



Qualitative Research on Urban Poverty in Thailand : A cross cultural reflection

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Abstract

This article discusses both the findings of a piece of research on urban poverty in Thailand and the reflects on the process of qualitative research in that country. This reflection is from the perspective of a Thai researcher writing in the environment of a western university. The findings focus on the ways in which Thai government has attempted to deal with urban poverty as it has been manifested in urban slums since the lift off of economic development. In the absence of a social security safety net, a consensus has appeared to emerge that self reliance is a culturally appropriate aim for the poor. This concept is analysed from the data and found to exclude many of the poorest who are unable to benefit from the available provision. The question of what can be ethical research among the poorest is examined, and the need to directly do good rather than avoid harm is prioritised for this research.

Keywords : Qualitative Research, Urban Poverty, Ethical Research, Cultural Reflection

บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้เป็นการอภิปรายเกี่ยวกับข้อค้นพบบางประเด็นจากการศึกษาวิจัยเพื่อแก้ไขปัญหาความยากจนในเมืองและกระบวนการทำวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ซึ่งเป็นการสะท้อนมุมมองของนักวิจัยที่ทำงานท่ามกลางบรรยากาศและสภาพแวดล้อมของนักวิจัยในมหาวิทยาลัยของประเทศตะวันตก ความพยายามของรัฐบาลในการแก้ไขความยากจนในเมืองปรากฏชัดขึ้นไปพร้อมกับความเจริญเติบโตทางเศรษฐกิจ ในขณะที่ระบบความมั่นคงทางสังคมยังขาดประสิทธิภาพ แนวคิดการพึ่งตนเองจึงเป็นแนวคิดทางวัฒนธรรมที่เหมาะสมสอดคล้องกับกลุ่มคนจนเมือง อย่างไรก็ตามกลุ่มคนจนเมืองโดยเฉพาะคนที่จนที่สุดก็ยังไม่สามารถเข้าถึงบริการสังคมอย่างทั่วถึง ประเด็นที่ควรคำนึงในการทำงานวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพคือจริยธรรมในการทำวิจัย โดยเฉพาะกับกลุ่มคนยากจน

คำสำคัญ : การวิจัยเชิงคุณภาพ ความยากจนในเมือง จริยธรรมในการวิจัย การสะท้อนทางวัฒนธรรม

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I. Introduction

“There are many different groups who came to our community and asked questions, such as students, researchers, government officials and politicians, but nothing has been changed for us.” (A resident of a Bangkok slum)

It is estimated that there are currently 3.9 million people living in urban poverty in Thailand, without the existence of an effective social assistance safety-net. In 2001 I began a PhD thesis that aimed to present an analysis of Thai governments’ urban poverty alleviation policy (Senanuch. 2005). The central aim of the thesis was to question whether the Thai government policy on urban poverty alleviation can be effective for the poor and the poorest in urban slum communities. Qualitative methods were used, supported by documentary research, and my own experience of being a community development worker and researcher in the urban slums of Thailand over a period of 18 years. This article is a reflection on my personal and academic journey during the writing of the thesis. I wish to highlight the dilemmas I faced as a Thai academic encountering the expectations of a western university as to methods used to gain data from my respondents.

From the beginning of the research, I endeavoured to elicit information from

the range of stakeholders engaged with contemporary urban poverty alleviation policy in Bangkok. Thus, the research was to include the perspectives of policy makers, the poor, and the poorest. I distinguished between these two latter groups by describing those who have access to some government provision for the urban poor and those who are excluded from such provision. I interviewed 18 policy makers, 15 community savings group committee members, and 65 of the excluded poorest. I also investigated the development of policy relating to the urban poor through an analysis of key government reports and documents. I examined all of the government policy documents relating to policies for urban poverty alleviation and the Thai Governments’ five-year National Economic and (later) Social Development Plans from 1961 to 2006. I also analysed each of the fifty four Government statements on their policies to the National Assembly covering this period.

This research produced two new major vehicles for understanding and interpreting Thai government urban poverty alleviation policy. First, the policy document research enabled me to construct a critical account of the historical development of policy relating to the urban poor, particularly those in slum communities. Second,



the interviews produced a unique view of the often desperate lives of some Thai citizens who are part of communities residing in what is estimated as 2,000 slums in Thailand. This view was seen through the eyes of both the urban poor and the policy makers. I found attitudes of the policy makers towards the urban poor containing a number of diverse stances, both negative and positive. The Government's preferred way of helping, previously by housing improvements, and recently by promoting credit and loan schemes with a low interest rate to strengthen community-based organisations and emphasise self-reliance, does help some of the poor; it also excludes others.

An important discussion in the thesis came to be about self-reliance. This is widely referred to by all stakeholders-from HM The King, through leading thinkers including Buddhist scholars, to the poorest in the slum communities. I analysed what such a concept meant to each of these groups. I found that there may be little agreement, either on what is being spoken about, or what the implications of self-reliance are for helping Thailand's poorest citizens.

As a community activist, I was also concerned throughout the thesis with how to improve the situations of the poor. I reviewed some curricula relating to the training of social/community workers to assess

how well students are prepared for their work. I made some conclusions that included practical recommendations for changes at a policy level, via civil society, and in professional education. The direct education and training of the poor is seen as crucial to any substantial improvements. My own experience, producing the thesis in a western country, was included throughout. This was in order to reflect on my learning and the challenges of researching within and outside the Thai social structure. It is to this experience that I now turn.

II. Qualitative research

Rather than using the 'objective' implied in quantitative methods' reporting of facts, I initially agreed with Bolton (1995 : 298-299) when he stated 'Of course you can get reliability on surveys when you are measuring cultural concepts rather than behaviour. And by now, most people...know what to say on surveys'.

I chose to use qualitative methods with all of my respondents. I wish to now consider the issues that arise from emphasising qualitative methodology in the Thai context.

There were six stated objectives, 1) to develop an understanding of the government policy for urban poverty alleviation, 2) to develop an understanding of



the philosophies and attitudes underpinning approaches to urban poverty, 3) to develop an understanding of the strengths and limitations of the implementation of government and other programmes for urban poverty alleviation, 4) to develop an understanding of the implications of these policies for the education and training of social and community workers, 5) to draw conclusions on government policy approaches to urban poverty alleviation and make these available to others concerned with social policy, and 6) to improve my abilities as a researcher in Thailand.

To achieve these, I needed to undertake face to face interviewing, both of those in power and those who appeared to be less powerful. I intended to use my position in Thailand as an action researcher as a way of accessing data that might not be available to others without my social capital. From the beginning, I was interested in using qualitative methods to ensure that the voices of the poor and the poorest were heard in the study. However, I also thought that the voices of other stakeholders were important to record, as their attitudes to the poor and to poverty-needed understanding if social policy changes happen. By this I mean extending benefits to those who are not now receiving help in urban poverty alleviation.

For eighty years qualitative research has established itself as a field of inquiry in its own right (Denzin and Lincoln. 2000 : 2). A variety of empirical materials may be utilized. My methods therefore included a case study and interviews to describe the worlds of the people I was studying. This reporting of the richness of the subjects' responses by a researcher, much involved with the social setting, is enhanced by participant observation which, along with key informant interviewing, is a feature of the method to convey the meanings attached to events by the participants (Knapp. 1999 : 161).

III. Ethics, power and the research process

Ladwig and Gore (1994 : 234) discuss the problems of power and method in research and summarizes these into three approaches : (1) as a problem of using particular methods for producing good research, (2) as a problem of relations between a researcher and a subject, and (3) as a problem of the production of academic discourse. I will comment on all of these aspects as I discuss my methods of the data collection.

At the beginning of my research I hoped qualitative methods would produce valid research, but I recognised that these



methods have to be sensitive to the Thai context. This meant taking the Thai social structure and crucially, my position and my respondents into account. In respect to the power relations between a researcher and a subject, the power differences between me and my respondents did not always result in me being in the most powerful position. Some of my respondents, such as politicians or high-ranking government officials in Thai society were in a more powerful position than I. For all of these people who may be powerful or apparently powerless, Fine et al. (2000 : 115) note that those respondents are not just answering questions. They are aware of the impact of their responses on the researcher. In my interviews, people were aware of my intentions-both personal and academic. They were also aware how their answers might or might not improve situations, either for themselves or for people they knew or presumably for myself.

The third problem of power and method was more challenging for me as a Thai academic pursuing a higher degree in a western university using data gathered from my own country during the course of my studies. George (1986 : 170) refers to the issues of using methods that are derived from other cultures ‘...sense can be made of observations in a foreign society

or culture by giving due attention to context, and that, with refinement of technique, observations can enhance our understanding of ‘the other.’ The validity of tools of measurement between cultures should be a point of discussion in all such research.

For me the issue of power and method was essential to my position as insider/outsider, observing the other. I am inside the Thai society when I am in Thailand. There ‘the other’ is sometimes close to me in terms of academic and community leaders and sometimes further away, as in the case of the poorest. I am in a sense also an insider in Thailand when I am outside the country, in so far as the influence of Thai culture is still with me. Then I have to produce a research about ‘the other’ in a culture where I am an outsider. This must conform to western expectations of what is good research in areas such as ethics, methods, analysis and writing. I also in this situation has to satisfy myself, living between both cultures, that I can make a similar positive evaluation of my performance. I was attempting to use my research not just as an academic exercise but as a way of improving the conditions of the poor. Therefore, I have to ask throughout if I can ever hope to ‘speak authentically of the experience of the Other, or an Other’ (Lincoln and Denzin. 2000 : 1050). Certainly



some of my respondents hoped I would speak for them. The voice I used in the reportage was imbued with my knowledge and concerned about the slums I was researching.

This issue of locating researchers in their research projects has been addressed in the way that qualitative methods have developed to the 21st Century. What is called the narrative approach allows authors to locate themselves in what they are writing (Denzin and Lincoln. 2000 : 3). The challenge for the researcher is to account for the influences of language, gender, social class, race and ethnicity. This seems very important to me when I was conducting the study in Thailand and translating the results into English for a western cultural audience. To focus on the accurate reporting of respondents' experiences, I needed to take account of the perspective of myself as the writer. This method is sometimes called auto-ethnography. 'In many ways the problems of auto-ethnography are the problems of ethnography compounded by the researcher's involvement and intimacy with his subjects' (Hayano. 2001 : 122). Hayano (2001) states that he first heard the term in the 1960s, when an academic argument happened about judging the validity of 'anthropological data by assessing the characteristics, interests, origin of the

person who did the fieldwork'. These problems are faced now, according to Hayano, in order to deal with a post-colonial situation where anthropologists can no longer study exotic tribes as friendly outsiders. Indeed, the cultures studies are no longer pure, or uninfluenced by global events. I tried to deal with this by writing in a way which was self-reflexive in terms of my own position in the Thai society, whilst being concerned to convey the experience of subjects who were not always known to me, and to an audience from a different culture. The study was therefore 'auto-ethnographic' in the sense that it reported on and developed my involvement with similar subjects in their environments over many years.

The use of qualitative, and specifically narrative, methods did not however take away the power differences between myself and my respondents. To deal with the problems that will always occur, we say in Thailand "Mai Pen Rai". it means Literally, "never mind" but it also directs our attention away from something that might prevent us from moving on. Power differences will always exist in a stratified society where everyone knows their place. I accepted that such power differences exist and saw this as part of my analysis.

The study had to conform to the requirements of the university ethics com-



mittee. Completing such requirements was not something familiar to me in Thailand. The research I have been involved in there has not made such demands. There is not a tradition of litigation against bad practice. The National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, which may eventually see protecting the public from harmful research included in its role, was only set up in 1999. However, I noted that the university ethics committee requirements related to not doing harm. The literature suggests that doing harm is sometimes difficult to assess. Goode (1999 : 23) concluded that what constitutes doing harm is a contested area, and, 'If the sociologist is completely honest, somebody is going to get hurt'. He is pointing out that not all participants will be happy with the findings of studies. A number of my respondents was concerned to read what I would write about their interview, even though they agreed to it being tape - recorded. Their fears may have been about the effect of their critical comments in a society where such criticism is not welcome.

Particularly since the development of feminist and minority group researchers, writers have emphasised the importance of not just avoiding harm but 'doing good' when interviewing participants from their own communities. Oakley (1999 : 49-50) questioned what she saw as the traditional

'masculine' form of the research interview that separated the interviewee from the expert interviewer, where only the expert could decide on the form of the data-gathering. Other researchers such as Tierney (1994 : 105) consider the research meeting needs to be more than data collection. It must also include empathy with the subject.

Implied in this is the need to do good directly for the participants. In conducting these interviews I was concerned with avoiding doing harm by revealing the identity of vulnerable participants. I was also aware of the importance of not "losing face" in the Thai society. I was therefore careful to avoid questioning them in a way that would bring shame on them. I used my skills in community work to create a friendly environment in which the participants would feel able to discuss issues freely with me. I am unsure of my ability to do good directly for the participants. On occasions, I did attempt this when I considered it my responsibility to inform people of funding and services provisions, conditions they were not aware of.

As to power, I am aware of the ways in which I used my professional skills to get the information from the participants. I also acknowledge that as a man in Thailand I was interviewing mainly women, and they may have felt an obligation to respond



to me as an authority that might be able to help them. However, I needed them as respondents more than they needed me. Equally, they may also have kept some information from me because of their fear of the implications that may.

IV. On reflection: second thoughts

After reviewing the western literature on ethics, I realised that I should strive to achieve the aims of participatory research. That is, that my subjects would be helped to improve and have control over their quality of life. I did not manage to achieve this. Further, I did not involve my subjects in every phase of the research process. This would have meant their participation, from design to publication, and beyond to involvement in the academic judgment of my work (Stanfield. 1994 : 174-175). I attempted to give some information to representatives of the poor by presenting my findings at a conference where I felt I could speak for them, to them, and hear their responses. I realised only later, when time and budget prevented me from correcting this, that I should always include direct feedback in the research design. I had also not allowed for feedback to those who have direct power over influencing policy. I decided I should re-interview this group and discuss my findings with them

and learn if I had accurately presented their views. Or had their views changed? I decided to return to this group in Thailand. The reluctance of this group to initially participate, and later to be re-interviewed shows that the powerful also needed to be directly involved in my research design.

V. Conclusions

The aims of the research were to examine the attitudes of government and key stakeholders to urban poverty. Central to this was my existing understanding, that self-reliance is expected of poor people. What I found was that self-reliance meant very different things to Thai people according to their position in that society. For those of the poorest, self-reliance usually meant getting no help at all forms either from their family or NGO or the state. The only way of helping such citizens is by developing their own power to achieve inclusion and it is from the poor themselves that community leaders can arise. This will mean training such people rather than in hoping for more direct help from, usually middle class social workers.

I was left, at the conclusion of this research, asking what I have learnt about the social research methods that I can practice in the future in my country. Firstly, I became more aware of the limitations of



findings that may be presented as facts. Secondly, and most importantly I will attempt in the future to be more inclusive of the participants in research. I think this is a central finding for me. I realise the meeting with the subject and the researcher affects the data that is obtained but also the research that can also provide an opportunity for the poor to educate themselves about their own conditions and ways in which it may be alleviated. Thai social structure is composed of hierarchies and such a structure expressed as patronage creates dependencies. The informal education potentially provided by involvement in research projects could balance such dependencies by helping the poor analyse their position in the social structure. Thirdly, there is a central problem with the critical approach to findings, including my own. Obtaining responses from participants that may imply some criticism

of their society is sometimes difficult. I remain uneasy about this situation. There are, of course, good reasons why people are afraid to voice their opinions in a society that is developing a democracy and where people cannot be assured that their rights to expose injustices will be respected. For Thai people like me who have the privilege of working alongside the poor, we do have the obligation to forgo any research that is not in actual partnership with those who are to be the subjects. Like many of my respondents the poor of Thailand have seen so many researchers come to their country and then go either back to their own country or to their enhanced careers in Thailand without any obvious benefit to participants. It is their human right to be involved at every stage of a research process. I have also learnt that such a procedure is also likely to provide more valid data.

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