

What does Thai public servants' suicides reported in daily newspapers tell us about suicide?: An analysis of reported cases from daily newspapers during 2007 – 2016

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Abstract

Suicide tends to be explained and perceived as an individual action. Although the proclaimed sociologist Emile Durkheim demonstrated in 1897 that suicide is a social action, health organizations still categorize the causes of suicide as personal problems or mental illnesses.

This article will challenge the scientific approach of the explanation for suicide with the question of whether there is an alternative explanation besides “depression or chronic illness, excessive drinking of alcohol, family issues and disappointment in love”.

An outcome interpreted by data collected over a decade from major daily newspapers on suicide by Thai public servants is that suicide can be explained as a power relationship with the cause of suicide consisting of an excessive, unequal power relationship between a victim and his or her opponents.

Key words: suicide, power relationship, daily newspaper, Thai public servants

Introduction

Suicide is one of four possible terms to describe the cause of death: natural, accidental, suicidal and homicidal (Leenaars, 2003). From one point of view, suicide is lethal violence (Leenaars, 2003) or is an outcome of intractable conflict (Coleman, 2006) but in the scientific approach there is a linkage with mental illness, so it has been claimed to be a part of medicine, psychiatry and psychology. Most of the reports from both the World Health Organization (WHO) and Department of Mental Health (DMH), Thailand have shown that the major causes of suicide are depression or chronic illness, excessive drinking of alcohol, family issues and disappointment in love (WHO, 2016b; Konthong, 2016). In Thailand, the figure for Thais who have committed suicide is a monthly average of 350 or a total of 4,205 cases in 2015. The suicide rate for Thai people in general in 2015 was 6.47 persons per 100,000 people, an increase from 6.08 persons per 100,000 people in 2014 (Hfocus, 2016). In 2016, suicide was ranked among the top 15 causes of death in Thailand (Worldatlas, 2016). Suicide from depression is the second most common cause of death after cardiovascular disease (Charoensuthipan, 2016). The number of depressed people who committed suicide in Thailand was higher than murdered people (Charoensuthipan, 2016).

However, different groups of Thai people committed suicide from different conditions and causes. Peasants have committed suicide when their life cycle clashed against the state's/market's life cycles in the context of intractable conflicts. This process results from a complex set of conditions. Peasants, who encounter conflicts between the cycle of their way of life and the cycle of the state's regulations which move in different power and time conditions, may commit suicide (Boonyoung, 2016). This result corresponds to incidents reported in newspapers that there are cases of suicide committed by normal people.

According to newspapers, there is a lot of news about suicide by Thai public servants, i.e. police officers, teachers, soldiers, etc. Only half of the cases reported mental illness or depression; on the contrary, the news focused more on stress from the responsibility on those committing suicide. This leads to the question posed by this article which challenges the scientific approach to suicide and suggests that there is a different complex process at work that leads some groups of Thai public servants to attempt or commit suicide.

Literature review

The subject of suicide has been dominated by the scientific approach. Biological aspects (abnormalities in neurotransmitter systems) (Traskman-Bendz Mann, 2000), psychology (impulsivity behavior) (Williams and Pollock, 2000) and psychiatric aspects

(pathological anxiety) (Murphy, 2000) have been used to explain the deliberate act of suicide. Much research based on this approach will explain a suicidal person as an individual patient who can be given treatment. Conversely, the sociological approach addresses the cultural-social background, condition and patterns of suicidal incidents (Taylor, 1988). From a political view, suicide is explained as the right to decide life and death by a sovereign power and can also be used as a method for contesting the sovereign power (Foucault, 1978; Taylor, 2011). In addition, suicide has been explained as a violent method of death that occurs when a person faces protracted trauma, an experience of prolonged trauma associated with many conflict procedures and troubling consequences during an intractable conflict (Coleman, 2006). For example, from 1900-2007, the rate of suicides increased in the period of a Republican-occupied White House due to groups of people being faced with and suffering from unemployment, recession, and inequality (Gilligan, 2011).

Because the process of structural violence is a source of direct violence (Galtung, 1990), suicide events will have a process of alienation which has a double aspect: to be desocialized away from one culture and to be resocialized into another culture. This process often occurs in the case of second-class citizenship, e.g. the brainwashing process, which over a long period of time leaves the second-class citizen with no choice. This process might consist of a long-term process of marginalization, fragmentation, penetration, segmentation, repression, and exploitation (unequal exchange) (Galtung, 1990).

In Thai society, suicide is not illegal but it is seen as sinful behavior from a religious point of view. This phenomenon of suicide by Thai public servants has not been the subject of any research except for the case of police officers.

Framework

To challenge the scientific approach, this article will use Foucault's concept of power and Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus'.

For Foucault, power is not only hierarchical and in a monarchical form, but it is anywhere and can be held by anyone. Power works through culture, customs, institutions and individuals (Feder, 2011). Therefore, the norm or typical understanding of things is a tangible form of power. According to this, newspapers, a form of mass media survives only to serve the needs of mass consumers, and are a good source to explore how power is working. They reduce complex and unique phenomena into 'instant' typicalities ready to be consumed by pre-indoctrinated people and they wield power over others.

To understand how power works in a form of discipline, culture, and custom, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' might be helpful to illustrate structure and agency or social practice and individual decision. For Bourdieu, behavior is a product of obedience to rules. His concept of 'habitus', a system of disposition, suggests that the behavior is an outcome partly of a structure, family upbringing, educational experiences and so on, and it generates perceptions, appreciations and practices (Maton, 2008) which members of a society adopt and pass onto one another and others. And 'habitus' does not work alone. Bourdieu summarized this in the equation that is [(habitus) (capital)] +field = practice (Maton, 2008).

According to Foucault's concept of power and Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', suicide can never be an action only of an individual; rather it is an outcome of an individual's limited action under not only a structured social practice arranged by power but also the way a society reveals only a part of it.

Methodology

This article collects data from the Matichon e-library, an online newspaper database, of reports during 1 January 2007 – 31 December 2016. The unit of analysis is an individual who committed suicide. The cases that are used in the analysis are officials of bureaucratic organizations and local organizations. The instrument for data collection is a structured form. This study uses frequencies and percentages for data analysis. In addition, secondary data of remarkable cases from many newspapers will be used to explain and discuss the process of Thai public servants' suicides. In addition, to challenge the scientific approach simply means seeking causes of suicide which the WHO and DMH Thailand did not report.

Result of analysis

The data relating to suicide by Thai public servants during the period 1 January 2007 – 31 December 2016 come from Thai daily newspapers that were collected by the Matichon e-library. There are 336 cases. Most of the cases were reported in Khaosod with 21.73 percent followed by Matichon, Daily News, Banmuang, Thairath, Manager Daily, Komchadluek and Siamrath with 14.58, 13.39, 13.39, 10.12, 7.44, 5.95 and 5.06 percent, respectively. The percentages of the news of suicide cases in each of Naewna, PimThai, Post Today Bangkokbiznews and Dailyworldtoday are less than 4.

The cases consist of 312 males and 24 females. The youngest suicide victim was 19 years old and the oldest was 60 years old. The average age was 42.65 years old.

Almost half of the cases were police officers followed by soldiers, teachers and local public officers. With regard to the ratio of each occupation with their different responsibilities, this article will show the results of a comparison between 2 groups; police officers and soldiers will be categorized as security officers and the rest will be categorized as public officers. In the case of security officers, the ratio of suicide is 3:2 of non-commissioned officers to commissioned officers. The highest rank of non-commissioned officer was police senior sergeant major and accounts for around 29.15 percent of all suicides by security officers.

Table 1 Numbers and percentages of suicide by Thai public servants during the period 2007-2016 by occupation

Occupation	Number	Percentage
Police officer	156	46.43
Others public officer	58	17.26
Soldier	41	12.20
Teacher	29	8.63
Local public officer	28	8.33
Lecturer	9	2.68
Nurse	8	2.38
Doctor	7	2.08
Total	336	100.00

During the period from 2007 – 2013 there was an increase in the number of suicides by Thai public servants. It reached a peak in 2013, and gradually decreased afterwards.



Figure 1 Number of Thai public servants' suicide period 2007 – 2016 by type of officer

The results show that the percentages of suicide cases for both security officers and public officers are higher for males than for females. Two-thirds of the cases are in the age groups between 46-55 years old and 36-45 years old. There are differences between the age groups for security officers and public officers. Most of the security officers who committed suicide were in the 36-45 age group. Most of the public officers committed suicide were in the 46-55 age group. (Table 2)

Table 2 Numbers and percentages of suicide by Thai public servants during the period 2007-2016 by type of occupation and personal traits

Personal traits		Security Officer	Public Officer	Total
Sex (n=336)	Male	191 (56.85)	121 (36.01)	312 (92.86)
	Female	6 (1.79)	18 (5.36)	24 (7.14)
Age group (n=310)	25 years old and below	15 (4.84)	4 (1.29)	19 (6.13)
	26-35 years old	32 (10.32)	28 (9.03)	60 (19.35)
	36-45 years old	67 (21.61)	33 (10.65)	100 (32.26)
	46-55 years old	49 (15.81)	56 (18.06)	105 (33.87)
	55 years old and over	12 (3.87)	14 (4.52)	26 (8.39)

Shooting was the most common method for suicide of both security officers and public officers. There are differences between each type of occupation. Four-fifths of the security officers' suicides were by shooting. But shooting was used by fewer public officers. Moreover, other methods used by half of public officers were less efficient. The result of this study is quite incompatible with the mainstream of suicide theory which focuses on biology and psychology. Only one-tenth of Thai public servants who committed suicide did so with mental illness/drugs and drink as a cause of suicide. One-fourth of them committed suicide because of the stress of

their job; for example, unable to control their jobs, job stress or job insecurity, etc. The second cause of suicide for both types of officer was family disharmony followed by physical illness/disease (Table 3).

Table 3 Numbers and percentages of suicide by Thai public servants during the period 2007-2016 by type of occupation and method of suicide

		Security Officer	Public Officer	Total	
Method of suicide* (n=336)	Strangulation/Hanging	19 (9.64)	46 (33.09)	65 (19.35)	
	Shooting by gun	163 (82.74)	60 (43.17)	223 (66.37)	
	Sharp or blunt instrument	1 (0.51)	3 (2.16)	4 (1.19)	
	Poisoning	3 (1.52)	11 (7.91)	14 (4.17)	
	Jumping into a river or from a height	11 (3.27)	14 (4.17)	25 (7.44)	
	Injection	0 (0.00)	3 (2.16)	3 (0.89)	
	Jumping under a train	0 (0.00)	2 (0.60)	2 (0.60)	
	Cause of suicide* (n=336)	Physical illness/disease	32 (15.24)	20 (14.81)	52 (15.07)
		Mental illness/drug	20 (9.52)	11 (8.15)	31 (8.99)
		Family disharmony	48 (22.86)	26 (19.26)	74 (21.45)
Family financial/debt		20 (9.52)	19 (14.07)	39 (11.30)	
Amorous jealousy/ paranoia		25 (11.90)	17 (12.59)	42 (12.17)	

Table 3 Numbers and percentages of suicide by Thai public servants during the period 2007-2016 by type of occupation and method of suicide (Cont.)

	Security Officer	Public Officer	Total
Running away from lawsuit	5 (2.38)	9 (6.67)	14 (4.06)
Stress about job	54 (25.71)	29 (21.48)	83 (24.06)
Drunkenness	6 (2.86)	4 (2.96)	10 (2.90)

* Cause of suicide is reported in more than 1 case.

The remarkable results from the above data are as follows: there was an increased number of suicides by Thai public servants. Security officers have more risk of suicide than other occupations and nearly half of all suicide victims were police officers. This finding corresponds to a Thai Centre for Investigative Journalism report (Prachathai, 2016) which found that the suicide rate of Thai police officers between 2008 – 2016 was about 32.5 officers per year or about 13.6 officers per 100,000 officers. The rate was higher than the rate for people generally which was between 3,000 – 3,800 lives in 2016. In addition, for public officers, teacher is an interesting occupation to which more attention should be paid. There are 6 teachers among the 10 cases of both types of officers who committed suicide to run away from a lawsuit or escape punishment, especially in cases of child molestation or child sexual abuse.

Conclusion and discussion

Considering that police officers alone counted for nearly half of all suicide victims, it is easy to perceive that the occupation is a crucial factor in suicide. But when victims were categorized into non-security officers and security officers, the figures show that in some years the number of non-security victims surpassed security victims. This information plays down the occupational factor. In addition, on the basis that the number of Thai police officer personnel is 230,000 (Interpol, 2017) and that of Thai military officer personnel is 453,550 (World Bank, 2016), the numbers of 157 cases of police suicide victims and 41 cases of military suicide victims suggests that being a security officer may not be an issue, or at least not a main issue. There must be other conditions that affect the number.

The WHO and DMH Thailand mainly categorized the cause of suicide to mental illness. Assuming that the victims were 'ill' at the time they committed suicide, it raises a question of what made them 'ill' because all the news reports stated that all the victims were on duty at the time of their suicide which implied they were not 'ill' at that moment. According to the news, the causes of were far from "depression or chronic illness, excessive drinking of alcohol, family issues and disappointment in love." Moreover, the ratio of causes stated in Table 3 shows that the causes of suicide for both groups were not much different. Taking the WHO's and DMH Thailand's point of view, both groups likely died with the same explanation.

Shooting was the most successful method of suicide with the highest percentage over other methods and more security officers killed themselves with a gun while the majority of non-security officers hanged themselves; therefore, access to a weapon cannot be (scientifically) ignored.

Anyway, if the occupation is not much of a factor and the scientific approach's explanation does not provide an alternative clue, what else can be explained by the data?

Statistics indicate that more low ranking officers committed suicide than higher ranking ones. Powerless people kill themselves more than powerful people kill themselves. Therefore, it must be something about the power relationship that played a part in suicide, not only the visible power relationship but also the invisible one. What is it?

What a newspaper told: Sample of officers' suicide

Case 1: Police Lieutenant Colonel Chan Chaisawat, an inquiry police officer, hanged himself at his house. He played a vital role in protesting the junta that used its absolute power of Section 44 of the interim constitution to make an overhaul of the enquiry into the police force. He submitted a petition to the prime minister on 8th February, 2016. Then, he came under heavy pressure from his superior who saw the petition as an embarrassing protest against the junta. He committed suicide in middle of the night of 12th February, 2016 (2Bangkok, 2016).

Case 2: Police Major Prakrom Warunprapa, formerly a superintendent at the Technology Crime Suppression Division, was charged on 21st October, 2015 by the Thai military under Article 112 of the Criminal Code, the lèse majesté law, for making false claims about the Thai monarchy for personal benefit. He was held at a temporary detention facility attached to the 11th Army Circle along with the two other suspects in the case. They were held in separate rooms. Two days after his arrest, he attempted suicide at 10 p.m. on 23rd October,

2015 by hanging himself with clothes that were given to him by prison officers. He died at the Corrections Department's hospital (Bangkok Post, 2015; Prachachai, 2015; The Nation, 2015).

Case 3: Police Captain Thawee Muenrak was an enquiry officer attached to Thung Song Hong police station. He handled a case involving 204 cars seized from the parking lot of IT Square located in the Laksi area of Bangkok on 28th November, 2014. It was suspected that several of the seized cars were not legally registered. He was under pressure from the police station chief and was sued by an auto finance company. The police station chief advised him to break the law by returning all the vehicles to the leasing companies, so he insisted that on returning cars to the leasing company he could no longer work on the case. Moreover, during the meeting, he had been scolded by the chief in front of other officers; he said that he would either resign or kill himself. Finally, a few days after the meeting, he shot himself in front of a family member at their lodgings in the compound of the police station on 29th January, 2016 (Bangkok Post, 2016; Fernquest, 2016; Thai PBS, 2016).

Case 4: Master Sergeant First Class Mongkol Fongkamphei, 53 years old, the acting director of Ban San Khwang Primary School in Payao province, shot himself at his house. This followed a parent of a girl, who was a student in the school, claiming that the girl had been sexually abused by Mr. Mongkol Fongkamphei from 2015 until October, 2016. Mr. Mongkol tried to finish negotiations as quickly as possible, but failed to do so. After the unsuccessful negotiations, he committed suicide on 10th November, 2016.

In these 4 sample cases, all the police officers experienced different difficulties. One had problems with his superior, one with a breach of the law (Article 112), one with a leasing company, and one with society.

Looking at these 4 cases from a scientific approach, it was conceptualized into individual problems and mental illness. Nevertheless, in terms of power the 4 cases can be 'interpreted' differently as a matter of the heavy weight of an unequal power relationship between the victims and their counterparts which is relevant in Thailand and might function differently in other countries. For example, in an established democratic ideology, Police Lieutenant Colonel Chan would have been praised for his protest over the junta rather than criticised as his commander did. If Police Major Prakrom lived in a country with either no or a less severe *lèse majesté* law, he would not have been detained in the way he was shortly before he died. It is also the same with the other 2 police officers who might not have committed suicide if they were in a different society.

Thus, this article proposes that beside all the scientific explanations for suicide, there exists excessive unequal power relationships originating in local society. A victim may pull a trigger alone but it is an unjust society that puts a gun in his hand.

Implication

If suicide is concerned with power relationships and a victim dies of an excessive unequal power structure in a society derived from its culture, then there is a loop of an issue composed of actor, structure, and culture in which an actor dies because of a structure originating from a culture influenced by the actor.

An explanation of one whose actions are determined by a structure created by oneself happens to match Pierre Bourdieu's habitus."

Habitus is 'the system of durable and transposable dispositions through which we perceive, judge and act in the world ... acquired through lasting exposure to particular social conditions and conditionings via the internalizing of external constraints and possibilities' (Wacquant 2006, cited in Costa and Murphy, 2015). Habitus is formed and informs about social practice to members in a society. Habitus works by covering exploitation, inequality, and injustice with the 'normal' practice of those people.

Habitus, like other post-structuralists' thoughts, is a "thinking tool" rather than a theory. It provides an alternative view on social issues. Social scientists have applied habitus in diverse ways; for example, Alan France shows how habitus offers an alternative and more sophisticated approach to understanding youth's relationship with crime (Costa and Murphy, 2015).

If Bourdieu was right the habitus of those police officers prepared them for a life of the victims of power harassment. The habitus transformed torturing, discriminating, and violating into tradition and culture and sometime into laws. Not only is there power harassment in a security organization but it is also found in other areas in society; for example, a nurse killed herself when she had to pay a huge credit card bill (Daily News, 6th November 2016). But what if she had lived in another kind of society, a non-market driven one, or she had lived in a place where the law protects consumers more than it does in Thailand?

Being in a bureaucracy or market-led habitus, suicide victims tend to be assessed by the scientific approach's explanation of physical or mental illness - an individual motivation, based on the ability to produce, consume and conform. This explanation silences their death and buries their message. That is why alternative thinking tools can echo their protest and expose the unjust society in which they had struggled.

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