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Researching out of cultural depth: Positioning within the insider-outsider continuum

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Abstract

In this article I discuss my experiences as an international PhD student conducting research in New Zealand. This reflexive paper will discuss the challenges and difficulties I faced as a novice researcher and as an 'outsider' who needed to understand and embrace the uniquely Kiwi-Māori culture that permeates New Zealand society. In particular, this article will focus on my experiences during the data collection phase of my doctoral research, which examines young children's empathy towards animals in Aotearoa New Zealand. As an international student from Singapore based in New Zealand and as a vegan of seven years, I will shed light on the two challenges that I face as a researcher: firstly, my struggles as an outsider making sense of the Kiwi culture while conducting this research, and secondly, as a vegan researcher whose personal philosophy of veganism runs counter to the overarching socio-cultural beliefs and practices towards animals in New Zealand.

Keywords

Reflexivity; cross-cultural; insider-outsider; ethnography; New Zealand; doctoral research

Introduction

The stranger will thus not be considered here in the usual sense of the term, as the wanderer who comes today and goes tomorrow, but rather as the man who comes today and stays tomorrow—the potential wanderer, so as to speak, who, although he has gone no further, has not quite got over the freedom of coming and going ... his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it. (Simmel, as cited in Levine, 1971, p. 143)

Sociologist Simmel's seminal essay on the stranger perhaps captures the fluid amoebic nature of the researcher's identity in ethnographic research. Most cross-cultural researchers, at one point in time or another, would have experienced some challenges to their identity in the insider-outsider continuum while traversing the malleable boundaries of cultural membership in communities they are investigating. Many qualitative researchers, even those who are researching within their own communities, have discussed their experiences in straddling the dual identities of being an insider and outsider, and the challenges they faced weaving in and out of these roles even within the same



situation. (For examples refer to Breen, 2007; Ergun & Erdemir, 2010; Gregory & Ruby, 2011.) Kusow (2000) explains this fluidity as a product of the situational nature of social roles, in which the “prevailing social, political, and cultural values of a given social context” allows an individual to “occupy an insider status in one moment and an outsider in another” (p. 592).

As a cross-cultural researcher conducting research in a foreign country, the Simmelian stranger resonates with me, encompassing in a nutshell my experiences in New Zealand. Originating from Singapore, I wandered in as a complete stranger to New Zealand to conduct my doctoral research on young children’s empathy towards animals. As Bateson (1979) suggests, “I come with stories—not just a supply of stories to deliver ... but stories built into my very being. The patterns and sequences of childhood experience are built into me” (p. 14). I believe that these stories that shape my life not only frame my perception and understanding of my experiences in New Zealand, but are also a source of tension in my negotiation of my identity as a researcher. At this point, I feel compelled to provide some insight about myself which I believe will later provide a frame of reference for my fieldwork experiences in New Zealand.

My doctoral research on young children’s empathy towards animals is drawn from two areas in my life that I am passionate about—veganism and children. From a young age, I have always been sensitive to the plight of animals. Coming from a socio-cultural background where animal sacrifice forms an integral part of religious practice, I have struggled to reconcile the need to sacrifice a life to show religious piety. Having dabbled in vegetarianism for three years as a teenager, I finally decided to go vegan seven years ago. As my reasons for going vegan stemmed from compassion and ethics, I have a keen interest in issues of animal welfare and in understanding the complexities and contradictions in human-animal relationships. Even though my early university education was in economics and political science and having spent several years teaching History, I went on to do my Masters in Early Childhood for the simple reason of wanting a different form of mental stimulation. In 2013 I became a mother and I was in a privileged position to witness my son’s development, seeing many developmental theories come alive from my postgraduate education. These experiences renewed my interest in children, and I naturally felt the need to marry these two passions and hence I decided to study children’s relationships towards animals, an area of study that has been largely overlooked in academia (Melson, 2011).

Initially, my research aimed to explore children’s empathy towards animals in New Zealand and Singapore, where I am from. At that point in time, I felt compelled to study children’s relationship towards animals in my own country as there is a paucity of research in that area. Furthermore, I believed that it would make an interesting juxtaposition to compare children in Singapore and New Zealand given their diverse geo-cultural contexts. However, in doing my literature review and data collection on children-animal relationships in New Zealand, I have come to understand that even within New Zealand, children-animal relationships are complex, multi-faceted and varied, owing to the influences of entrenched socio-cultural practices and economic factors. Hence, it no longer made sense to include Singapore in the study, as a comparison between these two countries would no longer be meaningful.

Arriving at the research questions

In the beginning I decided to approach the study from a mixed-methods paradigm, marrying both aspects of quantitative and qualitative research methodology. Coming from Singapore, where statistics are used to make research valid and accessible to the public, I believed that investigating quantifiable variables would provide me with the required data to assertively discuss the implications of my study while qualitative data would provide more in-depth understanding of certain participants’ experiences. Hence, my initial literature review was broad, looking at existing studies on children’s empathetic responding. However, I realised that these studies were mainly situated in developmental psychology and looked at certain variables to define empathy such as responding in empathy scales, reported behaviours or facial cues. (For examples refer to Stern, Borelli, & Smiley, 2015; Zhou et al., 2002.) I discovered that part of the problem for the fragmented study of empathy in children was the difficulty

academics face in defining and identifying empathy (Batson, 2009; Coplan, 2011), and so most of the existing studies examining children's empathy tend to investigate certain quantifiable variables rather than consider empathy as a multi-faceted socially and culturally situated construct.

I realised that my initial literature review did not provide me with the necessary scope to investigate children's empathy towards animals in the holistic manner that I wanted to. I felt that merely looking at certain variables and components of empathy was insufficient and would not provide the depth needed to investigate the complex and intertwined influences that affect children's empathy towards animals. Furthermore, in my analysis of the literature, I discovered that several scholars have argued that empathy is a socially constructed, intersubjective experience that is culturally situated (Hollan, 2012; Schertz, 2007). So I felt that my original approach would no longer do justice to this study and decided to utilise a qualitative perspective. As one of the pioneering studies in this area of children-animal relationships, especially in the context of New Zealand, I felt that a qualitative study would provide more scope to explore any concepts or themes that might emerge from the data. My research questions, then, became more open-ended in nature, allowing for greater opportunity to discuss the findings in a more inductive manner.

Because of these changes, I believe that my study would face some disinterest in Singapore. Though this study no longer has the statistical robustness preferred by many academics and authorities there, I believe that the study can be one of the first of its kind to draw attention to the importance and relevance of children-animal relationships in a country that has limited natural spaces and exposure to animals. Perhaps this is the spark that is needed to consider humane and sustainability education programmes in Singapore.

A methodology within the insider-outsider continuum

Breen (2007) argues that a researcher's identity on the insider-outsider continuum is decided by their positioning on the theory of knowledge or epistemology that guides their research. For instance, Breen (2007) suggests that certain perspectives, such as constructionism, feminism and critical theory, are best suited for insider research where the researcher and participants 'co-construct' meaning. Similarly, as my study is investigating children-animal interactions in an inductive manner, I felt social constructionism was especially appropriate to guide my research design and process and allowed for active involvement from participants in creating and shaping the outcomes of the study.

Because I was focusing on young children's routine interaction with and about animals, I decided to settle on conversation analysis as my main methodology. Originating from ethnomethodology, conversation analysis focuses on everyday language as the premise for social action. Through talk, people participate in social actions such as enquiring, answering, rejecting, accepting or complaining (Widdicombe & Wooffitt, 1995). Conversation analysis investigates the organisation of social action and, in doing so, it attempts to discover how people make meaning and construct their daily interactions with others. In addition, conversation analysis looks beyond 'conversations' and also analyses paralinguistic features, such as pauses, as well as non-verbal features, such as gesturing, gazing and posturing, while interacting (Pomerantz & Fehr, 1997).

Hence, for this study, I felt that conversation analysis would allow me to capture both the verbal and non-verbal aspects of interaction between children and animals, amongst children about animals, and between children and adults about animals. To be able to understand the socio-cultural influences in different contexts, I firstly recruited three early childhood centres in different settings in the Waikato region—an urban setting in Hamilton City, a semi-rural setting at the outskirts of Hamilton City and, finally, an authentic rural setting in a dairy farming community in the Waikato region. After selecting the centres, I used a few modes of data collection. Firstly, I set up 12 sessions of observations in the early childhood centre where I observed children interacting with animals on the premises together with their teachers in an authentic setting. These observations were audio and video recorded. Secondly, children were provided with an iPod for them to photograph and document animals they encounter in their daily lives. Children were then provided an opportunity to discuss the photographs with the teacher and researcher. These interactions were also audio and video recorded.

Supplementary data was also collected in the form of parents submitting a video of their children interacting with animals in their home or out-of-school environments, which was also analysed using conversation analysis methods. Finally, participating teachers and parents were interviewed for the study which was analysed thematically.

I decided on these modes of data collection for two reasons. Firstly, as a cultural outsider in New Zealand, allowing children and parents to provide photographs and videos of their home and family environment afforded me an opportunity to glimpse into their lives, making me an insider without having to physically cross any boundaries. On the other hand, in conversation analysis, the researcher takes the role of the observer and interaction with the participants is limited so as to achieve naturalistic observations. This allowed me to position myself at the periphery of the social membership into their community, giving me the freedom to negotiate my outsider status and maintain objectivity whenever necessary.

However, ten Have (2002) argues that in conversation analysis methodology, it is inevitable that a researcher has to use his/her membership knowledge to make sense of the events and practices being observed. In conversation analysis, membership knowledge is often understood as the capabilities of members to respond, understand and behave in ways that are acceptable in that particular society (ten Have, 1999). However, as a cultural outsider of New Zealand, I do not have the necessary membership knowledge to understand the nuances and subtlety in the verbal and non-verbal interactions that the children have with adults and animals. Furthermore, by being a detached observer, I am only able to get glimpses into the cultural practices of this society. As such, my state as an outsider could possibly affect my data analysis. To counter this, I will be relying on the expertise of my supervisors to act as cultural brokers, helping me to bridge the cultural divide and make sense of phenomena that might be puzzling or overlooked by me.

Stories from fieldwork—hidden identity, building rapport

In the course of my fieldwork, I see myself as Simmel's stranger, not quite the insider or the outsider, but someone who flows with the situation, looking for opportunities to negotiate insider status whenever possible, but also understanding that I can never truly capture the immense cultural experiences and knowledge of the community. Naples (1996) suggests that the insider-outsider status is far more fluid than Simmel's stranger, and posits that everyone within the same social grouping experiences varying degrees of being "others". Instead, membership into communities is often based on commonalities such as gender, race and family background. Similarly, Merriam et al. (2001) discuss the importance of considering positionality in the insider-outsider continuum and argue that how we position ourselves continues to shift, especially due to the heterogeneous nature of societies. They suggest that our positions continue to be in a state of flux as we seek commonality or differentiation with 'the other', and these "may at different times outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider or outsider status" (Narayan, 1993, p. 672).

I came to New Zealand with my stories built into me. These stories shape my identity as an individual and position me as a researcher in the field. However, at times, I have come to realise that it is prudent to keep aspects of my identity hidden. For instance, in my fieldwork, I have taken extra care to appear neutral and to never mention that I am a vegan. Because New Zealand has a rich pastoral farming heritage, dairying and beef/sheep farming are still highly regarded. Meanwhile, many vegans have taken to social media to criticise and highlight animal welfare issues in these farming communities. Furthermore, veganism is viewed as a threat to the livelihood of these farmers, as their very survival depends on the consumption of these products. Unsurprisingly, this has led to a lot of friction between the two camps. (For examples refer to Clark, 2016; Walters, 2015.) Hence, I have become mindful of the fact that my identity as an individual is at odds with the general populous, and how I position myself as a researcher will affect my insider access and, even worse, may lead to exclusion from the community that I am investigating.

During my fieldwork it dawned on me the extent in which I was a cultural outsider, not only to New Zealand but also in the early childhood setting. In some instances, because I was out of depth culturally, I found myself not understanding inside jokes that were shared with me and unable to pick up subtexts or non-verbal cues. To cope with that, I often looked for commonalities with the teachers, be it through parenting, gender or leisure activities, to help get past the initial hesitation to work with me. However, I was also faced with a conundrum: What are the limitations in establishing friendships in this country? Should I push to cultivate the relationship or be more aloof and hope for some commonalities to spark a cordial relationship? Furthermore, as a researcher, I did not want to cross the boundaries of acceptable rapport in fear that I would lose my objectivity and also my credibility as a researcher. The following vignette of my experience in an early childhood centre shows the challenges I faced negotiating my insider-outsider status.

I had been conducting observations at an early childhood centre in Hamilton City for about two months. I was working closely with two teachers who were in charge of the preschoolers. As I had already been in the centre for several sessions, I was able to develop a cordial relationship with one of the teachers. For some reason, the centre manager decided to move that teacher to look after the toddlers. When I had a chance to meet her, she shared with me her unhappiness over the move because she felt that it was unwarranted and working with younger children was not her forte. A few weeks later, she talked about how she could no longer assist me with the study because she felt that she could not provide authentic responses as she was no longer with the preschoolers. She also said that an animal-related activity that she did with the preschoolers was no longer carried out by the other staff despite the promises of the centre manager. Her description of the centre manager's actions suggested some friction in their relationship. Instead, she strongly suggested that I raise this issue of the cessation of the animal-related activity with the centre manager for clarification.

As a researcher I felt elated that I was included into her inner circle, and pleased that she could trust me with her honest feelings about the centre's activities. In fact, as a former school teacher in Singapore, and having experienced being a subordinate and subjected to decisions I did not agree with, I could fully empathise with her frustrations. However, on the other hand, I also felt uncomfortable and out of my depth at having to manoeuvre around the workplace dynamics and politics in a place I did not belong and had a poor cultural knowledge of. This is especially so because, in Singapore, it is not the norm to discuss workplace grievances with outsiders. Oftentimes, subordinates are expected to accept decisions made by superiors. My experience, though, appears not to be unique and several cross-cultural researchers struggle with establishing rapport and maintaining the porous boundaries of researcher-participant relationship. For instance, Sherif (2001) talks about her challenges in conducting fieldwork in Egypt where she was both welcomed, as she was part Egyptian, but also criticised for her lack of Arabic skills and Muslim cultural practices while conducting her fieldwork. She describes her challenges having to negotiate and even alter her identity to gain insider access to Egyptian families she was researching.

Navigating cultural subtleties

I have also realised that my lack of cultural knowledge on hidden nuances in communication in New Zealand can be a problem for my data collection. The following vignette elaborates on this experience.

I had been observing a rural early childhood centre in the Waikato region that I mostly visited on Wednesday or Friday mornings. Because the centre was situated in a dairy farming community, the teacher mentioned that a parent of a participating child could bring in some bobby calves for the children to interact with. I was thrilled with the suggestion because I knew that such opportunities were rare and would provide valuable data for my research. When I was discussing with the teacher, I asked if the parent would be able to bring the calves the following week. The teacher mentioned that the mother of the child had broken her arm and things were uncertain at that point. I didn't push the matter and I told them to let me know if there was a change to the

situation. The following Wednesday was a rainy day, and so I decided to postpone the data collection at the centre. In the late morning, I received a call saying that the bobby calves were at the centre since morning and I was welcome to come and observe the children. I frantically rushed to the centre but by the time I arrived, I knew I was too late as the children had already interacted with the calves and were no longer interested. When I spoke to the teacher, I realised that she had made arrangements thinking that I would routinely visit the centre on Wednesday morning. However, because I did not hear from her, I assumed that the calves were not going to be there. Even though the teacher did not say it, I could tell that she was a little upset with me.

In my fieldwork in New Zealand, I find this unspoken agreement to be a challenge for me. Coming from Singapore, we are often clear in our communication, and we will indicate if something is going ahead as planned or otherwise. There are rarely no hidden meanings or subtlety in certain communication such as when information is presented. This experience, unfortunately, is not an anomaly, and as elaborated in the vignette below, my severe lack of cultural depth and cultural nuance in communication has sometimes been an impediment.

As my research looks at young children's empathy towards animals, I came across a rural school that conducts annual hunting and game animal dress up competitions as a fundraising activity. The event is advertised as being open to the public and I felt that it would be a valuable opportunity to understand and document a cultural activity that is very relevant to my research. After ensuring that I had met the necessary research ethics approval, I contacted the school and emailed them information about my research. I then contacted the principal to find out if I could observe and interview some of the attendees at the event. She said that she spoke to the fundraising committee and they felt that because the event is open to the public, they were not sure about who would be turning up. I explained to her that I had the necessary consent forms and visitors had a choice to be interviewed. When I asked if I could just come and observe as a member of the public and not talk to anyone who didn't want to, she could not refuse me. On the day of the event, I visited the venue with a fellow PhD student. We were immediately stopped at the door by two women who came right up to us and blocked us from going any further. They were aware of my project as they had spoken to the principal but they said that the attendees were too tired to talk to anyone and they wanted to relax. When I asked if I could just snap some photographs of the displays without talking to anyone, they rejected me, saying that it was not a good idea without elaborating further. They appeared defensive and confrontational, and I could see that they were unsure of what my real purpose was and did not trust me despite explaining my intentions for the visit.

Even though I did not get to conduct the observation I wanted, this incident was really useful for my research as it opened up many questions on why I was denied entry to an animal-related activity. More importantly, this incident was a stark indicator of how little I know of New Zealand culture. My Kiwi friend who had accompanied me for this event, later explained to me that when the principal hesitated at my request for a visit, she was indirectly rejecting me. However, coming from a culture where we are used to being given clear and direct responses to requests, I genuinely thought that she felt that I did not have the necessary research ethics approval to interview and observe the event. In fact, she was subtly telling me that I was not wanted at the event which I did not pick up on. Merriam et al. (2001) discusses similar issues in her fieldwork where she works together with a fellow researcher who has insider access in her community. When participants were asked to explain certain responses, they reacted with, "Why do you ask this? You should know!" (p. 410). Just like these examples, in every community, there is a certain set of cultural norms and expectations that are inbuilt into the society, and whoever enters this community is expected to understand and follow these cultural norms. In my case, my lack of cultural understanding had become an issue in my fieldwork.

The experience I had above was the first time in my life that I was actively denied entry into a community. This incident is uncharacteristic of my experience thus far in New Zealand, where I have

enjoyed varying degrees of insider access. The ladies who acted as gatekeepers appeared civil but not welcoming. From their body language, they seemed to be protective of their community and distrusted me. While I was there, I observed how cordial everyone was with each other and it occurred to me that they possibly knew each other. It dawned on me that even though it was advertised as a public event it might not have been necessarily so. I believe what I did not understand was that possibly the public nature of the event was limited to people living in the rural community and neighbouring areas. This event was not an open invitation for outsiders to turn up at the door. Seeing me there could have made them defensive and protective of their close-knit community, and also because I did not adequately understand the principal's rejection of my request, they might have thought that I was ambushing them and so they could have been hostile towards me and my friend.

Balancing personal philosophy and researcher objectivity

Another aspect of my fieldwork that I am constantly grappling with is my personal motivations for the study. As a vegan, when I put myself out there in the field, I am constantly reminded of the contradictions in our treatment and attitude towards animals. I have to remind myself to be neutral in my stance and not be too affected by what I observe. Particularly, the following vignette illustrates the challenges I face in balancing my personal philosophy and conducting observations.

In the rural preschool that I was working with, one of the participating children's parents offered to bring some bobby calves to the preschool for the children to interact with. On the day of the observation, two young bobby calves were stationed in an enclosed trailer outside the preschool. Once the children ran up to the calves, the animals were startled and wary of the children. Some of the children were keen to stroke the calves while others were busy playing with the quad bike that was attached to the trailer. One of the children asked about naming the calves and the teacher responded that they don't name them. The child then quipped that it is "85", which was the number on the calf's ear tag. The teacher laughed and said, "85, yes they have numbers." The very next day, I was in another urban preschool observing an interaction between the children and the dogs that the teacher had brought in on that particular day. The teacher kept reminding the children to call them by their names and to use their names when giving commands. In my own interaction with the teacher, she mentioned that these dogs were like her children.

This particular observation with the bobby calves is perhaps one of the hardest observation sessions I had to do. One of the reasons I became vegan was due to the cruelty associated with the dairy industry, and while I was still in Singapore, it was a far-removed concept and only something I witnessed through videos. However, since coming to New Zealand, it has become quite a real experience as several local media outlets and undercover investigations show that animal cruelty does take place. For example, in 2017, Sunday Special ran an investigation on dairy farming and documented how calves are separated from their mothers (Sunday, 2015) and, in 2016, Farmwatch conducted an undercover investigation showing bobby calves being bludgeoned to death at a slaughterhouse (Farmwatch, n.d.). Every time I see a cow or a calf in the pasture, I am not filled with delight, but with a great sadness knowing that they are not destined to live out their lives. I find it particularly traumatising seeing young calves because they are denied the opportunity to be with their mothers who in turn face distress in losing their young. Also, in most instances, bobby calves are destined for the slaughterhouse and so to come face-to-face with these two meek beautiful animals knowing that the clock is ticking on them was very heart breaking for me.

I think the true nature of our treatment and attitude to animals came to the fore when one teacher told the child not to name the calves, while in contrast, the very next day, another teacher was insistent that the children address her dogs by their names. As much as these observation sessions capture the essence of what I am investigating, personally it was hard for me to digest and accept that we treat animals so differently because of the subjective value we attach to them. However, I believe that positioning myself as an insider has given me access to important data for my study and my outsider

status has allowed me to pick up on these contrasting perspectives which might be assumed to be the norm for a cultural insider.

In my data collection, I find myself sensitive to some of the terms and responses that staff and children use in their interaction and the underlying assumptions that lead them to such interaction. For example, while observing a session with children and a teacher collecting eggs from a chicken coop in the centre, the teacher was discussing how it is important for the children to look after the chickens so that the chickens will give their eggs to the children. This idea of an unspoken social contract between humans and animals was not only intriguing but also emotionally triggering for me because it brings to the fore the assumptions and obligations we put on animals. In another instance, I had the opportunity to interview a teacher who was assisting me to pilot the study. In the interview she mentioned that she believes that possums and hares should be hunted in New Zealand as they are considered to be pests to the environment. She felt that even though she kept a pet rabbit at home for her child and treated it well, she was not in any way sympathetic to wild rabbits and had also participated in hunting them. This information was important to me to show how much social and cultural practices have shaped the thinking of people in New Zealand and that I had to be very careful in trying to navigate and understand these socio-cultural practices and behaviours. As a researcher, I face this constant challenge and tension to be not emotionally invested in my study as I fear that I will end up skewing my data collection and the subsequent analysis. I also have to constantly remind myself that what I am observing is a culmination of centuries of socio-cultural and historical legacy in New Zealand, and, as a researcher, I need to be respectful and mindful of the existing cultural norms in this country.

Conclusion

If anthropology is to adapt to the realities of the modern world, it will be necessary to approach the study of all men through a multiplicity of perspectives as these are influenced by different interests and needs. The views of both insider and outsider must be accepted as legitimate attempts to understand the nature of culture. (Lewis, 1973, p. 590)

As Lewis mentions, what an insider and outsider experiences will be different, but equally valid. As a researcher, I have experienced both moments of being an insider and an outsider on the continuum, and these experiences are guided by the cultural norms and values of both myself and my participants. With each interaction, I learn and slowly inch my way to be an insider, learning and absorbing the cultural values of New Zealand, so as to not only gain access to communities, but also to get under the skin of New Zealand's social fabric, to understand what makes this community tick. My role as a researcher in this country that is hosting me is not to judge the cultural practices as an outsider, but to be emphatic to the cultural heritage despite my own personal philosophy. By balancing my 'insiderness' with an objective 'outsiderness', I hope to do justice to my research, and to construct new knowledge with my participants that is representative of their reality.

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