CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

‘....human experience from the ground up, from the point of view of interacting individuals who, together and alone, make and live histories that have been handed down to them from the ghosts of the past’ (Lincoln and Denzin, 2000:1063).

This chapter reviews the objectives of the thesis, and the why and how these were to be achieved. To do this I will detail the methods used and state why these were chosen as the way in which I could best achieve my aims, both as a researcher and within my commitment to achieving results that might be useful to the policy and practice of community development.

3.1 Objectives and methods of the research

1 To develop a knowledge base about the development of Thai governments’ policies for the urban poor in Bangkok during the period 1960 until the present, emphasising particularly the period following the economic crisis in 1997. This will be achieved through a review of policy documents, supplemented by my own field experience and attendance at key seminars in Thailand. This is to gain knowledge about policy development in order to assess the impact on current social policy.

2. To gain knowledge about the attitudes of stakeholders to the urban poor. This will be achieved through interviews with policy makers and service providers, and the poor themselves, in order to assess how these attitudes may affect policy and practice. In referring to stakeholders, I wish to include those at the receiving end of policy as well as policy makers.

3. To find out about the impact of current policies and provision on the urban poor. This will be achieved by interviewing those of the poor who are included in current provisions in savings groups and those who are excluded from these. This aims to find out if the apparent emphasis on self-reliance and family responsibility is able to assist vulnerable groups among the poor. My practice experience had taught me that, with minimal
government services, many of the poor were excluded from any provisions. The literature, such as that from the World Bank, confirmed my impressions as an activist and researcher that gaps certainly exist. Porter, a World Bank Country Director for Thailand, in his press release refers to structural poverty of the long–term poor among certain sub–groups and in certain areas which may need more targeted programmes and policies, ‘Easy to find, but more hard to reach’ (Porter, 2001:1). My research aims to access some of the included and the excluded and analyse their possible differences from each other, and to hear from them their perceptions about their status.

4. To explore the attitudes and understandings of academic teachers in social and community work to urban poverty in order to assess the possible impact of teaching on professional help for the poor. This will be achieved by interviews with key academics and a review of curricula. I chose the academics from the three institutions in Bangkok that teach social work and the one that teaches urban community development. I interviewed five academic staff whom I knew would have the responsibility to teach subjects directly relating to work with the poor.

5. To draw some possible conclusions, from this data, on the effects of government policy approaches to urban poverty alleviation, in order to make recommendations that may improve services to the poor.

6. To improve my abilities as a researcher in Thailand in order to more effectively help the urban poor through ongoing reflection on my research experience in a western environment. I needed to reflect on my experiences to produce a new and original detailed history of policy development and practice in urban slums in Bangkok.

3.2 The focus of the research

Not all people in slums are poor and a considerable portion of the poor live outside slums. However, identifying those who are poor outside slums is difficult. They may live on the streets, or in shared rented accommodation that disguises their lack of resources. This study selected the urban poor in Bangkok’s slums for the following reasons. Firstly, there are many slums in Bangkok. As described in Chapter Two, it has been estimated in
1996 that there were 1,521 slums in Bangkok and five neighbouring provinces. These slums are diverse in terms of economic standards, social characteristics, location and the kinds of social problems that exist. For example, some slums are ‘squats’, meaning that people have moved into land previously unused, but owned by the government or private landlords. Some slums are located in business centres, suburbs and factory areas, others along canals and railways. Some slums are built on land rented from the government or private individuals. Some slums were established more than three decades ago, others less than five years. The demographic significance of slums in Bangkok provides an important rationale for focusing on this specific group of the urban poor. Secondly, there are many government, non–government and international organisations working with the urban poor in Bangkok’s slums. These agencies have different approaches which are related to differences in philosophies, goals and objectives. They may have the aim of combating drugs, improving health, education, or the environment, achieving housing rights, or creating employment. Each organisation may have separate target groups; such as the elderly or children or women. The existence of organised programmes involved in the implementation of policies for the urban poor makes slums an important site of research. Thirdly, there are a number of people’s organisations in the Bangkok slums. These groups have been fighting to solve their problems by themselves for decades. The existence of these groups provides an avenue for accessing an understanding of poor people’s experience of poverty alleviation policies.

This study focuses on the urban poor in Bangkok’s slums, rather than those outside slums, and those in the regions. There are many people who are no doubt as poor who do not live in slums but rather on the streets of Bangkok. It is of course also the case that slums have appeared in cities in other regions and have rapidly extended throughout Thailand in the last decade since the government’s policy to decentralise industry to the regions. The numbers of slums in the provinces has increased, particularly in the Northeast in Khon Khaen, Udon Thani, Ubon Ratchatani, and in the North in Chiang Mai, Chiang Rai and in the South in Songkha. An investigation of slums in regions was prevented by a range of factors: the long distance to slum areas in other regions, limited budget and duration of this study. The Bangkok slums do include people who have lived
there for generations and are likely to demonstrate how a cycle of poverty may exist, and also possibly be broken.

3.3 Specific and important issues related to researching in and for two cultural contexts

I am a Thai academic with an established record in Thailand of action research. I am undertaking a PhD through an Australian institution. I am concerned with producing valid research as I come from an academic culture where ‘good’ research is often seen as large studies that provide a source of income for very poorly paid academic workers. The outcome of this context is that social scientists tend to favour quantitative methods, using students who may have little commitment to the aims of the project as interviewers. The principal investigators may also be more concerned about the financial rewards than the results of the study. Because in Thailand people are very concerned with presenting an acceptable face in public, this should be a special concern for researchers who just rely on large-scale questionnaires. The respondent may well assume that a correct answer is one that does not bring shame or problems for them. This problem of validity is also present in qualitative methods. The problems may not, however, disappear inside a checklist of responses to closed questions, but I hope can be analysed in responses to the open-ended questions in the interview.

Sometimes I have experienced the expectations placed on me as being different in the two different academic cultures and perspectives. For example, the responsibility to provide feedback to the research participants of the results of research is not seen as a priority in the research I have conducted previously in my country. Instead, the results may be presented at conferences. An interesting example of where these differences are apparently not acknowledged in the written record is a Thai research study, published in Australia. This was about the economic impacts of HIV/AIDS mortality. Kongsin (1997:100-101) details her research methodology as including some open–ended questions to obtain qualitative information and adds, ‘Household children were also interviewed to validate information obtained from adults’. The ethics and interviewing methods, including the effects of family power relationships, involved in this procedure
are not detailed. We cannot begin to evaluate if such concerns about power and method, and the differences in attitude in both cultures, existed for the author, or for her Australian editors. How much gets lost and gained in translation by the writer in areas of ethics and methods is a process I wish to try to acknowledge.

3.4 The research design

The research design for this study was produced in the context of my situation as an international PhD student, based at an Australian university for the period of 2001-2004. The collection of secondary and primary data was completed in three field trips to Thailand in 2002, 2003, and 2004. The data was analysed in Australia.

There are three methods used in this study.
(A) Secondary data analysis; (B) Face to face interviews. Both of these methods are informed by the third method; (C) Participant observation undertaken from my position as academic, activist and policy maker. In the following discussion, the research design is divided into two sections. Participation observation was used throughout the study, both in researching secondary sources and in direct interviewing.

3.4.1 Secondary data

To understand how the government’s urban poverty alleviation policy developed, I read all of the government policy documents relating to policies for urban poverty alleviation and the nine National Economic and Social Development Plans which were the five–yearly statements of government intent from 1961-2006. I also examined each of the fifty–four governments’ statements on their policy to the National Assembly covering this period. In addition, the annual reports of the government agencies most involved in issues of urban poverty alleviation were reviewed. These were the Urban Community Development Office (UCDO) and Community Organisations Development Institute (CODI). All documents were obtained from the period since these organisations were established in 1992 and 2000. A total of 10 of these annual reports were reviewed. Information posted on their internet websites was also explored.
There is a lack of well-developed information systems in these government departments. For example, in the National Economic and Social Development Office, which is responsible for national planning, the library is underdeveloped, there is no computer system, no photocopy machine provided and only staff can borrow books. However, this office had created its own website (www.nesdb.or.th) with some interesting but limited data. The information system of the Community Organisations Development Institute, which is working directly to support communities, is also underdeveloped. There is no library, the resource centre has limited and unorganised material. The website (www.codi.or.th) is accessible, but has little data about the urban poor.

I visited five NGOs that are involved with the urban poor. I wanted to access their annual reports to obtain more than one source of information that they would give to me later in interviews. They were the Duang Prateep Foundation, Chumchon Thai Foundation, People’s Organisation for Participation, Human Settlement Foundation, and Community Organising for People’s Action. Three NGOs did not provide information or disseminate information outside their organisations. When I asked about this lack of information I was told they were interested in producing this but did not because of lack of funding. This is an example of the limitations of the data I was able to gather. It is also an important issue for research in Thailand. It suggests the ways in which this advocacy for their target groups might be limited. Were there enough data available to policy makers?

Further questions arose about the validity of the data that were available. For example, very different figures are presented as to the numbers of slums existing in the urban areas in different documents. The BMA defines slums as their target group to work with if they are not squatters and if the number of families in the slum is over 100 families. This limits the size of the problem in their reports and presumably in their policy and practice. In addition, the context in which data are collected and analysed is important to understand. For example, bureaucrats and policy makers argue that recognising groups such as squatters would encourage more people to come into the urban areas. This reflects some general Thai attitudes to dependency which suggests that providing services may encourage poor people to stop taking care of themselves and to become lazy. This is
symbolised in the motto of the Faculty where I qualified in community development, and the Faculty in which I am now employed: “Help them to help themselves”. A similar motto existed in the Department of Public Welfare in Thailand. The belief may be that offering more help may be counter to the aim of achieving self-reliance. This may also contribute to general attitudes in Thailand toward the profession of social work.

In this context of a lack of published material I was able to supplement my knowledge by participant observation and analysis of oral presentations at the following key seminars and meetings in Thailand. A brief overview of the seminars attended is provided below:

Seminars where the poor were directly represented:
1. *Annual Meeting with Duang Prateep Foundation* which works with the poor people in Klong Toey slum, on 24 September, 2002. Prateep, who was born in the slum, is the founder of the NGO and a senator. She joined the meeting with her staff to discuss implementing development projects such as health, education, housing problems, environment, anti-drug campaign and income-generation activities.
2. *Monitoring the Project on Urban Environmental Development Activities*, organised by Chumchon Thai Foundation on 9 November, 2002. The objective of the seminar was to follow up and evaluate the improvement of slums environment projects. The 38 participants were poor people from different Bangkok slums who have received benefit from the projects.

Seminars providing important information on the policy of self-reliance:
1. *Community Economy*, organised by Thailand Research Fund on 24-25 October, 2002 at Siam City Hotel. The main issue for discussion was the changing of the structure and transformation of the village economy in all regions of the country over the last 50 years. What is the present situation and why? This seminar provided important information on the policy of self-reliance, in its discussion on how to create strength and self-reliance in villages. The distinguished guest speakers were Professor Wichan Panichpreecha, a former Director of the Thailand Research Fund, Professor Pasuk Pongpaichit and Dr Chris Baker from the School of Economics of Chulalongkorn University, Dr Akin
Rabibhadana, a President of the Chumchon Thai Foundation and Dr Worawut Romratanaphan from the Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University.

2. Strong and Self-Reliant Communities, organised by Community Organisations Development Institute on 21-23 January, 2003. The objective of this seminar was to find appropriate approaches in community development for community self-reliance. The participants were the village leaders from around the country. Prime Minister Thaksin Shinawatra was invited to be the keynote speaker on the topic ‘Government Policy in Supporting Community Self-Reliance’.

3. Annual Meeting with Staff of People’s Organisation for Participation which works with poor people in Bangkok’s and Chiang Mai’s slums on 27 February, 2003. I am an advisory committee member of this agency. The meeting discussed the progress and obstacles of projects implementation in each slum community, such as the project to promote income-generation activities, housing improvement projects and environment projects. The lack of finance to continue the projects was also discussed in the meeting.

Seminars also provided important information for supplementing interviews with stakeholders. For example, when I was unable to interview a prominent scholar monk on the subject of urban poverty, I was able to attend the seminar Religion and Community Development, organised by Ratchabhat Pranakorn University and Prathampidok Foundation. The objective of the seminar was to present the perspective of two monks who are successful in applying Buddhist philosophy for community development. These two monks are Prakrupipitprachanat and Prasupin Paneto. Both monks help poor people to solve their poverty in rural areas by establishing community savings groups as a resource for financial problems. They received the Education for Peace Prize of the Foundation.

Directly related to my interest in finding out how the curriculum for courses of training and education of welfare workers reflected ideas about the urban poor was the seminar on Social Development and Human Security, organised by the Faculty of Social Administration, Thammasat University on 24 January, 2003. The 50 participants were social workers, academics and students from the faculty. The objective of the seminar
was to celebrate the 49th anniversary of the Faculty and to raise the social workers’ awareness of their profession. The guest speakers were Sawai Prammanee, a senator, Paiboon Wattanasiritham, a President of the Community Organisations Development Institute, Associate Professor Nonglak Aimpradit, Dean of the Faculty of Social Administration and Panit Nititanprapat, General Secretary of the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

Seminars were also organised to provide opportunities for the poor to interact with policy makers and administrators:

1. **Homes of the Urban Poor: Community Rights in Choosing and Building Housing**, organised by the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand on 9 February, 2003. The objective of the seminar was to find an appropriate model to solve housing problems for the urban poor and present suggestions for policy making. Guest speakers were the President of the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, three representatives of the urban poor and a representative from a non-government organisation working with the urban poor. Around 30 participants were government officers from different departments and NGOs’ staff who work with the urban poor.

2. **Different Aspects of Slum Community** organised by the Thailand Research Fund on 21 February, 2003. The objective of this seminar was to discuss and analyse the present situation and problems of the urban poor. About 70 participants attended: government officers, NGOs, academics and community leaders. The guest speakers were Dr Akin Rabibhadana, President of the Chumchon Thai Foundation, Bantorn On-dam, President of the Human Settlement Foundation, Srisinthorn Pummanee, Project Manager of People’s Organisation for Participation. I was also one of the guest speakers in the forum. I used this opportunity to reflect to the seminar the voices of the urban poor whom I had interviewed for this study.

The information from those seminars formed an integral part of the analysis. They provided data in four ways: accessing unpublished materials, providing a site for participant observation, providing access to key stakeholders and providing access to the urban poor. Equally importantly, these seminars gave an opportunity for the poor to have a voice. In some instances, seminars provided me with the opportunity to give direct
feedback on my study. Overall, these events provided important information about attitudes to urban poverty held by leaders in civil, religious, political and academic societies; and sometimes the poor themselves.

3.4.1.1 Data analysis of secondary sources
The documents I reviewed (I recorded direct quotations) provided the historical development of the concept of urban poverty alleviation and the emergence of the concept of poverty as being important in economic development. I translated these direct quotations and analysed these in English. The responses of the NGOs to this situation are recorded in annual reports. I translated and analysed these in English. I then noted the focus of these policy documents in order to understand the assumptions that are made about the existence, extent, and ways of alleviating urban poverty.

I made extensive notes at the seminars and meetings I attended, both of the main speakers, and the responses of the participants. Here too I included participants’ comments under the topics: historical development, assumptions, and then comments on the attitudes to poverty and its extent and alleviation. The seminars provided extensive opportunities to record attitudes to poverty alleviation, For example, the Prime Minister’s speech at the Strong and Self−Reliant Communities seminar on 21 January, 2003. He had been involved directly with poverty alleviation methods and had already announced in 2002 that Thailand would have no more poverty within five years. He repeated this statement and also that he wanted to get rid of slum communities in Bangkok and major towns in five years.

3.4.2 Face to face interviews with stakeholders
The purpose of all interviews in the study was to understand the general attitudes of the stakeholders to urban poverty. As I have already stated, by stakeholders I mean all of those who influence or are influenced by social policy. Those who were on the receiving end of policy relating to the urban poor and the people who influence policy are not always in separate categories.
1. Interviews with policy makers

For the policy makers I chose those people who in Bangkok were directly working with and/or representing the poor and/or involved with formulating social policy for the urban poor in Bangkok. I interviewed eighteen policy makers. This group comprised two bureaucrats from the Bangkok Metropolitan Administration who worked in the Department of Community Development. They were the Director of the Department of Community Development and the Head of District Community Development Division. From the board of directors of the Community Organisations Development Institute, I interviewed the executive director and the representative of the poor who was currently living in a slum and who had achieved a high profile earlier by successfully resisting eviction and then being given some land by the land owner. I interviewed two senators whom I knew to be currently working with the urban poor. In 1999 the government established the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand. I interviewed two of the commissioners who are directly responsible for decisions about issues dealing with the urban poor. I also interviewed four project managers of local non–governmental organisations. These agencies are actively working with the urban poor on different problem issues such as women and children, HIV/AIDS, anti–drug, environmental, housing problems community development, and community rights.

As a community worker I assessed that it was important to understand what was taught about urban poverty to students who would be working in the field. I hoped this would show something about the attitudes held by academics, and what skills were thought to be necessary for workers with the poor. I wondered if the philosophy for self–reliance was also held by these institutions. In Bangkok there are three universities involved with social work education and one university involved with urban community development. I interviewed three academics who were teaching in social work, social welfare and community development and three specialists who conducted research and worked closely with the urban poor.
My interview schedule for all of my interviews with the policy makers and academics involved the following questions: what is your attitude and understanding about urban poverty? Who are the urban poor, and why they are poor? How can we solve the urban poverty? Who should be responsible for this problem? How was the government’s policy for urban poverty alleviation developed? What are the influences that formed social policy? What are the government’s provisions for the urban poor? Why has the government apparently decided to focus help for the poor by providing grants through their communities rather than by individual welfare? How accessible is this social policy to all the urban poor? How far do you think self-reliance and family responsibility is possible in urban slum communities?

An additional question for academic staff was: how does your curriculum reflect the answers you have given? If there are differences, why is this? What percentage of your students work with the urban poor? What skills are taught to students for working with the urban poor?

2. Interviews with savings groups committee members

I intended to interview savings group committee members. Before 1997, when I was a community worker in Bangkok there were between 200 and 300 savings groups in the whole of the City. I intended to interview 10 per cent of these. However, when I returned in 2002 the number had increased to about 500. I therefore focused on central Bangkok and was able to interview 15 savings group committee members from the 65 savings groups in the central area of Bangkok. Each savings group has a committee comprising between nine and thirteen members. I managed to access one committee member from each of the 15 savings groups. These comprised ten women and five men. I obtained access to these members through the assistance of NGOs who worked with this group. I had intended to interview the head of each savings group but the reality was different. For example, I would visit the slum community and hope to see the head but s/he had disappeared off to work. Such people were not able to stay around for a couple of hours for research purposes and without any payment. They were employed only on a daily basis. I then found another committee member to interview. The focus of my interview
was their attitudes about urban poverty. The questions I asked were: why are you poor? How do you solve the problem? Who should take responsibility for the urban poor? What do you think about the government fund, which is provided through credit loans to savings groups? I also asked them about their attitude about the savings groups, such as: how were the community savings groups created? What is the purpose of the savings groups? What is the qualification for membership? What kind of benefit is provided for members? Why do other people in the community not want to be a member of the savings group? Do you encourage them to participate in the savings group? What do you think about those people? What is the major factor for making your savings group successful or unsuccessful? I have categorised these as the ‘included’ group of the poor as they appeared to have been benefiting from what help was available.

3. Interviews with the excluded poor

I also wished to interview those who I knew to be ‘excluded’ from such help. I interviewed 65 of the poor people from the 65 slums who were non-members of community savings groups and did not access services that are provided through savings groups. The topics of interviews were their attitudes to urban poverty and to savings groups. I conducted interviews with the poor after I had completed my first interviews with the people who are usually seen as the policy makers. However, as I have noted above, some of the members of savings groups are also in powerful positions on government and non-government policy making committees. Separate categories of ‘policy maker’ or ‘poor person’ did not reflect the reality. Through the savings group committee members, they guided me to the poor who were outside the community savings schemes. These members know their groups of residents well and therefore know who is not involved in their savings groups.

My informants were mostly women, as in Thailand the responsibility for financial management is seen as the women’s role. As a result, I may not have reflected the views of men on these topics. Their voices are not heard very much in the study but the gains are that there is due recognition of the importance of women’s roles in urban slums.
The focus of my interview was attitudes to urban poverty. The questions I asked were: why are you poor? How do you solve the problem? Who should take responsibility for the urban poor and how? What do you think of community savings groups? Why do you not want to be a member of the savings group? What do you think about the community savings groups and the committee members?

3.4.2.1 Pilot interview
After I had designed the questionnaire for my data gathering, I conducted interviews with a few urban poor people who lived outside the areas of my study. This resulted in some minor changes to the questionnaire. My respondents in the pilot study were very unhappy with the idea that I should tape-record the interviews. These preliminary interviews also showed how curious the ‘subjects’ were about what I would do with the information they gave. Before I began the study interviews I prepared myself to give more information than was on the subject information sheet. The sheet, approved by the University Ethics Committee, was written in Thai but in language that was too academic for the poor to understand. I also decided to not always use the tape recorder as I had intended.

3.4.2.2 Accessing the stakeholders
I made a list of interviewees whom I hoped would be involved in this study and then approached them in different ways. For the people I had already been connected with or knew personally, I used a personal approach by telephone and made an appointment for interview. After that I sent them a consent letter that consisted of information about the researcher, the importance and objectives of the study, the expected outcomes, date and time of the interview. I informed them that a taped record would be made of the interview and destroyed when the research was completed. I also attached guidelines for the interview. This group was easy to access because I have been acquainted with these key stakeholders. My experiences in this field for more than eighteen years made me familiar with people from different levels from grassroots through practitioners to policy makers. If I did not know them personally I sent the consent letter with guidelines. A week later, I followed up by telephone to make an appointment.
My access to policy makers was greatly helped, therefore, by my working experience in the area I was studying. This was using my social capital in a way that opened doors to me to meet with key persons, or to impress on those I did not know my qualifications to be researching such a topic. When, for example, they mentioned confidential matters, such as criticising politicians, they trusted that I would carefully use such data to ensure they were not directly identified as the authors.

People with whom I was not acquainted were difficult to contact. It took time to make an appointment and interview. Some people agreed to give an interview because they saw the importance of this study. ‘Even I don’t know you personally, but I am willing to share my opinion for your study. I think findings could be used to help the poor’ (Director of a government welfare department). This indicates the importance of personal relationships, both in this study, and in Thai society in general.

Some people chose not to be involved with the interview. The people who failed to respond were one bureaucrat, three politicians, one academic, three international organisations and one monk. I sent a letter and contacted them by telephone at least three times. A typical response was this: their secretary, acting as a gatekeeper, politely denied to make an appointment. They said, ‘S/he has a busy schedule’. I asked when s/he would be available. They would reply that ‘I will contact you by telephone’. They never did. I gave up then.

This restricted group of stakeholders may mean that some powerful groups’ views are not represented here. The politicians are particularly important omissions. I attempted to contact the three main political parties in Thailand. They are the Thai Rak Thai party, the Chatthai Party (currently a coalition in power), and the Democrat Party. I contacted each spokesperson but they failed to respond. It is possible that they would have shown more interest closer to an election time.

There were difficulties scheduling interviews, working in the two countries. I went back to Thailand in October 2003. and contacted the Minister of Social Development and Human Security, Anurak Jureemart, by letter. I followed up by telephoning a number of
times. His assistant had told me that she would arrange for the interview and let me know later. However, the political situation in Thailand at that time was uncertain. Prime Minister Thaksin had decided to reshuffle his cabinet. This event changed ministerial posts. The Minister of Social Development and Human Security was in a difficult position. Finally, the post was rotated and a new face brought in. He was transferred to the position of Minister of the Culture Ministry and Sora–at Klinpratum became the Social Development and Human Security Minister (*Bangkok Post*, 8 November, 2003:1). After the cabinet reshuffle, I had returned to Australia and did not have an opportunity to interview the Minister.

Groups of the poor were very difficult to access. During the daytime they went out of the slum for their jobs. Some people have no weekends or holidays. They worked seven days a week to earn a little income. However, I had changed my timetable to meet them in the evening, night time and also on the weekends. I conducted interviews when they came back home. For this group I was an outsider and stranger. They did not appear to trust anyone, including researchers. When I introduced myself and told them about the purposes of the interview, emphasising potential benefits for them, they were questioning: ‘There have been many different groups who came to our community and asked questions, such as students, researchers, government officials and politicians, but nothing has changed for us’ (respondent in Watprayakai slum). They were reluctant to be interviewed by yet another person who appeared to just want information and was not going to help them. However, I tried to be friendly with them by talking about general problems of their community and pointing to where they might obtain help. When they felt comfortable some of them were convinced by this, and some were not.

Accessing people who live such precarious lives in terms of their well-being and even existence is difficult, for very good reasons from their perspective. They will be working irregular hours, often in two jobs, and will not often be at home at any set times. Even if they are physically present, they may be preoccupied with their own or family members’ concerns.
My aim was to understand their attitudes relating to urban poverty and the poor people who do not become members of savings groups and are excluded from those available funds. I gained valuable information from small numbers, but I do not wish to claim that these data are generalisable to all committee members of savings groups, or to those who are excluded from such schemes.

Because of time constraints I was only able to interview 15 members of savings groups, who themselves were committee members. Therefore comparisons between those of the poor and poorest can only be impressionistic. As I have indicated, I had limited access to stakeholders at a policy level. There are gaps in the findings of important persons who represented interest groups in relation to poverty. These were notably politicians. The lack of interest they showed in my project may reflect the importance attached to social policy research by Thai government officials. All researchers like myself who want to use their findings to achieve improvements in social conditions should consider this factor. Again the answer may be a more participatory approach, so that politicians see that such research could find out things that could be useful to them.

3.4.2.3 Data analysis of primary sources

The interviews were tape recorded, except with the poor who were not comfortable with this form of recording. I therefore used the questionnaire and notes I made during the interviews. I listened to the tape–recorded interviews of about 27 hours in Thai. I then translated their comments and arranged them in topics related to the questions. I omitted comments some participants made that they requested be not used for quoting. These comments were usually negative views about current politicians. After I had grouped the data into themes I then translated this data into English.

The data from the questionnaires I gathered by manual extraction of frequency and percentages. I have presented these fully in Appendices II and III and summarised the results in the findings and discussion chapters. For the tape–recorded interviews I have presented the findings as a narrative around the themes of attitudes to poverty and the poor and the solutions to these problems.
Following these interviews I returned to Thailand to present my initial findings to the subjects I had first interviewed and to include any amended data. Although I wished to hear from the poor and to include their reflection on the research findings, this was limited to some feedback at the conferences in which we participated. I remain aware of the criticism by the poor that researchers simply interrupted their lives. I asked a lot but nothing changed. I will comment on this aspect of research methods as part of my findings.

3.5 Qualitative research

Rather than using the ‘objective’ implied in quantitative methods’ reporting of facts I agreed with Bolton (1995:298-299) when he states ‘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. Overall official and unofficial measurements of poverty alleviation and access to programmes are important to include, both in terms of statistics, and attitudes to poverty. I needed therefore to review quantitative studies, especially as these are given such importance in Thailand, both by academics and policy makers. In this study I have included some quantitative data from the groups of the poor that were excluded and included from community projects as well as from secondary sources. I wish to now consider the issues that arise from emphasising qualitative methodology.

It was clear to me that to achieve the six stated objectives, 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 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 are to 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). It can use a variety of empirical materials. My methods will therefore include case study, personal experience and interviews to describe the worlds of the people I am studying (Ibid:3-4). 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).

3.6 Ethics, power and the research process

Ladwig and Gore (1994:234) discuss the problems of power and method in research and summarise these into three approaches: (1) as a problem of using particular methods for producing good research; (2) as a problem of relations between researcher and researched, 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 data collection.

As I have commented, qualitative methods will hopefully produce valid research, but these methods have to be sensitive to the Thai context. This means taking the Thai social structure and the position of myself and my respondents into account. In relation to the power relations between researcher and subject, the power differences between myself and my respondents did not always result in my being in the most powerful position. Some of my respondents, such as politicians or high-ranking government officials, were, in Thai society, 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, as I shall note, 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 is 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 is essential to my position as insider/outsider, observing the other. I am inside 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 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 have to satisfy myself, living between both cultures, that I can make a similar positive evaluation of my performance. I am 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 will be using is imbued with my knowledge and concern about the slums I was researching, gained over a period of 18 years.

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 (Ibid:19). This seems to me very important when I am 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 need 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). He 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’ (Ibid:123). 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, even the cultures studied are no longer pure, uninfluenced by global events. I am going to try and deal with this by writing in a way which is self-reflexive in terms of my own position in Thai society whilst being concerned to convey the experience of subjects who were not always known to me, to an audience from a different culture. The study is therefore ‘auto-ethnographic’ in the sense that it reports on and develops my involvement with similar subjects in their environments over many years.

The use of qualitative, and specifically narrative, methods does not take away the power differences between myself and my respondents. To deal with problems that will always occur, we say in Thailand “Mai Pen Lai”. It means literally “never mind” but it also directs our attention away from something that would prevent us from moving on. Power differences will always exist in a stratified society where everyone knows their place. I accept that such power differences exist and see this as part of my analysis.

This study conformed to the requirements of the Sydney University Ethics Committee (Human Ethics Committee, 2002:02/04/15). 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 note that the Ethics Committee requirements relate 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 were 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 ‘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 about data collection. It must also include empathy with the subject. Implied in this is the need to do good and to do this directly for the participants. In conducting these interviews I was concerned to avoid doing harm by revealing the identity of vulnerable participants. I was also aware of the importance of not “losing face” in 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 where they were not aware of these.

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 who 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 for them.
3.7 On reflection: second thoughts

As a result of my reviewing the western literature of ethics, I realised that I should hope 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 have not managed to always achieve this. Further, I did not involve my subjects in every phase of the research process. This would mean 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 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.

I had become aware, by having contact with western social work and policy, that government or NGOs, subsidised by state or federal funding, provided the possibilities for making a career in social work a desirable choice. No such widespread situation exists, or is likely to exist, in Thailand. From the data I had gathered from Thai academics, emerged a very important question as I was unsure how such academics, who relied on western theories of social and community development, translated these into the Thai situation where their students had little desire for or intention of working with the poor. My question was: ‘How do Thai social (or community) work academics cope with a situation where they know what they are teaching will not be used in a profession called social work?’ These are questions I decided had still to be asked.

3.8 Conclusions

The aims of the thesis were to examine the attitudes of government and key stakeholders to urban poverty. Central to this was my existing understanding, that self–relance is expected of poor people. This understanding is based on my knowledge and experience
as an academic and activist. I wished to examine how this developed in government social policy. Alongside this I needed to investigate the provision for assistance that has been made and how effective this is for poor people in urban slums whom I know may not be able to access what appears to be selective provision. This apparently selective provision appeared to result in a group of the poor who are ‘included’, initially by savings group schemes, and those who are ‘excluded’ from such provision. I wanted to understand what is required of people before they can successfully use government poverty alleviation measures. This is often known as having social capital. My interest was also in finding out what was taught in social and community education programmes about the urban poor. Overall, I wished to reflect on my role as researcher in the study and in producing a thesis in two cultural contexts.

This is to be strategic research, in that I hope to develop a greater understanding of government policy in terms of philosophies and attitudes, which may lead to effective intervention at the level of social policy and education and training of those, like myself, who work alongside the urban poor and poorest. The choices I made, to use qualitative methods, in the context of a focus on auto−ethnography alerted me to the limitations of my study in terms of generalisability, but also to the richness of the data I might be able to achieve and how this might influence other social research in Thailand.