

## **Positionality and Its Implications for Researching the Police in Vietnam**

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# **Introduction to Policing Research: Taking Lessons from Practice**

## **Positionality and its implications for researching the police in Vietnam**

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### **Abstract**

This chapter explores issues in undertaking policing research, especially regarding power dynamics in knowledge production as they relate to research and researchers in the Global North and South. Knowledge on policing is dominated by scholars from the Global North. Increasingly, there is attention being paid to whether research is ethical not only whether participants give informed consent, etc, but whether researchers have the right to study people and phenomena of any sort in the Global South. The chapter provides an overview of some perspectives of researcher positionalities, and their advantages and limitations when conducting research on potentially sensitive topics, such as policing, in one-party communist states, in this case, Vietnam. To better elucidate the practical and methodological implications of researcher positionality, three brief case studies are provided. The chapter concludes by noting that research is a collective effort, notwithstanding the constraints inherent within some researcher positions, while enabling advantages in others, and the impact that different positions have on the production of policing knowledge in relation to Vietnam.

### **Introduction**

The field of criminology or policing scholarship relating to Vietnam is not well recognised in the global economy of knowledge (Belknap, 2016). Why is this so, and what are the implications for police studies, both theory and practice? The nature of particular academic disciplines and fields of research are shaped by particular histories, political dynamics, local cultures and global dynamics of knowledge production. Scholarship from countries that experienced colonisation, such as Vietnam did and especially across the Global South, can be

somewhat absent from the theoretical hegemony of the Global North, which according to Connell (2015, p. 51), is simply the normal functioning of this economy of knowledge'. These dynamics shape how research can be conducted in relation to policing studies both globally and in Vietnam in the present day and place a responsibility on us as researchers to not only understand the targets or topics of research, but the power dynamics, people (ourselves and others) and processes that go into its undertaking.

In the previous edition of this book, Skinns, Woof and Sprawson (2015) discussed 'dilemmas and new directions' in the context of ethics and researching the police. The authors explored ethical dilemmas faced in their research on police custody regarding informed and voluntary consent, and anonymity and confidentiality (Skinns et al 2015). Navigating ethical dilemmas have been described more as a 'molehill' rather than a 'mountain' for some policing researchers (Rowe 2007, p. 37), indicating the dilemmas were more easily overcome than initially expected. Conversely, some ethical issues may seem unsubstantial initially, but then emerge into something greater than anticipated. In this chapter, we build on the chapter by Skinns et al (2015) by exploring ethical dilemmas and new directions, not within the confines of police custody, but in relation to the global landscape of who can or should even choose to ask research questions, and what are the ethical and methodological implications of this, especially as they relate to police who operate in a one-party state. To do this, we draw on another chapter from a previous edition regarding 'insider-outsider' researcher positionality, by Brown (1996) and Westmarland (2015), among others.

Positionality refers to the location of the researcher in relation to: the subject being studied, the research participants, and the research context and processes (see Holmes, 2020). Positionality is important because it influences who we are, and thus, shapes our views about the social world, affecting the choices and decisions of researchers – within certain parameters – thereby having implications for knowledge production and its limitations.

Briefly, insider research refers to research conducted by someone who is a member of the community being studied, while outsider research refers to research conducted by someone who is not. Below we present an overview of some of the implications of each type, which is followed by case study examples of how they function in practice.

Insider research:

- Access to insider knowledge: An insider researcher may have easier access to the community being studied, including police officers and community members. This insider knowledge can provide valuable insights into the nuances of policing in that community.
- Ethical considerations: Insider researchers may face ethical considerations such as conflicts of interest, confidentiality, and neutrality.
- Bias: Insider researchers may be biased towards their own community or their own experience of the police. While this may potentially affect the validity of research, it must also be understood that it can elicit important insights that might otherwise not be easily obtained.

#### Outsider research:

- Objectivity: Outsider researchers can bring an objective perspective to the study of policing, thus, avoiding biases that may arise from insider research.
- Language barriers: Outsider researchers may face language barriers that could limit their ability to communicate with police officers and community members.
- Lack of cultural knowledge: Outsider researchers may have limited knowledge of the cultural context in which policing takes place, including nuances that may potentially affect their ability to understand the complexities of policing in a particular context.

It is recognised that a binary of insider-outsider does not account for the multiple positions and perspectives researchers can have. Brown's (1996) typologies were: insider-insiders; insider-outsiders; outsider-outsiders; and, outsider-insiders, depending on a researcher's role and affiliation with the police organisation under review. Yet, these too are insufficient because many aspects of positionality can change, and thus, a more fluid conceptualisation is required. Moreover, the typologies require adaptation to account for differences in the police-researcher relationship that exist outside of the Anglo-American experience.

We explore researcher positionality in this chapter as it relates to the exploration of police officer perspectives in Vietnam. Briefly, we combine our multiple insider and outsider

perspectives to explain the nature and limitations of researching police and criminal justice perspectives. Regarding the co-authors of this chapter, Jardine was the first foreigner from a Western country or the Global North to be approved at the Ministerial level of the Ministry of Public Security (MPS) to undertake research fieldwork in relation to policing and the People's Police Academy (PPA) in Hanoi in the 2010s, Luong has nearly twenty years' experience conducting research and teaching at the PPA. While our dominant positionality could be understood as outsider (Jardine) and insider (Luong), we elaborate on these positions and their implications for policing research.

The following section provides an overview of knowledge production on policing or crime-related topics in Vietnam, and how Vietnam's unique history has shaped research activity. We provide case study examples of three research projects that include police participants and discuss selected aspects of their approaches and ethical and methodological implications in relation to the positionality of the researcher.

## **Background on knowledge production on policing in Vietnam**

The Socialist Republic of Vietnam (hereinafter Vietnam) functions according to a one-party communist state, in that there is a top-down system of governance, which includes the police. Notwithstanding, there are debates about whether 'top-down' an appropriate description is to characterise state-society relations, given that the party-state can also be responsive to communities, and be amenable to change through dialogue or negotiation (Kerkliviet, 2010). The People's Police Force function 'under the ultimate and direct leadership' of the Vietnamese Communist Party (VCP), and the 'direct command and administration of the MPS (Law on People's Public Security Forces, 2018, art. 4.1).

Vietnam is one of few one-party states in the world and ranked 174 out of 180 in the World Press Freedom Index in 2022 (RFS 2022). Vietnam experienced foreign invasions and civil wars for 2000 years. In the first half of the 20th century, Ho Chi Minh, who later became Vietnam's first President, sought a political strategy to mobilise the population to defeat French colonial powers. While there were numerous political groups with nationalist or anti-colonial agendas, Ho Chi Minh's Indochina Communist Party, later the Vietnamese after dominating other nationalist agendas, won out. In 1975, the VCP took Saigon, later to become Ho Chi

Minh City, and began ruling a unified Vietnam in 1976. In the period after the war ended, Vietnam closed its borders to outsiders, but after near economic collapse and famine, the government began opening its borders to foreign trade in the late 1980s, known as the Doi Moi (Economic Renovation) era.

The impact of colonialism and war on Vietnam was that its police and public security institutions emerged as part of communist rule, with protections on information relating to state secrets, access to information, as well as intelligence-led policing (Luong, 2022), for what type of knowledge acquisition and dissemination was permissible. Crucially, this is applicable for Vietnamese citizens (who are not police), and of course, for international scholars. Criticism of the government or Party is prohibited, thereby, also prohibiting criticism of the police in some circumstances, broadly interpreted. These prohibitions constrain local universities or research institutions from addressing these topics in their curriculum due to possible consequences. As a result, much of the content of curriculums relating to policing and/or criminology tend to follow interpretations and propaganda according to the Party or governments ideologies and provisions. What constitutes state secrets or criticism that is prohibited is also ill defined, meaning that researchers who embark on research in this field may not be aware of what is prohibited and what is acceptable, particularly for outsiders, either Vietnamese citizens (non-police) or foreigners. There is also the fact that there is a gap between law and practice (Jardine 2023) which adds to the ambiguity.

In Vietnam, after establishing the People's Police Forces in 1962, policing studies was established as a core academic discipline at the police training school in 1968. This first school was established after separating from the National Public Security School and is a precursor institution to the current PPA. Meanwhile, criminology was designed in crime prevention and criminal investigation's curriculums for policing studies since the 1990s. However, it was not offered as a standalone subject and discipline until the end of the 2000s. It was in 2007 that the first Research Center for Criminology and Crime Investigation was established at the PPA; it has a Director who is both a Major General Police rank and Professor (PPA, 2017). Since 2007, structural changes have meant that the Research Centre has been merged into the Institute of Policing Studies and is no longer an independent unit. Tertiary level policing and criminological curriculums for police, as well as officer-led empirical research, have been part of Vietnam's public security education priorities for a long time (unlike many Anglo-American police organisations). Nonetheless, this is under-recognised in the global economy of

knowledge, however, because this economy is rarely inclusive of scholarship unless it is available in the English language (Connell, 2015).

It is clear that the background to policing and police studies in Vietnam is important when discussing insider-outsider positionality for researchers, because police organisations themselves are not homogenous and there are different challenges, opportunities and implications associated with different contexts.

### *Barriers to researching police in Vietnam*

While police studies are not a field of research that students or scholars within Vietnam can easily take up unless they are part of the public security institutions, criminological subjects can be studied at some law schools. Nonetheless, much research on criminology and issues that might often come under the banner of crime prevention and criminal investigation in policing studies has typically been carried out under the control of the MPS, which includes 'politically-controlled police academies' (Cox, 2010, p. 229). Consequently, the MPS is a crucial gatekeeper for access to data (Cox, 2010, 2012), whether that be statistical data or professional perspectives as research participants. Barriers to researching police and crime have been documented by numerous foreign and domestic scholars (as examples, see Cox 2010, 2012; Jardine 2020, 2023; (Luong, 2017, 2019b, 2020a, 2020c, 2021a, 2021b; Luong et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020). Some of the barriers include:

- Lack of transparency: The Vietnamese government restricts press freedom and there can be a lack of transparency about party or government activities, for both insider (Vietnamese scholars) and outsider (foreigners) researchers. There are limitations on access to information which can make it difficult to conduct thorough research on the police, if the MPS does not provide formal approval.
- Party-government control: As a core body in Vietnam's political system and cabinet, the police are closely tied to the party-government structure, which can limit research and reporting on police activities. Independent research and critical reporting can be censored and suppressed under MPS management.
- Language barriers: Many Vietnamese police officers and officials may not speak or be fluent in English. Notwithstanding a small but growing number of Vietnamese scholars

who completed postgraduate degrees abroad requiring English proficiency, language continues to limit foreign scholars ability to communicate with potential participants, insofar as few foreign scholars speak Vietnamese, thus adding a layer of complexity to data collection.

- Limited resources: While there is an emerging pool of internationally trained, English speaking policing scholars from Vietnam, the study of criminal justice is not well developed across the tertiary sector as a whole which is impacted by challenges associated with lack of incentives and support to continue academic publication outputs when returning to Vietnam after completing doctoral degrees at Western universities. Thus, there are limited resources available to conduct comprehensive research on the police outside of those working within the Ministry of Public Security, including limited funding and qualified personnel.
- Ethical considerations: Research involving police can be politically sensitive and risky for both participants and researchers, with potential legal, personal and professional consequences. It is a practical reflection in Vietnam policing studies under the party-government and the MPS' umbrella. In fact, in Vietnam's police institutions have not yet independently established the ethical committee to assess and manage the ethic approval process for their policing research. Recently, under the secret state and its related protections' regulations of the MPS, they required all policing research (English versions) have to approve by the scientific broad department at the host institutions who maybe not English professional academic before submitting the international journals. Although these initial stages could be unclear the ethics consideration's approaches of the MPS; it is also part of the secretive protections their policing studies with international communities. While following ethical practices are important, the case studies and discussion below highlight there are limitations to the extent that typical ethical practices, such as anonymity and confidentiality, can be protected in some circumstances in order to minimise risks to participants and researchers alike.

Invoking 'national security', it is one way that information relating to policing and crime is guarded (Cox, 2010, p. 229). It can be difficult to determine what is a 'state secret' when national security is offered as a reason why an issue cannot be discussed or information be shared and may even result in further curiosity regarding policing studies in Vietnam, especially among international scholars. The State Secrets Protection Law (29/2018/QH14), upgraded from an Ordinance in 2018, defines a state secret as:



undisclosed information carrying important contents which is specified by the head of a competent body or organization according to regulations of this Law and the divulgence or loss of which may bring harm to national interest.

State secrets may be contained in documents, objects, locations, speeches, activities or other forms.

A crucial element of this definition is that it is ‘undisclosed information’ that has been ‘specified’ as being a state secret. This may appear to add clarity, but not necessarily so (state secrets are discussed further in Case Study 2 below).

The Law outlines the scope of state secrets in Article 7 which encompass information that is undisclosed and the divulgence or loss of which may bring harm to national interest, including *inter alia*:

*1.c. Strategies and schemes for ethnic minority and religious affairs and tasks thereof that concern protection of national security and assurance of public order and social safety;*

*2.a. Strategies, plans and activities regarding national protection and defense, national security protection and assurance of public order and social safety; programs, projects and schemes of exceptional importance;*

*3.b. Information about charges; investigation, exercise of the power to prosecute and supervise judicial activities, adjudicate criminal cases and execute judgments thereof;*

*7.c. Special scientific and technological tasks, national-level scientific and technological tasks related to national defense and security;*

*8.b. Information on personnel of the People’s Army, public security forces and cryptographer forces sent to attend domestic and overseas training;*

*10.a. Strategies, plans and schemes for development of journalism, publishing, printing, post, telecommunications and the Internet, radio frequencies, information technology, information technology industry, cyber information security, electronics, broadcasting, electronic information, news, foreign affairs information and national media infrastructure of service to national defense and security;*

*12.b. Labor, children, social evil and gender equality issues;*

## **Case studies of policing research in Vietnam and researcher positionality**

This section includes case studies to provide some practical examples of the implications of research positionality, drawing on studies according to two criteria:

1. The study involves Vietnamese police as participants in qualitative research; and,
2. The authors received ethics approval from a human research ethics committee or institutional review board to undertake the research.

The first criteria were selected so that there could be some meaningful comparison of issues across similar studies. The second criteria were to narrow the scope for which studies to use as examples, because there are wide-ranging studies on policing in Vietnam that do not have this process. Subsequently, it also enabled a comparison of how the ethical review process was affected, reported and navigated in the studies.

### **Case study 1: Navigating gatekeepers: researching police and law enforcement effectiveness regarding environmental crime and biological threats**

Peer reviewed criminological knowledge is not evenly available across the globe. Criminology is not even recognised as a discipline in a uniform way, especially in Asian countries (Belknap 2016, Liu 2009). In these contexts, it has been argued that wider sources of knowledge should be considered as acceptable to contribute to understanding policing and crime related issues (Cox ?).

Policy-oriented research helps to fill some gaps to deepen our understanding of policing and law enforcement challenges, weaknesses and topics that may be difficult to pursue through formal research practices.

In the publications, ‘Trafficking of Contagion: Environmental Crime and Biological Threats in the Greater Mekong’ and ‘Tackling Environmental Crime and Biological Threats across the Border of the Greater Mekong Subregion’, former PPA lecturer, Hai Thanh Luong, PhD, and

co-author, Nicholas Thomson, PhD, explore environmental crimes, including illegal trafficking of wildlife and timber, as well as other illegal acts that contribute to land degradation, subsequently creating risks for biological threats and risks of contagion. The research explored the relationships between environmental crime, law enforcement and biological threat preparedness and response and was published by the international organisation, the Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime (GI TOC) and the Journal of Illicit Economic and Development (London School of Economic and Political Science Press).

The research provides quotes from participants, including referring to issues that are or may be politically sensitive or culturally insensitive. For example, there can be competing tensions between environmental degradation and economic development, or species eradication and cultural norms (i.e., the consumption of wildlife products). The research found shortcomings in law enforcement such as: poorly equipped officials, low levels of knowledge and awareness of forestry crime issues and challenges; inadequate collaboration and intelligence-sharing; and unreliable data to inform, challenge or evaluate law enforcement effectiveness (Luong & Thomson, 2022a, 2022b).

Multi-country research taking into consideration the varying law enforcement agency perspectives and regulations in the Mekong region involved some limitations regarding the research process and transparency. Given the sensitive nature of some topics addressed, including corruption of border officials, it is possible that a more formalised approach would not have provided the same access to officials as participants. Therefore, the authors note that ‘Given the sensitive nature of much of this work, we wish to protect the identity of our colleagues who have provided their perspectives and look forward to working with them all as we go forward in developing interventions’ (Luong & Thomson, 2022b, p. acknowledgement). While it is not explicit in the final publication, this case study provides an opportunity to share that during the project’s second stage, which addressed the pilot of three cross-border crossings between Vietnam and Laos, Cambodia, and China, the research sought and received approval from the human research ethics committee of the Hanoi University of Public Health in Vietnam to comply with ethical requirements on the sensitive topic. In fact, as Luong’s multiple insider-outsider positions, this co-author contributed to navigating gatekeepers which may not easily be undertaken by researchers with only outsider positionalities, including being a native Vietnamese speaker. Specifically, Luong’s positionality includes:

- Vietnamese citizen and background (cultural insider)
- Australian resident (outsider cultural perspectives)
- Former Vietnamese police officer (both former occupational and organisational insider, with outsider perspectives)
- Undertaking research involving Vietnamese police and law enforcement officials at an international (policy-oriented) organisation (foreign institutional oversight, outsider)

This brief case study illuminates how the research context and topic, and the positionality of the researcher (multiple interactions of insider-and-outsider positions), all have numerous dimensions that influence – and limit– the nature of research on policing. Moreover, policy-oriented research also does not necessarily seek the same goals as academic research, insofar as it may have less emphasis in the published outputs about the methods used.

*Citation: Luong, H. T. and Thomson, N. (2022). Trafficking of Contagion: Environmental Crime and Biological Threats in the Greater Mekong. Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime.*

*Luong, H. T. and Thomson, N. (2022). Tackling Environmental Crime and Biological Threats across the Border of the Greater Mekong Subregion. Journal of Illicit Economic and Development, Vol 4.No 1, pp.8-16.*

## **Case study 2: Researching police investigations: confidentiality and navigating state secrets**

In one-party states, government controls can limit access to information about the way policing is conducted and data generally understood to be in the realm of the criminal justice sector. Crime statistics, which may be readily available in some countries, might instead be guarded as ‘state secrets’, as is often the case in Vietnam (Cox, 2012). In this context, researching the effectiveness of police investigations in relation to transnational crime might also be considered a sensitive area of empirical focus from the perspective of the MPS.

In 2016, serving Vietnamese police officer and recipient of a Program 165 Vietnamese Government scholarship, Chu Van Dung, completed his doctoral studies on the topic of 'Policing Transnational Crime in Vietnam' at the University of Leeds, in the United Kingdom. As is required in a dissertation, Chu outlines his methodology in detail, indicating that out of 32 interviewees, 14 were police officers, while 12 were from other criminal justice organisations and six were international experts (Chu, 2016, p. 34).

Chu's (2016, p. ) thesis used a 'cosmopolitanism' perspective and its key ethical values of effectiveness, fairness and the rule of law to analyse the institutional arrangements responsible for investigating transnational crime, including evaluating compliance with 'methods, strategies and regulations in order to assess whether there are frictions and tensions between the national interest and the implementation of international standards' (p. 6). To do so, Chu (2016, p. 6) also evaluates consistency with 'human rights standards such as individual liberty in laws, policing strategies and practices' as they relate to the investigation of transnational crime. Among Chu's (2016) aims is to assess the effectiveness of current structures for investigating transnational crime, and the nature of police powers and the criminal process in Vietnam compared to the England and Wales systems.

Chu's research is a useful case study for a number of reasons. Not only is it a rigorous empirical study with great attention to detail, it demonstrates the level of access that 'insiders' can achieve in areas that are potentially highly sensitive and come under some of the categories of the Law on State Secrets 2018, as outlined earlier in the chapter.

Academic freedom in one-party states is often suppressed due to concerns that independent and critical discourse could result in criticism that challenge the legitimacy of the party-state, including China (Xu, 2016) and Vietnam (Cox, 2012). What constitutes a 'challenge' is rarely able to be understood with clarity, and is why it requires a nuanced perspective regarding why some scholarship is possible, and some is not, or it is too risky to embark on given the ambiguity.

Again, we consider the positionality of the researcher, in this case, Dr Chu (the Deputy Director of the PPA as of this chapter's writing), is a Vietnamese citizen (cultural insider) and serving police officer (occupational and organisational insider). This positionality likely enabled Chu to achieve the formal approval and access required with little oversight and/or an easier procedure

by the MPS, while presumably being perceived as posing a low risk regarding exposing information or data that may be considered a ‘challenge’ to the party-state (see Case Study 3 regarding the conditions placed on a foreign researcher).

What is also noteworthy, is that Chu includes a specific section in his thesis relating to his compliance with the legislation relating to state secrets, demonstrating cognisance of its relevance. In this section, he outlines the type of issues that might be considered ‘sensitive’ or contrary to official policies in Vietnam (Chu 2016, p. 56), such as ‘information, for example operational plans of police units, that according to Vietnamese legislation is forbidden to disclose to a third party or to publicize, such as those contained in the [legislation]’, ‘any criminal behaviour or anything that might be considered a state secret or a confidential work practice/process. For example, the researcher did not ask about any unpublished criminal cases,’ and ‘there was also no discussion on any sensitive issues. It would be inappropriate and irrelevant to use the interview as a forum for general criticism of the Vietnamese government’.

While Chu’s dissertation had oversight by a foreign university and human research ethics process, it is uncertain if he would have been able to undertake such a study if he were not an ‘insider-insider’, as per Brown’s (1996) conceptualisation.

*Citation: Chu Van Dung (2016) Policing Transnational Crime in Vietnam, The University of Leeds, United Kingdom (Dissertation).*

### **Case study 3: Research on police culture and socialisation: applying an appreciative method/ology in sensitive political environments**

Researching Vietnamese police perspectives relating to police culture and socialisation processes as a foreigner is not an easy task. In Jardine’s (2023) ethnographic study on policing in Vietnam titled ‘Policing in a Changing Vietnam: Towards Global Account of Policing’, she outlines how adopting an ‘appreciative lens’ likely contributed to receiving approval from the MPS (see also Jardine 2020).

An appreciative lens draws on the theoretical framework of Appreciative Inquiry (AI) often used in organisational development which operates on an assumption that ‘every organisation has something that works well’ (Cooperrider et al., 2008, p. 3). By not focusing primarily on deficits within the People’s Police Force, Jardine (2023) suggests this likely contributed to a level of openness among police students and officers who participated in the study. Even though Jardine (2020, 2023) admits she was unaware of AI at the outset of her research, she later realised her approach was very similar.

This case study on police research aims to highlight the importance of both methodology and method in AI, hence ‘method/ology’ (see Jardine and van Dijk, 2023). AI is both an overarching philosophy (see below) and a collection of techniques or tools for data collection and analysis (such as the form and nature of questions) (Clouder and King 2015; Tight 2012, p. 9).

As an overarching philosophy, AI methodology is underpinned by five key principles (Cooperrider and Whitney 1999):

- **Constructionist:** knowledge is created and attributed multiple meanings through the dynamic interplay of social relations
- **Anticipatory:** anticipation of a positive future can create openings in cultures to embrace change
- **Poetic:** imagery and stories can inspire action
- **Positive:** positive interactions can create momentum for change
- **Simultaneity:** inquiry itself creates change.

While an appreciative lens may have contributed to gaining access to interview and observe police in training and at work in Hanoi, the study revealed much about police culture and socialisation in Vietnam. For example, the study disrupts universalist assumptions that police defer to legalistic approaches, instead finding that being flexible is understood as a core part of policing in Vietnam (Jardine 2020, 2023).

Moreover, Jardine (2023) refers to interviewing police in Vietnam about misconduct identifying a tendency among officers to prefer a personal intervention to discourage officer misconduct,

rather than formal reporting process and that upskilling officers to have more confidence to talk to their peers regarding minor infringements may dissuade progression to further misconduct.

According to Jardine (2023), it is likely that her positionality as a former Australian police officer (occupational insider, but cultural outsider), with experience in collaborating with Vietnamese police through previous research and her former work in Australian aid programs with police in Southeast Asia helped to gain approval for the research.

In terms of positionality, Jardine's gender identity as a woman can further place her as an outsider to the dominant gender in police organisations. While gender identity and expression may have advantages and disadvantages to conducting research in specific fields (Horn 1997), both Belur (2014) and Jardine (2023) argue that they believe their policing background played a more influential role in their research than did their identity as women.

In Vietnam, approval is typically required to conduct formal research (Cox 2012; Jardine 2023). For foreigners, this usually means having a local host institution and applying for a visa for the purposes of research through the immigration department. As a foreigner, Jardine (2023) was required to apply for a relevant education visa that was facilitated by the MPS before conducting the interviews in the PPA. While it is sometimes possible to conduct less formal or street interviews with police without government approval, there are limitations on the level of access that can be achieved. Conversely, gaining approval is also a considerable barrier for outsiders such as foreign researchers, depending on the topic being explored, which can otherwise be more easily overcome by insider researchers such as Luong and Chu in the case studies above.

*Citation: Jardine, M. (2023). Policing in a Changing Vietnam: Towards a Global Account of Policing. Routledge.*

## **Implications insider-outsider positionality for researching police in Vietnam**

Crucially, both Vietnamese and non-Vietnamese scholars have helped to produce more empirical knowledge about policing in Vietnam from both insider and outsider perspectives. From a foreign perspective, Cox (2012) described the 'highly restrictive' nature of conducting research in Vietnam and the requirement for foreigners to obtain approval to conduct formal



research. A decade later, Jardine (2023) observed a change in the breadth of policing and crime-related research being undertaken in English. She attributes this to the Vietnamese education sector's efforts to increase the standard of education and research, which includes the PPA because it functions as a university under the Ministry of Education and Training (Jardine, 2023). Conversely, in regard to insider-insider (domestic policing) scholars, their opportunities to study abroad were bolstered when the Party-government of Vietnam recognised the important roles of international cooperation to combat organized crimes and transnational crimes (Luong, 2015, 2017, 2019a, 2019b, 2020a, 2020c, 2021a, 2021b, 2022; Luong et al., 2019; Nguyen et al., 2020; Nguyen et al., 2021; Nguyen & Luong, 2021). As a result, they set up an independent project in the National Action Plans in Crime Prevention at the end of the 20th century to focus on the trends and patterns of transnational (organised) crime in Vietnam and Vietnamese in overseas (Luong, 2014, 2019b, 2020a, 2020b, 2020c). Accordingly, at the beginning of the 21st century, the MPS collaborated with the Ministry of Education and Training and others to recruit and allow some specific candidates from police institutions to study abroad. Notably, the way some insider-outsider typologies have been conceptualised in some cases by Northern researchers, does not necessarily hold for the experience of Vietnam. For example, insider-insider positions have been described as police or in-house researchers focusing on requirements set by management, such as collating statistics (Davies, 2016, p. 156), who may be 'enthusiastic amateurs', focusing on 'operational' issues (Westmarland, 2015, p. 165). In the case of Vietnam, the PPA also functions as a university, regularly graduating Masters level and doctoral police practitioner-students. Even as recruits, police students are required to complete a minor thesis as part of their 4-year commissioned officer training (Bachelor degree). Consequently, insider-insider policing researchers in Vietnam are more likely to have some experience or qualifications that those in Anglo-American police organisations do not, especially for officers who graduate from the Academy and go directly into academic staff or policy roles.

While Vietnamese police are more likely to have a degree or some research training, compared to Anglo-American police, this does not necessarily mean that their research activity will be sustained. For example, some PPA lecturers received local or foreign scholarships to undertake doctoral studies. Subsequently, their dissertations, published papers amid their overseas durations and made contributions to international academic conferences substantially increased the circulation of locally informed scholarship on Vietnamese policing. Paradoxically, while almost all of these Vietnamese police scholars returned to Vietnam and joined senior ranking

positions in the MPS and/or PPA after graduating from Western training institutions, their academic contributions have slowed. Even, as Luong (2021b, p. 1218) observed in the last decades, Vietnamese policing and criminology scholars ‘are very wary about research and are unlikely to share their findings without permission from the authorities because they fear reprisals for investigating the data.’ This is likely influenced by the strict publishing requirements by international journals, but also it provides insight into the limits of knowledge production on policing regarding insider-insider researchers, where the police institution does not incentivise (or support) scholars returning from abroad to continue to publish research. However, this may only appear to be a deficit, if publication is considered a superior measure of scholarly contribution and performance.

Insider-outsider positionalities are recognised as having fluidity and being amenable to change, for example, there is a shift from insider-insider to outsider-insider, i.e., a police officer moving into academia, as was the case for Luong. As one of the first courses pursuing the emergent non-traditional security in Southeast Asia region to follow up the Australian scholarship in Vietnam for policing studies Luong had a good chance to graduate the master for transnational crime prevention at the University of Wollongong in the early of 2010s before completing his doctoral degree at the RMIT University between 2013 and 2017 and continuing to pursue his academic career in Australia as a different case of the insider-and-outsider culture. In the 2010s, Luong founded, and continues to chair, the Vietnamese Society for Criminology and Criminal Justice (VSCCJ), along with support from colleagues who, unlike him, studied abroad and then returned to work for the MPS (insider-insider positions). The VSCCJ has really publicly operate and open the door in recent years when the second author retired his policing career (insider-outsider position). The VSCCJ aims to contribute to the development of the discipline by providing a network of scholars with whom to share experiences and knowledge, including contributions from people with multiple insider-outsider positionalities. While the network is open to scholars of any background, it especially connects the growing number of scholars from Vietnam or with a Vietnamese background who can leverage their ability to speak the local language, access the field, navigate gatekeepers to research participants and data, and negotiate the ambiguity regarding whether data may be politically sensitive or a state secret (noting that to foreigners or civilians, invoking that a topic is a ‘state secret’ is could dissuade a researcher from further exploration). This case reflects on the significant understanding about the context regarding policing studies in Vietnam.

On further analysis of the case studies, the positionality of the researcher also shapes how research ethics principles and practices are carried out. For example, Chu (2016, p. 54) reports how he was able to ‘guarantee the confidentiality of both the interviewee and the data’, as is typical practice. However, as a foreigner and outsider researcher, Jardine (2023) reports how she was required to make a modification to her ethics approval after the PPA (following the MPS regulations) made it a requirement that the names of participants would need to be made available to them. Subsequently, participants were informed of this requirement and provided informed consent to continue. Even though the participant list was never requested, and thus, never provided at the culmination of the research, Jardine (2023, p. 19) reflects on what power or influence she may have had as a doctoral researcher to rebuff the demands in the first place. This comparison presents how police organisations may respond to requests to conduct research about them, and the conditions which may be demanded depending on the identity of the researcher. The insider-outsider dichotomy is also challenged by whether a former police officer researching police in a foreign country is regarded as an insider-outsider, and outsider-insider, or an outsider-outsider (Jardine 2023).

## **Future of policing research in Vietnam**

This chapter explored researching policing in Vietnam and the opportunities and limitations associated with various researcher positionalities in the Vietnamese context that includes navigating political sensitivities and an emergent field of locally-led English language policing scholarship. Our case studies provide insights into different examples of research on policing that speak to the processes and power dynamics of knowledge production. Case study one demonstrates the value of policy-oriented research led by a cultural insider who can navigate gatekeepers in areas of sensitivity, such as corruption in cross-border crime. Case study two highlights how a cultural insider can deeply access police participants to explore their perspectives in relation to transnational crime. Case study three is perhaps indicative of one of the ways that outsiders can navigate gaining access to researching police is through adopting an ‘appreciative’ lens, highlighting that methodological choices shape the feasibility of some research pursuits, and hence perhaps why Appreciative Inquiry is an emerging approach in policing scholarship (Jardine, 2030, 2023; Jardine & van Dijk 2023; Skinns, Woof & Sprawson 2022).

The first author (Jardine) experimented with ChatGPT, a large language model, which generates sentences ‘by mimicking the statistical patterns of language’ collated from the internet (Stokel-Walker, 2023, p. 620) in preparing some points of this chapter. While it was found useful in relation to assisting with writing prompts, significant amendments were made to the generated text to reduce ambiguity or qualify statements provided. In the author's view, the generated text did not accurately represent the author's preferred presentation of particular viewpoints without close review and qualification. While ChatGPT has been cited as an author in some cases, there is a view that it should not be because it cannot take responsibility for the integrity of scientific research in the way that author must (Stokel-Walker, 2023).

While the three case studies in this chapter are separate undertakings, they all contribute to knowledge production on policing in Vietnam, thereby collectively advancing our understanding from different perspectives. Undertaking collaborative research where a team comprises both insiders and outsiders can jointly overcome instrumental barriers, such as gatekeepers, but also analytical barriers, where outsiders may observe situations from a perspective that insiders may be culturally ‘blind’ to (Liu and Burnett, 2022, p. 6). Notably, in the case studies presented, the three researchers are all serving or former police officers, whereas, a research team on a policing topic that comprises someone who does not have a policing background would also provide important outsider perspectives. Researchers who self-identify as ‘activists’ can also be crucial partners in collaborative police research teams in some contexts (Marks et al. 2010).

Researchers need to be cognisant of their positionality at the outset and throughout the research process. It is important to be reflexive about what one's own positionality means in relation to the choice of research topic, study design, methodology, tools and techniques and analytical approaches, and how it influences what is feasible to achieve. In sum, we argue that a research team which comprises people with different perspectives will enrich the production of knowledge about policing studies in general, especially in cross-cultural research, and even more so in places where navigating politically sensitive environments, such as Vietnam.

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