# Doing Fieldwork and Research in Psychology in Rural Thailand

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In this short article, I want to reflect on my experiences from doing fieldwork and research in rural North-Eastern Thailand from 1996-1998. A considerable part of my efforts was aimed at obtaining qualitative data through semi-structured research interviews, and also through observations. I will here mainly focus on the practical aspects of doing research in a culture that is profoundly different from anything in the West, with the aim of imparting some useful knowledge to others. I will not go into detail about my research project, let it suffice to say that it was done as part of my Ph.D. study at the Institute of Psychology, the University of Aarhus.[1]

During the latter half of 1996 I was stationed at NIDA in Bangkok, fulfilling the part of my study obligations that required me to stay with a foreign university for some time. NIDA stands for "National Institute of Development Administration" and is a privately owned university. At NIDA, my supervisor was Suntaree Komin, Ph.D. Dr. Komin is a woman who has both Thai and Chinese roots, and is a social psychologist. She has published a large study and many articles about the psychological-cultural characteristics of the Thai people (i.e. The Psychology of the Thai People, Bangkok 1978 and 1991). I was fortunate enough to persuade her to be my co-supervisor, my main supervisor being Gert Graversen at the Institute of Psychology. But I made regular journeys from Bangkok to the North East of Thailand, a journey of some 850 kilometres, in order to collect the interview data. The data were to begin with collected among industrial sugar workers occupied at the Kumpawaphi Sugar Co. Ltd., a Japanese-owned company located in the town of Kumpawaphi. Later on, I also lived with and collected data from agricultural sugar workers in the town of Ban Nongpai, some 80 kilometres away. Ban Nongpai is a small and typical agricultural village, with some 300 inhabitants, in no special way different from thousands of other small villages in the North East of Thailand. This area is only about an hour's drive from the river Mekhong, on the border of Thailand and Laos.

The industrial sugar workers were factory workers, engaged in milling and refining sugar from sugar cane in a modern factory, while the agricultural workers were occupied as sugar cane cutters, using an age-old style hand implement: a hatchet. My research was focused on comparing the meaning of work, work motivation, job satisfaction and leadership of these two groups.

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[1] The ph.d. dissertation *Meaning of Work, Work Motivation, Job Satisfaction and Leadership* was defended on 22nd December 2000.

Before going to Thailand, I tried to prepare things as well as I could. It was not my first trip to Thailand, I had already travelled twice to the country as a tourist, so I knew what to expect regarding the climate. Preparing oneself mentally for the climate change is of course necessary. Considering the fact that I knew that I would stay for months and end in a subtropical climate, with high air humidity and temperatures ranging from a low 28 degrees at night to a height of 40 degrees Celsius or more at daytime, mostly without air conditioning. I soon found that the best thing to do was to dress like the local people, and to try to follow their customs, for example by avoiding any straining tasks between 11 a.m. till about 15 p.m. The early mornings, from 6 a.m. onwards, and the late afternoons and the evenings were the best times to work. Going to sleep early in the evening was also a good thing, because I could then get five good hours for work in the morning, before the sun neared the eclipse at noon and the heat became unbearable. It takes some time to adjust to this rythm of work, so dissimilar to what we are used to in the West.

The languages of Asian countries will of course always be a barrier to understanding between a Western researcher and his research subjects, especially when the knowledge of English is very limited among the general population. Conducting qualitative interviews means that one must use an interpreter, and take care to train him or her for the work. This was among my first tasks in Thailand, and I have described it earlier in an article in the "Nyhedsbrev" from 1997. I will only point out that I was very lucky, getting a good interpreter at short notice, who helped me with many things during my stay in Thailand and who also deepened my understanding of the country's culture and customs. It is definitely helpful for the researcher to try to learn to say some simple sentences in the new language. Being able to greet others, ask for common kinds of food and drink in a restaurant etc makes one feel better at home and improves one's self-esteem. In the eyes of many native speakers, a foreigner who tries to speak their language, even if it is only a few words, will be more welcome than others, at least this is my experience. On the other hand, there exists no shortcut to grasp complicated Asian languages, but learning to speak a little will often go a long way toward establishing better ties with the people in general and with one's research subjects in special. There are also some terms and concepts that often recur with regard to one's research subjects, during the interviews, and in my opinion the researcher should learn and understand key concepts with the help of the interpreter. One reason for this is that such concepts may contain meanings that are not easily translatable into other languages, and need careful explanation.

Before going to Thailand, I had applied for permission to do research in the country at the offices of the National Research Council in Bangkok. This permission was only given after a personal recommendation to the board of the National Research Council of my supervisor, Dr. Komin. As a rule, academics must obtain the official permission of government institutions like this in most countries, and in some cases it may be difficult to obtain the permission. I want to emphasise that in many countries it is illegal to do research prior to a permit. A permit is often issued in the form of an identification card with a photo, signatures and an official stamp, stating the time limits that the researcher has to finish the research, i.e. data collection, in the country.

The staff of the Kumpawaphi Sugar Co. Ltd proved very helpful in all ways, and indeed far outranged my expectations. For example, the company provided me with a small room at their premises, with office facilities, and even me with a personal secretary during my stay. The staff of the personnel department helped me with distributing questionnaires, and with getting access to people willing to be interviewed. It was my feeling that the interviews were carried out in a relaxed atmosphere, and the people who I interviewed were not afraid of stating their views about positive or negative aspects of their work.

My advice to qualitative researchers planning to do fieldwork in Asia is: be prepared for the unexpected. Often, things are not what they seem, especially when people arrive and see most things through their Western derived cultural spectacles. It is of course a basic matter for any qualitative researcher to be open to the new and the unexpected, but in a cross-cultural context this is no easy matter. For instance, even the smallest sign of anger or impatience is considered a very rude kind of behaviour in Thailand. Also, people do not like to say things straight away, especially not if there is any danger of another person's loss of face or hurt feelings. A Thai will even avoid asking necessary questions if he or she thinks that doing so may interfere with another person in any way - even if the other person is seemingly idle. It is a good practice to spend some time with new friends, learning about the cultural traditions, and to discuss these things with the interpreter, who is the real contact to the people. Naturally, the interpreter will not violate the traditions of the country, but if there is not a clear understanding between researcher and interpreter on this issue, many and possibly costly misunderstandings may ensue.

It is best to start the transcription of the interviews immediately when they are available. I did this in the evenings, and this work often bore fruit because I realised new questions to ask and discovered new things that I had missed during the interviews. Things like this usually come back when one listen to the tapes. If I had not done this, many valuable things would have been lost, but I did not hesitate to change my interview guide as my knowledge increased and my understanding of the subject matter became deeper. Each morning I started discussing the new things with my interpreter, and in common we added new questions to the interview guide. Of course, it also often happened that new and unexpected leads occurred during the interviewing, which were then immediately followed up. But one should remember that using an interpreter is somewhat less flexible that when the researcher speaks him or herself, and it is also more time-consuming to use interpreters. The interviews should also not be so lengthy that they lead to fatigue or boredom of the interview subjects. But the researcher and the interpreter will soon find out how much time is approximately needed with the average interview subject, so to speak, and will thus be able to plan how many interviews will be conducted in a single day.

Staying for months and years in Thailand gradually led to an accumulation in my mind of "silent" or "tacit" knowledge about the country, the people and the nature. It is implicit in the concept "tacit knowledge" that one may have difficulties putting one's knowledge and experiences directly into words. And if an attempt is made at doing so anyhow, the author soon realises that the written text only covers one aspect of what could have been said on the particular subject. Even ten different versions of text, focusing on the same experience, would

probably not cover its essence. Still, the tacit knowledge that gradually gets built regarding a foreign culture or even the nature is essential to a true and a personal understanding of the research matter. It is a basic for inspiration that I often felt like a motivating force to try to grasp the deeper levels of the culture. I will cite one example here. In the evenings, I made it a daily habit to take a walk outside the small agricultural village where I resided. I wanted to see the sun go down, because the sunset was exceedingly beautiful. Often, I took my camera with my, and took pictures of the sunset. The villagers could not understand that there was any special reason or point in watching the sunset, because, in their words, it was always the same, day after day. But to me, it was a new thing, to see the tropical sun go down like a great red disk, changing the whole sky to a pink hue, and watch as the birds and the nature gradually went to sleep in the tropical forest. It awoke in me associations and thoughts about how close these people really were to nature, so close that they themselves did not realise it. For generations, these people had lived in the middle of nature's wonderful beauty, toiling beneath the hot sun, tilling the earth and doing another thousand tasks. Generations came and went, and I was perhaps watching the last generation of agricultural workers, before the age of technology sets in and revolutionises the sugar cane harvesting, as it has already done in many Asian countries.

But to me, the city-dweller from the West, this was all new, and I started to think about man's past and the time before mechanisation and industry came between man and nature. In the urban agricultural village, there is no limit between work and other life activities, it is all a natural occurrence. Industrialisation has separated work from leisure and family activities. I had to experience this on my own body, in a direct manner of speaking, in order to truly understand it. And in order to get into contact with the rural life as fully as possible, I tried my hand at working with the sugar cane cutters, cutting cane and loading it onto the truck. I was nearly dead from exhaustion at the end of the first day, and could hardly walk home in the evening, but it was worth the effort. I explained to the people that I was investigating their work, and I thought that I would not understand it unless I had at least worked with them in a group for a time. After the initial surprise this caused among the people, I was more than welcome into their workgroup and many observations and valuable bits of information were obtained because of this practice. I have no training in ethnography and participant observation was just something that I had read about. But I tried to compensate for my ignorance using common sense. In retrospect it worked out okay (I want to add here that when I later told some academics in Bangkok about my activities with the workers, they looked at me with condescending concern in their eyes, but as the Thai are extremely polite people, they did not say anything. But it was a clear breach of tradition for an academic researcher like myself to mix directly with the working people and going to work with them, especially when one considers the great social gap that exists in developing countries between manual labourers and scholars and other university people. But I was forgiven because I was a Westerner, I think).

It is dangerous for a researcher to become too engaged in his research subjects, especially if he starts to identify with them. In that case, the identification may lead to a colouring of one's results, or of taking sides with one group against another etc. I was fortunately well aware of this, and tried to do my best to avoid it. But my experiences of the Thai rural people gradually led me to respect them a lot. Most of them are quite unimaginably poor, from a Western and

Scandinavian point of view. Many of them had no property except their clothes and a few things that could be put into a small suitcase. Some had no permanent home. There were widows who had to support their children with their bare hands, there were children without parents, there were people dying of illnesses that are easily cured or slowed down with a little money. One example is diabetes, invariably leading to death in a short time, because there is no money to pay for the necessary insulin shots. It is very sad to watch people die in front of you in this way, without being able to do anything about it. Despite all this, it was rare to see a person who was not happy and smiling, people being content with what they had, and finding enjoyment in life's small things and in each other's company. There is almost no social security in Thailand, especially not in the agricultural villages that really constitute a world on their own. I could not help but compare the happiness of these people to ourselves who have so much in the West, but still many of us complain all the time about our wages and find fault with countless other things. The bottom line is that I was inspired with a feeling of deep respect for these hard working and conscientious people, who maintained an attitude of happiness despite the harsh reality of life. But it helps the Thai people that they are not worried about the future, they take each day as it comes, and the question how they will survive tomorrow is not today's problem.

It is my belief, based on experience, that a psychologist doing research in a foreign culture must necessarily mix ethnography with his main field of study if he or she is to make any real progress. I lived for months and years in a small Thai agricultural village, pretty much in the same style of life as the local people. There is no air conditioning, the houses are made from teakwood and people drink rain water that is collected in large clay containers during the rainy season. I learned to eat different kinds of the local food, including things such as ant's eggs and fresh chillies. Thailand is full of lizards, large insects and poisonous, deadly snakes. These creatures are commonly met with in the houses. One learns to take it easy despite the fact that a spider, twice the size of the palm of one's hand, is resting on the wall one or two meters away. When a deadly snake such as a cobra or the "ngu sa", which is black, comes too near a house, it is beaten to death with bamboo sticks by the people, that is to say, if it is noticed in time.

The Buddhist temples and monasteries in Thailand are the places of learning and wisdom, many of them are situated deep in the forest, some distance away from the villages. I was frequently wakened by the sound of striking bells in the middle of the night, the sound being easily carried for long distances. The monks often start their day at three or four o'clock after midnight, chanting hymns to the glory of the lord Buddha. But the religion of the villagers is really a mixture of Buddhism, animism and spirit-worship, mixed with a fair dose of what we would call superstition. In my opinion, superstition is a wrong term here, and should be substituted with the word wisdom. I sometimes visited the monks, and tried to learn from them.

I did a number of interviews with the help of an interpreter with old people who had lived all their life in the village, using a video cam recorder. These interviews were not associated directly with my research topic. I asked the people to tell me about the time when they were young, how life had been before there were any roads, doctors and medicine to be found in these parts. How did the people survive, how did they build the houses, how was work and

life different from the present? Where did they come from, and where were their father and mother born? I keep this information for possible later use.

Last but not least, the researcher must be of a strong physical disposition in order to endure some of the things encountered in the subtropical climate where diseases like malaria are common. I was bitten thousands of times by mosquitoes, and contracted malaria at one time, but was cured. My daughter, who went with me on one trip, was on the border of death from food poisoning, but fortunately she survived, thanks to the staff of a local hospital. By sleeping under a mosquito net, insect bites during sleep can be avoided. Things like these should be expected if one stays for a long time in a rural area, but they are also a part of the general experience.

The importance of living with the people, and accumulating "tacit knowledge" and a gut feeling for the life, country and culture of the people who are one’s research subjects (an obsolescent term) cannot be overemphasised. My advice to others who are planning qualitative research in Asia or other places, where the cultural dissimilarities are great from the West, is to allow for sufficient time. It is impossible to get any significant insight into a foreign culture after a short stay. A better strategy is to visit the place several times, and to realise that any significant project of this kind may take years. It takes time to adjust oneself to things, but in the end the quality of the research and one’s understanding of the research topic will be that much better.