Chapter 18
Refining the Occupation of Research Across Cultures

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Abstract This chapter discusses an 8-year international collaboration involving research teams from three countries: New Zealand, Thailand and the United States. The purpose of the research was to explore and compare the meanings that the food-related occupations associated with potent cultural celebrations (Christmas and Songkran, the Thai New Year) hold for elder women. The researchers began with what seemed a straightforward multi-site study in three countries, and then found that the richness and complexity of the data and analysis required the development of methods to work across all three cultures. The team created and lived a lengthy and rigorous process as the methods were implemented and refined. This process was informed and enriched by growing understandings of our participants’ cultural uniqueness as well as our own cultural differences. We discuss our team process as we learned to communicate effectively and with integrity for our study. The team’s development will be illustrated with some of the data, methods and findings as they emerged. We conclude the chapter with a summary of what was helpful to this team of international researchers to look across cultures in a trustworthy way.

Keywords International collaboration, Northern Thailand, United States, New Zealand, Food-centred occupation, Occupational therapist, Elder women, Rigour and relationship, Methodological challenge, Language issue, Use of technology.
18.1 Introduction

Over the past 8 years, three groups of researchers from Auckland, the northern-most city in New Zealand, Chiang Mai, in the north of Thailand and Richmond in eastern Kentucky in the United States, have worked to bring an international collaborative study to fruition. Along the way, much has been learned. This chapter addresses one aspect of that learning: how to collaborate despite disparities in language, culture and financial resources; different levels of academic seniority and methodological backgrounds; and geographical distance and different time zones.

The project that brought us together was an exploration of what it means to elder women to participate in the food-centred occupations associated with Christmas and Songkran, the Thai New Year festival. Our purpose in seeking to understand the meaning of planning, preparing, cooking, offering and sharing food was twofold. Firstly, as occupational therapists, we are aware that due to population aging in all three countries, increasing numbers of elder women will be living in our communities, and we assumed that a proportion would ultimately enter residential care. We anticipated that occupational therapists working in either setting would be better equipped to provide therapeutic occupations if they understood what it had meant to these women to provide food for cultural celebrations. Our second and more theoretical purpose was to consider whether some of the meanings of food-centred occupations cross cultural boundaries. This concern rests in occupational science, which is the study of the form, function and meaning of human occupation, broadly interpreted as the things people do to occupy themselves (Yerxa et al. 1989).

When we initiated the study, we looked forward to what we might uncover by talking to participants. Perhaps naively, we did not fully appreciate the complexities of interpreting the findings across cultures. More importantly, we did not know how much we would need to learn in order to work successfully as an international research team. In the discussion that follows, we describe how our interpretations were enriched by our growing awareness of our participants’ practices, circumstances and beliefs, as well as our own cultural differences. The focus is on the team process as we learned to communicate effectively and with integrity, whether in face-to-face meetings, over the phone or electronically. The process of developing into a team that could collaborate across national boundaries is illustrated with some of the data, methods and findings as they emerged. We conclude our chapter with a summary of what was helpful to this team of international researchers to look across cultures in a trustworthy way.

18.2 Creating the Collaboration

This international study of food-centred occupations for older women was initiated to advance an existing relationship between the schools of Occupational Therapy at Auckland University of Technology and Chiang Mai University. Older women