Knowing Otherwise: Affective Actions In Intercultural Communication And Professional Practice

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Abstract: Reflexivity, the critical self-examination of one's role in the research process, has become increasingly central as researchers navigate positionality, power, and methodological bias when working across diverse sociocultural and linguistic contexts. Yet, intercultural research often overlooks the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions of collaboration that shape how knowledge is produced. This paper examines how transnational, multilingual researchers negotiated ontological and epistemological differences during an intercultural research project in Thailand, and how lived, embodied forms of knowing can challenge culturally situated power structures and inform more relationally attuned research practice. Drawing on reflexive autoethnography and narrative inquiry, we reconstruct our experiences from a 2025 interdisciplinary project on trauma-sensitive education in Thailand. Using storytelling and restorying, we analyse two unexpected fieldwork incidents to explore how emic and etic positionalities, affective responses, and intra-team relational dynamics informed our collaborative praxis. The narratives reveal that intercultural research is deeply entangled with affective labour, ethical decision-making, and shifting positionalities. Disruptive incidents, ranging from injury to culturally mediated non-participation, exposed divergent understandings of trust, care, power, and voice. These encounters illustrate how intercultural sensitivity arises through relational reflexivity rather than procedural competence, and how hierarchical cultural scripts shape participation, silence, and agency. The study demonstrates that effective intercultural collaboration requires *epistemic flexibility*: the capacity to navigate between cultural logics, negotiate multiple ways of knowing, and create "third spaces" where epistemological differences are acknowledged without privileging any single framework. This highlights the need for affective awareness, relational responsibility, and reflexive openness in theorizing and practising intercultural research.

Keywords: Reflexivity, Positionality, Autoethnography, Intercultural Collaboration, Intersubjective Knowledge, Intercultural Sensitivity, Heutagogy, and Affective Interactions

1. Introduction

In this paper, we draw upon Mitchell's (1984, p. 239) notion of a "telling case," which has been suggested is when the particular circumstances surrounding a case serve to "make previously obscure theoretical relationships suddenly apparent." In our case, we attempt to show how the traces, remnants, and residuals of lived, negotiated, and embodied experience in intercultural research can provide material for reframing carefulness and trustworthiness, [which] are "simultaneously context dependent and [in which] context [is] acknowledged" (Andrews, 2017, p. 459). The broader problem guiding this paper is that intercultural communication research continues to rely heavily on cognitive and representational models of culture, leaving insufficient attention to the affective, relational, and embodied dimensions that shape intercultural collaboration in practice.

We aim to challenge Western epistemological dominance in intercultural communication studies by highlighting how, in ethnographic fieldwork, cultural differences are navigated through tacit, felt experiences that resist codification yet profoundly shape interactions. Our exploration of an epistemology of relationality required us to dialogue beyond "preferred structural orientations and theoretical interpretations" (Davies & Vicars, 2014, p. 87), and in doing so, we have sought to address a critical gap in intercultural communication research that typically overlooks embodied and affective dimensions. Accordingly, the purpose of this reflexive autoethnographic case study is to examine how intercultural researchers negotiate affective relationality, positionality, and team dynamics during collaborative fieldwork, and how these lived encounters generate forms of knowing otherwise.

Our heutagogical relearning of how affective dimensions influence cross-cultural professional interactions in Thailand's unique socio-cultural landscape draws upon the intra-active and contextual affordances of cultural positionality and social situatedness (Rogoff, 2003) in which "the major agent in [our] own learning… occur[ed] as a result of personal experiences" (Hase & Kenyon, 2007, p. 112). Blaschke (2012, p. 590) suggested:

> "*A key concept in heutagogy is that of double-loop learning and self-reflection. In double-loop learning, learners consider the problem and the resulting action and outcomes, in addition to reflecting upon the problem-solving process and how it influences the*

learner's own beliefs and actions. Double-loop learning occurs when learners "question and test one's personal values and assumptions as being central to enhancing learning how to learn."

Blaschke also listed the following traits of effective heutagogy: self-efficacy, in knowing how to learn and continuously reflect on the learning process; communication and teamwork skills, working well with others, and being openly communicative; creativity, particularly in applying competencies to new and unfamiliar situations Blaschke, 2012, p. 59).

Our telling case, we suggest, reveals how intercultural research can be a performative, affective, and relational negotiation of co-constructed identities in micro-level interactions. In our telling case, we paid careful attention and professional commitment to (inter)cultural sensitivity, which we suggest cannot be reduced to mere cognitive competencies but is sustained through affective intersubjective encounters. In affirming the importance of affective associations, it has been suggested that they, "like semantic ones, are collective as well as individual; they operate through common or similar experience among members of a group living in similar circumstances, …and through shared expectations [and] memories" (Leavitt, 1996, p. 527). We would add that these associations also operate in and across broader sociocultural and political contexts (Yazan et al., 2023; Moradkhani & Mansouri, 2023). In doing so, our contribution lies in demonstrating how reflexive autoethnography can illuminate the affective labour, ethical dilemmas, and relational negotiations that constitute intercultural research collaborations but are seldom made visible in mainstream scholarly accounts.

We propose throughout this paper how, in intercultural research collaborations, questions about the relationship between life as lived and life as experienced are often focused on negotiating the relationships between subjectivities and identities. In our reconstructed narratives, scrutiny has been directed to the affective relationality of team building when working across multiple social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds. To guide the reader, the next section outlines our narrative and autoethnographic methodological approach, followed by the presentation of our three reconstructed stories. We then discuss the key themes that emerged from these reflexive accounts before concluding with implications for intercultural communication scholarship.

2. Methodology: Re-storying

In narrative theory, story is a methodology, and Connelly and Clandinin (1990, p. 24) have noted how humans make meaning of experience by endlessly telling and retelling stories about themselves that both refigure the past and create purpose in the future. Deliberately storying and restorying one's life, or a group or cultural story, is therefore a fundamental method of personal and social growth. Jørgensen and Strand (2012), in their work on collaborative storytelling, have remarked how a participant's narrative is entangled with different stories: "emerg[ing] through a complex intra-play of many different stories [and how] there are multiple stories simultaneously present in [any one] story" (p. 175). Chang (2008) has suggested how core to a storied epistemology is a relationality in which autoethnography positions the self as an extension of the community rather than an independent, self-sufficient being, because "the possibility of cultural self-analysis rests on an understanding that self is part of a cultural community" (Chang, 2008, p. 26).

As a reflexive autoethnographic case study informed by narrative inquiry, our methodological positioning draws on collaborative autoethnography in which multiple researchers co-construct, analyse, and restory their lived experiences. We chose this approach because our aim is not to produce empirical generalisations but to examine how intercultural knowing emerges through embodied encounters that are best accessed through reflexive narrative rather than through traditional forms of data analysis. Autoethnography allows us to foreground the affective, relational, and situated dimensions of our own experiences, and narrative inquiry provides a way to reconstruct those experiences in ways that honor complexity rather than reduce them to codified themes.

Our approach to reconstructing autoethnographic stories that belong to a particular time and place was to apply the "restorying cycle" approach, which Liu and Xu (2011, p. 182) suggest is "a relational methodology [that] carries a sense of expansiveness and the possibility of being filled with diverse people, things, and events in different relationships." In practice, each of us initially drafted written reflections based on our memories, field interactions, and personal meaning-making. These drafts then became the basis for a series of reflexive, dialogic conversations in which we shared, questioned, clarified, and elaborated our accounts. Through this collaborative process, we re-shaped our individual narratives into reconstructed stories that attend to both singular and shared dimensions of experience. Thus, the narrative reconstructions presented in this paper emerge from iterative cycles of writing, dialogue, and mutual reflection rather than from external data sources.

Ethically, we approached the restorying process with careful attention to relational responsibility. Because our narratives involve interactions with one another and with colleagues encountered in the field, we engaged in continuous consent, consultation, and negotiation regarding what could be included. All stories were co-validated within the research team to ensure that no account misrepresented, exposed, or harmed another member's experience or positionality. In moments where cultural or institutional sensitivities were present, we deliberately anonymised settings or withheld unnecessary detail to maintain confidentiality and care.

Our interpretations of the two events were derived from our particular and situated vantage points, and our analyses were constructed from participation in reflexive dialogic conversations. Distinct from the idea of there being one correct truth, Durlak et al. (2011) have suggested how critical self-reflection of individual lived experiences positions storied encounter(ing) as a critical counterbalance to hegemonic methodological discourses, one that requires cultural expressions of affirmation and relational trust to facilitate "the narrative process of telling and retelling" (Liu & Xu, 2011, p. 183). Our restorying of events thus situated us in a methodological "contact zone"… "a material and metaphysical in-between space for the intersection of multiple and contested stories" (Somerville, 2010, p. 338).

Storytelling is, we have found, inherently messy, and in our showing of events, the production of our stories did not subscribe to, nor were tamed by, ill-fitting codes or categories. Our thinking about our learning was framed by our shared experiences. As we stumbled together through what others might term fieldwork data, we found, amid what some may describe as methodological messiness, that in our reconstruction of the events, there can be no tidying of the disorderliness of affective encounter. Phrases such as self-indulgence, narcissism, bias, and generalisability can haunt the imaginary of narrative scholars,

but in our stories, as we examined the domains of private scripts and public discourses, we rehearsed our understandings of the two events by thinking with our situatedness and relationality.

Mediative thinking (Heidegger, 1966) became profitable for reconstructing and being beside the process, affording us an interrogative position from which to trace how our affective responses migrated across epistemic discourses, practices, and ontological positions. Being beside offered a "grid of intimacy" (Trow, 1981) that facilitated a flow of interpretations. As we commented on each other's perceptions and supplemented each other's telling, the process of creating cooperatively evolved texts required working together to uncover a collective understanding of our preferred way of being within interactions with others and self. Corradi (1991, p. 108) commented on this approach: "…each… is understood by the other and altered by the interaction with the other."

To prepare the reader for the next section, we emphasise that the narratives presented in our findings are not treated as data to be categorised but as lived accounts that reveal how meaning, relationality, discomfort, and learning unfolded in the field. The stories, therefore, function as both method and material, allowing us to explore how intercultural research is experienced, negotiated, and made sense of through affective, embodied, and relational processes.

3. Findings: Our stories

3.1. Mark - Unmoored, Unknowing, Undone

Gacel-Ávila, (2005) Gacel-Ávila (2005) has spoken of the cultivation of perception in ethno-relativist encounters, which Shor (1993, pp. 30–31) suggested has much to do with "what ordinary people do every day, how they behave, speak, [and] relate." Having lived in Thailand for several years, I thought I had a passable, albeit relative, understanding of Thai culture. However, two events that occurred during the fieldwork for a project on trauma in Thai primary schools reminded me that perspective is both positional and precarious, and that pre-conceived knowledge can easily become unmoored.

In my vignette, I initially turn to my falling off a bungalow balcony on the second day of my research trip to narrate the effects, effects, and "biographical disruption" (Sparkes, 1996, p. 46) that it induced within the team. Lying on the floor at midnight, feeling the blood from the gash on my head seep and stain the concrete, I recall waiting for the ambulance to arrive, surrounded by anxious Thai colleagues, while asking myself how I had become accidental "data."

Richards and Schmidt (2002, p. 474) have suggested that "a person's sense of self is formed as a result of contact and experiences" (re)produced through intra-actions with "other beings, entities, or phenomena" (Grant, 2014, p. 545). Falling off a balcony in a rural Thai province at midnight became more than an unfortunate accident: it also situated the team to consider how "the body is the site, or place where the 'truth' of identity is revealed" (Fraser, 1999, p. 109).

Despite reassurances to the contrary, I felt I had become an instant liability to our project. Under the probing fingers of the doctor as he examined my skull for signs of fracture in accident and emergency, I wriggled and squirmed as my Thai colleague translated his directions and added a few of her own, ensuring I did not collide too much with the binaric and hierarchical relations of insider/outsider, native/foreigner.

Doubt as to whether I would be able to join the project the next day lingered in the air like a spectral presence. My anchorage as a researcher and team member had, I felt, become unmoored. Wheatley (1994, p. 422) has explained that "ethnographic relations, practices, and representations, as well as the metaphors we use to make sense of them, are contextually contingent, their character is shaped by whom we look at, from where we look, and why we are looking in the first place." My fall, in both a literal and metaphoric sense, became articulable by, and in, the heuristic "triadic structure of [how] words, [can make known] knowers, and things" (Barad, 2003, p. 813).

After my fall, I experienced considerable vertigo and required daily hospital visits to have the dressing changed. I felt increasingly responsible for, and reterritorialized by, the extra work I was causing for the other team members. St. Pierre (1997, p. 410) describes how "once a shift in subjectivity occurs, the rest of the world shifts as well, and it is impossible to go back," and as I remained unsure how to confess my feelings, my thoughts converted into embodied action during the second fieldwork session in the North of Thailand.

My ability to fully concentrate was becoming exacerbated by increasing dizziness, which resulted in my Thai colleagues insisting I undergo a CRT scan. This involved being accompanied to hospital by a Thai colleague, waiting for an appointment with a neurologist, and receiving a brain scan. The inconveniences I was generating by requiring daily medical attention were now, I felt, affecting the fieldwork by compromising my ability to adequately perform the expected roles. St. Pierre (2011, p. 613) notes that "[t]he destruction of even one concept/category can disrupt other related structuring concepts/categories," and on the first day of the second phase of the fieldwork in another province, two of the school principals absented themselves from the sessions. I assumed their absence was due to my faltering and impaired performance. Sitting with my colleagues over lunch, I tentatively asked why they thought this had happened. I already felt I had let the team down and did not know how to broach the issue of the principals' absence with my Thai colleagues.

As Bourdieu (1991) reminds us, "every speech act and the reception it receives are marked by the social conditions of their production, and by the relation of the power between the speaker and the listener" (p. 37). In that moment, everything I thought I knew about cultural intersubjectivity and relationality became abstract, and I sat with my silence. On later reflection with my Thai colleagues, I came to understand how silence may reflect culturally embedded scripts of discomfort. Recognising such contours is critical for researchers aiming to foster culturally responsive participation, one that is attentive not only to who speaks, but also to the conditions under which voice is made possible or constrained.

3.2. Nuntiya: The 'In-Betweenness' When Negotiating Entangled Cultural Relation(S)

The decision to initiate an interdisciplinary research project (namely, a trauma-sensitive classroom model in Thai schools), one that brought together scholars across linguistic, disciplinary, and cultural boundaries, launched me into a journey that positioned me as being in-between as a gatekeeper, a workshop facilitator, and a team member. While the role necessitated me to constantly and continuously meditate on and reflect upon every action and interaction, it became even more complicated due to my

concurrent position as the leader of a research institute. Operating within these two overlapping levels of gatekeeping, institutional and project-based, compelled me to confront the fluidity and multiplicity of my own positionality.

The very first act of gatekeeping was the formation of the research team, a process that was itself a delicate negotiation of trust, positionality, and carefulness. I brought together two Thai scholars, one from the field of health sciences, whom I invited to serve as the principal investigator (PI), and another from translation studies, alongside two Australian collaborators, both experts in trauma-informed education. Apart from myself, who had cultivated longstanding personal and professional relationships with each of them individually, the four of them did not share such histories. More importantly, the three of them were complete strangers to the prospective PI. This lack of shared background meant that mutual trust could not be assumed. My role, therefore, was not just that of a gatekeeper but of brokering a relational bridge to assure trustworthiness, manage expectations, and navigate the unspoken tensions that often emerge within interdisciplinary and intercultural contexts.

Although all of the team members placed a considerable amount of trust in my selection, I had to inform and assure the Thai team of the Australians' scholarly integrity, cultural humility, and commitment to co-creation rather than imposition, and vice versa, prior to the first team meeting. This was a subtle gesture of building a relational bridge among the team members. Notably, in this process, articulating a shared goal, why this interdisciplinary study was timely and necessary for addressing concerns around student mental health and teacher burnout in contemporary Thai education, was as important as clarifying the roles of the Thai and Australian researchers. A critical part of this gatekeeping involved navigating how to leverage the Western-dominated trauma education framework that the Australian collaborators would bring to the project. The challenge was to position their contributions as informative rather than overriding, ensuring that their perspectives enhanced rather than displaced local educational realities. This required establishing a clear and mutual standpoint on how a linguistically and culturally responsive practice would underpin the research process. In this sense, team formation was not merely about assembling expertise, but about setting the groundwork for interpersonal, intercultural, and inter-epistemic trust. Gatekeeping here was both logistical and relational, bridging knowledge and cultural gaps in intercultural interactions.

The two incidents during the cross-cultural fieldwork made me realise that gatekeeping also involved dimensions of care and carefulness. The first incident occurred in Surin province, in northeastern Thailand, during a two-day trauma education workshop conducted by our team (the Australian researcher, Mark, and two Thai researchers) with twelve participants (three school principals and nine teachers). Although I was not physically present, my role as a gatekeeper became even more salient. When I learned that Mark had fallen from a balcony and sustained a serious head injury, it triggered a moment of deep reflexivity. My gatekeeping role expanded beyond that of a relational bridge and facilitator of inter-epistemic trust, encompassing ethical responsibilities embedded in international research collaborations. The actions I took during and after Mark returned from the fieldwork blended professional responsibility with personal care.

While my immediate concern was his well-being, I also felt accountable for the team's challenge in navigating the unanticipated situation. Since the workshop had to proceed without Mark, I supported the team remotely through careful re-planning to ease their burden. Although my Thai colleagues continued to conduct the workshop as (re)planned, my concern for the safety and recovery of our injured collaborator remained with me, prompting reflection on how best to respond. In that moment, the idea of carefulness expanded beyond procedural attentiveness to include a deeper sense of care and accountability. As a gatekeeper who had invited a foreign collaborator into a local context, I bore implicit responsibility for his safety. Mark's injury brought that obligation into focus. I insisted that he receive a thorough medical examination upon returning to Bangkok and arranged for my research assistant to accompany him for daily wound care, following the doctor's instructions. Through this experience, I realised that carefulness is insufficient without care, a situated, attentive practice that resists abstraction and is rooted in the messiness of human vulnerability. Gatekeeping, then, entails an ethics of care and carefulness, involving the negotiation of institutional, interpersonal, and even medical boundaries. Embedded in this role is what Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) describes as a form of relational responsibility that requires acknowledging the intra-actions and entangled relations that constitute the field and shape the responsibilities we carry within it.

The second incident occurred during another two-day workshop in Chiang Mai, in northern Thailand. This time, I co-facilitated the workshop with Mark and Mathuros. The workshop followed the same design as the previous ones and included twelve participants, three school principals and nine teachers. Although all participants were present at the venue, two of the principals chose not to attend the first-day sessions despite having previously agreed to participate. This seemingly minor disruption created ethical tension. Mathuros, concerned about the implications for the workshop's credibility, consulted me and Mark to decide how best to proceed on the second day. Drawing on my experience in Participatory Action Research (PAR), I suggested we ignore them, as their lack of engagement indicated an unwillingness to participate. Investing time and energy in convincing individuals who had shown no interest would not align with the core practice of PAR, which is grounded in voluntariness (Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Moreover, it could risk coercion or misrepresentation.

My response reflected how my gatekeeping practice involved ethical screening not of people but of intentions. By choosing not to pressure the non-attending principals, I recognised non-participation as a legitimate form of expression even if it diverged from what researchers might typically expect. Particularly in contexts where participation is layered with power dynamics, unspoken norms, and hierarchical values, it becomes crucial to interrogate what counts as participation and who benefits from being counted (Torre & Fine, 2006). The dual role of gatekeeper and researcher requires the ability to discern both the willingness and the ethical presence of participants. This careful discernment calls for sensitivity to interactional and intercultural cues as well as the ability to resist the pressure to "fill the room" for the sake of representational legitimacy.

The incident also highlighted the importance of responsive collaboration. My colleague's concern was valid and grounded in her commitment to the research implementation. However, our ability to collectively pause, discuss, and reflect enabled us to navigate the tension between methodological rigour and ontological responsiveness while reaffirming the participatory ethos of the project. In this way, intercultural gatekeeping became an act of shared ethical interpretation, a co-negotiated practice grounded in trust, mutual respect, and open dialogue.

Throughout the research process, my in-betweenness facilitated not only intellectual dialogues across academic paradigms but also embedded cultural sensitivity into the micro-level interactions within the research team and between the researchers and Thai school principals and teachers across the four regions of Thailand. At times, I found myself translating not only

languages but also expectations, emotional rhythms, and working cultures. This role drew me into a continuous act of mediation between research paradigms, institutional priorities, and cultural sensitivities. Simultaneously, I found myself entangled in overlapping systems of power as someone positioned to oversee a research institute, coordinate an interdisciplinary project, and hold space for differing assumptions about knowledge, engagement, and interculturality.

Situated both within and outside various circles, Thai and international, academic and administrative, researcher and cultural insider, my gatekeeping was never neutral. Rather, it became an ongoing negotiation shaped by trust, cultural logics, and an ethical responsibility to maintain team harmony while also ensuring the success of both the research project and broader institutional goals. Constant reflexivity not only on my role as a gatekeeper but on how and why I performed that role guided me to move between, within, and across shifting boundaries of power in both academic and administrative worlds.

The gatekeeping function was thus fluid, requiring me to interpret and reinterpret my actions in response to the dynamics of the research team, institutional demands, and the cultural landscapes in which we operated. Being in-between also meant managing uneven power relations, often subtle but consequential. My choices, what to translate, what to filter, what to emphasise or soften, shaped how knowledge was produced, how interactions were interpreted, and how relationships were sustained. This position required a careful balancing of cultural and professional sensitivities, i.e. navigating concerns around ownership, epistemological authority, positionality, and agency.

My position as cultural mediator involved making constant ethical judgments about whose voice to centre, when to speak, when to step back, and how to manage differing expectations. Ultimately, I learned that in cross-cultural research, affect and relationality are about "holding space between multiple worlds," enabling navigation through complex power dynamics where Western and Thai epistemologies intersect. Intercultural practice often unfolds through felt experiences rather than formalised protocols, requiring continuous attunement to unspoken cultural cues and emotional undercurrents.

3.3. Mathuros: Inside Out/ Outside In: Taking Care In The Field

In our interdisciplinary project to develop a trauma-sensitive classroom model across four culturally and linguistically diverse regions of Thailand, I served as principal investigator. The initiative brought together a multinational team of researchers, including Australian experts, Thai researchers, and local stakeholders, i.e., school principals and teachers. My role was multifaceted: I was responsible not only for ensuring that the project met the expectations of the funding agency but also for safeguarding the ethical, emotional, and relational fabric of the field space. From the outset, I found myself oscillating between scientific oversight and deep emotional engagement. As a Thai researcher with long experience in international collaboration, I was familiar with navigating differing cultural logics. Yet this project asked more of me, it demanded attunement to the subtleties of voice, silence, body language, and the unspoken. I became increasingly aware of the tensions that could arise when globally informed intervention models intersected with localized realities. This positioned me at the nexus of affective interaction and intercultural professional practice, where managing emotions and relationships was as critical as managing the research design.

In the field, rather than merely coordinating translations, I entrusted a Thai team member to act as a cultural interpreter, a bridge capable of navigating the soft spaces between speech and meaning, between global paradigms and local priorities. Their role was not simply to translate English into Thai, but to read the room, sense unease, and advocate for clarity, dignity, and cultural fit. I reminded myself that even within Thailand, regional differences in dialect, protocol, and pedagogy were significant. I had to lead from a place of humility and deep cultural awareness, ensuring that no participant felt overshadowed, tokenized, or unseen. This was foundational to affective interaction: prioritizing emotional safety and relational trust as the bedrock of our intercultural work.

Two moments during fieldwork deeply challenged and ultimately deepened my commitment to inside-out and outside-in reflexivity, illuminating the complexities of affective and intercultural leadership. After a successful first day of workshops in the northeastern region, I returned to my room in the evening to prepare for the following day. Around midnight, a research assistant knocked urgently on my door: our Australian expert, Mark, had fallen and lay outside his room. I rushed to find him bleeding from a head injury. My reaction was instinctive; I abandoned all research concerns and focused solely on his well-being. We called 1699, Thailand's emergency hotline, and I accompanied Mark to the hospital. In that moment, I was not a principal investigator; I was a colleague, a caregiver, and a human being concerned for someone's life. After medical staff confirmed Mark was stable but needed 24-hour observation, I made the unilateral decision to switch the second day's workshop to Thai, aiming to reduce pressure on the team and allow space for Mark's recovery.

To my surprise, Mark expressed his determination to lead the next day's session, insisting he felt well enough to proceed. His commitment prompted deep self-reflection. While I had acted with care, I realised I had made a decision for him rather than with him. Despite my intention to protect, I had unintentionally overridden his agency. This experience reminded me that ethical care includes consultation, not just protection. In moments of crisis, the authority I hold as a PI must be wielded with collaborative humility. Next time, I will ensure that critical decisions, even those made under stress, involve open dialogue, especially when they affect the roles and dignity of team members. This incident became a critical lesson in affective interaction. My initial protective response was rooted in a care ethic, but it overlooked the intercultural dimension of professional practice: respecting a colleague's autonomy and professional commitment, even in crisis. True care in this context required not only empathy but dialogue, a mutual negotiation of needs and roles that honoured his agency.

Later in the northern region, a different kind of disruption occurred. Two school executives, key figures in the project, quietly removed themselves from the afternoon workshop sessions. Although they remained within the venue, they chose not to participate. My initial response was visceral: a mix of frustration, confusion, and concern for the project's success. As I sat with these feelings, I realised I was projecting assumptions. Were they disinterested? Offended? Rejecting the intervention? Had we done something wrong? Instead of retreating into speculation or exerting control, I chose to engage them informally and discovered that their absence was not a statement about the project but a response to a pressing school matter they shared responsibility for. The following day, they rejoined fully, participating with openness and insight. This encounter illuminated the dangers of overinterpreting silence. It taught me that in fieldwork, absence is not always a sign of disengagement. People's

lives are complex, and their participation is shaped by factors beyond the scope of the project. This moment deepened my reflective discipline to pause, question, and listen before forming a judgment.

Here, the intercultural professional practice was to resist the affective impulse of frustration and instead employ curiosity. By choosing inquiry over assumption, I engaged in an affective interaction that repaired a potential rupture. It underscored that effective intercultural practice requires interpreting behaviour through both cultural and personal lenses, not just a project-centric one.

These experiences underscored the deeper truths of interdisciplinary and intercultural research. I came to see emotional labour not as peripheral but as central to ethical leadership. Holding space for uncertainty, discomfort, and emotion became just as important as meeting project deliverables. Reflexivity emerged as a crucial tool, enabling me to pause, reflect on my assumptions, examine my position of power, and cultivate spaces of ethical clarity and relational repair. Rather than asserting control, I learned to privilege dialogue, especially in moments of tension or crisis. Shared decision-making not only honoured the agency of my colleagues but also fostered mutual trust and respect. Importantly, I began to approach moments of silence or withdrawal not with judgment but with curiosity. This shift opened pathways for connection, understanding, and healing. In this project, the work of research was inseparable from the work of the relationship. Taking care in the field meant staying present with ambiguity, honouring the lived complexities of everyone involved, and holding myself accountable both internally and externally. Through this reflexive posture, I learned to lead not only with competence but with care.

Simultaneously, I carried the expectations of external funders, institutional metrics, and the assumptions of the Australian team. They brought with them pedagogical frameworks, research timelines, and funding justifications that had to be translated linguistically, contextually, and ethically into the lived experiences of Thai classrooms. This meant encouraging the Australian team to slow down when necessary, simplifying academic jargon without diluting its meaning, making space for teachers' knowledge to be foregrounded, not as recipients but as co-creators of the trauma-sensitive model, and advocating for voluntary, respectful participation while resisting extractive or overly directive approaches. As the workshops unfolded, I often found myself managing competing imperatives: institutional efficacy versus cultural fit, global frameworks versus local realities, professional detachment versus human connection.

My reflexive stance required constant shifting, zooming out to see the wider picture, then zooming in to attune to subtle shifts in energy, trust, and emotional safety. This ongoing negotiation was the essence of my intercultural professional practice. Each decision, from pacing to language choice, was an effective interaction designed to build trust and ensure the research was not merely on the participants but with them. Through this reflexive posture, I learned to lead not only with competence but with care.

4. Discussion

4.1. Knowing Otherwise: Intra-Subjectivity And Intercultural Sensitivity

Reflecting on how we cared for both the research team and participants, and how we navigated the research process, reveals the complex interplay between our positionalities and the intra-subjectivities shaped by disciplinary defaults and cultural sensitivity. Each team member played a vital, though different, role in ensuring the team's well-being and the smooth operation of our bilingual workshops. Yet, despite our best efforts, moments of disruption exposed the fragility of even the most careful planning.

In our thinking about trust, power dynamics, and cultural sensitivity in cross-regional Thai research contexts, we aimed to contribute to intercultural communication scholarship by demonstrating how embodied knowledge operates within professional research practices. Our lived experiences indicate that navigating "cultures within a culture" demands heightened cultural awareness and sensitivity from both Western and Thai researchers. Professional communication within such spaces is therefore not a set of transferable skills, but a dynamic process of negotiating multiple epistemological frameworks simultaneously. This necessitates what Holliday (2011) terms "critical cultural awareness", the ability to recognize how cultural scripts shape interactions across diverse contexts, fostered through a reflective and open-minded approach to intercultural communication that resists the reproduction of stereotypes and prejudices.

4.2. Taking Care When Troubling Trust - The Politics Of Presence And Absence

The trouble of trust arose repeatedly as a theme throughout our research encounters, revealing how differently it was understood and enacted within the team. While building trust was central to the participatory process, its meaning diverged according to each member's epistemological stance. For those operating from a constructivist cultural default, trust was relational and affective, emerging through mutual recognition, ongoing collaboration, and a shared commitment to the process (Freeman et al., 2009). In contrast, for others trained within positivistic frameworks, trust was procedural and structural, anchored in clearly defined roles, measurable outcomes, and standardized protocols. These divergent intra-subjectivities of trust intersected with the enactment of cultural sensitivity, shaping how the research was navigated and participants' identities were recognized across contexts (Kim, 2015; Barad, 2007).

Contoured by geopolitical positionalities of belonging to different regions in Thailand, the performative tensions that manifested in the field invited us to reimagine trust as a central component of a politics of belonging and relational entanglement, one that demands (inter)cultural sensitivity and reflexive engagement across cultural and epistemic boundaries.

In our case, the dynamics of presence and absence involved ingrained power relations within the inherently hierarchical nature of Thai culture (Doungphummes & Sangsingkeo, 2022). From this onto-epistemological perspective, status and power are not abstract social variables but lived and embodied realities. In particular (sub)cultural contexts, academic affiliation carries significant institutional capital, commanding trust, respect, and cooperation within the research process. In others, however, this same status may hold little influence or recognition. What may appear as non-participation can thus be read as a refusal to inhabit a redefined social role that undermines the everyday performative power of participants. Researchers operating from an etic standpoint are often more attuned to these layered positionalities and the cultural dynamics at play, allowing them to recognize non-participation not as resistance per se, but as a complex negotiation of power, identity, and belonging.

4.3. Intersection Of Gender And Linguistic Abilities

As three (out of four) workshops were conducted in both Thai and English (with Thai interpretation), participants' linguistic ability became a significant factor influencing their degree of interaction. When it intersected with gender, language competence subtly shaped who spoke and who remained silent. Some female participants, particularly those with English-speaking skills, engaged actively and vocally. Even when the discourse shifted into Thai, many women remained reluctant to speak, suggesting that silence was not merely a function of linguistic ability.

In contrast, many male participants were passive during the English segments but displayed greater ease asserting their views when the discussion moved into Thai. These dynamics suggest that linguistic capital intersects with gendered expectations, influencing not only levels of participation but also how participation is socially negotiated in mixed-gender settings. In this context, the ability to articulate in English symbolized power, allowing some female participants to assert their viewpoints within Thai patriarchal norms (Doungphummes & Sangsingkeo, 2022).

Recognizing these contours is critical for researchers aiming to foster culturally responsive participation, one that is attentive not only to who speaks but also to the conditions under which voice is made possible or constrained. Clearly, while we placed great emphasis on managing the flow of a mixed-language workshop, we overlooked the significance of participants' gender identities and how these intersected with linguistic participation.

In retrospect, what seemed like a straightforward methodological decision, grouping teachers and principals in the same participatory space, was a culturally consequential act. Our intention to foster inclusive dialogue inadvertently disrupted entrenched hierarchies of authority and respect. What we saw as an opportunity for shared learning was experienced by some participants as misrecognition of status. Here, onto-epistemological status collided with local social norms, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity in navigating positionality across various spaces, disciplines, and social orders. In this space of epistemological encounter, learning how to be present, responsible, and responsive across differences was imperative.

Academic status and voice did not seem to carry weight in the second fieldwork site in Chiang Mai, where two school executives chose to absent themselves from the sessions. Although they mentioned school matters as the cause of their absence, we noticed that power dynamics appeared to hold more sway than institutional affiliation. As principals, they occupy the highest rank in their schools, but participation in our sessions positioned them as equal to their subordinate teachers. This flattening of hierarchy, whether intentional or not, was likely experienced as a diminishment of their usual authority. These shifts in positional power disrupted the performativity of everyday relationships. Even when care was taken to acknowledge their formal roles, it may not have been sufficient to counter the broader cultural scripts that emphasize visible displays of rank and deference.

The absence of the principals can thus be read not as disengagement but as an assertion of their positional authority. Their 'dispositioning' from the role of institutional leaders to that of equal participants disrupted the tacit hierarchies they were accustomed to occupying. This underscores how deeply cultural norms of hierarchy and relational positioning can shape, and sometimes undermine, democratic participation in research.

5. Conclusions

Griffiths (1998) has suggested that collaboration can lead "to better knowledge" and is ethically desirable, as educational research is better conducted "with" others. Our reconstructed stories of intercultural collaboration show that in the relationality of team building, and in the responsibilities that arise when working across multiple social, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, it is important to think with the quality of the interpersonal encounter and with multiple identities as "categories that can be only defined in relation to each other" (Stronach, 1996, p. 368).

It has been suggested that "the art of seeing has to be learned" (Dumas, 1984), and through our reflexive accounts we have attempted to underscore the importance of affective dimensions, empathy, emotional regulation, dialogue, and accountable decision-making, in intercultural research collaborations involving researchers from different sociocultural, linguistic, and epistemological backgrounds (Durlak et al., 2011). During the project, however, we often treated the complexities not as integral to the research encounter but as obstacles to be managed. In doing so, we failed at times to fully attend to the lived realities shaped by cultural norms, hierarchical expectations, and intersecting identities.

Intercultural research collaborations, as we have learned, function as complex professional and personal spaces where knowledge production is inseparable from relational dynamics. For research teams working across sociocultural boundaries, effective collaboration depends on creating what Kramsch (2011, p. 354) calls "third spaces", intercultural zones where team members recognize epistemological differences without privileging any single approach. Successful intercultural research, therefore, requires researchers to develop what we call "epistemic flexibility": the capacity to navigate and negotiate between different cultural logics of knowledge creation and validation.

Data availability statement: The data of this study are derived from autoethnographic reflections and personal experiences. Due to the inherently personal and sensitive nature of these data, they are not publicly available to protect the confidentiality and privacy of the researcher and others involved.

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