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## **Reflexivity, Positionality and Power in Cross-cultural Participatory Action Research with Research Assistants in Rural Cambodia**

### **Abstract**

This paper draws on the experiences of a doctoral student undertaking a cross cultural, cross language participatory action research (PAR) project in rural Cambodia. Cambodia is a largely Buddhist country with a complex history of religion, invasion, colonization, war and oppression. Despite a democratic constitution, political control and fear of challenging authority are ever present; and all had an impact on the participation and development of this project.

I recruited eight volunteer community health workers (CHWs) and two research assistants (RAs) with an aim to explore methods and challenges faced when trying to improve health with and for community members. Over eight participatory workshops and a two-day training session CHWs identified, implemented and reflected on solutions to community health problems. Simultaneously the RAs and I reflected on the processes and challenges we faced. Creating opportunity for reflexivity allowed for discussion to emerge around culture, position and power and how these were impacting on the research process and outcomes. Established social hierarchical power structures in Cambodia presented challenges to undertaking a PAR project with emancipatory and social change aims. Such structures also impacted on the ability and readiness of participants to be critical and analytical. The importance of the RAs as cultural navigators and the necessity of embracing their situated knowledge as both an insider and outsider is a key finding.

Keywords: Participatory Action Research (PAR), Reflexivity, Positionality, Cross language/culture, Power, Research Assistants

### **Introduction**

Participatory Action Research (PAR) to some extent has its origins in the work of Paulo Freire (1970) who argued that the poor and excluded can and should conduct their own analysis of their own reality (Freire 1970). PAR aims to create a space for researcher and participants to co-produce knowledge and where relevant, action for change. A fundamental issue within PAR is the balance of power and the need to recognize that the researcher and participants both have situated and experiential knowledge that can benefit each other (Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach 2009).

PAR within public health is based on a cycle of action and reflection that aims to improve health through working collaboratively with the people who are most affected, who in turn take actions to improve their own health (Baum, MacDougall, and Smith 2006). The reflection process allows researchers and participants to identify and make sense of an experience, situation or practice with the aim of understanding and improving it through collective discussion (McGee 2002). This paper identifies and critically reflects on the power dynamics which emerged in the research process. It provides a critical discussion of researcher positionality through the process of reflexivity to understand how this impacts the research process and interpretation of research findings (McGee 2002; Finlay 2002; Finlay and Gough 2003; Cahill 2007). Also discussed is the role of research assistants (RAs) as cultural navigators who adapted western methodological approaches to a more culturally acceptable style.

### ***Positionality and Reflexivity***

Positionality is the wider historical, political, economic, religious, social and intellectual contexts of a person that affect both interpersonal relations and qualitative research processes (Merriam et al. 2001; Temple and Edwards 2002). Part of a researchers' positionality is also how they view themselves and are viewed by others: as an insider or outsider, someone with power or who feels powerless, or coming from a privileged or disadvantaged situation. For instance, I arrived into Cambodia feeling like a privileged outsider as a white, middle class, educated woman with funding to travel and research in Cambodia. Therefore, in the interest of negotiating prevailing power differentials and to better understand how such positionalities and power impact on the research process, reflexivity was necessary. Reflexivity differs from reflection in that it is not only a process for making sense of an experience but is an entire attitude, a state of mind (McGee 2002). It involves an immediate, dynamic and continuing self-awareness that reminds the researcher to deconstruct their positionality with the aim of producing a more trustworthy, transparent and honest account of the research (McGee 2002; Finlay and Gough 2003; Finlay 2002). Practical reflexivity such as keeping a research diary allows for the recording of thoughts and experiences, before, during and after data collection and analysis. Such diaries may include choices or decisions made, reasons for these and personal reactions to research situations and relationships (Gough 2003). Asking difficult questions about one's culture, environment, social and personal history helps to deconstruct the ever changing sense of ourselves in the research process (Etherington

2004). Another method is verbal collective reflexivity in research teams or with research participants, which promotes open discussions about how different positionalities are affecting the research. Both methods were used here.

Reflexivity is important for all co-researchers; translators, research assistants (RA), peer and community researchers (Caretta 2014; Edwards and Alexander 2011). Literature on the implications of engaging RAs in cross cultural, cross language research is growing (Flaherty and Starcova 2012; Caretta 2014; MacKenzie 2015) and in some part this can be attributed to a shift in theoretical perspectives concerning their impact on the research process and outcomes (Temple and Edwards 2002). Research assistants and particularly interpreters were traditionally viewed as neutral transmitters of messages (Temple and Edwards 2002); more recently theoretical perspectives emerging from feminist and social-constructionist standpoints situate them as active participants in the research process (Temple and Edwards 2002; Berman and Tyyska). It is now clear that their positionality is likely to have an impact on the research; understanding how and in which way is a growing area of interest. Temple and Edwards (2002) through their own experience of working with interpreters highlight the need to understand the positionality of all involved in the research and have coined the term ‘triple subjectivity’ to describe this phenomenon. They argue that:

*‘Like researchers, interpreters bring their own assumptions and concerns to the interview and the research process. The research thus becomes subject to ‘triple subjectivity’ (the interactions between research participant, researcher and interpreter), and this needs to be made explicit. Rigorous reflexivity in research where researchers are working with interpreters requires an exploration of the social location of the interpreter.’ (Temple and Edwards 2002, P11)*

A lead researcher is most often an outsider whereas research assistants are normally positioned as ‘insiders’ in that they may share similar language, gender, race, geographical location and cultural backgrounds to those of the participants (Merriam et al. 2001; Edwards and Alexander 2011). Being reflexive about positionality including the insider/outsider status of the researchers (both lead and assistant) can facilitate an understanding of complex cultural differences and power imbalances that are often present between researcher, research assistants and participants (Merriam

et al. 2001). Edwards and Alexander (2011) identify that power relations between assistant researchers and lead researchers are fluid and change throughout the course of the research period. They suggest that lead researchers have more power during conceptualization and recruitment but less during data collection when insider knowledge and language are required, and during other phases power is likely to be fluid and changing. Likewise, the power dynamics between RAs and participants will also change over the course of the research process.

### **Project introduction**

This PAR project worked with volunteer community health workers (CHW) in Kratie Province, who were identified through negotiation with the Provincial Health Department (PHD). Their commune (the third level administrative division) is regarded as rural and resource poor; key reasons for the choice. The local Health Centre Chief identified eight possible CHWs from four different villages. All CHWs agreed to take part in the research following a participant information session and signed consent forms. Eight participatory workshops and a two-day training activity took place over ten weeks, which were facilitated by the RAs. The RAs initially were recruited to translate and interpret the CHW's discussions during the PAR process, however their role developed quickly into that of co-researchers as described throughout this article.

To start the research process the CHWs were given cameras to assist identification and analysis of public health issues through the use of visual photographic images. Workshops were facilitated to enable participants to categorize photographs, identify public health priorities and generate potential solutions through action plan development. Regular participatory workshops allowed the CHWs, RAs and I to critically reflect on the implementation process, to re-plan if necessary, implement and reflect again. The RAs facilitated the workshops in Khmer followed by a debrief session to discuss (in English) their interpretations of the workshop dialogue. During the debrief sessions the RAs and I would discuss and agree on key themes that had developed in the workshop. These were reported back to the participants at the next workshop for verification. The discussions grew organically from that point with a few pre-determined open questions should they be required. Data analysis took place in a timely manner with CHWs and RAs and included analysis of written, visual or creative outputs from the workshops such as flip charts, mapping or photographs as well as the identification of key themes from the debrief sessions.

### ***Project Setting***

Cambodia's history and development is complex with colonial legacies and more recent conflicts influencing societal relations. Between 1975 and 1979 under the Khmer Rouge communist regime, Cambodia experienced one of the worst genocides in recent history with approximately a quarter of the population executed. Personal and political freedoms were outlawed and intellectual cleansing resulted in the mass execution or exodus of the educated classes (Chandler 1991). This has left a legacy of survivors who learned to hide their intellect from authority and created a climate of control and fear (Chandler 1991). Following the war, Cambodia began to rediscover and reshape its identity under the auspices of the United Nations (UN) (Chandler 1996), who orchestrated the first liberal democratic elections (Berdal and Economides 2007). Although constitutionally a democracy, the same Prime Minister is still in power today; with reports of corruption, violence and political control (Ear 2013). Since the 1990s international aid has poured into the country and impacted on the development and governance of Cambodia (Ear 2013); making it one of the most aid dependent countries globally (Chanboreth and Hach 2008). Despite economic growth, inequalities continue to increase; the rural poor suffer the most with diminishing natural resources and are often devoid of basic needs (Brinkley 2011; Schelzig 2014). Resulting health inequalities coupled with inadequate public health infrastructure, expensive private healthcare and demotivated, underpaid public sector health staff have resulted in poorer health indicators in comparison to the region (Bourdier 2016).

### ***Positionalities and Power of Researchers and Participants***

#### ***Research Participants: Insiders***

The majority of CHWs worked in the agricultural sector and had minimal education, most only to primary school level. Rural life in Cambodia also means experiencing higher levels of poverty, inadequate infrastructure, poor health outcomes and restricted access to goods and services, including the use of mobile phones and access to the Internet. The CHWs differed in experience, gender, age and social position and because of this there were internal power differentials. Two CHWs held positions of power due to their elevated hierarchical status as elders, deputy village chiefs and their vast experience as health volunteers. During the workshops the other CHWs would look to them for answers to our questions before replying themselves. The RAs also looked to

them for support when they needed to motivate or explain parts of the workshop that were more challenging. Despite the power differentials the older CHWs were not dismissive of younger, less experienced CHWs; indeed, they provided at times much needed leadership skills.

*RAs: Insiders or Outsiders?*

Two RAs were recruited through online social networking sites and by advertising through NGOs and known contacts. Sothara and Sophal were chosen as they were local to Kratie Province, spoke good English and demonstrated a passion for participation and an interest in the lives of their rural neighbors. I anticipated that the RAs would be more akin to ‘insider’ researchers because they were from Kratie and spoke Khmer. The first RA recruited was Sothara who then identified Sophal who was a known colleague whom she felt comfortable with. I considered it important that the two RAs would be happy to work together and this proved to be crucial as they were able to openly discuss the research without fear of judgment from each other. Two RAs were employed to; offer different communication techniques, strengthen interpretation of dialogue through discussion in their own language and to translate some dialogue to me during the workshops.

Sothara (female) has a university degree and good English literacy skills with some experience of working with English speaking researchers as a translator. Sophal (male) also has a university degree and experience of working with English speaking tourists. Both RAs were urban educated individuals with access to a better standard of living, infrastructure and services; and both were computer literate and owned iPhones. The positionality of the RAs varied depending on the viewer. I perceived the RAs as being ‘insiders’. However, the RAs identified themselves as outsiders in comparison to the CHWs. As noted above, they were urban educated professionals, which elevated them in the eyes of the CHWs who called them ‘Teacher’ regardless of attempts by the RAs to challenge this power imbalance.

Edwards and Alexander (2011) highlight that ‘insider’ co-researchers have familiarity of the local milieu and a feel for ‘unspoken codes of behaviour and values’ that help the research process. However, ‘inside’ researchers may also omit certain information which they take for granted as a known factor or omit information that depicts their community in a negative light (Edwards and

Alexander 2011). Therefore the positionality of the RAs as somewhere in-between insider and outsider researcher has advantages from both sides of the argument.

### *UK Researcher: Outsider*

I was clearly an outside researcher; I came from a high-income country, spoke a different language, had access to knowledge and education, was privileged and would leave after the research was completed. I was placed in the same category as a Non-Government Organisation (NGO) worker, meaning that I came with funds and an agenda that the RAs and participants would do their best to help me with. However, the PAR nature of this project meant that the participants would be researchers themselves and so involved in a critical process of analysis and reflection, something not asked for by NGOs.

Initially the RAs and I spent time trying to create an equal environment desirable for a PAR project, however I had to recognize that I visually, audibly and financially represented an individual with more power. This struggle to create equality with participants has been reported by other researchers working in a cross-cultural, cross language setting. Caretta (2014) found that despite all intentions and attempts to re-construct her hierarchical position amongst participants and research assistants, their perception and distorted expectations towards her did not change. Kemmis (2006) states that it is far from easy to establish the social and discursive conditions in a project where people can equally, openly and fearlessly ask and answer questions. Mitteness and Barker (2004) suggest that researchers accept that a common ground is only ever fleeting and that social hierarchies exist and cannot be modified by ideological stances. The RAs position and power transformed, however, as they became cultural navigators and the link between the two very different worlds of the CHWs and my own.

### *Research Assistants as Cultural Navigators*

As described by Karnieli-Miller, Strier, and Pessach (2009), my role as an outside researcher was to create a welcoming, informal, anti-authoritative and non-hierarchical atmosphere in which participants and RAs would be able to explore public health issues, possible solutions, challenges and barriers to implementing health improvements. To provide what Kemmis (2006) describes as 'a communicative space in which emerging agreements and disagreements, understandings and



decisions can be problematised and explored openly'. My understanding on how to create such an atmosphere included being selective about the location used for workshops, preferably (I thought) a politically neutral space was required. However, in the interest of deconstructing power balances, we asked the CHWs where they would like to conduct the meetings. They chose a Mini-Pagoda. We met there for the first meeting to look at the photographs of public health issues taken by the CHWs. The photographs depicted villagers who were described as poor and so were sensitive in nature. Within minutes of the meeting starting at least twenty villagers had entered and congregated around the laptops showing the pictures. The ethical implications were clear and I shared my concerns with the RAs and requested that they politely ask the villagers to leave.

My assumption that the RAs should be responsible for this task highlighted that I had not understood the cultural implications of the hierarchical society of Cambodia. Even though I knew from reading and observing that Cambodia held strong to hierarchical traditions, I didn't understand how that translated into reality at the community level. The RAs told me they could not ask the villagers to leave, it would be disrespectful and they were uncomfortable with me asking them to take control. However, they solved the problem in a culturally appropriate manner by seeking the help of an elder more experienced CHW who was also a Village Chief. She then instructed the CHW who was active in that village to ask the villagers to leave the Pagoda, it was her village and therefore her responsibility.

I learned two things, one that there was a leader amongst the CHWs who held power within the group and two that I had to hand over my own power and trust the RAs to handle situations. From that point I understood that the RAs would facilitate and navigate such cultural differences and would be the conduit for all interactions. Following this session, the CHWs and RAs decided that a better location for the workshops would be the local Commune Hall. Again, I had reservations about using this hall as it had political affiliations and was a government building and public space; Sophal had a different view and commented that he felt that the;

*...commune office was the best place to have the meetings because the CHWs see themselves as the frontline to health in the villages and this is a commune concern. The commune office gives the power you need to have an impact.*

Once again, my background and assumptions differed from those of the assistants. These early indicators of cultural difference helped to shape the research process and assisted my understanding of the power I had unwittingly assumed and the power that I must relinquish.

### ***Challenges to Implementing Western Based Methodological Approaches in a Cross Cultural Setting***

During the early stages of the research, participants actively took part in the photography and planning processes and openly discussed the various challenges and solutions. However, problems arose when trying to explore their experiences of implementing the action plans in their respective villages. The RAs and I began with asking prepared open questions such as ‘How did the plan go?’ ‘What worked well or didn’t work so well?’ ‘How did it make you feel?’ ‘What experiences did you have when implementing the action plan?’ however we received short answers such as ‘it was fine’, ‘no problem’, ‘it is done, don’t worry’. We struggled to get any additional details of what had transpired in the villages and continued receiving one-word answers rather than the rich discussions that had previously taken place. I couldn’t understand why there was a change in attitude and asked the RAs to re-structure the questions. Although they tried they also seemed confused and told me they weren’t sure what I wanted. I felt disenchanted and couldn’t understand what was happening. I had used these questions many times in qualitative research workshops/interviews previously and was confused by the short answers I was receiving here. It was not that participants were reluctant to answer questions but seemed unable to provide detailed, opinionated, critical accounts of an experienced situation. This was at odds with my previous experiences as a UK based researcher.

Through the process of reflexivity with the RAs, I tried to understand what cultural factors might be at play that I was not appreciating. They highlighted that the open questions I was asking were not the ‘Cambodian way’; and they themselves were not familiar with this method of inquiry and struggled to imagine what they would answer in a similar situation. I decided to take some time out for deeper reflection and began to realise that I came from a very different world, one that is more open to offering opinions, feelings, criticisms and reflection. A world that supports and encourages open criticism of governments and services through evaluation and appraisal and is all part of the liberal society and consumerism model in which I lived and worked. Following this

critical self-awareness, I returned to the RAs to further explore their life world and how we could change our style to suit the ‘Cambodian way’.

We tried and tested different communication approaches and found a way through this challenge. I would discuss with them what we would like to know more about and they would spend many hours discussing in their own language the best way to support CHWs in providing a richer report of their experiences. At the end of the project we found that we learned more from the CHWs when questions were not pre-structured and took more of a conversational approach. Sophal reflected:

*...in Cambodia we have a lot of ways of saying things...if you think like ‘this is polite’, ‘this is rude’, there is hundreds of other words in-between. Depending on which word[s] you’re using [depends] on what result you get. So my feeling is that if you try to speak a bit rude sometimes, um, a bit more simple, more cut through, the more conversations we have, the better answer[s] we get....*

*I think most of the thing[s] that we found out for our research was unexpected...unexpected conversations like... that was when it [peoples hesitations] went down a little bit, you know just normal conversation. So when all the question[s] are prepared to ask them, [we get the] same answer but [if] we just speak cut through, we found a different thing all the time.*

At this point the power began to transfer to the RAs and they became more involved in structuring the sessions and advising on what methods may or may not work. The previous one-word answers developed into discussions and the CHWs unveiled a complex difficult experience of what it meant to be a CHW in rural Cambodia.

### ***Unwelcome News***

As the CHWs reflected on the challenges of implementing their action plans they began to show signs of increasing disempowerment. The less experienced, younger CHWs received verbal abuse from the local community and were challenged as to their authority to instruct on health practices. Some were not supported by Village Chiefs who could enhance their authority through association

and ended up implementing the action plan alone without help from the community. These CHWs felt the obstacles were too much for them to overcome and started to doubt their ability to do the role at all. The process of reflection had produced this doubt when previously it had not been an issue. The sessions began to have a negative focus. I feared for the project and questioned my own ethical practices as the information was important to the research but was disempowering for the participants, the antithesis of PAR. Discovery of such negative events has been coined by Kemmis (2006) as ‘unwelcome news’ and is in line with critical PAR objectives, although at the time it did not feel like it. Kemmis (2006) argues that although research interests should strive to make practices more rational and reasonable, more productive and sustainable, more just and inclusive, it is also necessary to challenge the researcher and the participants. Sometimes this elicits ‘unwelcome news’ about the nature and consequences of current situations. I wrote in my diary:

*Today I felt despondent and helpless, I feel their [CHWs] jobs are challenged by culture, lack of support, disrespect and frustration. I reminded myself of the fact they are volunteers and wondered is it worth it for them? Perhaps for the two older, more powerful CHWs maybe, but the younger ones do not seem enthusiastic about their roles. As a researcher I need to think how we can re-motivate the group and move forward.*

The responsibility I felt for the CHWs was an important factor in the research. As an outside researcher there was a need to be flexible and sensitive to the context, needs and changes occurring both with the RAs as well as the participants (Avgitidou 2009). However Kemmis, McTaggart, and Nixon (2014) add that ‘the point of communicative action in public spheres is to allow people to handle unwelcome news individually and collectively, with care and consideration for others’. The key was not to panic and to let this happen. Indeed, the other CHWs with more power in their communities discussed how historically they too had experienced negative reactions from community members. They were sympathetic to the challenges faced by newer CHWs and assisted by sharing stories of what they had done in difficult situations. CHWs were being reflexive and through discussion began to meander through a number of possible solutions.

The discussions, although negative in nature, were situating the research into a wider socio-political and cultural context. Demonstrating how the hierarchical system embedded in Cambodian

culture could be a barrier to changing behaviour, how the structures within government did not support them and the financial inequalities within and between villages had a distinct effect on health behaviours. Still my initial response was concern that I had created this negativity so close to the end of the research period leaving me with moral dilemmas. I postponed the next meeting with CHWs and during this period considered the impact of the research on CHW morale and the role of outside agents in their plight. This led me to seek assistance and advice from the Provincial Health Department. We discussed the situation as explained by the CHWs and asked for their input and help to address some of the problems. The Provincial Health Department were keen to share their own critical reflection of the problems experienced by the CHWs which further embedded the knowledge we had gained from the workshops into a national context. We agreed that a training session addressing behaviour change communication problems would benefit the CHWs. The RAs and I proposed this to the CHWs and they agreed.

Following the training we met as a group one more time where CHWs shared what they had learned in the session and how they would apply this in their villages. Their new knowledge and skills helped to dissipate the previous feelings of disempowerment and equip them with a new tool to tackle some of the challenges they faced. I learnt that embracing ‘unwelcome news’ within critical action research is challenging but should be expected.

### ***Influences on PAR Projects in a Cross Cultural, Cross Language Setting***

Reflexivity continued after my return to the UK and I began following up threads of thoughts that were not fully explored while in the field due to constraints of time and resources. I went back to the literature to develop a deeper knowledge and understanding of the Cambodian historical, political and cultural forces, which I had struggled to grasp when in the field. My reading prior to arriving in Cambodia had been a more general history; with a stronger focus on public health and development. After all that was what I was there to investigate. However, I had missed the ‘wider’ reading which may have enabled a broader and deeper analysis of Cambodia’s past and present. While in Cambodia, I read accounts from survivors of the Khmer Rouge, I visited information tourist areas that depicted the realities of the past and I spoke to many people. On my return to the UK, I read fiction based in Cambodia that provided colorful accounts of the culture and provided an imaginative literary voice. I read books written about religion, power and moral order, about

Cambodia's dependency on International Aid and the role of the UN after the days of the Khmer Rouge. All of these helped me to understand the life world of the participants and what I had observed during the research process. I better understood that critical reflection as a method in itself went against the grain of the Cambodian Culture as did challenging hierarchical structures that provided security through established patron-client relationships such as between a community member and village chiefs or the PHD.

## **Discussion**

### ***Historical, Political and Cultural Forces***

Religion, oppression, politics and a dependency on international aid had all impacted on the research process. Religion in Cambodia is dominated by Theravada Buddhism which encompasses beliefs that current social standards and hierarchies were established in a previous life and should not be challenged (Nissen 2008). Such beliefs authorise those in power to remain so regardless of their actions, and result in a passive approach to 'leaders misbehaviors' and a reluctance to speak negatively (Nissen 2008; Brinkley 2011).

The historical and current political context in Cambodia is and has been one of oppression with often-severe consequences for 'speaking out'. The Khmer Rouge specifically targeted the educated urban population. Under the constant fear of execution Cambodians perfected the art of hiding or banishing independent thoughts and criticisms in order to save their lives (Chandler 1991; De Walque 2005; Brinkley 2011). Moving forward to the current political climate in Cambodia there is still instability, with human rights abuses consistently reported by the media (Human Rights Watch 2015). In 2015 the Secretary General of the United Nations '...expressed his concerns about reports of widespread intimidation, harassment and arrests of civil society actors, the media, and members of the political opposition' (Ki-Moon 2016). Such incidents further enforce a climate of oppression, reluctance to express critical thought and fears of showing negativity towards any governmental activities.

Development in Cambodia over the past 20 years has been largely influenced by international aid through external financial investment and NGO activity. Many NGOs and external donors, although well-meaning, come with pre-conceived ideas of how the development process should

be implemented; however, capacity development as a result of technical assistance has not transpired (Godfrey et al. 2002; Kelsall and Heng 2015). It can be argued that many of these initiatives have constrained the capacity and desire of Cambodians to problem solve, critically appraise or plan for themselves, especially at the community level. NGOs have also re-enforced notions that outsiders have ‘better’ knowledge and so hold power regardless of their credentials.

Once I considered these influential factors I began to understand that the questions I was asking and the request to be critically reflective were not consistent with the reality of peoples lived experiences and norms of everyday life in Cambodia. The CHWs were part of the government health system and the questions I was asking would require reflections on sensitive topics with potential political conflicts and criticisms of governmental management. This corresponds with what Chavez et al. (2008) call “internalized oppression” whereby ‘community partners in research often self-censor and conform to what is presented. They nod their heads and say ‘yes’ in resignation - when the heart feels no - as a result of having been led to believe that they are ‘deficient’ and dare not challenge’.

### ***Critical Reflective (western) Methodologies***

The normal role of CHWs is limited to transferring information from NGO training to the community and not to question a situation or reflect on experiences. There is an embedded culture of pleasing external agencies; hence the response of ‘don’t worry, the plan is done’, which indicated a desire to show success regardless of the reality. The reflective methodologies that are a central feature in PAR practice also did not come natural and were not culturally aligned to the current Cambodian context. Being Cambodian, Sophal and Sothara were able to understand the gaps in communication between my methods and participant’s understanding. It was not until the RAs created a more relaxed environment and particularly when Sothara took over with a gentler more conversational approach that narrative of their true experiences unfolded. Their approach aligned with the work of Harris (2008) with Cambodian development workers who also found that pushing local people to participate can actually bring about negative effects, while being patient enabled participants to become more involved. In hindsight, it would have been better to have more time with the RAs prior to meeting the CHWs to discuss with them Cambodian traits and possible research approaches, but time and availability was a pressure. Without the RAs the

research would have gone stagnant and remained a predominant western model and not true to the principles of PAR.

Meulenberg-Buskens (1996) argues that western constructed methods can be a starting point but that the challenge remains to ‘come up with the most appropriate response to a certain situation, taking everything (as much as you can) into consideration’ by exploring other modes of knowledge construction. This is what Sophal and Sothara did on my behalf and my power focused on ensuring they could do this by providing and facilitating space for them to be reflexive together.

### ***Power Structures***

I arrived into an aid dependent nation where external organisations, from high income countries, had dominated development and held power over government and people. Therefore I too, as a white, western, educated woman from a university, had presumed power that was defined even before I arrived. On arrival, I remained in power as I instructed the initial design and implementation of the research process and methodologies. At this point in time I risked compromising the emancipatory and non-hierarchical knowledge production aims of PAR as, regardless of my conscious desire to relinquish control, my own underlying positionality and project aims made it difficult for me to let go. However, as the research progressed the RAs spotted the errors in my methodological approaches and began to challenge my design and so a power transference took place from me to them. As highlighted by Martin (1996), when power seeks to dominate it is met with resistance and Sophal who was the more confident of the two RAs explained how he needed to challenge my approaches in order to better the research outcomes. He also highlights that it was my ‘story’ planned from my own experiences, he told me;

*... I feel like I don't understand everything in your head, it's like you know, [you] have this experience, you have that experience, you wrote it down so you can feel like, just like you're the writer of a story... I have to guess all the time about you.... You know the [reflective] questions [for the CHWs], but you don't know the [possible] answer, for me I don't know the question [structure], I know the [possible] answer [from CHWs], that's why I try to ask you and to challenge you with some of the questions you said.*



Perhaps it is how such resistance to dominant power structures is handled that determines whether power can be a dynamic and fluid force. Foucault (1980) argued that power is exercised and not possessed, but I possessed power even before the research began due to the context I was working in. However, as suggested by Martin (1996), by exercising less power during the research process, a more dynamic power arrangement of structural dominance and subordination by participants and researchers is achievable. However, I cannot say that the power I held at the beginning was ever fully negated as even in the final reflections the RAs continued to call me ‘Boss’ and the participants referred to us as ‘Teacher’. These were terms they chose, that felt natural for them and were embedded in the social structures of Cambodia. This is a historical feature of Cambodian social organisation which is explained well by Ovesen, Trankell, and Ojendal (1996);

*‘what appears to a Westerner as conservatism in the sense of unwillingness to bring about change is basically a function of the quest for order, for restoring and/or upholding the ideal social and cosmological order which is a prominent feature of Khmer culture and world view.’*

This is counter to the vision of PAR which is to bring about social or community change yet I was asking CHWs to challenge established social order and to disrupt power structures which they had relied on and practiced for years. Challenging, critiquing and reflecting is counter to the Cambodian notion of learning as explained by Tith Huon who comments that ‘in Cambodia, importance is given to recitation rather than to reflection and to the diploma rather than to learning’ (as cited by Ovesen, Trankell, and Ojendal 1996). Undertaking a PAR project within such an established social and world order was challenging. However, the RAs acted as negotiators and boundary-crossers with special insights into the complexities of implementation, changing the research into one that was more culturally acceptable (Harris 2008).

Our views of the power held by CHWs also changed. Sophal reflected that previously he had pitied the rural population but now considered them as resilient; whilst remaining sympathetic to their challenges. I felt the same. This concept of empathy versus pity is echoed by Enrica (2016) who argued that while it is essential for outside researchers to identify his/her privilege, this ought not to result in essentialising the ‘other’ as powerless. Our respect for the CHWs and rural life increased as we learned more about their lives. Furthermore, the older CHWs who had power

established through the Cambodian social structures were good at encouraging their counterparts to engage with the research and their advice was well received. Their age and experience helped the RAs and I to understand local cultural norms and they themselves were more comfortable at analysing difficult situations. They also didn't fear our judgment as some of the younger ones did and were able to lead by example, opening up opportunities and enabling confidence in others to speak openly. The RAs and I ensured that a discursive space was available to facilitate the power of the elder CHWs to support the younger.

## **Conclusion**

The experiences described here have uncovered the interplay between prevailing and changing power structures, the application of western methodological research approaches in a non-western culture, and contextual forces such as culture, history and politics. It is through fieldwork experience that such intricacies were discovered as well as ongoing reflexivity that helped to situate the knowledge into a wider global framework.

The importance of gaining a wider cultural understanding of a country and its people' when preparing for participatory cross-cultural research for me was a major learning point. My focus was more around public health issues, policy development and primary health care on the one hand; and research methods on the other. I had read a lot before I went but hadn't anticipated the need for political and sociological analysis. Often when preparing for a project, time and planning constraints can lead to gaps in appreciating and understanding the embodiment of a country that will impact on the research process. Furthermore, learning in the field is important and part of the doctoral journey, as is ongoing literature searching, reading and reflection in an attempt to synthesize findings within a broader reality. PAR is a context bound paradigm that deals with real-life situations that have transpired and developed over time and truly understanding this is often difficult and sometimes not possible until after the research is underway or even finished. It is through sharing such experiences as detailed above that outside researchers and evaluators may better prepare for cross cultural research.

Engaging a third party such as research assistants in cross cultural, cross language settings in PAR will continue to increase as international research agendas and international aid and charities seek

to monitor, evaluate and learn from programmes. Participatory paradigms and methods are growing in popularity; however, caution should be taken when implementing situated knowledge from high income, stable communities into complex cultures such as Cambodia. More research is required to understand how best to engage RAs in the processes of reflexivity in order to address power differentials and adapt culturally appropriate methodological approaches. RAs may underestimate their own knowledge and power (Harris 2008) and as such require more support to actualize their potential. The employment of more than one RA further helped with communication, reflexivity, confidence and challenging an outside researcher perspective. Finally, undertaking cross cultural research in a truly participatory way is challenging; the use of reflexivity, however, is key to deconstructing, not only, one's positionality and power but the internal forces at play that are embedded before you arrive as a keen researcher.

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