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## MY DOCTORAL JOURNEY: AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY OF DOING SENSITIVE RESEARCH IN A DIFFERENT CULTURAL CONTEXT

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### ABSTRACT

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Aim/Purpose	This paper aims to provide important learning insights for doctoral students, researchers and practitioners who wish to research on sensitive topics with research participants from a significantly different culture from their own.
Background	Embarking on doctoral research in different cultural contexts presents challenges for doctoral students, especially when researching a sensitive topic.
Methodology	This paper uses an autoethnography as its research methodology.
Contribution	This paper extends the literature on doctoral researchers' experiences of exploring the lived experiences of senior travellers who have faced major life events. Little of the previous literature on the experiences of PhD students has explored the experiences they had while researching on a sensitive topic in a different cultural context to their own. To fill this knowledge gap, this paper presents an autoethnography of my experiences.
Findings	This paper presents some critical insights into undertaking research in another culture. Its findings are outlined under the following four themes: (a) Feeling vulnerable, (b) Building rapport, (c) Preparing for the unexpected, and (d) Exploring lived experiences.
Recommendations for Practitioners	When conducting sensitive cross-cultural research, understanding researchers' vulnerabilities, rapport-building and preparing for the unexpected are very important. The use of a visual element is beneficial for the participants in their idea generation process. Visual methods have the potential to capture the lived experiences of participants and enable them to reflect on those.
Recommendations for Researchers	Doing cross-cultural sensitive doctoral research poses a number of methodological and practical challenges. It was very important to gain a wider cultural understanding of the country and its people in my cross-cultural doctoral research.

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To this end, this paper suggests that future doctoral researchers consider volunteering with the community as a way to gain understanding of the research context when preparing to undertake cross-cultural research.

Impact on Society	The findings support the importance of cultural sensitivity when doing cross-cultural research.
Future Research	Future research could be conducted in a different cultural setting to reveal whether the key themes identified here are universal.
Keywords	PhD student, doctoral research, cross-cultural research, sensitive research, autoethnography

## INTRODUCTION

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Doctoral research is a long journey filled with various unexpected events (Brydon & Fleming, 2011). As a South Asian brought up in a small island called Sri Lanka, I came to New Zealand for my doctoral studies with the aim of exploring the lived experiences of senior travellers, particularly in terms of how they have faced major life events such as the death of a spouse or loved one, life-threatening illness, divorce or separation. At the beginning of my doctoral journey, I realised that carrying out this sensitive research in a cultural context significantly different from my own is incredibly challenging because conducting doctoral research in a cross-cultural setting may be like the “road less travelled, slow, uncomfortable and at the time extremely difficult to navigate” (Cobb, 2014, p. 172). A sensitive topic is one “which potentially poses for those involved a substantial threat, the emergence of which renders problematic for the researcher and/or the researched the collection, holding or dissemination of research data” (Lee & Renzetti, 1990, p. 512). Some of the risks with my doctoral research into major life events of senior travellers included potential emotional distress to interviewees and indirect distress to myself as well (Jobe, 2018).

Recent years have seen a growing body of research exploring the PhD student experiences (Mason & Hickman, 2019). This literature includes studies on gender and doctoral studies (Chan, 2003; Kurtz-Costes et al., 2006; Means et al., 2017), student well-being (Mackie & Bates, 2019; Schmidt & Hansson, 2018; Stubb et al., 2011), peer support mechanisms (Mason & Hickman, 2019; Stubb et al., 2011), exploration of supervisory relationships (Killeya, 2008; Malfroy, 2005; Mantai & Dowling, 2015; Wang & Li, 2011), research with people with learning disabilities (Durell, 2016), and student satisfaction (Barnes & Randall, 2012). Significantly, there is a comparative paucity of research on doctoral students’ personal experiences when researching on a sensitive topic in a different cultural context from their own. To fill this knowledge gap, this paper presents an autoethnography of my experiences for the purposes of expanding sociological understanding (Sparkes, 2000). The use of autoethnography allowed focusing on my doctoral research experiences to be the unit of analysis (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

It is somewhat surprising that previous researchers have not focused on the experiences of doctoral researchers doing sensitive cross-cultural research. This paper, therefore, extends the literature into the doctoral researchers’ experiences of exploring the lived experiences of senior travellers who have faced major life events such as the death of a spouse or loved one, a life-threatening illness and divorce or separation. In so doing, this study adds to the extant literature on doing cross-cultural doctoral research on a sensitive topic through a discussion of the notable aspects I encountered on my doctoral journey. The findings of this paper will provide significant insights for doctoral students and researchers who are planning to do sensitive research in a cultural context that is significantly different from their own.

## ***RESEARCH BACKGROUND***

Doctoral study presents a substantial and lengthy challenge and it is one which does not always go according to plan, especially when a sensitive topic is being studied in a cross-cultural context (Cobb, 2014; Jobe, 2018). Sri Lanka is a largely Buddhist country with a history of invasion, colonisation, religion and civil war. New Zealand too is a colonised nation, with the majority of its early settlers having arrived from Great Britain (Shordike et al., 2008). Thus, doctoral students who do not come from this Anglo-Saxon culture, but rather come from Europe, Western Asia, South Asia, North Africa, and the Horn of Africa, may encounter many challenges in preparing and undertaking a sensitive doctoral topic in a cross-cultural setting (Cobb, 2014; Jobe, 2018). According to Miller and Brimicombe (2003),

The PhD journey, like foreign travel, involves the exploration of unknown territory and encounters with unfamiliar cultures. The experience is as much emotional as cognitive, and aspects of the journey may be exhilarating, frightening, puzzling, stimulating, exhausting or tedious. For many PhD travellers, the journey is aided, and sometimes hampered, by fellow-travellers and people met along the way. (p. 5)

Any research that relates to the participation of humans requires paying attention to the potential impact of that research on all those engaged in it (Cohen et al., 2013). My doctoral study explored the lived experiences of senior citizens in relation to possibly stressful major life events. Studying senior citizens is necessary for a number of reasons: first, the world is facing an ageing population (United Nations, 2017), and secondly, this stage, compared to other younger stages, is a unique phase in our lives because many losses are associated with ageing (Hooyman & Kramer, 2006; Ramanayake et al., 2018). When agreeing to participate in my research, the participants may not clearly have understood the emotional risks to them of participating in research that required them to talk about various losses in later life, not only because these topics are personally sensitive, but also because previous literature has mostly viewed these topics negatively. When intending to undertake similar research, researchers may need to check whether prospective participants are in a sufficiently emotionally stable position to participate in the research before recruiting participants. For example, immediately after a major stressful life event people may react to the loss with emotional pain, while not attempting to make sense of the situation (Rosik, 1989). Therefore, in my research I was careful not to recruit anyone who had recently experienced a major life event. In this way, I was able to be sensitive to the participants' needs by ensuring that an appropriate amount of time to handle their emotions had elapsed. Furthermore, there was a risk that the interviews would bring up traumatic events within my research participants and that they might experience emotional pain and stress while participating in this research. For all these reasons, my doctoral research demanded careful consideration of its research design.

Many scholars from a variety of disciplines have illustrated the challenges of doing cross-cultural research in, for example, economics (Lambert, 1967), education (Cobb, 2014), nursing (Clark, 2012), communication (Levine et al., 2007), health (Tu et al., 2003), psychology (Tu et al., 2003), and marketing (Buil et al., 2012) among others. These studies have highlighted that in cross-cultural research, researchers more often require the assistance of interpreters or translators (Hennink, 2008). In some other cases, research participants tend to believe that they share common experiences and viewpoints with researchers who share their same race or ethnic background (Beoku-Betts, 1994; Liamputtong, 2008). Beoku-Betts (1994), for instance, who is a black West African female researcher, pointed out that one of her research participants told her that she preferred to have a black scholar like Beoku-Betts, because "black scholars have a sense of soul for our people because they have lived through it" (Beoku-Betts, 1994, p. 416). Requiring written informed consent may at times be inappropriate, for example, when research participants have low literacy levels (Clark, 2012). Obtaining a signed consent form can, therefore, be difficult with some cultural and ethnic groups (Liamputtong, 2008). Language too is important when doing cross-cultural research (Hennink, 2008).

Overall, cross-cultural research poses numerous methodological and practical challenges which are infrequently debated in qualitative research (Hennink, 2008). As novice investigators, doing cross-cultural sensitive research with vulnerable populations may pose many more challenges for doctoral students than for an experienced researcher (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011). Nonetheless, previous studies have given little discussion to the issue of performing sensitive cross-cultural doctoral research (Liamputtong, 2008), and, consequently, there is a comparative paucity of research on doctoral students' personal experiences of doing sensitive cross-cultural research. This autoethnography, therefore, advances existing knowledge by exploring the challenges one doctoral researcher faced when researching a sensitive topic in a culture that differs from his own and offering the insights he gained.

## METHOD

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Autoethnographic approaches in social science research are growing (Chamberlayne et al., 2000) with researchers using various forms of autoethnographic narratives such as novels, vignettes, poems, personal narrative or stories, field notes and diaries (Bochner, 1997; Ellis, 2004; Haynes, 2006; Jenks, 2002; Spry, 2001; Vickers, 2002). Autoethnography is a qualitative, inner-directed and context-conscious research method and it provides the researcher with a unique "window through which the external world is understood" (Ngunjiri et al., 2010, p. 3). In other words, autoethnography explores a social and cultural context through the personal experience of the researcher (Doloriert & Sambrook, 2009). The difference between autoethnography and ethnography is the focus on 'other' in ethnography and the focus on 'self' in autoethnography (Ingman, 2016, p. 69). For example, Ellis describes doing autoethnographic research as follows:

Well, I start with my personal life. I pay attention to my physical feelings, thoughts and emotions. I use what I call systematic sociological introspection and emotional recall to try to understand an experience I've lived through. Then I write my experience as a story. By exploring a particular life, I hope to understand a way of life (Ellis, 1999, p. 671).

The decision to select autoethnography as the choice of method for this paper was influenced by the following considerations. First, as discussed earlier, there is little research that explores the experiences of doctoral students doing sensitive cross-cultural research. I, therefore, aimed to present a personalised account of my experience to extend sociological understanding in this area and because the choice of autoethnography supported me in the articulation of my lived experiences that were embedded within a socially constructed setting (Tham, 2020). Secondly, as vulnerability is part of what makes autoethnographic studies unique, the use of this method provided me with a way to get to know myself as a re-searcher and to present areas of my weaknesses and strengths during my doctoral journey (Moeke-Maxwell et al., 2010). Thirdly, Ngunjiri et al. (2010) suggest that autoethnography provides opportunities to study subject areas such as loss, pain and grief that are not easily expressed, because in autoethnography researchers can expose their pains, heartbreaks and other emotions (Ngunjiri et al., 2010).

To some extent, autoethnography is more of a philosophy than a well-defined method (Wall, 2008), so there remains considerable creative space in the representation of text (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). Data in ethnography traditionally arises from interviews, participant observation, field notes, and research diaries (Mayan, 2001; Morse & Richards, 2002). While autoethnographers have also used similar sources in their studies (Wall, 2008), Wall points out that autoethnographic scholars have a variety of additional sources of data in their research armoury. Ettorre (2005), for example, used a diary, letter, articles, and medical laboratory results to facilitate the analysis of her experience of illness. Similarly, Sparkes (1996) used medical records, diary extracts, and newspaper articles about himself to discuss his sporting career and his suffering from a chronic condition.

Positionality is important because researchers need to understand their own beliefs and assumptions in order to explore someone's experience with fresh eyes (Hopkins et al., 2017; Willson, 2010). For

that reason, I kept a research diary in which I wrote down my thoughts and feelings throughout my doctoral research (Laverty, 2003). As Ray (1990) suggests, I needed to understand myself first before entering into the lifeworld of another. In keeping with autoethnography, the autoethnographic text I produced was based on my research diary notes. The diary notes were analysed with an open-ended analysis to identify meaning units and extract these to my lived experiences of conducting my doctoral research.

## FINDINGS

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This section presents the key themes derived from the data analysis of my autoethnographic research diary notes. The key themes derived from the data analysis were: feeling vulnerable; building rapport; preparing for the unexpected; and, exploring lived experiences. It is hoped that my exploration of these key themes will provide important learning insights for future doctoral researchers and practitioners who are interested in researching similarly sensitive topics with a community whose culture differs significantly from their own culture.

### *FEELING VULNERABLE*

The study's first theme—feeling vulnerable—emerged from the data analysis of my diary. As I analysed this data, the concerns I felt that my research participants and myself might have been exposed to the possibility of being harmed emotionally as a result of taking part in my study became clear. I wrote:

I am feeling discouraged to continue this research as it can cause distress to the research participants. I wonder whether I will be able to find participants for my study. How will I minimise any potential risks to both my participants and myself?

It should be reiterated here that I kept in mind not only that bereavement, life-threatening illness, divorce and separation were personally sensitive for my research participants, but also that these topics have predominantly been viewed negatively in previous studies. In terms of sensitivity, I was, therefore, aware that there was a risk that conducting interviews on these topics could potentially cause my interviewees emotional trauma (Jobe, 2018). Previous research has also suggested that doctoral students, as do participants in many interview situations, move through stages where they feel too 'vulnerable', especially when quite personal issues such as health, issues around violence, and bullying are being explored (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011; Bireda, 2015; Durell, 2016; Fahie, 2014; Jobe, 2018; Means et al., 2017). I felt challenged in terms of my competencies to carefully conduct this research, so it was crucial that my research was designed in such a way as to prevent any further potential harm to both my research participants or myself (Jobe, 2018) that could result from any lack of cultural knowledge or understanding on my part. I wrote:

I know how people from my culture react and understand these major life events. Will it be the same with the people here? I don't know much about how elderly New Zealanders will react to my interview questions related to their major life events. On the other hand, am I worrying too much about this?

Each culture and religion has its ways of reacting to various types of loss and, especially in crisis situations, people are likely to go back to their cultural systems (Kagawa-Singer, 1998). As a South Asian, there were some age and cultural differences between myself and those who participated in my study and as my research progressed I became aware that different factors in the world that the participants inhabited might influence their experience, because people's realities and experiences are shaped and linked to their social, cultural and political contexts (Flood, 2010). I, therefore, followed Howard and Hammond's (2019) suggestion that I should not ignore my own feelings of vulnerability as I conducted my research, but rather that I should accepted it as a part of my doctoral research experience.

### ***BUILDING RAPPORT***

The second key theme that became evident from my research diary was the issue of 'building rapport'. I was constantly aware that the relationship between myself and my participant was one of the most significant bases for the success of my doctoral research (Howard & Hammond, 2019). I wrote:

As per the journal article, I read today, in my research rather than just giving information about their lived experiences, my participants are allowing me into their lives. They are going to tell me their travel experiences after facing the death of their spouse, major illness and divorce or separation. Expressing this information may be very difficult for a third party. Therefore, I will need to develop a good relationship with my participants, and it will surely help them.

As I aimed to collect rich and reliable data from participants from a different culture, I needed to develop trusting relationships with them by sustaining cultural sensitivity (Liamputtong, 2008). Previous scholars also suggest that this trusting relationship should be developed before the interviews took place and maintained throughout the research journey (Corbie-Smith et al., 2002; Hall & Kulig, 2004; Laverack & Brown, 2003). I wrote:

I am an introvert, not a very social or outgoing person. Will I be able to build good relationships with senior citizens from a different culture? There is a significant age difference too. However, I am happy with my supervisors' suggestion to do some volunteering with organisations for elderly people. I am going to give it a try. I feel this will surely support my PhD in many ways. On the other hand, I love helping people too.

From the beginning of my PhD studies until their completion, I volunteered on senior citizen programmes in New Zealand. Hall and Kulig (2004) and Laverack and Brown (2003) argue that a person who is working closely with the local people would be most suitable for cross-cultural research. My role as a volunteer involved spending time with senior citizens, enjoying conversations with them, and sharing in their interests and activities. Most importantly, my volunteering has supported my PhD immensely and in countless ways. First, I got the opportunity to understand senior citizens' world. Second, my volunteering helped me to meet new people, develop friendships and expand my network. Third, it helped me in finding prospective information-rich research participants. Importantly, sharing our social and cultural backgrounds reduced the distance between my prospective participants and myself (Madriz, 1998).

The development of trust between doctoral students and potential research participants is important to their studies' methodology and, in particular, to the recruitment process (Davey & Day, 2008). I described myself, my supervisors and my academic institution to develop trust with potential participants (Parkes, 1995). Another way doctoral researchers can gain access to potential participants is through a relationship with community stakeholders (Liamputtong, 2008; McIntosh, 2020). The organisations I volunteered with also supported me by connecting me with other organisations. I wrote:

I am so happy to see that the organisations I volunteer with have shared my research invitation throughout their network so that I will find a few prospective participants through them. Today, I requested from these organisations who will share my research invitation, to ask the interested prospective participants to contact me directly for more details about my research. I believe this will reduce peer pressure and allow them the chance to opt out without feeling guilty.

Significantly, Jobe (2018) also highlights the advantages of accessing research participants via gate-keeping organisations, as these can offer support and guide the researcher to develop appropriate access strategies. I wrote:

I have come to an important stage of my PhD. Data collection will be starting soon. How am I going to make a good connection with my participants? I will support my participants as much as possible. I will create a welcoming and informal environment for my participants to express their lived experiences easily. I will use in-depth interviews rather than focus group interviews. I will take the role of the learner in the interview process and will assure participants that irrespective of what they said, their ideas would be valid for my research. I will also give the participants the option of stopping the interview at any time and rescheduling it for another time.

As the interviews were designed to suit the convenience of the participants, I let them choose the location and an appropriate time. As I adopted a qualitative interview style, they were able to discuss what they felt was most relevant (Hynson et al., 2006). Furthermore, using in-depth interviews rather than focus groups allowed the participants to express their beliefs with less fear of being exposed or embarrassed (Sim & Waterfield, 2019). I spent time with participants both before and after the interview to develop trust and connection. I also maintained appropriate eye contact and verbal and non-verbal communication to encourage my participants to express their ideas.

### ***PREPARING FOR THE UNEXPECTED***

The data analysis indicated another important theme: ‘preparing for the unexpected’. Any research that relates to the participation of humans requires paying attention to the potential impact of that research (Cohen et al., 2013). As my doctoral research explored a sensitive area, it demanded very careful consideration of its research design. For example, Hennink (2008) stated that when researching in Japan, she prepared for her research by spending a week in Japan before commencing data collection. I wrote:

I think preparation for the unexpected events is a significant aspect in doing sensitive research with research participants significantly outside my own culture. I am aware that during interviews, my research could elicit deeply personal experiences and so this could potentially have an emotional impact on them. Therefore, I must prepare to address every potential risk of my research.

My research sought to probe deeply into the lived world of people; therefore, a number of sensitive issues could arise for the participants during the interviews (Willson, 2010; Willson et al., 2013). Doctoral students conducting qualitative research on potentially sensitive topics with participants from a different culture need to be able to assess the impact of the research on both the participants and themselves (Wills et al., 2016). To prepare myself, I decided to review previous studies that gave guidance about how to conduct sensitive research and ways to reduce distress during research for both the participants and the researcher (Buckle et al., 2010; Dyregrov, 2004; Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001; Hynson et al., 2006; Jensen et al., 2002; Legerski & Bunnell, 2010). I wrote:

There is a risk of participants’ experiencing emotional pain and stress while participating in this research on senior travellers. Therefore, I should clearly describe the emotional risks of participating in this research to them.

Bearing my concerns in mind, I conducted an initial conversation with each participant before they signed the consent forms to ensure that they were fully apprised of this potential risk. I told each participant that their participation in this research was entirely voluntary and I also informed each participant that we could not predict everything that would happen within the interview process (Buckle et al., 2010). I conducted three pilot interviews to pretest the feasibility of the research. These pilot interviews helped me to establish whether the recruitment approaches and interview techniques were effective. I also let the participants know that, if they wished, they were welcome to invite a support person to be present during their interview. At the beginning of each interview, I encouraged my participants to report any concerns to me immediately and to let me know whether I should continue with the interview. If my participants needed any additional resources, I prepared for this eventuality

by compiling contact details for local support organisations and, if needed, I gave this information to the participants at the end of the interview. To reduce the dis-tress I might experience, I planned debriefing sessions with my supervisors throughout the data collection process.

### ***EXPLORING LIVED EXPERIENCES***

The fourth theme that emerged from the data analysis was: ‘exploring lived experiences’. I wrote:

I will be starting my initial discussions with my prospective participants next week. Before recruiting any participants for my research, I will check whether they are in an emotionally stable position to participate in my research. I will not recruit anyone who had experienced a major life event within the previous year, in order to be sensitive to their needs.

This decision was based on a need to allow participants appropriate time to handle their emotions (Bentley & O'Connor, 2015; Damianakis & Marzali, 2012; Dyregrov, 2004; Lowe, 2005; Richardson & Balaswamy, 2001). As noted previously, immediately after a major stressful life event such as the death of a loved one participants may react to the reality of their loss with emotional pain, while not attempting to make sense of the situation (Rosik, 1989). I was sensitive to my participants’ emotional needs, recognising that certain times of the year such as lost loved one’s anniversaries and birthdays would make it difficult for the bereaved to participate in the research at that time (Beck, 2006; Dyregrov, 2004; Hynson et al., 2006; Parkes, 1995). I was willing to reschedule meetings as necessary to avoid any difficult periods, and I allowed participants to decide the session dates accordingly (Parkes, 1995). To collect data, I conducted in-depth face-to-face semistructured interviews. Semistructured interviews have the advantages of both structured and unstructured interviews in that they not only allow the interviewer to gather a range of rich data, but also allow participants the freedom to respond to questions and probes (Morse & Field, 1995).

Written accounts were not deemed an appropriate way to collect data, because these are less able to capture the impact of the data collected on the participants (Buckle et al., 2010). In addition, writing an account that captured their emotional experiences might not have been easy for some participants. The interviews began with questions about the interviewee’s demographic background. Then I directed open-ended questions to the participants. The questions were broad and open-ended so that the participants had sufficient opportunity to express their viewpoints (Giorgi, 2009). Using open-ended interview questions also helped me to collect rich insights by providing participants with the opportunity to describe their experience broadly (Penner & McClement, 2008). I wrote:

During the interview today, Matthew was emotional. Therefore, I encouraged him to communicate his concerns immediately to me, and we discussed whether I should continue with the interview or whether he would like to stop. I also asked Matthew whether he needs a break for a cup of tea or wanted to change the topic and talk about something else.

When an interviewee wished to resume the interview, I ensured that I had given enough time for them to make themselves feel better. I allowed them to terminate the interview at any time, and they were also able to ask for the recording equipment to be switched off at any point. As discussed earlier in this paper, neither the participant nor myself knew precisely how the interview would unfold (Hadjistavropoulos & Smythe, 2001). All my re-search participants were aged 65 years and above, and I was aware that they had difficulties in remembering their past experiences (Craik, 1994; Willson, 2010). Therefore, I decided it was important to look beyond interviews when exploring a complex and sensitive phenomenon. According to Gibbons (2013), interviews rely on language; however, our lived experiences are made up of multiple dimensions. I wrote:

I want my research participants to express their thoughts about their experiences, even if the thoughts are difficult to express. I think the use of the ‘Mebox’ method in my research will allow them to focus on responding alternately rather than having to respond to direct questioning.



Similar to previous studies that have used physical memory prompts in qualitative research, I used a visual research method called the 'MeBox' method (Elphinstone-Jolly, 2012; FitzPatrick et al., 2019; Gibbons, 2013). Gibbons created the 'MeBox' method for a visual anthropology project that aimed to understand and communicate the study participants' multifaceted experiences of chronic illness (Gibbons, 2010). The 'MeBox' method is helpful for the process of idea generation, as it allows participants to think about their experiences in ways other than verbally and to think about broader aspects of experience (Bagnoli, 2009). The 'MeBox' objects facilitated my exploration of the participants' experiences. I wrote:

I feel so happy today. After eight months of data collection, I have finished my interview with the final participant today. I feel the end of data collection interviews is an important step, and I will need the support and participation of my research participants in the next stages of my research.

The interviews ended with a discussion on the next stages of the research. My qualitative doctoral research project needed to produce valid and trustworthy representations of my research participants' lived experiences (Creswell, 2013). In qualitative research, transcription is fundamental to the data analysis process, because it is critical to the dependability and validity of the research (MacLean et al., 2004). As I am not a native English speaker, I used the services of a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews I had recorded with my participants. I met with my participants again a few months after the final interview to show them the transcriptions of their data and to uncover any misinterpretations. In this way, I validated the research by ensuring the findings were an outcome of their expressions rather than my viewpoints (Gibbons, 2013). It was important that participants identified their experiences before this information was communicated to the readers of my doctoral research (Gibbons, 2013).

## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

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Sensitive, cross-cultural doctoral research with vulnerable populations poses numerous methodological and practical challenges (Ballamingie & Johnson, 2011; Hennink, 2008). The purpose of this paper was to provide an autoethnography of my doctoral research experiences as I explored a sensitive topic with senior travellers who came from a culture significantly different from my own. The key findings of this paper were derived from my research diary (Mayan, 2001; Morse & Richards, 2002). This paper has added to the existing literature by showing the creative space in the representation of text in autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000; Wall, 2008). The key themes of this paper can provide important learning insights for future doctoral researchers who are interested in researching similar cross-cultural sensitive topics. The research findings highlighted the researcher's vulnerabilities along with occasions when his competencies to conduct the research were challenged. This paper has, therefore, added significant insights into the existing literature in a way similar to Dickson-Swift et al. (2007). The paper offers something new because few previous studies have focused on cross-cultural doctoral researchers' vulnerabilities.

The participants of my research had faced major life events such as the death of a spouse or loved one, a life-threatening illness and divorce or separation. There was a probability that they may have been exposed to the possibility of being harmed emotionally while discussing these stressful events in their life. As discussed in the findings, following Howard and Hammond (2019) my understandings of my vulnerabilities as the researcher helped me to take several steps to minimise the potential risks to both my participants and myself. When doing similar research, qualitative doctoral researchers should, therefore, not ignore their vulnerabilities; rather they should accept these as a part of the research experience (Howard & Hammond, 2019). The findings of this study also highlighted that when doing similar doctoral research it is also very important to gain a wider cultural understanding of the research context and its people (Ozano & Khatri, 2018). Cultural sensitivity is an important aspect of researching with people from different cultures (Liamputtong, 2008). Dunbar et al. (2002) argue that researchers need to think about cultural sensitivity, because a failure to do so can damage

their research process. For this reason, they urge researchers to “ask questions in a culturally relevant and explicit manner” (p. 294).

Furthermore, Liamputtong (2008) described why researchers need to gain more knowledge about the context when doing cross-cultural research. When conducting a group discussion in Fiji for instance, research participants should be seated according to their status i.e. participants with higher grade will be seated in the front and those with less status in the back (Liamputtong, 2008). In terms of gaining cultural understanding, this paper’s suggestion that future doctoral researchers should consider volunteering with the community when preparing to undertake cross-cultural research should prove valuable. While previous research suggests that finding prospective research participants can be difficult in cross-cultural research (Liamputtong & Ezzy, 2005) and that cross-cultural researchers may need to spend more time in data collection (Clark, 2012), this paper’s findings show how my volunteering during my doctoral studies not only helped me to understand the senior citizens’ world and to extend my network, but also indicate how volunteering prior to undertaken my research proper helped me in finding information-rich participants for my research. Moreover, this paper also highlighted another significant insight by showing that the introduction of a visual element benefitted research participants in their idea generation process (Bagnoli, 2009). The visual method I used in my doctoral research had the potential to capture participants’ lived experiences and how, when used in conjunction with face-to-face interviews, it also enabled them to reflect easily on their experiences (Gibbons, 2010; Ramanayake et al., 2019).

In conclusion, there is a significant gap in research that explores doctoral students’ personal experiences of doing sensitive cross-cultural research. In particular, previous studies have neglected the experiences of doctoral students while researching a sensitive topic in a different cultural context from their own. To fill this knowledge gap, this paper presented an autoethnography of my doctoral research experiences. Doing cross-cultural sensitive doctoral research poses a number of methodological and practical challenges. In particular, as in the case of my study, it demands careful consideration of its research design. Like every doctoral student, I was challenged several times during the research process, as researching a sensitive topic in a different cultural setting is not easy. As Liamputtong (2008) suggests, qualitative researchers should take leadership in cross-cultural research, as cross-cultural research will continue to be an important topic of debate among researchers. For Starr (2010), “The researcher’s own experience is the focal point from which a new understanding of the culture in question is revealed” (p. 3). Therefore, this paper advances existing knowledge by providing an autoethnography of a doctoral researcher’s experiences in doing sensitive research in a culture significantly different from his own.

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