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Pranee Liamputtong, *Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 288 p.

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## Book reviews

**Pranee Liamputtong, *Performing Qualitative Cross-Cultural Research*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010, 288 pp.**

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Pranee Liamputtong wrote a timely and appealing handbook, interesting for many of those working in social research in increasingly multicultural contexts. Though this book proved that a “sexy” title is not enough, and in the end, this book turned out quite disappointing, at some points it was unsophisticated in the way research problems were addressed. This book is organized to follow the research process from theoretical and ethical issues before accessing the field to the management of research relationships and dissemination.

The first introductory chapter supports a “healing methodology” in doing cross-cultural research, with praise for a decolonizing methodology to overcome positivist approaches neglecting the agency of the disadvantaged. The attention to respect and collaborative knowledge in order not to objectify people involved in research is a cross-cutting issue throughout the whole book and probably the most relevant contribution to the training of junior researchers. Though, this was done in a quite naïve way, confusing methodological consistency with “rigidity.”

It is impressive that such a support for “interpretation” in social science has no care for the whole debate raised after the Weberian *verstehende soziologie* that would ground this naïve “healing methodology” on stronger epistemological grounds. (I hope that a reference to Weber does not sound too “colonial.”) Among the other weaknesses, for example, there is no awareness of the “blind spot” issues in the analysis of social action.

The risk is an overculturalization of social problems, with paradoxical effect on the benefits for disadvantaged minorities and for supportive actions towards them (one of the main goals this book would like to pursue), based also on a blurred definition of “culture” that focuses mainly on the recognition of colonized and immigrant populations, though mostly not on their condition of structural disadvantage – thus excluding class-related issues from cross-cultural research (in the whole book, just a page and a half is dedicated to class problems). This is an issue clearly outlined by Loïc Wacquant and Pierre Bourdieu in an interesting article on “the New Planetary Vulgate” published by *Radical Philosophy* in 2001.

The second chapter focuses on moral and ethical perspectives involved in cross-cultural research – according to the commandment “first do not harm.” Exploitation, unintentional dangers, and informed consents are among the most important issues covered in this chapter, as is analyzing interesting past researchers (though more in the field of health and epidemiology than on social research). In particular, the chapter focuses on limits of bureaucratic jargon and on alternative practices to achieve a substantial consent by participants into research: it touches thoroughly and reflexively a problem that risks to be underrated.

The third chapter analyzes problems in gaining access and maintaining relationships, starting from the idea that research should be always an action benefitting directly or indirectly involved participants. The author focuses in particular on reciprocity and

restitution as a means of gaining trust. The interesting dilemmas Liamputtong poses are viewed somehow as new or specific to indigenous or minority populations, while an eye on classics of social sciences – like *Changing Attitudes Through Social Contact* by Festinger and Kelley, *Street Corner Society* by Whyte, and the Middletown studies by the Lynds – could help contextualize them in general qualitative sociology (for example, as far as the relationship with community leaders is concerned).

Chapter four is dedicated to cultural sensibility and researchers' responsibility. Many question marks find no answer here: how researchers could deal with the risk of becoming “encyclopaedists” of cultural differences without a method to work on the boundaries of differences instead of the indefinite variability of contents (an issue that anthropologists have been working on for some half a century, at least from *Ethnic groups and boundaries* by Fredrik Barth). A critical assessment of self-identification and categorization processes to overcome reification risks in cultural analysis is needed, but it is missing here. Often, it is not even clear why some issues are included in a handbook on cross-cultural research. Why, for example, is developing a trusting relationship important? Is it an issue just for cross-cultural research? Or are there specific features of this common issue in cross-cultural research? The author does not explain. Chapter five discusses insider and outsider perspectives as researchers, pretending that the external outsider is the most dangerous for the integrity, disempowerment, and oppression of communities. Besides the fact that – again – this problem has a tradition in social studies (at least from the *Polish Peasant in Europe and America*), ignored by the author, she superficially acknowledges risks tied with an insider point of view (few or no words on the observer's blind spot, in-group power asymmetries, and issues related to blurred identities)... to the point that it is unclear why insider research should be considered cross-cultural. Even the attention to ethnocentrism is lacking, since the author prefers to frame problems in post-colonial theories.

The sixth chapter concerns communication and language problems in cross-cultural research, drawing attention to the role that bicultural researchers can play and potential problems with interpreters and translators. Such a problematization helps raise awareness of the need to keep under control these problems such as considering the point of view of translators on research issues, using forward and back translation, and using transcripts in the original language so as not to lose original richness. However, in dealing with this issue, there is no reference to pragmatics of communication, sociolinguistics, proxemics, kinesics, and the like. The seventh chapter introduces some qualitative methods, mainly oral history and focus groups. The preference for these methods as good for working with unprivileged persons (especially indigenous ones) is explained quite extensively (storytelling is a common practice in many contexts, its use sounds familiar to research participants, and it is also a way to give direct voice to the disadvantaged), though no reference is provided on how to analyze resulting qualitative documents in a culturally sensitive way.

Chapter eight focuses on participatory research as a way of empowering research participants and supporting collective action. Besides the quite well-known community-based participatory research and participatory action research, Liamputtong pays special attention to photovoice, aimed at using a visual language to critically portray community needs, using pics as a stimulus for further discussion and as a form of empowerment

and collective restitution. Finally, chapter nine is devoted to writing and disseminating cross-cultural research. Besides the naïve idea of blurring the boundaries between art and science (producing also short stories, poetries, and the like), which turns to be an ostentatious realism with no debate on emic and etic dimension of discourse and blind spots, Liamputtong deals with ownership of research findings and knowledge sharing, suggesting ways to reach at best people involved in research also with unusual dissemination strategies (e.g., theatrical performances and exhibitions).

In the end, the main quality of this book is the hearty focus on ethic issues and participation in social research, though tips, guidelines, and tools about how to practically put into practice the research ethic she supports are very limited-quite disappointing in such a kind of handbook, directed to students and junior researchers. Furthermore, for a handbook that pretends to drive the reader through cross-cultural qualitative research, the examples provided and the literature cited are extremely narrow, mostly related to health studies. Nevertheless, the most astonishing point is that this book looks like decades of history of social studies do not exist. Blurred concepts and methodological dilemmas could be properly framed within reference to the classics that already discussed similar research issues.

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