. However, there are other issues which may also contribute to successful fieldwork. In this article, we will discuss the status of being an insider/outsider researcher using our own experiences in carrying out research with Thai people in southern Thailand and Thai women living in Melbourne, Australia. It should be noted here that all the studies we conducted and refer to in this article received ethical approval from the human ethics committees of Thaksin University and/or La Trobe University.

Insider/Ousider Binaries
Based on the cross-cultural research framework proposed by Banks (1998), there are two main categories of researchers: cultural insiders and outsiders. Each has different sets of values, perspectives, behaviors, beliefs, and knowledge (Banks, 1998). Cultural insiders have cultural commonalities with the local people as they share the same social background, culture,
and language (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Ramji, 2008; Song & Parker, 1995). It is suggested that researchers who are cultural insiders are better accepted by local people. This is because they are seen by as “a legitimate member of the community who can speak with authority about it” (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 110). It has also been argued that cultural insiders are particularly advantaged because they have better insights when describing the social and cultural characteristic of the group with whom they undertake research (Liamputtong, 2010; Bishop, 2008; Tillman, 2002).

Cultural outsiders refer to outsider researchers who enter a locality to conduct research. Cultural outsiders hold different values, beliefs, and knowledge from the community where they undertake their research. They have less understanding than insiders of the values, beliefs, and behaviors of the community. The relationships they form with local people might be at the superficial level or there may be none at all (Liamputtong, 2010; Banks, 1998).

Cultural insiders may be able to conduct research “in a more sensitive and responsive manner” than outsider researchers (Bishop, 2008, p. 148). Because of the cultural commonalities, they are better placed to gain the trust of and develop and have closer relationships with local people more quickly. This can reduce the difficulties in forming rapport with local people and communities (Falzon, 2009). Sharing these characteristics can support insider researchers and thus enable them to respond to sensitive issues in an appropriate manner (Suwankhong, Liamputtong, & Rumbold, 2011; Shariff, 2014). This suits the cultural and social contexts better than would be the case with outsider researchers (Liamputtong, 2010). Banks (1998) contends that “only a member of their ethnic or cultural group can really understand and accurately describe the group’s culture because socialization within it gives them unique insights into it” (p. 6). Insider researchers also have better access to local resources and this enhances their working with local people and producing good quality research fieldwork (Liamputtong, 2010, Suwankhong et al., 2011; Banks, 1998; Birman, 2006; Coloma, 2008; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Falzon, 2009; Merriam et al., 2001).

However, cultural outsider researchers may also be able to develop deeper explanations of a phenomenon being investigated (Al-Makhameh & Lewando-Hunt, 2008; Carter, 2004; Coloma, 2008; Deutsch, 2004; Merriam et al., 2001). This is possibly because they realize that they may not have sufficient knowledge about the world of the participants. They need to scrutinize certain issues more closely, instead of seeing them as common phenomena or not seeing them at all (Liamputtong, 2010; Coloma, 2008; Merriam et al., 2001). In fact, Merriam and colleagues (2001) contend that “insiders have been accused of being inherently biased, and too close to the culture to be curious enough to raise provocative questions” (p. 411). To them, “the insider’s strengths become the outsider’s weaknesses and vice-versa” (p. 411).

The position of insider/outside can also shift during fieldwork (Chawla, 2007; Mani, 2006; Narayan, 2008; Ramji, 2008; Shariff, 2014). For example, if insiders behave inappropriately or do not share the same ideology as local traditions, they could easily be viewed as outsiders by the community members. On the other hand, outsiders who constantly build trust and show sincerity toward local people would increase the level of trust and keep up a lasting relationship with them. They can become insiders (Mani, 2006).

### Indigenous Insider and Successful Fieldwork: Our Experiences

Successful fieldwork can be based on a number of strategies. In our research, we shared our own fieldwork experiences with traditional healers in southern Thailand and Thai women in Australia.

#### Being Accepted as an Insider

The first key characteristic leading to successful fieldwork is being accepted as an indigenous insider by the participants. In our research with traditional healers in southern Thailand, the first author (who conducted most of the fieldwork) was recognized as a cultural insider by local people from the first day she arrived in their community. Because she was born and had spent most of her life in a Thai communal environment, she was aware of the unique cultural, social, and linguistic characteristics of the local setting. As she quickly showed local norms, she was soon considered to be an insider. This familiarity with the local context resulted in trusting and long-term relationships with the local people and the community. As Madden (2010) and O’Reilly (2009) suggest, local people will open their world more when they have trust in a person whom they consider as an insider.

Cultural insiders can exhibit traditional behaviors and appropriate manners naturally (Al-Makhameh & Lewando-Hunt, 2008). Due to her cultural insider status, the first author knew how to behave in accord with local manners. Knowing how to show respect when meeting with people who are, for example, of different genders, age, and social status is natural to her. Thus she did not need much time to learn about and practice the traditional manners appropriate for local settings. This natural response allowed her to cultivate trusting relationship more quickly with local people. People tended to accept her as a person in their local areas, although she had only just entered their world. Being recognized as a cultural insider allows the researcher to be more acceptable and able to take part in community activities. This is achieved without having to take too much time seeking permission from local people to participate in their daily lives. This is in marked contrast to researchers who are seen as cultural outsiders (Liamputtong, 2010).

As a young woman entering the local community on her own, most people were willing to give the first author special care and to treat her as one of their family members. They were very keen to provide her with the necessary facilities which allowed her to stay with comfort in their community. This suggests that when the researcher is recognized as a cultural insider by local people, he or she will quickly and easily have access and gain close relationships with local people.
As the relationship of trust between the first author and the local people was gained easily, she was able to start talking to people and asking people general queries, share personal experiences, and even discuss sensitive issues openly. They were able to make jokes about things around them. The more trust she gained from local people, the more she was able to generate insightful information about the investigation. The relationship of trust also allowed her to live comfortably in the community. They invited her to join in all the community activities and there was a friendly atmosphere as they showed her around. She asked people questions freely, visited them at their home at any time, and had meals with them. Sharing their personal lives led to further natural conversations. Such relationship put the participants at ease and gave the researcher privileged access to the local culture, social norms, and beliefs. This assisted her to obtain informal consent from local people. Some even suggested that, for our project, we did not have to get formal consent from them. However, we took care to obtain their formal consent.

Language plays an important role in cross-cultural research. Language allows participants in research to identify meaning to the world. It permits the researchers and the participants to interact in order to produce an understanding of the social world of the participant and to interpret this context (Hennink, 2008). Language is, therefore, a fundamental tool which allows researchers to understand human behavior, their sociocultural processes, and cultural meanings (Hennink, 2008, p. 23). In cross-cultural research, if the language of the researchers is markedly different from that of the participants, they are seen as an “outsider.” In contrast, by using the same language, the researcher tends to be seen as an “insider” by the participants (Liamputtong, 2010). Spradley (1979, p. 17) makes this clear: “Language is more than a means of communication about reality: It is a tool for constructing reality.” Both of us are researchers who are Thai native speakers. We used the Thai language in all interviews. This not only allowed the participants to articulate in great depth by using their native language but also meant they accepted us as insider researchers. Because of this, we were able to avoid difficulties regarding language issues that outsiders encounter who do not speak Thai (Liamputtong, 2010).

Shared Ethnic Identity

Trusting relationships were also established very quickly when we conducted research with Thai women living in Melbourne, Australia. Due to our “shared identity” (Rakhit, 1998) as Thai persons living in a foreign land, the women talked to us as if we were their friends, family members, or someone they had known for a long time. They also asked many personal questions in order to get to know us better and shared their stories with us as they felt we shared the same social and cultural backgrounds. One woman told us:

This [project] sounds very interesting to me . . . you are doing a great job . . . I admired you . . . this is good for women, you know . . . haven’t seen anyone doing thing like for Thai women, especially here [in Melbourne].

It seems that the status of insider has great potential if the researcher and the participants have some common ground, such as a shared ethnic identity. The sense of shared ethnicity helps cultivate good relationships and openness when undertaking a research project. It did not matter which part of Thailand we came from, we were always accepted as Thais in a foreign land. When we were trying to contact one Thai woman to invite her to be a participant in the research, she was very happy to do so and to meet other Thai women. She told us: *I am very happy to help . . . at least I can share my story with others . . . I always like to support other Thai people when I can.*

Furthermore, before the interview, she invited us to visit a Thai temple with her and her colleagues. On that morning, she picked us up at our place. She said,

It would be good if we can go to the temple and make merit together. Would you like to go with us? We will drive you there. I have not been to the temple for such a long time. I always feel good after that. Then we can come back to my home for the interview. We will have a good time today.

We spent time with them, traveling to the temple, and having lunch together at the temple. We felt that this fostered good relationships and trust and gave us greater opportunities for being recognized as an insider, although we had only met the woman for a few hours. A comfortable environment and relaxed atmosphere prevailed throughout the time we spent with the woman. These experiences encouraged the woman to open up more about her understanding of breast cancer as well as her private life. Before the interview commenced, she shared with us a great deal about her life, suffering and happiness while living as an immigrant woman in Australia.

As Thai women living in Melbourne, the participants treated us as family members and they got along well with us very quickly. We were not seen as strangers to them. Usually, we would be invited to a woman’s home, although we had suggested meeting at a coffee shop or suitable public place. One day, the first author made an appointment to meet a participant who said at first that she preferred to meet at a shopping center. As they were looking for a place where they could talk without interference from other people, she said to the first author, *I think I better take you to my house. It is quiet and more relaxed there. Don’t worry . . . my kids are at school. I can drive you back to your place after we have finished.* On arrival at her house, she showed the first author around and served her a cup of coffee and homemade biscuits. She said, *Please feel like your home . . . it is bit messy though because of the kids.*

The second author had similar experiences with Thai women in her research on childbearing. Most often, the women would invite her to interview them at home. They would cook lunch for her, which she gratefully accepted as this was a way
to show respect to the women. They even packed Thai food for her to take home because they thought that, as a working mother living abroad without any family member to help, it might be difficult for her to look after herself properly.

**Shared Gender Identity**

With regard to cultural insiders, there are other issues to be considered, these include gender, social class, age, and other social characteristics (Coloma, 2008; Narayan, 2008; Ramji, 2008; Swadener & Mutua, 2008). The gender of the researchers may influence the perceptions of the participants and how they place the researchers in the research process (Pini, 2005). As Van Maanen (1988) suggests, “women . . . in the field . . . find some doors open more readily than others” (p. 4). Our experiences suggest that being recognized as a cultural insider by the participants occurred automatically because of shared gender. Being the same gender, we could develop trusting relationships with Thai women living in a foreign country.

In our projects with Thai women in Melbourne, the participants felt more comfortable talking with us about any issue even at a personal level. Often, we were well received and accepted by the participants, although we had just contacted them over the phone for the first time. These positive responses from the participants happened because we were not only Thai persons but also women. The participants were happy to meet another Thai woman living in Melbourne. They were keen to participate in the project as they saw the benefits for other Thai women living in Australia. When we explained to one woman about the research project and the objectives of the study, she was very interested and stated that:

This is very good for women. We tend to ignore this part but it is a woman’s matter. We should look after our health. Men would not know anything and could be careless about our breast health. I am very happy to talk about this with you. I am not shy . . . not embarrassed. Only you and me here, right? We can talk more openly.

When we made an appointment with another Thai woman, we received a similar reception from her. We asked the woman for a location that would be convenient to meet up for an interview. The woman suggested her home. Her husband offered to sit with them during the interview, but the woman decided that he should not do so. During the interview, she said the following:

If my husband sits with us too, I would not be able to share my views and experiences more comfortably like this, you know. We cannot talk openly about sensitive issues like women’s stuff . . . I feel I can talk with you like woman talk to woman . . . especially about our ‘breasts’. I feel safe to talk to the same gender about this thing anyway . . . and we can speak Thai . . . in our language too.

We contend that being a female researcher researching a sensitive issue with female participants allows us to experience things denied to a male researcher. During our conversation with one woman in the breast cancer project, she touched her breasts and said,

I sometimes check my breasts like this [her hand press on her breasts when showering]. I want to check if there is no lump or anything like that . . . abnormal thing. If there is something wrong I can go to the doctor early. Mine is possibly small size, hah (her face turned red and still holding her breasts). See, if you are a male interviewer, I would not touch mine and show you like this. I would feel too embarrassed! But you are a woman. I am not too shy to talk about this thing and can show my breast to you as I should, why not.

In a childbearing research project, the second author interviewed women who had become a mother in a new homeland. Being a woman allowed her to share with the women many intense experiences about motherhood and the difficulties of living in a new country. Often, the women would express that because of their shared gender identity, they felt that they could tell the first author matters which they would not otherwise bring up with a male researcher. This was particularly so for matters relating to sexual relationships with their partners and their difficulties after giving birth and during lactation. According to Thai postpartum beliefs and practices, women should refrain from sexual intercourse for at least 30 days after giving birth (Liamputtong, 2007). But this created resentment on the part of some husbands, particularly men from Anglo-Celtic background. As a woman, the Thai women believed that the first author would understand their experiences and appreciated their difficulties relating to sexual relationships.

**The Pitfalls of Being an Insider: Our Experiences**

Although the status of cultural insider can make it easier to conduct a study, there are some disadvantages to being an indigenous insider (Chawla, 2007; Ramji, 2008; Subedi, 2007). Cultural insiders can take many things for granted. They tend to believe that being an indigenous insider can facilitate their understanding of the meaning of the symbolic practices and cultural norms of local people without having to ask for further information. Because they conduct the research within their own sociocultural contexts, they assume that they have commonalities in terms of experiences and knowledge (Al-Makhamreh & Lewando-Hundt, 2008; Suwankhong et al., 2011; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). Thus indigenous insiders might not pay enough attention to some important issues in the study (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007). This could possibly result in insufficient clarification regarding the phenomenon being studied; this may lead to an inadequate knowledge of the social world of the participants. This can impact on the outcomes of the study in a way that hampers the production of rich explanations of the phenomenon under investigation (Suwankhong et al., 2011; Brannick & Coghlan, 2007; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010).
There were some challenges that we experienced in our studies. For example, in our study of traditional healers in southern Thailand, the first author tended to be insufficiently curious about enquiring about specific issues in greater depth. This was because she had been embedded in the sociocultural contexts and belief systems of the locality for a long period of time before conducting the study. She tended to assume that she knew about their beliefs and ignored some details that were similar to her own experiences, hence she did not seek further explanations from the participants. Many people also assumed that she already had an extensive knowledge of their world. They tended not to explain things in great depth to her. This led to limitations in obtaining more detailed explanations of their world. As a result, some insightful information could have been lost.

The interviews with Thai women who had breast cancer in southern Thailand offered another example of this. In several cases, the first author missed important information because of the perceived insider status she held in the minds of the participants. One woman started telling her story and her beliefs about breast cancer.

I believe that my illness is partly caused by bad karma. We can say this as we don’t know what each has done in the past … each is different … I might have done something bad or wrong to others in my last life. It returns to cause a suffering like this in this life or something like that … but I am alive … this is still better than if I die …

In this example, the concept of bad karma is well-known among Thai people. Bad karma refers to negative deeds that one has committed and caused suffering to others. It is believed that sooner or later bad things will occur to the person who has committed bad karma (Liamputtong, Haritavorn, & Kiatying-Angsulee, 2012; Morris, 2008; Phillips, 2007).

Another interview took place with an older woman who believed that attending a funeral would make the symptoms of breast cancer worse.

Since I have been diagnosed with breast cancer, I never go anywhere except the hospital. I am really scared about going to any funeral. Most people who have a serious illness like this will not go to a funeral. They say it is not good … I am scared to go because I would get intense pain. This belief has been with us for a long time.

This is another common belief held by most Thai people that attending a funeral during an episode of illness will cause pain to the body. The first author already knew about this as this is what she has always heard from family members and other older persons. In both cases, when the participant finished the explanations, she did not follow-up the issues to elicit further explanations. This was mainly because she assumed that she had already understood the point that was being made. As a result, although we managed to provide rich descriptions of the women’s beliefs, their personal insights on these particular beliefs were not explored properly.

It should be noted here that it has been suggested that some research participants might not be willing to discuss certain issues with researchers who come from the same ethnic group (Liamputtong, 2010; Hall, 2004). This is due to the fear that they might suffer judgement by other members of their ethnic community. We sensed that this did not occur in our studies, both in southern Thailand and Melbourne. This may be due to the nature of our research, the good rapport that we established with the participants, and our shared gender identity.

**Being an Insider … There are Still Difficulties**

In some situations and contexts, the researchers can be both insiders and outsiders (Adler, 2004; Banks, 1998; Walsh-Tapiata, 2003). The position and identity of the researchers may shift over time (Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Kusow, 2003; Narayan, 2008). Insider researchers have the privilege of knowing the life worlds of the people whom they wish to learn about. However, if they are “unquestionably welcomed” into the local setting, this may be a matter of mere luck (Chawla, 2007). In reality, even for insider researchers “local” knowledge can only be accomplished through extended periods of immersion (Liamputtong, 2010; Gokah, 2006; Ramji, 2008; Sherif, 2001). Although we were accepted as insider researchers, there were some challenges that we faced during the fieldwork. In our project with traditional healers in southern Thailand, at the initial stage of entering to the community, the first author was seen as an outsider by some individuals in the community. Although she had been born and raised in the region and understood the local culture, she had left the region for a number of years to study abroad. On returning to her home origin for research fieldwork, many things had changed. She was no longer familiar with the geography of the community, the lifestyle of local people, the environment, and even the public transport system. She had to reimmerse herself in the community to reestablish herself as a local person. This took time. Entering the community made her nervous and lacking in confidence about starting to talk to people. It worried her as to how people would react to her. She thought people might not accept her as a researcher or they might consider her an outsider to their world. She felt that people looked at her as a stranger because they were not familiar with her. In addition, from her prior experience of working with the Thai community, people tended to expect some benefits to their community from researchers. They did not believe that doing research could significantly improve their lives. This was because of their negative experiences with previous researchers, who had arrived in their community to gather information and then left without giving anything back to the community. One man told her:

I have not seen that people who do research can do anything much for our community. They spoke nicely when they need
information from us. When they have finished, most never come back... I know it well.

This response made her feel that she was also seen as a complete outsider and this remained with her and discouraged her when carrying out the study.

When interviewing Thai women about breast cancer in Melbourne, we realized that there were differences in expectation among the participants. Most of the participants were of a lower educational level than the researchers. They believed that as we had obtained a doctoral qualification, we would know more about breast cancer issues than they would. One woman said *Oh you already have finished the doctoral degree, you might not need to ask me. I think you know better about this thing, right? (laughing)*. The women also felt they would not be able to provide the deep information that we might have expected.

I am happy to share but don’t expect too much as I don’t have background in health. I work nearly every day. I don’t have time to find out about health information or breast cancer much. I am sorry if I cannot give much detail of what you might expect.

The second author also had similar experiences in her earlier research on childbirth and the Thai customs of Thai immigrant women in Melbourne. She asked many questions about traditional beliefs and practices relating to pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period. Often, the women would say to her that, as a Thai woman, why did she have to ask such questions. She should know the answers herself. She had to explain that although she had some knowledge about these issues, she would like to learn about them from the participants as she believed that they might have better knowledge about them than she did.

In our breast cancer study with Thai women in Melbourne, many tended to mix the Thai and English languages in their narratives. They found it easier to use English to express some feelings and thoughts rather than the Thai language. However, we were often unclear about their expressions, and hence had to keep clarifying with them in Thai to ensure that we understood what they meant. Although this was not a big issue for the participants, we felt that this created distance between us and reduced our status as an indigenous insider to some extent. Joy talked about her opinion about searching for breast cancer knowledge. She mixed English and Thai in conversation (the English phrases used are in the single quotation marks):

*It is not ‘frequency’ but ‘regularly’. It means that health professionals should provide [breast cancer] knowledge to us three or four times a year, helping women to get ‘familiar’ with breast cancer prevention practice. We can have more ‘awareness’... if we are not ‘searching’, we won’t get knowledge.*

**Conclusion**

The position of cultural insider/outside is a key component when doing cross-cultural research. This status can be the key to success in fieldwork particularly in traditional communities such as the Thai. Being an insider means being recognized as part of their community by local people and this can help to gain the trust of local people more easily. Insider researchers and participants have common backgrounds that tie in with local social and cultural practices. This allows insiders to form a relationship with local people, to learn things, to behave like local people, and to understand new sociocultural contexts. Outsiders might have to take more time to gain trust from the local people as they are viewed as strangers to the community. However, this position could be advantageous as they might be able to see different perspectives, ones that insiders might fail to see. We have discussed our own experiences as insiders in our qualitative research in southern Thailand and Melbourne, Australia. We contend that despite being recognized as insiders, there are also challenges that we have personally experienced. Conducting research in the real world can be a daunting endeavor. However, having a certain status, such as being an insider and sharing gender and ethnic identities, can make the fieldwork more effective and productive. Our personal experiences in conducting research with Thai people in different contexts contribute to understanding them and their real life experiences generally in a cross-cultural context. It is also hoped that this article will be of value to researchers who wish to embark on research with Thai people in particular.

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